

# Jack's Viking Sky 7

## SPIRIT

by *Mitch H*

### Chapter 31 - City of the Highborn

Crowning a rounded hilltop, the silvery walled City of the Highborn stretched in a graceful circle. The city seemed to be about two miles in diameter. The metallic looking boundary wall shimmered in the morning sunlight. Jack's small party drew to a halt about fifty yards from the only entrance through the three-story wall.

As the roadway left the shadowy forest and crossed into the clear sunlight, it had become covered in a thick mat of lush grass. Daniel worked at appearing relaxed, comfortable as he was lifted out of Jack's lap and placed on his feet on the grassy way by Balin. His nuts had started aching harder during the short ride. He was still not recovered from the poisonous effects of the goat hair herb, and he felt he was already too close to exhaustion, though the day wasn't even half over.

Lemmel began preparing Daniel for his entry into the city, straightening his clothing, meticulously wiping every speck of dust from him.

Jack sat above him astride his great black mare, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings. A flicker of apprehension darkened Daniel's eyes as he looked up to Jack for reassurance. His lover looked tense, but confident. Daniel swallowed his nervousness and squared his shoulders, studying the city as Jack was doing.

The wall that surrounded the city seemed to be made of a brushed metal, beyond the technical development of this planet. It was thick enough that men could be seen walking along the inset way at the notched top. At the base of the wall there were no clusters of outbuildings. No shepherd's huts could be seen anywhere. There were no peasant dwellings leaning against the great city's outer walls as could be found by walled cities on many planets. The base of the wall and the surrounding area for many yards was bare of anything but a lush green carpet of grass, shepherds with flocks and a few grazing, well-groomed horses.

Travelers who had been on the grassy road to the city all halted, now resting off the road, staying far from Jack's small group. A horn had sounded within the gate. Their party had been spotted by the city sentries who worked at the only portal through the silvery wall. No more travelers exited there now. Everyone in the immediate vicinity had stopped moving, anticipating a Sky's entry.

A dozen sentries lounged or stood at attention in and around the wide gate opening. They were dressed alike, in leather armor of a deep rust color that complimented their dark skin well. Each wore a narrow-brimmed hat made of molded leather that matched their armor. They held spears like the ones Brynvold's household guards carried. The spear shafts were decorated with ribbons of a wide variety of colors.

Lemmel knelt in the grassy roadway removing Daniel's slippers. Then he worked gently, tucking the drawstring of a pouch into the low waistband of Daniel's pants.

As Lemmel worked, Daniel adjusted the fit of his veil, tugging it forward a bit. This was the only summer veil he'd owned, though he'd had more than one winter veil while on this planet. Last night Jack had insisted the veil weave was strong enough for gold, so Daniel had reluctantly let Lemmel sew gold on it, losing the option of letting the veil dangle like a scarf, light and unfettering around his neck. The veil now had heavy marks along the lower hem, round, gold coins high in the weave, and gold beads along the front that dangled on his cheeks.

Now with Jack, Balin and Lemmel several yards behind him--in fact, everyone who was traveling north toward the gate had paused far behind him--Daniel trod gracefully, barefoot to the wide gate. It had taken, as close as he could count, a year and nine months to get to this city. Though outwardly he appeared calm, his hips swaying slightly and his shoulders relaxed, inside he was a bundle of singing nerves.

The gate opening was arched, not very Viking in structure, surely, and reached high enough that a mounted worker caste Champion would be able to ride through without ducking. The mortarless archway was more Romanesque than Norse in construction, complete with a keystone at the top of the arch. But it was a keystone made of metal, the same metal that made up the entire wall as far as Daniel could see. It was odd to see such a primitive construction style, a Roman arch, mixed with such modern materials. The lines were clean, and the construction looked virtually indestructible. No wear marks, no age showed in the metallic structure. It was as if the construction had concluded only days before.

Daniel turned his attention from the opening, took his eyes off the raised bars with their spiked tips poking down a foot into the huge archway, and gazed at the sentries manning the portal.

He walked slowly, arms relaxed at his sides and despite his exhausted state, veiled head held high. The slit pants draped from his prominent hipbones, fluttering in the slight breeze. The short top he wore fluttered too, the hem tickling across his ribs. Then Daniel bowed his head to get the sunlight off the front of his veil. He wanted a clearer view of the huge sentries. They were all worker caste as he had expected.

The nervousness he felt was unnecessary. He'd passed as a Sky all across the continent. This would be no different. It was only a matter of walking past the sentries, being

greeted by a temple guardian, getting a pendant and then walking in the city to wait for Jack and the others to enter and reclaim him.

When he'd drawn within a foot of being under those spikes he stopped and lifted his veil off his head. He let the satiny fabric slip through the fingers of his right hand, feeling the impact of attached marks and coins against his palm. The sunlight that had blinded him only moments before now shone on his long, very light hair. All the days of riding bareheaded in the meadow had continued to bleach out what the low desert sun had started. His hair had platinum streaks in it, with darker blond along the crown and deeper still at the nape of his neck. Two years of growth had it hanging in loose waves down to the middle of his back, sweeping above the slight hollow of his lower back. Shorter tendrils fell forward of his shoulders, framing his strong neck and the low cut, oval collar of his thin shirt. The hair had a natural part in the middle and looked tussled because of the veil.

He folded the cloth and held it loosely in his left hand. Then he reached to the small pouch suspended from its drawstrings tucked into his waistband, pulling it from where Lemmel had made it secure. Daniel held the marks ready to pay Jack's entry into the city of slavery. Some of these marks Daniel had earned on his back, or in the case of Thaid's rape, on his stomach.

Pushing the thought of the innocent man out of his mind, Daniel gazed with his brilliantly blue eyes at the gathering of sentries. Each of them must have seen many Skys come through this gate before, those others having to expose themselves too, stand naked-faced for inspection.

Wordlessly, he waited.

"Aye," a sentry said, stepping near to Daniel. He wore a shiny silver badge pinned on his right breast. It looked less like a law enforcement badge, and more like a brooch. "Come ye to serve for ye House's entry, sweet Sky?"

"No. I do not," Daniel answered formally. "My host brings a gift to the great goddess, Nirrti, and prays that her glory may benefit from his pitiful offering." Now he held out the heavy sack of a hundred marks, dangling it by the string so the sentry would not have to touch his bare flesh.

"Aye," the sentry said with a show of disappointment. "Aye. Just so." He took the sack, spilling the shiny marks out in his palm. "Pass ye, and the House that hosts ye into the City of the Highborn. Glad Nirrti be, that one of her beautiful children has returned to her bosom. Come, little Sky. Present yeself to the temple guardian and take ye pendant. Come. Be as free as ye wish within the walls with Odin's true children."

Daniel stepped forward directly under the gate's sharp spikes. He paused, this time being greeted by a very tall and wizened old worker caste man who was dressed in a long, blue robe. The color of the robe marked him as a temple guardian, but Daniel would have

known what he was regardless of his clothing. The man had an inked drawing in the middle of his forehead. It was the artful, upturned curves of Nirrti's mark.

Though he was marked like a jaffa, Daniel knew instantly that he did not carry a symbiote. He reeked of ale and was missing teeth.

This man was here to observe and pass judgment, and to give Daniel a pendant to hang around his neck that would ensure his freedom to leave the city without having to serve in the temple.

"Young one," the old man wheezed happily, his gap-toothed smile too wide. "Lovely. Lovely. Here," he commanded as he held out a pendant on a leather cord. It spun from its cord, a circle of naquadah, about two inches wide. It gleamed in the sunlight, reflecting back the metallic, almost oily quality that naquadah had.

As he got within touching distance of the old guard, Daniel was hit again with the odor of ale.

"For ye lovely neck. Adornment. Where be ye other adornments, little Sky-child? What fancies does ye House put on ye? Rings? Sparkly stones? No? Why, what a poor little beggarly Sky ye be. So plain. Naught but pitiful veil marks, and ye shameful House owns a fine Champion. Tisk! He be rich enough. Ye tell that stingy bastard to buy ye a bauble for ye navel. That be a right fine navel. I expect I've had my own tongue in it, eh? When was it ye served in the temple to earn ye right to leave the city? Surely I did not pass up a morsel such as ye." He brought the cord over Daniel's head, letting his arms encircle the shorter man.

With a great effort Daniel remained rooted to the spot, didn't dodge away from the old guardian's touch. His jaw muscles bunched in anger. Gruber breathed heavy in his ear.

"Old man," the city sentry chided with good humor. "Give him the circle and let him get on in. Time to drool over him later. Fine ass on him, right so. But not here. There be tradesmen need entry so we best get this morsel out of the way and back under his veil, eh?"

"Ah. Shame," the old man said as he shook his head in regret. "Shame. Cover him up. Aye. Loop pulled or I'd be on my knees inspecting him, I would. Veil off or not, it be my right ye know, see that he be in good order down where it counts."

"Aye. As often ye tell us. Now shut it and let the lad through. He does have a House, but maybe there'll be a time his ass comes available in days hence."

Daniel flicked his gaze toward the leather-clad city sentry, seeing the man's eyes staring brazenly at his crotch. His hands balled into fists, crushing his veil. He wanted to smash the man's face! He wanted to swing upward, regardless of how high he had to stretch and

smash right into that leering bastard's grinning mouth. He'd take him down, just like he'd taken Hrainlang. With a knife in his heart!

"Here, then," the old man said, sounding angry and disappointed now. He pushed the circle's black, leather cord further down Daniel's hair, running his hands along the golden strands as he did. Then his touch wandered, drawing down Daniel's chest until they reached his naked stomach. "What a waste," he muttered. Then he pressed a fat fingertip into Daniel's navel. "Sweetling. Ah, ye've got a lot of nice bits," he said as he caressed Daniel's tied genitals harshly, pushing aside Joslin's unseen grip. Then his tone changed, betraying his irritation. "Go on. Get in and cover yourself. Ye drive men to do what they shouldn't, parading around like a slut. Cover up."

"Ach," the sentry grunted out the disapproving sound. "Need the temple to send a new guardian," he shouted derisively to the other city sentries.

With his still-tender nuts aching from the old man's harsh squeezing, Daniel lurched away and took a step through the gate, hastily unfolding his veil as he moved. The pain in his groin flared anew with each breath. By his second step he had the veil on, the beaded hem covering his eyes. He was safe now, safe from any touch or comments. No one could notice him in a sexual way now. He was safe.

The sentry behind Daniel continued to shout in a chiding manner to his fellow sentries. "This old temple pervert can't keep his mind off that cock. Though, coming in here as this Sky did, a Champion and even a servant with blue eyes, the Sky asked for it, I'm thinking. Blue. See? They've drunk from him and right recent, judging by how bright the blue is. Had his little cock in their mouths no more than a night ago, eh?" he said, pointing at Jack's party.

Behind him, Daniel heard the sudden ring of a great-sword being drawn. He took several more steps and turned to look behind him as he fled barefoot on the cobblestones. Balin had leapt from Freyfaxi's broad back, his sword in his fist. His strides were so fluid and long that he didn't appear to be running, but the master swordsman was at the city sentry's side within a breath.

"Champion!" the sentry sputtered. "This one has not offended! This was merely--"

His words died in his gaping mouth as his head fell from his shoulders. His headless body jerked, limbs spasming out and then it toppled backward to land with a sickening thud on the cobblestone way. Blood spurted from the severed arteries in the neck, the heart still pumping.

The sentries all around the gate rushed forward but not even one reached for his own sword or leveled his lance. Effortlessly, Balin swung his blade in a circle, marking clear territory around himself.

"Veil was on!" one sentry shouted at the huge Champion. "We saw. Dead Bordon did not. His fault, Champion, for daring to turn his back on ye House's Highborn. Bordon's shame. Settled it be. He spoke ill after the veil was on. No more blood needs to be spilled. Honor. Ye have kept ye House's honor. Go in peace."

"Go in peace," another sentry added his voice to the first one.

The others drew back instantly, nodding their assent. The old temple guardian was shaking, his hands clutched to his chest. Bordon's head rested where it had landed against his left foot, his shocked, sightless gaze meeting the old guardian's. The man jerked his own gaze up from the macabre sight and nodded vigorously at Balin.

Balin glared at the sentry who'd spoken, and then wiped his blade on the fallen body's cloak. He sheathed his long blade and then with a flourish of his colored cloak, casually remounted Freyfaxi.

Daniel stumbled backward a step, managing to keep on his bare feet. He got the veil tied and then hastily went several yards down the narrow, deserted cobblestone street that fed the gateway travelers inward to the city. Shaking, he stopped along the side, waiting for Jack and his party to enter.

Jack had kicked Sleipner into a cantor and when he reached his barefoot lover, reined the horse in hard on the cobblestones. Sleipner protested, tossing her head as one hoof slid when her hock hit the paver stones, losing her traction. Jack patted her neck, but held her in place while she recovered her balance. Then he reached down, offering his forearm to Daniel.

"Can't," Daniel protested, his eyes wide and wild. He was breathing too deeply. Joslin and Gruber both had ahold of his ankles. "Jack--"

"You're right. Gotta be seemly. Balin'll get you." The sentries were still watching.

Daniel wanted nothing more than to be in his lover's embrace. He cupped a hand over his tied genitals, easing the pain a little.

"Pardon, gentle master," a youthful worker caste stepped from the roadside. "But-- Ah, ye steward approaches. This one withdraws," he said as he curtseyed deeply. "Pardon. Pardon."

Jack glared at the new arrival, stunned that anyone would foist themselves into the middle of this bloody mess. Balin rode past Lemmel and jumped from his horse. He swept Daniel up in a carrying embrace and brought him to Jack's horse.

"Why did you kill that man," Daniel demanded, sounding breathless. "It was--"

"Hush," Balin whispered harshly.

"Young steward ... "

Jack heard the newcomer speaking to Lemmel but tuned the man out. He was unarmed, and no danger to their party. Jack gazed down at Daniel, watching him start to struggle with Balin. "Come on. Put him up here."

Jack patted the spot in front of him, got Daniel situated between his thighs and then took a hasty look around, scanning their location for more possible trouble. Except for the newcomer, Jack's party was alone in the short stretch of narrow roadway. They were only a few yards inside the gate, still on the only roadway that led into the city. This portion passed through the yards-thick, three-story wall, funneling travelers in through the tall buildings attached to the wall another ten yards before branching off into various parts of the city. Little sunlight reached this section of the road.

A few yards down the section had a few windows along it, a few small niches with little carts wedged in them. Some were selling food and drinks, others promoted accommodations and other services. There were about ten people in all along that short section of road. All were gaping at Jack's party.

No one else had come through the gate behind them yet. The sentries could be seen through the wide opening cleaning up Balin's latest mess. Jack shook his head.

"I'm all right," Daniel insisted. "Just a little startled. I should have left the veil off longer, right?" he asked Balin.

"The wrong doing was not ye own, Highborn. Was the dead man's for being careless around a Sky. His folly, and the city be better off with him dead. More so when they learn who ye truly are. If he were still breathing on that future day when ye true identity becomes revealed mayhap he'd be drawn and quartered instead of the merciful ending I gave to him."

"Oh, crap," Daniel swore.

"Come on, Balin. Let's get ourselves out of this penned-in spot."

"Aye. Not a defensible position, this."

Jack wrapped his arms around his lover. "You're shaking."

"I'm pissed off," Daniel said, his voice betraying a slight tremble.

"Master," Lemmel called hesitantly. "This man asks if he may, a boon of House Ondeil. He seeks to be of service he says, but the truth be, he shows to be wearing the brown and yellow tied in the style of House Wulfstag. I think he be looking to see who ... under the veil ... Hold," Lemmel called to the man who hastily backed away.

"Wulfstag servant. Do not flee. My master's house be aligned with Wulfstag. His Champion will not slay ye. I only guessed ye true purpose because ye master told of his man being sent here to watch."

The man who had started to dart away at Lemmel's words halted and turned back to face the small party.

Jack gazed down at the man, gauging his potential danger, and then spoke in a hushed voice. "You were sent here by Wulfstag to watch for what he lost, right? We won't name what he lost, not here on the road. But it's been found, returned alive to your master."

"This be true?" the man shouted, reaching out to grab at Jack's pant leg.

The Champion took a hasty step toward the man. He clamped his hand over the shocked man's mouth. "Aye. And it can be proven. In my tuc I carry the rune stone given as an alliance mark from his own Champion. Ye master's heart was rescued and returned to him by my own House's hand. Now, best we be getting away from these eyes. Enough entertainment we've given them for one day."

"Oh, Nirrti be praised," the gasping man managed once Balin let him breathe again. "Oh, in all my dreams I had not thought it ever would be so. And my master, he be yet among the living?"

"Alive, and walking, if that's what you're wondering. Now, we're leaving here. We don't need any more attention focused on us today." Jack pointed, indicating for Balin to remount.

"Oh, come. Come," the man insisted. He motioned to Jack. "My service to ye, Highborn master. I may guide ye through the ways to ye inn? At which do ye stay? Or a house? Do ye keep a house here within the walls of the City?"

"No. We're going to the Inn of the Well. It's supposed to be a pretty decent place I hear," Jack said.

"I know that inn, dear wonderful Highborn!" he said eagerly. "Even my own master's city home be close to it. With an alliance in existence between ye and my House ye have right to take ease there. It be grand, fine Highborn! With rooms of sunlight and fresh air as ye need. Oh, may I be of service this--"

"Yeah, sure. If you could just tone it down a bit, hm? We've already made a big enough splash on our way through the gate. Which way to Sven's place?"

Animals were not permitted far past the inner wall of the city. At the end of the narrow road, Jack's party stopped at the entrance to a tidy paddock while Lemmel made stabling arrangements with the proprietor.

Without verbal direction, Balin gently lifted Daniel from Jack's horse and held him cradled until Jack dismounted. Then he stood Daniel at Jack's side and knelt in the cobblestone roadway, placing Daniel's suede slippers back on his feet.

Jack kept one arm around Daniel's lower back and then instructed Balin to get Daniel's cloak.

"Weather be too warm for it, House. Not seemly," the big man whispered.

"Do it anyway--"

"Will draw more attention," Balin insisted. "Please, House. Take my warning to heart. We've a long walk ahead. He cannot bear closer scrutiny. He falls apart even now."

"And who's fault is that? Hacking that guy's head off right in front of him--"

"Was no choice, House. He had the veil on."

"Please!" Daniel interrupted the two. Then he turned to Jack, drawing a trailing edge of his veil in front of his lower face, resting his cheek on Jack's shoulder. Pressed to Jack this way, Gruber couldn't get at his cock. The relief from that constant sucking had Daniel sighing.

Jack drew Daniel into his embrace, letting his own cloak fall halfway around his lover. At least Daniel's ass was covered now. "Sorry, baby," he whispered in his lover's ear.

Young worker caste boys, easily as tall as Daniel and Jack were put into service porting House Ondeil's belongings to the city residence of House Wulfstag. Sven's servant vied with Lemmel to take charge of the porters, scurrying around from horse to horse issuing orders for the youths to be careful and to show proper reverence for the privilege of serving a Highborn of such great stature. After all, House Ondeil hosted the Sky. Though he didn't use those words he merely had to point to the blue sash on Jack's steward and the blue ribbon adorning his Champion. A very blessed house. A very wealthy house, Ondeil showed to be.

The horses were taken off to be brushed down, fed and stabled well. Jack squared his shoulders and took Daniel's hand. As they readied themselves for the short walk through the city, Lemmel brought Daniel a skin of water, helped him take a sip and then offered it to Jack.

The dusty road through the forest had dried Jack's throat but hadn't set him to coughing. Back in the meadows such a cloud of dust would have had him doubled over or flat in bed for days. Jack squared his shoulders and then put his arm back around Daniel. He motioned impatiently at Sven's man to lead them on. He'd had enough of this nonsense, and wanted to get Daniel off the streets as quickly as possible. Daniel looked pale. He

hadn't slept more than a couple of hours at a time since the attack in the port city. Balin was right. Daniel was falling apart.

As they moved along Jack surveyed their surroundings. All the buildings within the city's metal wall were wood and mud bricks. The roadways were paved with cobblestones. The roofs were a mixture of thatching and shingles. Many of the unshuttered windows showed glass panes, but more were bare. Apart from the outer wall, there was no evidence of higher technology to be seen within the city. It was as if a medieval village had been plopped down in the center of a space-age donut.

"What's your name, fella?" Jack asked, his tone betraying his impatience as Sven's man curtseyed yet again.

"Auluf," great Highborn," he answered breathlessly, walking backward to both lead Jack and to address him respectfully. He tried to curtsey again as he walked. "Auluf of the southlands. I serve House Wulfstag as did my da and his too. Three generations with Wulfstag from master to master. My da was steward to the master until ... the trouble. He died that day."

"Okay. Don't trip. Just turn around and get us to Sven's place in one piece, all right?"

"Aye, Highborn. Aye," he said while curtseying again.

Jack shifted his grip on Daniel, placing his arm more supportively around his waist, lacing his fingers together with Daniel's across the veiled man's bare midriff. Daniel was silent, very unusual for the archaeologist. They were walking through a new city. Daniel had to be full of questions and dying to get a closer look at things, but his head was down. He seemed to be in a daze.

"How far?" Jack asked Auluf.

"A short way, Highborn. If ye need a carry-way for ye Highborn to ride in one can be summoned. Shall--"

"No. He's fine. Let's not waste any time fetching a taxi. A carry-all. Just get going. You okay, babe?" Jack added in a whisper to Daniel.

He got a nod for a reply, and firmed up his grip on Daniel's fingers. "Won't be long. City's not that big."

"I know," Daniel whispered back. "I saw ... before that guardian put his hands on me, I saw ... When we were riding up here I saw the ... "

"Yeah," Jack finally said. "You all right?"

"No," Daniel answered. "But I will be. I just hated the feel of him touching my stomach. Like they did back in Drangaskogen. Never had that happen before. Not in an imparting. It was dirty. I don't want to talk about it."

Jack nodded, realizing Daniel probably couldn't see him with the sunlight striking the veil the way it did. He knew now that Daniel missed a lot, hidden under that veil.

They'd gone several yards along a wide boulevard, the clean street paved with rounded stones that were fit tightly together. Foot and handcart traffic moved slowly as if no one in the city was ever in a hurry. Small ornamental trees grew in the boulevard divider. They began to pass open shops, busy with customers.

Life here seemed easy and prosperous.

Stretching out ahead of them, Jack saw nothing but worker castes traveling up and down the boulevard or milling around among the shops. Then to his left he saw a smaller person appear for a moment through the break in the sea of tall, dark people. It was a Highborn man, elderly and stooped with age. His gray hair was fuzzy around the back of his balding head. Dressed in a bright, brocade jacket and linen pants, he tottered along with a worker caste servant woman in his wake. Then Jack lost sight of him. "Saw a Highborn," he told Daniel.

"Um," Daniel said.

"Yeah. An old guy. Had on a tacky jacket of some kind. There're two more together. That's three Highborn so far."

Daniel plodded along, his head still down.

"Hey, that shop," Jack said, tugging slightly at Daniel's arm to get his attention. "That a Highborn working in it? Someone who actually works for a living."

This got Daniel's attention and he looked up where Jack was pointing. "A tailor's shop? You saw a Highborn in there?"

"See through the open window? No glass," Jack remarked as he stopped in front of the open door of the little, one-story wooden structure. The shop was sandwiched tight between other structures as were most of the places they'd passed. The city had a limited amount of space and it seemed every square inch was accounted for. Jack peered through the window into the dimly lit interior, and then stepped back sharply as a veiled Sky suddenly appeared from the edge of the window to stare boldly out at the little group. The man wore a pale green veil with dull, mauve beads along the hem. He lifted the front edge an inch.

"Nothing for you here," the veiled Sky snarled at Jack.

Daniel pulled away from Jack and stepped through the dark doorway. He peered around the dim interior of the tiny shop. There were a few bolts of cloth and a small quantity of finished garments. The only person present was the veiled Sky. "Hello, I--"

"Be gone, slut master!" he sneered over Daniel's shoulder at Jack. "I don't have to sew for the likes of your pet," he said as he pointed at the naquadah circle hanging around Daniel's neck. Then the veiled Sky turned his back on Daniel and Jack, resuming his seat at a sewing table and began stitching on a garment.

"Please," Auluf called beseechingly to Jack. "Please, this way." He curtsied, holding his hands out to indicate the direction they'd been traveling.

"Sky-- Desire," Jack said, reaching through the doorway to cup a hand around Daniel's elbow. "Time to go."

"Jerk the leash harder. Your empty-headed slut has clogged ears," the veiled man hissed, his back still to Daniel.

Balking, Daniel reluctantly gave into Jack's urging. He shook his head as he backed out of the tailor's shop. His jaw muscle jumped repeatedly as he joined Jack on the roadway outside. "He ... I need to know why he was so angry."

"He seemed pissed off about the pendant thing," Jack said.

Daniel clutched his fingers around the circle of naquadah, feeling an echo of the old guardian's hands as he'd placed the cord around his neck. "The pendant. It means I've served in the temple. That tailor thinks I've served in the temple."

"But you haven't," Jack whispered. "It doesn't matter what they think. It only matters that you haven't."

"I haven't," Daniel agreed angrily. "But the label still fits, doesn't it?"

"No. No, desire, it doesn't fit."

"Stop lying," Daniel hissed, his hands now balled into fists around the cold circle. "I wanted to kill that damned guardian ."

"What did he say to you?"

"My navel. He wanted to know if I remembered when he'd fucked me in the temple. And not an imparting, Jack. Fucked. It hurt when he squeezed my balls."

"They pretty sore still?"

"Hell," Daniel swore angrily, "every fucking step I take reminds me of Drangaskogen."

"Then I should get a cart, or one of those carry thingies--"

"No you don't! I'm not helpless."

"I never said you were," Jack objected.

"And don't try jerking my leash again!"

"Highborn," Balin interrupted the tirade that had grown too loud. "We draw near privacy soon. Perhaps ye talk could be resumed then?"

"Yeah," Jack said, nodding irritably at the big Champion shadowing them so well. "Sky, just save it--"

But Daniel's attention had been caught by something else. "Look," he said, tugging on Jack's sleeve. He was pointing across the boulevard's divide, the tree and shrub lined strip of land that divided the two directions of flow of traffic.

On the other side of the street a Sky dressed in a summer length veil and dirty, slit pants was wandering in a circuitous path toward the coming busy intersection. Foot traffic and carts filled the roadway. As the shirtless and barefoot Sky aimlessly approached, all traffic ground to a halt and people averted their gaze, backing out of his path.

Daniel slipped out of Jack's loose hold and crossed between two shrubs to get a clearer look at the Sky. As Jack joined him, Daniel turned to his lover. "See how everyone backs away and all but ignores him? It reminds me of a scene out of India."

"India? Because they're ignoring the pink elephant in the room?"

"Wrong metaphor. And in this instance it's not a metaphor. He's like a sacred cow."

"Ugh," Jack said, glaring at Daniel. "That's a nasty comparison."

"But apt," Daniel replied, his gaze never leaving the Sky. Now the man had come to a halt, almost dead center in the wide intersection. All the worker castes that had been approaching the intersection were shifting in place, their impatience evident.

"How long do you think they'll put up with this?" Jack asked. "They don't look any too happy--"

"Why ask me?" Daniel cut a sharp glare at Jack, but then quickly turned back to watch the Sky. The man seemed to be gazing up at the sign above the entrance of a corner business. Daniel looked up at the sign too. It displayed a roasting pig beside a tankard of ale.

"Why ask you? You're the cultural expert."

"He's hungry, isn't he?" Daniel asked. He looked back at the man, noting how thin and dirty he was. "Jack, he's hungry." Daniel moved to step back into the street toward the intersection but Balin swiftly blocked his path.

"Let me pass," Daniel demanded, reaching to push at the big Champion.

Jack grabbed Daniel's hand, pulling him into a bear hug. "Don't do it, Sky," he whispered harshly in his lover's ear. "Don't let anyone see you push Balin around. You could get him killed."

Balin leaned down and whispered, his tone as harsh as Jack's. "The little Highborn appears to be lost. If he doesn't move on, doesn't take care of himself the temple guardians will come and assess him. Ye must not interfere, Highborn. If he be not able to bargain they will offer to take him to the temple so that he may serve and receive coin, food and drink."

"And if he refuses?" Daniel demanded.

"They will judge him to be unsound."

Daniel wrenched himself from Jack's embrace and dodged around Balin. He hurried into the middle of the intersection and stopped a step away from the dazed Sky.

"Hello there. I think you need some food and water. If you'll come with me ..." Daniel said, keeping his tone soft and non-threatening. He held his hand out to the young man.

"What? Food? No. No, I have no coins ..." the young Sky paused, licking his dry lips. "Water in the city fountains. I'm fine. I'm fine. No imparting today." He glanced from the eatery's sign to Daniel. "Oh. Kinsman. What did you want?"

"You were going to come with me. I have food to share with you." Daniel held his hand a little higher. "Shall we go now? You're hungry."

"No," the young man shook his head. "I'm fine. I don't need to take another imparting for a while. I'm fine. I have plenty of coins." He tugged at his empty imparting cloth that was tucked into the waistband of his dirty pants.

"If you don't get out of the street the guardians will come and--"

"No!" he said, his voice breaking in fear. "No temple! I'm not going there. I don't care what ... judgment. I won't go there ever."

Daniel took a hasty look around. Though no one was staring overtly at them, everyone in the vicinity was watching the exchange. And Jack was bearing down on them fast, his face set in a furious glare.

"Look, my friends and I are on our way to eat. You can come with us and eat too. Kinsman. Kinsman," Daniel added to reinforce the connection.

"Kinsman?" the young Sky asked. "You're a Sky. Why would you risk yourself? Why would you risk the guardians taking notice of you?"

"Come on," Daniel said as he reached out and took the man by his arm. He guided the now mute Sky toward Jack and the worker caste porters who were following him. At the edge of the intersection Daniel slowed, supporting the mute Sky more now. The man was trembling. "Which way?" he asked Jack. "We should get going before anyone gets brave enough to ask questions."

Jack was alternating his angry glare between Daniel and the surrounding city dwellers. "Not cool. You promised you'd quit leaping into the fire, remember?"

"I couldn't just leave him out there," Daniel protested.

"Of course you couldn't," Jack said, his tone not losing any of its anger. "You never could resist charging after someone about to throw themselves over a cliff."

"I know he's not Sha'ure, so shut--," Daniel paused and turned his back on Jack before continuing. "Lemmel, give me a flask of water. Do you have any of those little journey cakes handy? Give me one." He snatched the water from Lemmel and unstopped it with his teeth, then forced it into the trembling Sky's hand.

"Drink this. My House's servant has a cake for you. See?" Daniel took the little cake of fruits and nuts from Lemmel and pushed into the man's other hand. "Eat, kinsman."

"No," the man said weakly. "I won't pay for it by servicing your House's servants. I don't want to get fucked."

"None of them will fuck you," Daniel said, using the same harsh word. "No sex. No impartings. You don't have to. I can share this food with you because we're kinsmen. Eat it."

"Kinsmen," the frail Sky echoed. He took a nibble of the cake.

"We must go," Balin commanded. "Now."

"House, great House," Auluf dared to interrupt. "Truly ye do have an alliance? I mean, ye know of what was lost of course. And this should be proof. But now I see ye have a most unusual household. I mean ... "

"We are who we say we are," Daniel said, shocking the man more instead of reassuring him. As Auluf began to back away, his face showing his doubt and fright, Daniel hastily stepped to his side and whispered in his ear. "He would tell you so. Ashild."

Auluf gasped, his hand covering his mouth. Then he turned to address Jack, acting as if Daniel wasn't there. "Aye. My da served as steward and I was in training to be steward. I heard the sacred name, though I was not to know it. Ye are who ye claim to be. Come now. Ye Champion knows the right of it. This unseemly deed does not go unnoticed."

"Move it," Jack commanded his servants. He grabbed Daniel around his waist, pausing only long enough for his lover to get the veiled man in a firm grip and then they were walking hastily back across the boulevard and then down the roadway toward the city center. Porters from the stable trailed behind them.

Within a few moments they'd reached a two story walled dwelling. A tidy brick wall set at the road's edge rose twelve feet tall, hiding the lower story of the house within. Auluf opened an artfully decorated metal door in the wall, escorting the group into a tiled courtyard overflowing with lush plants and flowering trees. A wide stone path marked the way to the front door of Sven's city home. Auluf moved ahead and opened the tall door, curtsying low and indicating for Jack and the two Skys to precede him.

His boots rang clearly on the marble floor as Jack stepped over the threshold. He paused a few feet inside, standing in a pool of colored light. Over the door a round, stained glass window let shafts of dazzling sunlight into the grand foyer of the two-story home. The floor shone brilliantly with the multiple colors, bringing life to a mosaic of large marble squares set in a geometric, swirling pattern. The walls were of the same marble, varying in color from beige to a golden yellow hue. More windows with stained glass framed the door he and the two blond men had entered through. The interior was well illuminated with natural lighting.

Off to his left Jack could see a vast sitting room, very much like the one they'd found Sven in when they'd returned Ashild to him. A few yards in the two-story foyer and to the right a daunting, wide staircase led to the upper floor of the spacious home. Below the stairs, a hall led off to other rooms.

He heard rustling from the rear of the home. Two other servants rushed in, pausing in open surprise at the sight of a Highborn and two veiled Skys.

Jack appraised them quickly. Both were middle-aged women, worker caste servants showing the colors of Sven's household. He dismissed them as no threat. Jack ushered Daniel and the silent Sky to a padded wooden bench along the left side of the vast foyer opposite of the stairs. He let go of Daniel and stepped back as the two Skys sat. Daniel was still shaking and Jack suspected it was from more than the adrenalin surge at the city gate. Daniel was exhausted already.

The porters filed in and were directed by Auluf to a rear room of the great house, their sandaled feet slapping as they scurried to deposit their burdens. Sven's servant issued hasty orders to the two women, sending one scurrying upstairs to prepare bedrooms and another back to the kitchen to make a meal for House Wulfstag's honored guests.

Jack saw that Lemmel was kneeling in front of Daniel and the silent Sky, offering another journey cake and a flask of cool, berry juice. Satisfied that Daniel was okay for the moment, Jack peered around, reassessing what he could see of the great home. It was a defensible place, though according to Balin there was no overt crime in the city. The two-story structure was sound, with clean lines and tall ceilings. The windows had leaded glass, thick veins of channeled lead running around the small pieces of intricately shaped glass. No one would be coming through an unshuttered window into this house. The beautiful and fragile look of stained glass windows hid their true strength. The front door was metal-banded wood, equipped with sliding bolts at top and bottom. When buttoned up tight the place would withstand a small army.

Balin stood just inside the entry, tensely peering out the front door. Then Auluf was back, shooing the youths out of the door. He trotted after them, closing the gate behind them and then was back inside. He closed the door and then curtseyed to Jack again.

Balin joined Jack, standing in the swath of colored light shining through the round stained glass window.

"Rooms a-plenty, fine Highborn. Up above be accommodations of grandeur. A place for ye Champion near the front so that he may watch, and a bath now? Shall more servants be coming or would ye ... Best I conduct this with ye steward. My apology, fine Highborn."

"Ondeil," Balin said. "House Ondeil. And no more servants of the household come. If more are needed ye may hire a personal servant or perhaps another maid to accommodate." He turned to Jack. "As we do not spend coins at the inn, some are available for seemly servants."

"First let's get the kid there some decent food and then a bed, all right?" Jack said.

"Aye," Balin answered. "Lemmel, make the young Highborn comfortable. Auluf will show ye where."

"Aye," Auluf said eagerly.

Daniel patted the silent Sky on his shoulder and handed him the second journey cake. "Go with them. They'll show you where to rest and they'll bring you more food. You can have all you want here and you don't have to pay for it. From one kinsman to another. That's seemly. And if you don't mind, Lemmel's a steward of my House. He knows how to touch respectfully, knows how to not see, all right?"

The dirty Sky nodded, seemingly too numb to fully appreciate his change in circumstances. He held his hand out to Lemmel, and only then seemed to realize he still held the flask in one hand and a journey cake in the other. He kept hold of the food and drink and Lemmel cradled his wrist over his own sleeve and helped him to rise.

Daniel stayed on the bench and sagged back against the marble wall. He pushed his veil back up off his head to dangle down around his neck. Then he wiped his hands over his face, scrubbing at the lines of tension. Gruber's fingers were stubbornly clinging to his ankles no matter how hard he ignored them, but Joslin's grip on his wrists had faded as he rested. He wondered, if he could just stay still for a while, would their touch fade completely?

Across the spacious foyer, Jack stood at the bottom of the step and watched as Auluf ushered Lemmel and the young Sky up the stairs, pausing at the top. The maid had readied a room and she waited at the landing, offering her assistance to the young Sky. The man seemed almost to leap from Lemmel's supporting hand to the woman. He sagged against her.

"Lemmel," Jack called. "Come on back down here. You too, Auluf. The kid will be better off with a woman taking care of him."

"She'll get him cleaned up and comfortable," Daniel said. "Nonsexual," he added as Jack turned to him. Daniel stayed sagged against the wall, weariness written all over his face.

The two worker caste men descended the stairs and stopped on the bottom one just above Jack. Balin joined Jack at the bottom landing, waiting for the Highborn's further orders. Jack began to take off his travel cloak. He'd gotten the clasp undone and was turning to hand it to Lemmel when there was a sudden loud rap on the front door.

Jack's gaze flew to the door. "Shit! The bolts!"

Immediately following Jack's curse the door was flung open. Hulking worker caste men swarmed into the sunlit foyer. Jack took a step toward them but got pulled up short by Balin's huge hand snatching him back mid-stride.

"Temple guardians," Balin hissed a warning.

More than two dozen men, their long, dusky-blue robes fluttering in their haste, moved in through the wide door. Each one had the mark of Nirrti inked on his forehead. Several carried long spears.

"Honor, Highborn," the lead man said with a brief curtsy toward Jack. "Nirrti's servants come in answer to a call from her children. We are told one of her divine ones be here in distress?"

Jack tried to shrug out of Balin's grip. "What the hell is this?"

"House Wulfstag welcomes Nirrti's eyes and ears," Auluf said, jerking nervously as he stepped down in front of Jack and curtseyed low. He stayed in the awkward crouch and waved a hand to indicate Jack. "House Wulfstag's Highborn guest welcomes Nirrti's guardians."

"Temple guardians," Balin repeated under his breath. "Hold. Too many to cut our way through. Stay seemly or lose him now. They'll take him if even only ye prove to be unseemly."

On the other side of the wide foyer, Daniel leapt to his feet. His wide-eyed stare flew between Jack and the in-pouring of temple guardians. Hastily, Daniel began to tug at his veil, unwinding the tangle from around his neck.

"That be him?" one temple guardian asked.

Behind him, the elderly guardian from the gate stepped forward, his shifting stance betraying his fright. "Aye. Seemly. He come through the gate seemly. No need to look closer for any action at the gate, I swear it."

"That must be the one," another guardian said, pointing at Daniel. "Stopped a lost Sky in the street, he did. Took him, and not in a seemly way. Wasn't seemly then, so for that, we may test him."

"The veil must not be on," the closest guardian commanded, his hand outstretched as he stepped hastily to Daniel's side. He snatched the protective cloth from the blond man's fingers.

"My veil--" Daniel protested. "I was seemly in the street!"

"Kissed? Shared himself with the other Sky?" a guardian asked the one who'd identified Daniel from his encounter with the unwashed Sky.

"Nay. Not a seemly way about him. No sharing of himself. No kiss nor intimate touch did I see."

Daniel was surrounded by the huge guardians now, more than twenty around him and more coming through the door. Daniel tried to dodge away, to get his back against the wall but the guardians, followed by Gruber took hold of his upper arms. They stepped into the center of the grand entry, placing Daniel upright in the pool of colored light.

"Loop pulled?" one guardian asked.

"Aye," another answered as he dropped to his knees in front of the veilless Sky. "As was the one he took. That lost one, he has not earned a testing today. Lost in his mind, he be, but still seemly. He will find his way to the temple soon, unless some House or Champion takes his wares under their roof."

"Lost one needs a bath first, I think. He was filthy when I saw him on the street this dawn."

Daniel gasped and jerked away as the man grabbed his crotch. He moved to push the man's hands away, but a guardian behind him reached out and wrapped him in a bear hug, trapping his arms folded against his chest. His pants were being unlaced!

"Maybe Wulfstag's guest will take the lost one. If this Sky proves unsound and we take him for judgment, perhaps House Wulfstag's guest will not need to go far for a replacement for this one, eh?"

"I'm seemly," Daniel protested. "I--" His voice was stolen from him as the guardian slid his pants down. Another guardian began untying the loop of his underwear. Those too were pulled down.

"He looks to be sound."

"Aye. And Champion must have drunk from him right recent, judging by the brightness of the blue. That right, honored Champion? This be the Sky who gave ye that recent Odin's smile?"

Daniel gasped as one of the guardians wrapped meaty fingers around his balls. Pain lanced up into his belly. He bit his lip to keep from crying out. He was still so sensitive from the horrible racking of the goat's hair herb.

"Aye," Balin said, his grip on Jack tighter than ever. "Odin's smile came to me from yon Sky."

"And to ye House's steward?"

"Aye--" Lemmel tried to say, but his voice caught in his throat. He cleared it and then spoke again. "Aye," he said loudly, emphasizing his word with a nod.

"Right recent by the brightness of the hue, I'd say," another one of the guardians answered. He'd been holding a small white object. It resembled a pestle, an alchemist's instrument used for grinding ingredients into powder. It was about as long as the worker caste's hand, one end as thin as two fingers, and the other end widening into a ball shape. He held it up as he spoke, "If it was this Sky who blessed them with Odin's smile then there be no need to test him with a milking."

"Aye," another guardian responded, sounding neither disappointed, nor satisfied.

There seemed to be no particular hierarchy among them. One was bolder than the others, seeming to question louder and use grander hand gestures, but all were milling about, pulling at Daniel, inspecting him and anything else in the surroundings that caught their eye.

"Then he be in working order. Can impart Odin's smile. When was it ye last drank from him?" a guardian asked Lemmel. "Not more than a moon ago, I'd say. When, lad?"

Another guardian pushed at Daniel's chin, tilting his head back, peering into the blond man's blue eyes. Daniel jerked his chin from the man's grip and twisted away, catching sight of Jack again through the throng of men. Jack was glancing from Lemmel's blue eyes to Daniel, his brow creased in sudden doubt.

Across the foyer, the low desert youth's face grew tense. His naturally dark complexion flushed even darker. "Recent. I'm not--"

"Was not a bargain," Balin said gruffly. "Behind the veil, and not to be spoken of."

"Ah. Was more than an imparting, then?" a guardian demanded.

"No coin exchanged," Balin said, shaking his helmeted head. "Speak no more of it lest ye be judged unseemly and become an enemy of all within the Hall of Champions."

Daniel was trying to turn his head away from the man staring down into his gaze. Suddenly he grunted in pain. One of the men kneeling had tugged on his balls. Another man was now fisting his cock, pumping up and down the velvety length. He twisted his head, again finding sight of Jack through the throng of temple guardians. Way across the foyer Jack was staring at him, his jaw clenched. The distance between the two lovers seemed insurmountably vast.

One of the guardians moved and Daniel lost sight of Jack again. Terror began to close his throat. Two guardians took hold of Daniel's ankles and lifted his feet, forcefully bending his legs at hip and knee. The heavy, naquadah ring hanging around his neck swung to the side, dangling by his armpit. The guardians pulled off his slippers and cast them to the marble floor. Then his pants and underwear were taken from his body, and his legs were splayed wider. Another guardian leaned over him and looked into his eyes for a moment.

Shuddering, Daniel saw the man stick a finger into his own mouth and suck it wet for a moment. Then he leaned down farther and ran that hand under Daniel. A wet, hard finger probed at his ass. Daniel tried to thrash out of the grip the many hands and arms had on him. He struggled, feeling like an insect caught in a spider's web. He had no control over any of his limbs. More hands touched him. They'd lifted him higher. Terror battered at his mind. He twisted again, and caught sight of Jack and the gathering of others watching the scene from the bottom of the stairs.

Jack, with Lemmel and Balin behind him was staring at the display. The kitchen maid had returned and stood beside Auluf. Every eye in the place was on him, witnessing the assault. Panic gripped Daniel, robbing him of the awareness that he had to hide his pain, had to cooperate, had to show them he was seemly. Daniel opened his mouth to scream at Jack to help him. Then the guardian penetrated him. Pain swamped Daniel's consciousness and robbed him of breath, ripped the scream away before he could voice it.

"Ah," a guardian sighed with satisfaction. "Aye, this little Sky be well able to serve Nirrti."

"Let me have a feel. Ye say he be all sound inside?"

The finger probed deeper and Daniel clenched his ass. Another finger, Gruber's nasty thick finger, was digging beside the first, trying to penetrate him at the same time. He gasped in a lung full of air. Then another gentle tug on his too-sensitive balls tore his breath away again.

All around him lines of huge men were gathered waiting for their turn to penetrate him. And Jack was watching. It was his nightmare from the low desert come to life. Daniel clenched his eyes shut. The sound of their ragged breathing and harsh words assaulted his ears. He thrashed his head from side to side. Their hands, their smell, their sound was everywhere around him.

"Aye. Lusty little Sky. He makes a right decent living for his House, I'd wager. Many a fine mark to be earned by one who be so responsive. Much better than them spirit-dead ones who just lie under a man and take the seed without returning some joy. Ah. I'm in too. Here. Any other wish to feel him inside? Oh, it be in good working order in here."

The fingers came out of him roughly, sending a new flush of pain up his spine.

"Me. I'm for feeling inside, but let me taste. See if he truly be sound by taste. That be the way how I prefer to judge."

"Do we see too much pain in him? If so, that warrants further testing. He must be able to take an imparting and not let the pain stop him from serving his goddess."

Pain? Too much pain? They didn't want to see so much pain in him, that's what Daniel remembered. Hide the pain. Show them he could endure ... could serve.

Hands. Hands all over him. Fingers invading. Lips and hot breath on his flesh. A tongue pushing inside where the fingers had been! Dirty words. Sexual words assaulting him where Jack could hear. Someone was tongue-fucking his navel. The nasty old guardian from the gate? It was Joslin, trying to lick up his spilled seed, trying to take from him, steal his essence from him. They wanted it because everyone who looked at his friend Lemmel knew that Daniel gave it away frequently.

Jack was watching him. Jack was seeing them. Jack was hearing everything now.

What Daniel had feared more than anything was finally happening. Jack was seeing it. Never! He'd thought they'd get off this planet and Jack would never really know what it was like, would never see Daniel's body being used this way. This image would be there, burned in Jack's mind forever.

"Lift his ankles higher. I'm for being inside. The full test, mind ye. I suspect he cannot endure. If so, if the pain be too great then we judge him to be unsound."

Gruber was pushing his legs back, pushing his knees toward the table so Joslin could rape him next.

No! Daniel screamed inside his mind. No! Not in front of Jack! God, please, no!

His legs were pulled up tighter, his knees pressed against his shoulders compressing his lungs. The man who'd had him in a bear hug shifted his grip and other hands pulled his arms out from his body. Suspended in the air, he was held under his armpits and restrained at shoulders, elbows and wrists.

"Aye, though we do warn them so, the House that hosts a Sky, they sometimes grow too attached, too coddling. They let their little Sky grow too timid and pampered, never imparting and that be unhealthy for both." The guardian glared at Jack for a moment before turning his attention back to the Sky being tested.

Daniel gasped as the wet tongue left him. A hard cock--and how well he knew the feeling--a hard cock of a worker caste man pushed at his spit-slicked opening. Then it penetrated him. Daniel flung his head back against the solid chest of a temple guardian, his eyes clenched tight, his teeth gnashing together.

"He takes it. He endures as Nirrti decrees."

"Ye best not stay in too long. One as lusty as this, ye be likely to spill seed in him and if yon Champion does not take ye head, we will. Nirrti's children are not to be used thus. Not during a test."

"Just to make sure he ... be ... in working ... order," the raping guardian said. "Ah. Ah. Oh, ye be ... right. Too lusty of a slut. Enough," he said with obvious regret and then he pulled out.

"Keep him up. I'm for a quick push inside too. Aye. Oh. Aye. Working ... order. Tight. Tight." He withdrew only to be replaced by another leering guardian.

"Best we let him get back to servicing his House's needs then. All be seemly here. Get ye tool out of him."

"Well done. Aye, all be seemly. Put him down on his feet. Who minds his veil? The goddess' women will not have to end the life of this one today."

As the molesting hands left him, Daniel crumpled to his knees, hunching over and wrapping his arms around his bare stomach. His breathing was nothing but ragged gasps. The marble was harsh and cold under his bare flesh.

"Ye veil. Take it," a guardian said harshly. They were the first words any of them had spoken directly to Daniel. "Here, at least show the reverence and then I'll place it for ye. Cover, Sky, lest ye seem wanton, needing more of our mighty staffs in ye."

With a gasp, Daniel forced his eyes open and saw the veil held below him. Kiss it? They wanted him to kiss ... Someone pushed the vile cloth tighter under his face and against his lips. Then the guardian draped the thing over his head and neck to trail along the floor.

"Better now. Seemly. House Wulfstag be in order, as be his Highborn guest," the guardian said, nodding toward Jack.

The guardians filed out of the house as hastily as they'd entered, shutting the door behind them. Balin loosened his grip just as Jack heaved and tore from his grasp. The livid man dashed across the marble foyer, slamming the bolts closed on the door. Then he ran to Daniel's crumpled form. He knelt down on one knee and cautiously placed a hand on Daniel's shoulder.

"Sky." Under his hand, Jack felt his lover shaking. He was huddled on his knees, wrapped in a tight ball.

"Desire?" In the deathly silence of the foyer Jack heard a tiny, dull keen. It was an inhuman sound of pain and it was coming from his lover. Jack huddled lower, down on both knees now. Daniel was almost completely naked. His short top did nothing to cover him. The veil was draped across his head.

Jack tugged the veil cloth down Daniel's back, covering his naked flesh. The keen had grown louder. "Danny?"

Suddenly the sound stopped. Daniel clenched tighter into a ball, pressing his forehead to his knees and then down to the floor. He wrapped his arms over his head. A desperate sob tore from him, followed by an angry grunt. Then Daniel panted several times and took a deep lungful of air.

Jack shifted, putting his hand over Daniel's shoulder. Lemmel came and knelt by Jack, wordlessly holding out his recently discarded travel cloak. Jack snatched it from him and tugged it over Daniel. Under the cloak, Daniel stayed in a clenched knot, his grunts of pain growing louder and harsher. Then the terrible sounds morphed into a deep scream. The new sound came from the bottom of Daniel's gut, a harsh, frightening sound of emotional torture.

Jack sank onto his seat and clutched at the cloak-draped form of his lover. The sound sent his scalp tingling.

Daniel's hands came off his head, balled into fists. He smashed them against the marble floor, grunting with the effort. Another bass scream tore from his throat. This one rose in volume and gruffness and seemed unending.

Shifting back and easing his knees out, Jack tugged Daniel halfway into his lap. His lover stayed clenched in the tight ball, his face still down to the floor. The naquadah circle he wore dangled against the marble. Daniel was screaming incessantly now, uncontrollably,

and the sounds were so deep Jack could feel them rattling his bones. He held onto Daniel as the anger continued to gush vocally from him. He beat at the marble floor several times, and then lurched up, beating at his own thighs.

Daniel arched his back, his upturned face splashed with a rainbow of sunlight from the stained glass window. His bass, gut-deep screams continued on and on. Jack tried to snatch at one of Daniel's fists, only succeeding in scraping his lover's wrist with his fingernails. Daniel jerked away from him, clenching himself in that tight ball again, his fists pressed wardingly against his head. His angry screams continued, now somewhat muffled by his tucked posture.

Jack settled for holding onto him, letting him get some of the anger and hurt out. He glanced up and noticed that all the others except Lemmel had left the foyer. The young steward knelt a few feet away, his face a blank mask, hiding his emotions well. Solemnly Jack met the youth's gaze.

Lemmel's eyes were bright blue, as bright as they'd been that first day back in the meadow. Daniel and Ulfrik had come bounding in to the cot, happy and flushed from their day riding. And then Jarngerd had entered and all hell had broken loose. Jarngerd was so overcome with joy.

And Daniel had been so quietly, so beautifully embarrassed.

Now Daniel was clenched into a ball of anger, screaming out his pain. The deep, growling screams were rattling Jack's eardrums as well as his nerves, causing his scalp to tighten more and the flesh on his arms to dimple.

Jack felt a prick of pain tug at his eyes. He realized Lemmel had dropped his shimmering-blue gaze to the floor so Jack turned his attention to Daniel. The screams were still ear-bruisingly loud, deep and bone jarring. But now they were broken with sobs. Daniel was beginning to cry.

This realization had Jack clenching his own jaw, pressing his own lips together. His lover was crying. How Jack wanted to wipe that pain from Daniel's heart! But he couldn't. He couldn't protect Daniel, couldn't save him from what this world was doing to him. No one could. He rubbed Daniel's back, feeling the sobs building, the hitching of his breathing becoming deeper. Soon the sobs outweighed the screaming. Daniel's body shook constantly.

Jack looked up again and met Lemmel's too-bright eyes. How long ago had it been since Lemmel and Daniel had done it? And Balin? Why were Balin's eyes still so blue? Shouldn't they have faded some by now? Yes, if it truly had been a long time since Daniel had let Balin or Lemmel suck him off. Had Daniel been lying to Jack about his contact with the two worker caste servants? Had he been doing it with them behind Jack's back?

Shaking his head to derail that unworthy train of thought, Jack tightened his grip on Daniel. He tried tugging Daniel into his lap again and this time he partially succeeded. His lover sprawled over on his side, still in a tight ball. Jack leaned down and kissed his long hair and then sat quietly, supporting him.

The spill of light around them grew less brilliant. Jack wondered if the sun was moving past its vantage point or if clouds were rolling in. Daniel's sobs were growing quieter. His anger was either running out or exhaustion was taking its toll. He smoothed the cloak over Daniel's naked legs. Jack straightened his back, trying to ease his tired muscles. Then he wiped a hand over his own face. His cheeks were wet!

He'd been crying. Damn. He'd been crying along with Daniel and hadn't even realized it. Jack shook his head.

"Baby?"

Daniel drew a shuddering breath and then grew quiet. He didn't uncurl from his tight ball, but his sobs stopped. A couple more shudders shook him. He'd cried hard, Jack knew.

"Baby?" he tried again. "How about going upstairs and lying down for a while, okay?"

After several silent moments Jack felt Daniel's body begin to relax from its tight ball. He gently shook Daniel's shoulder. "How about it? A soft bed. Need to lie down." He didn't specify which of them he felt needed the bed the most.

Daniel drew a deeper breath and his body relaxed further.

"I'll get Lemmel to help us up. My back's stiff," Jack said.

Wordlessly, Lemmel rose and came to the Highborn men. He knelt down and helped Jack draw the cloak further around Daniel's neck. The veil was trapped under it, but when Lemmel made a move to straighten the white cloth Jack brushed his hands aside.

"Let's get up," Jack said to his steward. "Help ... here." He shifted his grip, going under Daniel's chest and guiding Lemmel to lift under Daniel too. Then Jack scrambled to his knees, wincing at the stab of pain he felt. He got to his booted feet and moved to put a supporting hand under Daniel, but Lemmel had scooped him up into a cradling hold. Jack stepped in front of the tall lad, tucking the cloak carefully over Daniel's torso and legs.

The clothes and slippers that had been so violently stripped from Daniel were left on the marble floor. The trio silently ascended the marble staircase, Lemmel going slow enough so that Jack could keep ahold of Daniel's shoulder.

Auluf appeared at the second doorway in the wide upstairs hall. Silently, he curtsied low, keeping his head down. Lemmel strode past the man, carrying Daniel into a huge

bedroom. Jack paused at the opening to close the door, shutting Auluf and any maids outside.

"Where's Balin?" he asked Lemmel as the younger man laid Daniel on the bed. The bed was a four-poster design with a solid headboard that reached up well over eight feet toward the tall ceiling. The room was easily twice the size of the grand bedroom he and Daniel had shared back at the meadows. Like Sven's home below the divide, the furnishings here were beautifully made, and also the correct proportion for Highborn men. Though the bed and chairs were wide enough to accommodate even Balin, they were low enough to be comfortable for Jack.

The floor was marble tile, Jack noticed. The house would have a very solid construction to support such extra weight on a second floor. He crossed the spacious room, discarding his jerkin on a chair on the way. The bed was positioned at a forty five degree angle from the corner of the room, and set several feet out from the wall.

"I do not know where ye Champion be at this moment, master," Lemmel answered Jack's question. "Shall I go inquire now, or would ye rather I stay and serve here?"

"No. My Sky and I will be fine. Go take off. Find Balin and make sure the place is secure."

Lemmel bowed and then withdrew. Jack didn't spare him a glance, but climbed onto the wide bed, kneeling by his cloak-wrapped lover.

"Wanna get out of this? There's some wash water over there. Probably warm," Jack added. He tugged the veil away from Daniel's face and smoothed his mussed hair back. It had grown so long since they'd crashed on Nortvegr.

Daniel shook his head and then burrowed his face into the pillow Lemmel had laid him on. His eyes were clenched tight. Then he reached up, drawing the veil and the cloak over his head again.

"Okay, then," Jack said. "Maybe just sleep now. Then later ... later we'll see ... Sleep now."

Daniel didn't answer him.

Jack glanced around the room at the row of floor to ceiling stained glass windows. He thought briefly about closing the shutters and curtains but decided to just stretch out for a moment. He still had his boots on. He kicked them over the side of the bed, feeling Daniel flinch as one hit the floor, and then flinch again when the second boot landed. Jack stretched out and then rolled tightly against his lover. He held onto Daniel, concentrating on feeling him breathe.

When Jack woke up the slice of room he was facing was inky black. He rolled slightly away from his tight embrace of Daniel and then noticed a flicker of candlelight coming from his right. Daniel was still in the same tightly curled position he'd been in earlier. Jack raised his head and turned to look at the source of light coming from behind him. Balin sat in a chair nearby, keeping watch over them.

"How late is it?" Jack whispered.

"Night fell not long ago, House," Balin spoke in a matching soft tone.

"I've got a headache. Thirsty," Jack added.

Balin rose and got Jack a glass of water from a bedside table. Standing on Jack's side of the wide bed he held the glass out. Reluctantly Jack took one of his hands off his lover and accepted the glass. He drank deeply. "Thanks. Now tell me the truth. How long has it been since you've sucked off my lover?"

"Too long, House." Balin took the glass and sat it down. "Do not misunderstand me. Not too long from regret, from possessiveness, but too long for my eyes to look as they do. I had seen the brightness of my sweet Lemmel's eyes, daily as bright as ever ... and thought it was ... that he and ye Highborn were still of high spirits. Playing they do, House. As two lads. I had thought still in private they continued their games. I had not realized my own were still as bright."

"How long has it been since you did that to him?" Jack repeated, wanting a firm answer.

"Since before we gusted at House Wulfstag."

"So your eyes should have started fading some by now?"

Balin pursed his lips and stared at Jack, his gaze clearly troubled. Finally he nodded. "If Ulrik's eyes are still as bright blue back in ye Meadows, then some there may have made the connection and realized ye Sky be more than just a Sky, that possibly he be the new Nortvegr. Some day soon travelers will arrive here from the Brooksmeeet council of elders to declare his holiness. We had best make our move before then, if there be any hope of avoiding contested rights and deeper temple guardian inquiries. Needless bloodshed," he added, his brow creased in thought.

From beneath Jack's cloak Daniel spoke. "Any temple guardian who dares lay a hand on me again ... "

"You awake?" He got no answer. Jack made a shooing motion at his Champion, sending the big man quickly from the room. Then he tugged at the edge of the veil that still covered Daniel's face.

"Don't," Daniel said frantically, his voice breaking with a sob. "Leave me ... alone."

Jack stilled himself and listened to Daniel cry softly. The sounds were so much less violent than the screaming he'd done downstairs. The pain had been overpowering in the foyer, swamped by anger. Now the sadness in his lover had overtaken the anger.

"I never ... " Daniel couldn't finish his sentence.

"Sky? It's all--" Jack bit off his words. All right? Of course it wasn't. Stupid platitude.

"Never would have lied to you about doing it with Balin or Lemmel." With each word Daniel's tone changed more from sorrow to anger. "I never would have lied, Jack."

"Baby, I know. I was stupid, thinking what I did--"

"I didn't want you to see that! What they did to me! Oh, God!" Daniel tore himself away from Jack and clambered from the wide bed. Nearly naked, he fled across the room, blindly stumbling into furniture. His veil slipped away, unheeded.

Jack flung himself off the bed and pursued his lover.

In the dim, flickering candlelight Daniel crashed into the chair Balin had been occupying. He went down in a tangle of naked limbs. On his hands and knees he sobbed, his mouth open wide. The circle of naquadah the temple guardian had hung on him dangled down, swinging with each wracking sob. Jack reached his lover and touched Daniel's shoulder. Daniel jerked away and the pendant swung violently, slapping against his chest.

With a startled jerk, Daniel grabbed at the pendant. Then he tugged it off, over his head and flung the offending circle into a dark corner of the room. It made a sharp, metallic sound as it struck an unseen wooden surface.

"That bitch!" Daniel screamed. "Her fucking slave mark around my neck!" Daniel scrambled to his feet, violently shoving the fallen chair away from him. Then he turned to the table and snatched a vase off it. He threw the vase to smash in the same corner where the pendant lay.

"She's dead, Sky!" Jack said, his anger matching his lover's. But Jack's anger was not aimed at the dead goa'uld. It was aimed at the damage that had been done to Daniel. "No reason to curse her. She's dead," he added, calmer now.

"That fucking bitch!" Daniel continued, his anger beyond control. He picked up the chair and lobbed it after the vase. It too crashed against the wall. Daniel stood there, dressed only in the short top that barely covered his nipples. His breathing was ragged.

"Oh God!" he swore, his voice now suddenly tinged with fright. He ran across the dark room and tossed the chair aside. Then Daniel dropped to his hands and knees, searching among the broken pottery for the circle of naquadah. "Oh, thank God! I found it. Jack, I

found it," he exclaimed. Daniel pulled the cord over his neck and clutched the pendant to his chest, his hands clenched over the cold metal.

"Sky," Jack said softly as he knelt at his lover's side. "Got it? Okay. Okay."

"Not going to serve. Won't give them any excuse ... " He bowed his head, unable to continue.

Jack pulled him into a tight hug, cradling Daniel's head on his shoulder. The candle light flickered, sending dancing, faint shafts of yellow light across the walls of the spacious bedchamber. Jack stroked Daniel's long hair and rocked him silently.

## **Chapter 32 A New Way**

Balin had been ordered from the room long ago. The single candle he had left burning in the vast bed chamber continued to dance and flicker on the round table. Jack sat on the cold marble floor gazing across the room at its weak flame, holding his weeping, angry lover in his arms. "Desire," he started, but stilled himself. What could he say? "It didn't matter, what I saw. I know this has been happening to you. Didn't make any difference for me to actually see it."

Daniel grew deathly still. "No difference ... " he said weakly. "No ... difference. Makes me no more of a whore than I already was."

"That's not what I meant. Not what I meant at all. I didn't need to see it in order to know what those men do to you."

"I never wanted you to see it. I never wanted to have to look into your eyes and ... "

"I love you," Jack said, pushing himself to speak words that had hardly ever crossed his lips before. "Desire, I love you with all my heart--"

A knocking at the door interrupted him. Daniel shoved out of Jack's embrace and scrambled across the floor to grab up his discarded veil. He had it halfway over his head before he stopped, tugged it back off and turned to stare at Jack.

"The veil," Jack said impatiently. "Put it on."

"It makes no difference," Daniel said angrily. "No difference. If it's them they'll just rip it off me. Rape me. It doesn't save me from them."

Another knock sounded against the wood of the bed chamber door and Jack scrambled to his feet.

"Sky, put it on!" Jack ordered forcefully. "Who else-- It could be Sven's servant and I don't want that man seeing you like this! Cover up!"

Instead of obeying, Daniel retreated to a far dark corner of the room. Jack took a step toward his retreating lover and then drew up short. He shot a quick glance to the door and then went to it, opening it a small fraction. Lemmel stood in the hallway.

"Ye did not call for me to enter, master." Lemmel looked troubled. He was holding a bright oil lamp.

"Damn," Jack swore violently.

Lemmel faced him without flinching.

"What's up, kid?" Jack snapped, and then turned to look for his lover. "It's just Lemmel," he called into the unseen depths of the room. Jack stepped aside, holding the door open wider for Lemmel to enter.

"Master, ye Champion sends me with light and food. I have trays without. Warmed, scented bath water comes soon as ye may wish. This fine house has a spa and a fine tub down below, but Balin said perhaps ye would wish to stay inside the safety of this room."

"Is it less safe out in the rest of the house?" Jack asked suspiciously as he paused on his way to Daniel. The lamp Lemmel had brought was now casting a big shadow from Jack. It danced jaggedly in the corner of the room where Daniel was standing. He stepped to his left, letting the lamp illuminate his lover.

Daniel had wrapped the long summer veil over his head, bringing the trailing ends down to cover his naked groin. He looked much as he had long ago in the tiny inn near the Stone castle. There, Daniel had studied his reflection in a polished piece of metal, imagining how he'd look if he had to wander the streets in a veil and an imparting cloth, the only things he legally owned on this world. The difference between that long-ago pose and this one was Daniel looked as if he had faded halfway out of existence now. He was colorless, vague somehow. He didn't meet Jack's gaze.

Jack winced. Then he got his cloak from the bed and brought it over to Daniel, forcefully wrapping it around the quiet man.

"Master, there be roasted bird, soup too. Fresh vegetables and soft seed-pods as my brother likes."

"Good. Sky, wanna eat?"

"No." Daniel shook his head, but gave into Jack's tugging. They moved back to the round table that had held the now-smashed vase. Jack pulled out the remaining chair and maneuvered and pushed Daniel into it.

"Clothes," Lemmel said. "I have for ye, Highborn."

"Stop it, Lemmel. Stop it. Don't call me that. Daniel. My name is Daniel--" his voice broke in a quiet sob that lasted only a fraction of a second. "I'm not high anything. I'm just me. Jack, please, we have to get out of here. I can't do this. I can't survive this."

Jack leaned over his lover and wrapped his arms around him. "We have to get off this planet. We have to find the damned stargate and dial home. But before we can do that you've got get it together. You've got to--"

"I know. I know!" Daniel covered his face with his hands. "I know," he said again, his voice muffled but growing stronger as he leaned into Jack's embrace.

Lemmel had retrieved the thrown chair and sat it beside Daniel. The construction was sturdy enough for a worker caste. It had not been hurt by Daniel. After Daniel straightened up and uncovered his face Jack let go of him and sat in the chair. He raked his fingers through his silvery hair. "We have to move fast. Balin said--"

"The eyes," Daniel interrupted him. He brought his hands back up to his face but balling them into fists now. "I haven't been doing anything with Balin or Lemmel behind your back. You know that, Jack. Tell him, Lemmel. The last time we had oral sex, when was it? Tell Jack," he commanded desperately.

"On the road to House Wulfstag. Soon after we left my master's new stone castle in the southlands ... Highborn."

In response to Lemmel's hesitation, Daniel tore the veil off his head. "Daniel! My name--"

"Baby, please," Jack said reaching out and laying a restraining hand on his lover. "You're hurting him."

Daniel glared at Jack and then looked up at Lemmel. The low desert youth was frowning. His eyebrows were drawn downward.

"Aye, brother. I cannot. Do not ask me to endanger ye so. My way be not that path."

"Our ways are not your ways," Daniel said softly. "Nox wisdom."

"And," Jack interjected, "the very young do not always do what they are told. The kid's busted a lot of rules for you already. Maybe that's one too many?"

Daniel dropped his gaze to the table, now laded with the tray of food Lemmel had brought, as well as a stack of Daniel's clothing. "I'm sorry, Lemmel."

"Ye may not apologize to me, brother. I need it not." Lemmel nodded decisively and then set about lighting lanterns suspended in sconces along the walls. When his tasks were

complete the room was bathed in an equal, warm yellow color. The shadows had been chased away.

With a deep breath Jack slumped back in the comfortable chair. Lemmel was back, pouring him a glass of water. Jack took it gratefully. Daniel had knocked over the one Balin had poured for him earlier.

"Starving," Jack said as he watched Lemmel move the food around, setting plates in front of the two seated men. "Wanna get dressed first?" he asked Daniel over the top of his glass.

"Don't you think I need to wash their slime off me first?" he asked bitterly as he pulled his veil back on.

"If you want," Jack said apologetically. "I ... guess ... "

"Master, even now the two serving women bring warmed water and a small, copper tub. The little tub be big enough for a Highborn to sit in. And House Wulfstag's northern steward, him he aids too."

"Who's with the other Sky?" Daniel demanded. "He didn't leave, did he? I hope those bastards didn't scare him ... or my ... I over-reacted. Did he hear what went on?"

"You didn't over-react," Jack objected.

"He sleeps, Highborn. Had a bath, he did, and eaten another meal. The Champion has seen to his needs and tells him many times no payment be due. Many times," Lemmel said, a slight annoyance showing on his face. "As if we would lie to a Sky," he added under his breath.

"He probably just can't believe his own good fortune, Lemmel. It's not you that he doesn't believe."

"Aye," Lemmel said, giving Daniel a small bow. "Ale? Wine?"

"Wine," Daniel said. "Something to help relax my muscles. But not so much that I lose control again. I want my other veil up here. Where is it? Both of them. The one your mother gave me too."

"Aye. Just so. All clothes are here," he said, indicating a small chest of drawers along one wall. The room was huge, with a high ceiling. Its sparse furnishings made it seem even more grand than it was. The small chest had been easy to overlook.

"Dawn arrives soon," Lemmel said as he brought the veils to the table. "Ye slept the night away."

"Needed the sleep," Jack said between bites. "Take it when you can get it."

There was a noticeable lightening of the curtains. Someone had closed them while the two Highborn slept, hiding the night-blackened, stained glass designs. Jack poured wine in Daniel's glass. "We've got to keep clear heads. Just a little, like you said."

Daniel snorted. "Don't need to tell me," he said angrily, and then his tone changed to one of bewilderment. "The eyes, Jack. I don't know what to say. It really has been a long time. Long time."

"We're not the same genetic stock as these people. Centuries of evolution. There've bound to have been changes. Nirrti wouldn't have accounted for that."

"Evolution? You're talking genetics now? Which one of us is the scientist here?" Daniel speared a bite of food with his fork but didn't eat it.

"Evolution, I was saying. So your ... semen ... It'd be different than the blue-eyed people of this world. Even a small difference could account for it. But these people ..."

"What?" Daniel demanded, the bite of food forgotten. He still held the fork with one hand, but was clutching Jack's cloak closed with the other, keeping his naked groin covered. "Balin said something about it, didn't he. What was it?"

"He comes, ye Champion, master. Wish him to discuss this with ye?" Lemmel took a step away from the table, searching the huge room for another chair. He found one and brought it and got a nod from his master.

Balin did arrive within moments, leading the maids and the steward who was toting a six foot long oval copper tub as if it were a little wash basin. Daniel hunkered down inside Jack's cloak, his untouched food completely abandoned now and glowered as Balin shooed the maids and Wulfstag steward from the room.

"Dawn, House. The sun rises. City has awakened even now. Market and eateries be open for them that would break their fast. We must talk. Plans must be made for the comfort of the dirty Sky."

"Dirty?" Daniel demanded, lifting his head and pushing his veil back to glare at the Champion.

"Aye," Balin said as he took the seat Jack indicated. "He be a lost one, a Sky with no allegiance, and bargains poorly. I do not know who owns his pants or pouch. They have been cleaned and are almost dry enough for him to wear when he awakens, Highborn."

"Why did you call him dirty?" Daniel demanded.

"He has no house allegiance to call him by, and I wished to distinguish him from ye."

"Hell," Daniel swore angrily. He dropped his head, staring at the table. "I'm probably dirtier than he is right now. Probably have been for-- He doesn't sell himself willingly to ... Never mind. I'll loan him some of my clothes. A shirt. Shoes. Lemmel," Daniel said hastily as he looked up, "get--"

"Highborn, I beg forgiveness," Balin interrupted, "but he, the unclean one, he be not of a mind to be more indebted to ye in an unseemly way. First the way of the Sky caste greeting one another, of sharing one's self or a bargain struck, and then may come food, drink."

"I'm ... They said I didn't kiss him. That's what I did wrong. I can do that, share myself."

"Okay, hold the phone here," Jack protested. "I mean, wait. Let's discuss this first. The guy, he's not real stable is he? Maybe we can kind of fix him up with a few marks and set him up in an inn or something? See if he can take care of himself?"

"No," Daniel said, thrusting himself away from the table. "Lemmel, where's the soap? I'm going to take a bath and then I'm going to get him some decent clothes and find out where he wants to go. Let him make up his own mind, Jack. He's not a slave."

Jack slumped in his chair, paying scant attention to his food and even less to Daniel's near-frantic bath for the next half hour. With the water ready, Daniel changed from one veil to the other, finally keeping on the very short one Lemmel's mother had given him and stepped in the tub with the short, white cloth firmly tied in place.

Dawn rolled in on Wulfstag's city manor while Jack stared at the food spread before him. His lover was in serious trouble.

Moments after their crash landing on this planet every moment of Daniel's life, every ounce of strength was spent keeping Jack alive. In Brooksmet he'd recovered from Thaid's attack, first by having to help Asny understand how to relate to the master miner's son. Then Lemmel had arrived and Daniel had come more out of his shell to take care of Lemmel, to make sure the young man was safe, that Balin wasn't taking advantage of him, that he was adjusting to village life well. Then it had been Ashild who needed Daniel after the kidnapping and near-rape Daniel had suffered at the hands of the false lord and his disgraced Champion.

Here, he'd found someone else to rescue, someone else to take care of so he wouldn't have to deal with his own pain. Perfect. Jack knew what this was. After Charlie had died, his Sara had moved her ailing father into the house, had found a reason to go on living, by being his care-giver. But that wasn't the one and only thing that ended their marriage. Sara's inability to grieve and heal was a serious barrier. Because of her withdrawal it had made it so much easier for Jack to turn his back on her. He'd emotionally abandoned his wife and his marriage. And he'd come back from Abydos in love with someone else. No, it hadn't been Sara's fault at all. Her actions had just made it easier for Jack.

Daniel wasn't grieving. He wasn't healing. He was just jumping from one temporary solution to the next. In fact, he was hauling temporary solutions out of the street now. And Jack wasn't going to let him go, like he'd let Sara go.

Hell no! Had his love for her always been false? Why was it impossible to even contemplate turning his back on Daniel? To contemplate not pulling out every last bit of strength in his body to save Daniel was unthinkable. Impossible. Because there was no other option. None.

And Daniel was his. His, God damn it! Not Lemmel's, or Balin's or Odamari's or any one of a hundred nameless big oafs. Jack O'Neil's lover! This whole concept of an open relationship, of a willingness to share Daniel with just any damned horny bastard who came along? It was shit! In Colorado or on this damned planet. Shit!

Jack glowered at his full plate. Finally he glanced up at his lover across the room. With his oldest veil on his damp hair, Daniel was having Lemmel shave his groin now. He'd soaked in the warm water long enough, used the chamber pot, gotten his hair cleaned and his face shaved. And now he was getting the final touches on his seemly appearance. Jack glowered at the low desert youth.

All the hair gone now, Lemmel used a soft towel to pat Daniel's groin dry. He was smiling up at the blond man, Daniel meeting his gaze under the bottom of the veil Lemmel's own mother had covered him with long ago. Jack took a quick swig of water and then slammed the thick glass on the table. Daniel startled, grabbing at Lemmel's shoulder.

"Sorry," Jack snarled. He got his boots from where Lemmel had sat them by his chair and pulled them on.

"I'm almost ready," Daniel said. "The summer veil," he instructed Lemmel, managing for a moment to ignore the groping hands of Gruber and one of the guardians on his wrists. "Would you check it for dust? It was on the floor earlier." Dropping the black, leather cord over his head, Daniel settled the circle of naquadah on his bare chest.

"Aye, Sky. Just so and it be ever clean now. Merely a damp cloth to it when ye were soaking in the little tub."

"Sky," Jack interrupted, then found he could no longer meet his lover's gaze. He glared at the table as he continued, "I don't want you to ... I mean ... I think it would be best for our relationship if you didn't have sex with anyone else for a while, okay?"

Daniel blinked, his mouth slack for a moment. "Are you aware that it wasn't my choice downstairs?" he asked, almost biting out the word, choice. He kept his grip on Lemmel, seeming frozen in place now.

"I don't mean that. I mean when it is a choice. I don't mean ... I would like it if ... you and me, we could maybe talk about changing our relationship a little, and make it more ... tight. I don't want anything coming between us."

"I have no choice, Jack! Do you think if they come back I can just say no thanks, fellas? My lover's been taken over by the green-eyed monster today, so could you come back later? Maybe he'll let his pet off his leash then."

"Sky!" Jack shouted. He scooted his chair back and rose to his feet, his fists planted on the table. "I mean I'm afraid for you. I don't think you're thinking clearly right now. You were attacked downstairs. That wasn't sex. What I'm talking about is sex. Like what you do with Lemmel and ... "

"Lemmel?" Daniel echoed, brushing at the phantom fingers clutching his forearm. No one was there.

The man in question bowed down, pressing his forehead to the floor.

As he moved, Daniel lost his grip on the younger man. He squatted, grabbing the towel from Lemmel's hands and wrapping it around his naked groin. Daniel rose and stared at Jack, his mouth again slack, his face betraying his shock.

"Sky, I'm sorr--" Jack said, starting to apologize.

"No. It's all right," Daniel said, holding his hand up to stop Jack. His tone was chillingly calm. "We'll discuss this later. I have things to take care of right now. Just hold that thought, and we'll get to it later. I need to get dressed now."

A loud knock on the door interrupted him before Jack could object. "Not now!" Jack shouted at the door. It opened and Balin strode in. He was in full leather armor, carrying his horned helmet under his arm.

"House, my duty to keep all as safe as possible. A tradesman summons at the servant's entrance. Him, he says to the cook that he has Sky business within. Says the ... unnamed one has a bargain of his. I'm for seeing what he speaks of, so as he has no right to return with the temple guardians. Bastards," Balin added under his breath.

"Go on," Jack said, waving dismissively at the man. Then he turned back to see that Daniel had gotten his underwear and pants on. "We still need to talk--"

"If this has to do with the Sky, then I'm going with you, Balin." He tugged his shirt on and then exchanged his oldest veil for the light, summer-weight one.

"No, you're not!" Jack said, holding one hand up toward Daniel as he turned and pointed his other hand at the big Champion. "Get down there and get rid of the guy. Give him

some coins or something and get him the hell out of here. Sky! God, damn it!" Jack swore as Daniel strode past him, shoeless, his summer veil in his hands.

Balin stepped out of Daniel's way and glared at Jack. "Ye best see him stay in here."

"Sky!" Jack stomped after his lover. In the hall Jack came face to chest with Wulfstag's city steward. He drew up short of running into the taller man. "Should have gone to an inn. Least there I could have locked him in a room. Taken the key."

On the landing at the top of the grand staircase a much cleaner, scrawny Sky stood with one of Wulfstag's female servants. She was offering him her supporting hand to go down the stairs. He had on the slightly damp, pale yellow pants. The pouch, wetter than the pants, showed through the thin fabric. His moist veil was on securely. Cleaned of dust and grime, it showed to be a pure white color at the crown, deepening to a delicate yellow hue at the hem.

The Sky looked up toward the coming group. What was visible of his face showed fear.

"What's going on?" Jack demanded of the woman, jogging a half step behind Daniel. "You make him get up? You should have waited for me."

"Honorable House," The steward tried to explain, "a tradesman with a right has come. I only acted to let this Highborn know he was summoned. I did not tell him his presence was required. I would never-- It be not possible to make a Sky-- I could not keep this from him before I tell ye as it be his right, as he be not hosted by ye, his right to know. We may not--"

"Never mind!" Jack snapped over his shoulder at the trailing man. "The damage has been done. What does the guy want?"

"To speak with yon Highborn. It be not my place to--"

"Balin, get the hell down there and ... You know what to do."

The big Champion ran down the stairs, donning his helmet as he went. The silent Sky was cowering against the servant woman as Jack and Daniel with Lemmel arrived at the top of the stairs.

"Are you all right?" Daniel asked. "Kinsman," he added. Hastily, he draped his veil around his neck and then held out his hands, palms up.

The veiled Sky put his hands in Daniel's and then leaned forward, offering himself for a kiss.

Daniel glanced sideways, glaring at Jack for only the fraction of a second and then kissed the man who's name he did not know. It was a chaste kiss, lips closed and eyes open. As

he withdrew he tried to smile encouragingly, and brought his hands back away from the veiled man, straining to keep the move smooth, despite the pull of the vaporous guardians who wanted his arms far out from his sides.

He concentrated hard. "You meet my ... desire, the Highborn Jack Ondeil. He follows the Nortvegr. He'll tell you my name when the servants have withdrawn." Daniel glared at the woman. His veil was around his neck, the weighty gold embellishments making it a heavy collar. He moved it up over his head, straightening out the beaded edge to hang on his cheeks. By the time he got it secured in place the Wulfstag servants had retreated down to the kitchen. The guardians, Gruber and Joslin didn't leave.

"We should go down with them," Daniel said. "There seems to be someone--"

"Not yet," Jack said. "Gonna finish the introductions?"

"The next line is yours, Jack. I would have thought you'd learned that by now."

"Ah, yeah," Jack said snidely, his eyebrows climbing his forehead. "This is my desire, and my life mate. We're mated for life. This is ... " his voice dropped to a whisper before he could say the name, "Daniel. For life," he added firmly, "and I'm determined to keep it that way."

"Daniel," the veiled man said as he nodded. "I am Heyerdahl. Unhosted," he added, sounding apologetic about his circumstances. "Thank you for the food. And-- and the warm bath? I had not experienced such a wonderful thing outside the garden. Though, don't misunderstand. The city fountains are a fine place to bathe, and ... and I like the water there. It's nice. Nice. Isn't it?" he asked, his voice betraying a deep fright. "I like the city," he added hastily. "Nice."

"I suppose it is," Daniel said, giving the man a little smile as he rolled his lips into a tight line. "We were just about to have breakfast. Would you care to join us? First we have to get rid of whoever's come--"

Balin's boots rang loud on the marble floor of the grand foyer far below the balcony railing. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, gazing up with a troubled expression on his face.

"What is it?" Jack called down the stairs, moving past the two veiled men.

"Ye best come, House. This one will not settle for coin. It would be charity to let yon Highborn pay for what he cannot own. Man comes for what be rightfully his, I fear. Ye Highborn will not like ... "

"I bet," Jack said angrily. He shot a glare back at Daniel. "Stay here. I'll go see what it is--"

"House, this be not settled through coins, nor even veil marks. There be no price for it."

"Damn it! I don't like giving orders and then finding out they're impossible to follow."  
Jack trotted down the stairs.

"Aye," Balin said, nodding in complete agreement.

The two veiled men were a couple of steps behind Jack as he reached the bottom step. He stopped on it, facing his Champion.

"Best for it if I bring him in here, Highborn. Ye'd not receive him in the kitchens or servant's way as that be beneath ye dignity. Him, he be nothing more than a tradesman, master of a drinking house. Come for what be his."

"Get him," Jack snapped. Then he turned around and saw who was two steps up the staircase behind him. "You're supposed to wait upstairs."

"I just followed Heyerdahl down. You can't order him to wait upstairs, Jack. He's not your slave."

"Please!" Heyerdahl objected frantically, reaching out and taking Daniel's left hand. "I don't understand. How can such angry words--"

"My apologies," Daniel interrupted, squeezing his grip in Heyerdahl's hand. "I'm not angry. Neither is Jack. We just got interrupted before we could have breakfast. Please forgive our haste."

"No," Jack interjected. He went up one step and reached up the small space that separated them. He took Daniel's right hand, and then he brought it up to his lips and kissed it. "I've been unapardonably rude and overbearing this morning, showing ill manners to my desire. My mate for life. I apologize to you both. I really mean it even if this isn't the most ideal way to say it, or the timing stinks, or ... not the time or the place but I do mean it."

"Jack--" Daniel was shaking his head in dismay. Jack's touch felt so good, as if he had the power to dissolve Gruber and Joslin. Daniel sighed in relief. Then Balin returned with a worker caste man and Jack stepped away to face him. From the front, Joslin's rough fingers pushed up Daniel's inner thighs. Behind him, a guardian was breathing on his neck and Daniel tried to move away from the hot moistness and the stench only to find that increased the pressure from Joslin.

The new arrival in the hall was dressed in muslin breeches, the legs tucked into thick-soled, brown boots. He wore a long-sleeved tan shirt with billowing sleeves. Over this he had a tan jerkin, laced tightly over his ample belly. He was a full head shorter than the Champion who escorted him to within a dozen feet of Jack.

The man curtseyed low. "Honor, Highborn. Honor."

"Yeah," Jack said. He faced the man squarely. Then he rolled his shoulders to work tension from his body. He stood on the next-to-bottom step, leaning against the too-tall stair banister and studied the man. "What can we do for you today?"

"Naught but allow me unmolested to have what be my own property, Highborn. If ye be hosting the little Highborn now, then ye will have the task to provide him with what I come for anyway. So I be taking mine and am on my way. No trouble here, Highborn. I follow the Nortvegr."

Balin cleared his throat and took a step closer to the shorter worker-caste man.

"What's yours," Jack stated the question.

"Aye," the man answered, curtsying again.

"Fine," Jack said, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head. "Go for it." He waited for the man to respond.

"Aye," the man said, seeming to be waiting for Jack to deliver something.

Silently, Heyerdahl pulled his hand from Daniel's grasp and moved down past Jack, off the stairs. He began fumbling at the laces of his pale yellow pants.

"Whoa there, buddy boy," Jack said hastily as he stepped down between the undressing man and the worker caste tradesman.

"Jack?" Heyerdahl said, his eyes squinting in confusion. He kept unlacing the still-damp pants.

"I see them had a washing," the tradesman interrupted. "Would have fetched me more if they still had his self on them. Though, with the loss of him as a nightly draw sitting in my tavern, I be glad enough to take what profit I may from the selling."

"You want his pants?" Daniel demanded as he joined Jack in making a human blockade. "Damn. His pants. You own them, don't you?"

The man addressed Jack, ignoring Daniel completely. "Clothing, in exchange. Was a bargain, Highborn. Him, though, not made an appearance much of late. So the profit was not much to me. I'm for having what be mine now that I found him. Them temple guardians, though, they did see him many a day and would never once tell me where my clothes be so as I could have what I own back. Bastards. Then today they done go and say, he be here in House Wulfstag's fine manor. Glorious place," he added as he looked around at the beautiful walls and floors.

"Wait a minute. I'm not hosting this guy. His pants aren't mine," Jack objected. "I'm not hosting him. If you want them because you think I'm hosting him--"

"Makes no difference to me," the man said as he shrugged. "I've a need to have my property before the value goes to naught."

As Heyerdahl finished getting the stubborn, wet laces undone Daniel stepped up to him and laid a hand on his arm. "Is this right? He owns your pants?"

"Yes," Heyerdahl said, his voice very weak. He pushed the clinging material down his legs and stepped out of them. Then he began untying the loop of his underwear.

"Not those," Daniel objected.

"Aye," the tradesman said, still speaking as if he were only addressing Jack. "Mine and I've the right to see him shed. My property, I've a right to see it come off." He stepped to his left to get an unobstructed view of the still-veiled Sky.

Balin advanced right behind the man, keeping him within a half an arm's length, a lethal distance.

"Oh," Heyerdahl said, his voice sounding hollow. He stopped tugging at the lacing and removed his plain veil. He laid it over the stair banister and resumed to work at the wet ribbon. He was breathing more rapidly now.

Unveiled, Heyerdahl looked to be in his early twenties. His hair was almost pure white. It fanned out across his shoulders, hanging below his waist. It looked thin and wispy. His upper body had a sprinkling of pale freckles, attesting to summers spent without a shirt. His face was non-descript, neither handsome nor ugly. Though terribly thin, he would have blended into any crowd in any of the Norse countries. His eyes were a pale blue, and his lashes long and slightly darker than the hair on his head. Both his face and what was visible of his groin were freshly shaven.

"Couldn't you return and get them later?" Daniel demanded, his voice tinged with anger now.

"What comes due me. The value goes down even by the minute," the tradesman said to Jack, and then his tone became more gentle. "Charity hurts the Highborn. To leave them once the value begins to drop be charity."

"Of course it is," Daniel said snidely. "You want them warm from his body, don't you? Too bad we cleaned them. How much will you lose now that they don't have his ... essence on them? Hm?"

"Highborn, much," the man said regretfully. He kept flicking his gaze to Jack when he spoke, though he was answering Daniel's angry questions. "And if ye could hurry, Sky? Best I be back and have all up for sale within the hour. By tonight they'll have sold. I want more men to have a chance to bid. Patched a tear here, I see."

Heyerdahl got the ribbon undone and released his genitals from their bondage. He stepped out of the underwear and stepped around Daniel to hand the clothes to the worker caste man.

"Aye. But where be my shirt?" he asked. "Ye owe me a shirt and if ye have lost it, then for me there be naught but ye pay me some for it. Time with ye not veiled--"

Daniel lunged between the two, ripping his own shirt off over his head. His veil came with it and ended up in a tangled mess. He jerked the two pieces of fabric apart, and then thrust the shirt at the man.

The big-bellied man took several hasty steps back, flinching from the proximity of Daniel's veil. "Please!" he begged, his voice and flinching manner betraying his fright of the smaller man and the cloth he held.

Daniel drew his arm back and then flung the shirt at the man's feet. "His shirt," he said tersely, and then his tone changed to one of mock-cheeriness. "Sorry. Guess I had put it on by mistake this morning. You know how it is. Us Skys. Such empty-headed little boobs. There you go, pimp. There's a shirt. Go sell it." Daniel's chest was heaving. He was breathing too deeply. He stood in the marbled grand entry, bare except for slit pants that rode so low half his ass showed. His nipples were hard in the slight chill of the drafty space.

The tradesman scrambled to grab up Daniel's discarded shirt. He clutched the wad of clothing to his face, taking a deep sniff.

Beside Daniel, Heyerdahl was completely naked, his hairless groin fully exposed. The younger Sky turned his back to the room and got his veil. He clutched it to his chest, his head bowed in fright.

Jack took a menacing step toward the tradesman but had no reason to go further. Balin had grabbed the man by his collar and was now forcefully helping him depart through the servant's entrance.

"It's okay," Daniel was reassuring the naked Sky. "I'll loan you some of my clothes."

"I cannot," Heyerdahl said. "I cannot repay such a terrible debt."

"You can do other things besides impartings."

"No," the man whispered, his head still bowed.

"Jack?" Daniel said, looking to his lover for help.

With Daniel's eyes on him Jack felt a great wash of warmth. "Mated forever," he whispered. "Yeah. Uh, yeah we can figure something out. You got prospects. You know

how to cook?" he asked hopefully. "I've got this dish in mind. Round, flat bread. Tomato sauce. A nice thick layer of cheese. Know what pepperoni is?"

Heyerdahl didn't know what pepperoni was, and had never been in a kitchen. He sat at the round table in the master bedroom with the other two Highborn, covered in his veil with his imparting cloth across his lap. With his head bowed he was listening to Jack and Daniel discuss options.

Lemmel was on the far side of the vast chamber, working in the area that was being used for bathing. Balin was off tending to House business downstairs.

"Clothes first," Daniel said. "If you can't buy them for him then maybe he could bargain with ... Lemmel. How about Lemmel?" he asked the silent Sky. "You could perform some chores around here. Lemmel needs help taking care of things like cleaning Balin's armor or unpacking supplies. We don't have enough servants with us here in the city. They're all down south in my desire's village and on his meadows lands. For help around here, Lemmel could pay you by getting clothes for you to wear. And Lemmel's an honest man. He follows the Nortvegr. He could arrange--"

"Babe," Jack interrupted, "that's a fine idea. I'll help Lemmel figure out the details with Heyerdahl. You need to eat something, and ... slow down. Take care of yourself first, okay? Eat, then get some rest if you can."

"I'm fine, Jack."

"Aren't you always?" Jack said in a troubled tone of voice. "But you have to stop trying to rescue him. Let the rest of us do our part and you worry about you for a while. Hmm?"

"Lemmel," Daniel called. "Where did he go? Lemmel," he called louder, looking for the busy youth who'd left during the tense conversation.

"Here, Highborn. How may this one be of service?" the youth called as he re-entered the bed chamber carrying pots of warm water for Jack's bath.

As Lemmel sat the water by the copper tub Daniel joined him there, speaking in low tones to the steward as he worked to prepare Jack's bath.

Staying calm through the twice-delayed breakfast was difficult for Jack. He listened as Daniel finished cooking up a scheme with Lemmel. His plan was to take the veiled man down the boulevard to visit the tailor who was a Sky. Jack bathed, with Heyerdahl, Daniel and Lemmel as an audience. Then he refused to leave the manor until Daniel had finished his breakfast.

They walked fast down the roadway back to the tailor's shop, an uncomfortable walk for Jack, with his intense lover on one hand, and a nearly naked stranger on the other. It was still dumbfounding to see the way people ignored Heyerdahl's nudity under his long,

summer veil. The veil hung low enough to cover his groin, but was so thin it really hid nothing.

On the walk they passed another Sky, this one dressed in so many jewels he sparkled like a chandelier. His eyelids were dusted with a dark blue color and his cheeks and lips were colored a soft shade of rose. His hand was resting on that of a steward. The Sky turned away, pointedly averting his gaze from Jack's odd group.

Peering hard at the veiled man's back Jack wondered if he'd turned away because he was willing to recognize that the stranger Jack held hands with was naked. Or did he turn away because he was afraid of taking notice, and by doing so, drawing the attention of guardians as Daniel had? Was it self preservation or maybe disdain for the lack of jewels and makeup on the two men Jack escorted?

Jack stopped at the shop door as Daniel hurried Heyerdahl inside. Lemmel followed, making the little shop terribly crowded with his huge bulk. Standing outside the door, Jack peered nervously down the street left and right, just as Balin was doing.

"So far, so good," he said to the big Champion.

"Aye. And for how long?"

"You're sounding a little pessimistic there, buddy boy. Am I rubbing off on you?"

"Nay. We have not rubbed since before walking on Wulfstag's posted land, House."

"Eh ... Never mind." Jack shook his head. He spared a moment to tune in the angry voice he'd been expecting from the little shop at his back. Yep. Daniel was pissing someone else off today. Jack felt less singled-out now. "This won't take long, Balin. That Sky's gonna throw them outta there any minute."

"Aye," the Champion said with a big nod.

"You don't have to speak to me," Daniel said, remaining very calm in the face of the hurled insults Lemmel was having to field for him. "This man," he repeated, this time pushing Heyerdahl in front of him, "needs some clothes. My desire's steward wishes to buy some clothes for him to wear, as he's struck a bargain. If you'd just--"

"Steward," the tailor sneered, "Your master's pet presumes to foist himself on me. You may think you're going to get to use this young street-urchin and make my handiwork part of your vile bargain but you're wrong. Get out of my shop, out of my sight before I slap you."

"You'll do no such thing!" Daniel said, lifting the front edge of his veil above his eyes. He stepped solidly in front of the steward. "Lay one hand on Lemmel, endanger his life like that, and I'm going to knock you on your ass. Lemmel hasn't done a damned thing to

you. He doesn't deserve this kind of treatment. All he's done is try to help this Sky out, get him some clothes. He's agreed to hire the Sky to do some cleaning and general housework in exchange for room and board and clothing. You have no right to hurl that attitude at this Sky or to threaten Lemmel's life. Understand?"

"I won't hear your fancy words, steward," the man kept arguing, still managing to ignore the person who was actually speaking those fancy, angry words. "There are other tailors, worker caste tailors who'd be damned glad for a chance to measure your new sex toy. Go find one. You'll get a much cheaper price from them, just for the privilege of handling--"

"No one is going to grope him," Daniel said. "And if price is your concern," he paused and turned around to Lemmel, "show him what you're prepared to pay. Go on, Lemmel."

"Aye, Highborn." Lemmel withdrew five of the oblong gold marks from his pouch. He reached over Daniel and laid them on the tailor's table. "For the outer wear as what my master's Highborn, what his friend needs. For inner wear I had thought coins, of which I have more than--"

"Friend?" the tailor interrupted, holding his hand out to stop Lemmel. "Who's friend?"

"Aye," Lemmel agreed. "Here, the friend of my master's Highborn, him who stands in ye shop even now. And a fine shop it be. Never did I see such a shop until I come to this city. In the low desert we have no such. Clothes there be made by the wearer or their ma. Here, though, we see such a wonderment of things. All manner of things that never did I think to see. Such as this shop, and the fountain in the center of this city I hear has water free for any who wish. This we cannot even dream of in the low desert. I have seen things of wildest wishes this day. I am sore blessed."

"Yes," the tailor said, again with a sneer to his voice. "I can see the blessing in your eyes. Rather bright, isn't it?"

"Aye. Gifted freely to me by one who be more kind than ... than I had thought ever to know. And his friend will know such kindness, if only ye will strike a bargain to make him some clothes that will be his to use until neither he nor I walk this world. Thus be our bargain."

"Forever? That's not possible. What could he possibly do for you, you who have Odin's smile, what could this unskilled Sky do for you?"

"He has agreed to assist me in caring for my master. But more valuable, his assistance will aid my master's Sky, who counts him as friend. One friend to aid another, this be priceless, my ma says. So for that, the worth be uncounted, as are our days left on this world. A fair bargain. I follow the Nortvegr."

The tailor regarded Lemmel silently, his lips rolled inward. Finally he blew out a breath through his nose and crossed his arms. "I rent this shop, desert boy. Don't call it mine."

Fine or not, it's rented, just like his clothes will be." Then his face softened and he pushed his veil back off his head. "What's your name, desert boy?"

In the face of the angry tailor's tirade, Lemmel's features had lost none of their comeliness. "Lemmel, I be, tailor Sky. Lemmel Larsson. A trader I was, caravanning in the low desert in my youth, and then I come north to be with my master's Sky and to repay him for the unbargained blessing he give to my family. Only, serving him be hard, as he keeps giving more blessings unasked, though I have not even had a fraction of time to pay off the first," he said, his voice now colored with disdain. "I ask ye, tailor Sky, how can a man to pay off what he owes when the counting be so uncountable? Such as when one friend does for another, the untold worth of that, friend to friend, as taught to me by my ma?"

"You don't owe me anything else, Lemmel. I haven't given you anything you haven't returned to me. We're equal."

"Then truly," Lemmel said as he peered down at Daniel's unveiled, smiling face, "truly I can say that about ye friend as he will return what be given and it will be equal between he and I."

"This sounds ... " The tailor didn't finish, but kept shaking his head. He turned his back on the three who crowded his little shop and rummaged through a wooden cabinet. "I have ... Well, this would be better. You'll want something that will last a long time. Not something light like most of the strutting whores prefer to wear. Something you can work in, move in. Something that will last so you won't have to make another bargain any time soon. I have the perfect weight of suede. Brushes clean. Not too difficult to keep. And Lemmel, you didn't mention a winter cloak or boots. Does that mean you don't care if he stays warm in winter?" The tailor glared over his shoulder at the desert youth.

"A cloak, I must confess I had not thought of a cloak. Jarngerd, she who weaves my master's wool would have made him a fine cloak were he living in House Ondeil's rich Meadows below the divide. I apologize, Highborn," Lemmel said, bowing to Heyerdahl. A cloak--"

"No," Heyerdahl said. "A cloak? It's not necessary."

"Just as ye say," Lemmel said. "A Sky be never wrong. Though, if later one be needed ye have but to say and one shall be procured."

"That's fine," Heyerdahl said to the big worker caste.

"His friend," the tailor said, continuing to address Lemmel, "would do well wearing this suede." He held the beige roll of suede out toward Lemmel.

"Oh, aye," Lemmel said, his voice tinged with awe. "Fine and right soft looking it be."

"Go on, desert boy. Touch it," the tailor insisted.

"But ye hand be too near--"

"I've got my veil off. Don't be afraid. We're negotiating a bargain here. I've agreed to make the clothing. Shirt, pants and I can supply him with summer slippers and winter boots too. I have an arrangement with the cobbler next door. I'll give him the leather, and the footwear will be ready within the day. Underwear, I have a plant fiber cloth that works well. A cloak too. One mark is enough payment for all."

"Thank you," Daniel said softly.

The tailor shot him an angry look and Daniel bowed his head to avoid the man's accusing eyes. The pendant that marked him for what he was hung heavily around Daniel's neck. He reached up and covered the naquadah circle with his hand, hiding the evidence that damned him so completely in the tailor's eyes. Joslin's tongue vied with the old guardian to see who could lick him deeper. Daniel slid his hand lower, covering his navel. He shuddered.

No amount of pushing got rid of their disgusting touches. When he was beside Jack, against Jack, the touches faded a little. Jack seemed to be able to block some of them from getting to his skin.

Heyerdahl's veil had to come off. He'd done so bravely, standing in the little shop to be measured. The tailor had kissed the timid Sky before laying hands on him to take measurements. He kept them there for a long time, fitting scraps on Heyerdahl and whipping up the ribbon-woven underwear pouch that every Sky wore. Heyerdahl stepped into the finished garment and gratefully pulled the loop. Then he re-donned his veil and sat by Daniel on the small bench. The tailor continued to fuss with the suede for a while and then told them he could have the clothing ready by dark, if they wished to send Lemmel back for the items. As he said this, Daniel realized the man was finally addressing him directly.

That fact must have dawned on the tailor's mind at the exact moment. One moment the tailor was chatting in a friendly manner and the next he looked as if he'd been slapped.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"We've met now. Unseemly," the tailor said, shaking his head. "Unseemly. If a guardian were looking in ... "

"We'd need to make it seemly," Daniel said. "That's all."

"I've never had to kiss one of you," the tailor said angrily. "Damn. Never thought I would. I've always managed to avoid the whores."

Daniel bowed his head, studying his hands balled tightly in his lap.

Heyerdahl reached out and laid a comforting hand on Daniel's arm. "I'm sorry. That seems to have hurt you somehow."

"Me? You don't like it either. You don't bargain for impartings. You chose to starve instead. I had a choice too. No, I didn't. I didn't have a choice. Jack's life depended on me ... "

Lemmel squeezed his big bulk between the table and the bench against the wall and knelt. Then he took Daniel's fists in his big hands and kissed them one at a time. "Highborn," he whispered, "ye never have to again. My life, Highborn. If ye even need it to keep ye from having to take an imparting ever again, ye have it to spend. That of my mate, Balin, ye have too. Ye own mate, my master. Him, I see how he loves ye."

"Yes," Daniel whispered, his voice choked with emotion. "But I will never ask you for your life, Lemmel. You've done enough for me already. I want you to have a long and happy life with Balin. Return to Brooksmet and raise children, be with your parents again. I want you to have choices, Lemmel. Like my friend here, I want him to have choices too," Daniel said, his voice growing stronger as he spoke. Then he looked up at Heyerdahl and spoke firmly, loud enough for all three of the men in the shop to hear. "All Skys. We should be free. No one should ever be a slave."

"Free as ever ye are under my master's roof. Not a slave to him, but a true mate. When ye step through Odin's great ring all will know this as I do."

At dusk that day Lemmel returned to Wulfstag's city manor, two bundles in hand. One was for the newly cleaned Sky, his durable suit of suede clothing and thick soled slippers. The other bundle was something unexpected. It was a present from the tailor, a note accompanying it written in tidy, small handwriting.

Veiled, Daniel sat firmly against Jack on the huge bed and read the runes. "He's saying this is his way of repaying what I gave him today. He'd never heard any other Sky talk about freedom. It's a set of clothing that he thinks will be suitable for visiting the temple. Lemmel had mentioned something about you and I stepping through Odin's ring."

"You have to promise me you're not going to pull any more Skys in off the street."

"I promise you I'm going to pull all of them in off the streets. I'm going to end Nirrti's reign here. End it."

### **Chapter 33 A Hall of Champions**

Finally Jack was feeling a sense of proficiency. A plan was in motion. Balin insisted time was growing short. Someone would eventually be sent to the City from the elders of Brooksmet and they had no way of predicting when that would occur. Daniel had to be

out of the city one way or another by then or he would be tested by the temple guardians, a test that they would surely want him to fail. Otherwise, they would lose all their power. Jack was determined to have Daniel through the gate, or if it wasn't functional, have him as far from the City of the Highborn as possible.

Though Skys moved through the city freely, and as they'd discovered, in relative anonymity due to their veils, if suspicions were roused that some Sky might have claim to be Odin's messenger, action would be taken. If Daniel wasn't identified specifically, the guardians would not stop until they had rounded up every single Sky in the city, imprison them within the temple and milked each until they found the one who turned worker caste men's eyes blue for too long. It would be a simple process of elimination, a horrible process ending in Daniel's elimination.

In the spacious bed chamber of Wulfstag's city home Balin stood ready to depart with his House. "We'll arrive at the Champion's hall at sunset so as to be less conspicuous among the many who have residences elsewhere in the city. As tomorrow be a day of rest, most Champions within the city walls gather at sunset to observe the close of day, of Odin's watchful eye closing for slumber."

"That's a figure of speech, right?" Jack asked. "Not some big honkin' eye hanging down from the ceiling in this hall." He shook his head, his own eyes wide in hope.

"Nay," Balin said, a frown stretching his mouth down. "We observe the heavens grow dark, and then have ale and tell of recent adventures."

"Ah!" Jack said, very relieved. He adjusted the set of his tunic and tugged at the billowing white sleeves of his shirt. "So we drift in, just very casually, and if no one's posted a "stewards keep out" sign, Lemmel comes in and hangs back at the door to watch our backs. We take a look around, very casual again. Just blend in and enjoy a little ale, some food, do the social scene with the other gathered Champions and Highborn. Then when we're sure we're blending in well, you show us where the long viewer thingy is. We get a peek in the hall and if no ceremonies are going on at that time, we might be able to sneak into the temple and have a quick look."

"Aye. But no sneaking as ye claim we will be able to do. There will be a sign from Odin when ye Sky enters. I feel this strongly, House. All under one roof the three structures be. The temple in the center, flanked on the west by the Champion's mighty hall, and to the east stands the hall where Nirrti's children serve the worshipers who come to give her offerings. The Sky hall."

"Yeah, all under one roof. So you're thinking we enter the one to the west and it'll still make some big sign appear. Right. Okay if so, we'll handle it when the time comes. Play it by ear," he said, humoring Balin's adherence to the belief that Daniel was some kind of prophet.

"Ear?" Balin asked, one eyebrow rising in disapproval.

"By ear. We don't follow a written, a firm plan of action. And if the temple is too full, got too much going on, we come back here and buy a union ceremony from the guardians. Ready to go, then. Sky?" Jack asked, turning to regard his lover. He let out a low whistle. "Lemmel do all that?"

"What?" Daniel asked, regarding his reflection in the polished metal plate hung on the wall by the bed chamber door. "The hair? He said this looked better, a little bit of hair braided down the sides with the rest of it combed back over my shoulders. It'll be hidden under the veil anyway. I'm wearing the long one."

"And the ... Desire, you've got eyeliner on." Jack stepped closer to his lover and touched his chin lightly. "Your lips look a little ... more ... delicious."

"Lip liner and some kind of rouge. You know Vikings aren't well known for body makeup," he said, speaking clinically as he turned to his lover. "I'm assuming this is Nirrti's addition to the culture, but Lemmel said that Odamari and Ashild both had ... And he's right. I remember Odamari's eyes." He turned back to the mirrored surface and regarded his reflection. "Anyway," he said his words now hasty, "this just makes me blend in here better. Can't go running around looking raggedy and ... What was it that temple guardian called me? Beggarly, I think. I'm a kept whore. I need to look the part."

"You're not a--"

Daniel's gaze cut to Jack's reflection. "Sorry, Jack. My old negativity. I forgot to throw all of it away I guess. Won't happen again. Shall we?" he said invitingly, holding his hand out for Jack to support.

"Yeah, I guess ... " Jack paused and put his hand under Daniel's, "... guess so. But you do look amazing." He stared down at Daniel's well-manicured toes, revealed now by the new sandals he wore, a gift from the Sky tailor, along with the clothes. Jack's gaze drifted up.

The new slit pants riding low on Daniel's hips were made of the thinnest, whitest material Jack had seen on this planet. They shimmered with an element of reflective, possibly metallic thread. The slits in front hung open even when he stood still, unlike the heavier suede pants he'd worn in the meadows and on their trek north. These pants seemed to be suspended by an invisible force from their perch low on Daniel's curved ass and the tied bulge of his genitals. The underwear showed through the pants, a slightly more solid strip of the same cloud-white cloth, and did very little to keep his penis and testicles from view.

Daniel's shirt was made of a different material than the pants. It had the same pure white coloring, but wasn't shiny. It was, if possible, even more see-through. Jack could see the areolas of his lover clearly and the perky nipples in the dark center of sensitive flesh. Sensitive nipples. Daniel had sensitive nipples. His stomach, his navel, his ribs, all sensitive when Jack ran his lips over them.

The naquadah circle hung down level between Daniel's dark nipples.

His lover was partially hidden, but more sexual for the partial quality. It made a man want to reach out and just very lightly tug those white pants down. A finger in the waistband by his cock, or maybe a finger in back sliding down the sexy dip between those round globes. A finger pushing down inside that gleaming cloth and running against that satiny skin, down and in until ...

Jack groaned. "Damn." Now Daniel was regarding him appraisingly and Jack squirmed under the intense scrutiny.

"You've got a hard-on, Jack," Daniel said in a very matter-of-fact tone. He took his veil from Lemmel's reverent hold and secured it carefully, mindful of the heavy gold embellishments.

"Don't I know it," Jack muttered tersely. "If we don't get going now, we're not going tonight."

"We must, House," Balin objected. "All gather this night of the week, and entry by Skys who be less than correct in their behavior ... " Balin paused and bowed his head in regret for a moment before continuing, "... such a fragile Sky's entry might be less noticed by the guardians who lurk about the front of the temple grounds. We must pass the watched entry of the temple to reach the entry to the hall of Champions. There my brethren will welcome ye and ye hosted Sky under bond of my sword."

"Yeah, yeah," Jack said irritably. He knew Daniel wasn't ready. Mentally or physically. He hadn't slept more than a couple hours at a time since the attack in Drangaskogen. There were dark circles under his beautifully lined eyes, made almost invisible now by the artfully applied makeup. Besides the signs of his physical exhaustion, he went off, lost his temper at the slightest provocation.

Daniel was a mess, and he was fucking gorgeous.

With a great effort he tore his gaze off his lover's nearly naked body and they went down the stairs, Lemmel trailing at the back of Jack's group.

Lemmel might have to stay at the entrance with any stewards who accompanied a House who had the allegiance of one of the powerful Champions this night. His entry or denial would be at the discretion of visiting Skys in the hall. If any who arrived before them didn't want his eyes seen by a common worker caste, Lemmel would be barred from entry.

"There'll be other Skys there, so you'll have to relax, Jack. I'll probably have to do the greeting thing. Be unveiled if all of them are."

"I'll handle it. Green eyed monster is all locked up. Promise."

"Yeah," Daniel said doubtfully.

As he led his group out of the manor house Jack fumed. He still hadn't managed to make himself understood by his lover. It wasn't jealousy that burned him. It was a need to protect his lover. A vital need. He'd failed Daniel in so very many ways, and on too many occasions, just as he'd failed Charlie in the most vital moment of the young boy's life.

But Daniel wasn't a child. He was a full-grown and autonomous man. He had his own kind of power, and Jack had to respect that. He glanced sideways at Daniel noticing how he seemed to hesitate before moving again every time they stopped, like when they stopped for Lemmel to open the door. Daniel seemed to find it hard to start walking again. Maybe he was still hurting from the attack of the guardians.

The walk was short. Wulfstag's man hadn't exaggerated when he said the manor was close to the temple. They walked north less than a hundred yards down the cobblestone roadway past other grand homes of Highborn men, until the roadway ended at the intersection of a crowded boulevard. This wide thoroughfare ran east to west. Straight ahead and a little to the left of them loomed the hundred foot tall structure, the temple they'd traveled a continent to reach.

The east, west boulevard was teeming with worker caste and a few Highborn, most moving about casually from the small eateries along the way, or strolling to the grand temple that dominated the surrounding structures. Everyone moved at a casual pace, coming to the close of a day in a relaxed, confident way.

"The temple," Balin said, pointing out the obvious. Then he nodded almost imperceptibly toward a squat, brick building to their left. "Hall where the city elders be most hours of the day. Best we avoid that." He held out his arm, indicating for the small party to cross the boulevard toward the massive temple.

Jack stopped in the wide roadway to take in the grand nature of the temple structure. The evening sunlight splashing on the stone edifice's western surfaces gave it a yellow glow. Nirrti hadn't built this structure. But it smacked clearly of alien construction. The center, the temple proper, had a peaked roof, with spires that rose over two hundred feet. To the east was a shorter wing, of later construction. It was the hall where Sky caste served worshippers. A small entry door there had two blue banners hanging above it. To the left of the temple was another hall of later construction, but almost as tall as the temple itself. This was the Hall of Champions.

"You can kind of tell who might have built it," Jack said softly.

"Asgard," Daniel answered, not taking his eyes off the edifice that dominated their view. "The central portion anyway. But Nirrti's followers have added the west and east wings. Also some of the carvings on the frieze. But the main core of the building isn't Nirrti's work. She never went in for construction much. She did add the metallic city wall though, and probably defined the inner garden wall as well. Forbidden Garden," he added. "Clean

lines. I can see part of the garden wall down to the left. The right hand part is hidden by those thick trees."

"This temple design, it's not like the Ancients, is it?"

"It reminds me of the castle, that fortress where we found Catherine's fiancée, Ernest Littlefield. Heliopolis. Remember the construction of that building where we found him? He'd located a library of knowledge there that I would almost have died for. The meeting place of the four races. Remember the architecture of that place?"

"Yeah," Jack said, sounding vague. "Tell you the truth, I wasn't paying that much attention to the architecture then."

"Do you ever?" Daniel asked, still studying the tall structure. "It resembles a Roman temple, with Doric columns along the front. See? Here, and here. The entablature above. See the figures carved on the frieze? Those were added at a much later date than the original construction. But this place has one striking difference than Heliopolis, Ernest's discovery. This is all one level.

"Uh, Sky," Jack said hesitantly. "The statue down in front on that pedestal. There by the center steps that lead into the temple."

"Oh, shit," Daniel swore in barely contained anger. "The ... goddess herself," he said, sparing a quick glance at Balin and then at Lemmel. "Twice life-size. That's her symbol on the pedestal."

"Yeah," Jack whispered, drawing Daniel closer to him, letting his cloak drape his lover's nearly naked ass. "Better not go badmouthing the bitch in front of them. She's dressed like--"

"Me," Daniel said angrily. "Look at her clothing. That's where the Sky clothing comes from. They dress us up like her, like a fucking ... Damn."

"Like Nirrti," Jack finished, and then regretted speaking. He could feel Daniel quake with anger. "You gonna get a grip on this? We're bound to run into more of her crap inside, ya know."

"I can handle this. We have to get in there tonight. Balin's right. Someone from the council of elders will come from Brooksmoot. Probably thinking they're doing me a favor, you know. Raising my status or something. They can't possibly understand the political ramifications, that the guardians would see it as a threat to their power if some ancient prophecy of Odin's came to be that could end the reign of Nirrti's laws."

"Yeah. We'll get in, peek through the telescope thingie and find out if it's a gate, if the DHD is accessible. Then we'll hit the place provided there's not much going on in the big hall. Right?"

"Yes. Wish we had Teal'c with us?" Daniel asked, giving his lover a lopsided grin.

"You know I do." Then Jack stared up at the top of the building. Along the squat, triangular pediment there was a series of small statues, depicting nude men having sex with other men. In the center of this orgiastic tableau was another statue of Nirrti. It had to be her. She was the only female represented on the exterior of the building. Several children were kneeling down around her, worshiping her. Skys, Jack realized! Not children. Their erect penises were proportionately grotesque. He looked back at the myriad of combinations of men having sex on either side of the statue. Worker castes mating with Skys, or at least, Highborn. The statues were all a light marble color. Could be Highborn, could be Sky. But they were all being done by a huge worker caste man. Huge. Jack shuddered.

"What?" Daniel asked, tightening his hold on Jack.

"The little carving things up in the big triangle. I don't like this. All that sex, it's too blatant, too accepted. Right out here on the street. You stick so close to me in there, so close like you're glued, got it?"

"They won't rape me, not the Champions anyway. Just the temple guardians. They're not allowed in the Champion's hall so once we get inside, I'm safe."

"Still," Jack said. "Close like glue, got it?" Jack scanned the casual strollers, picking out several temple guardians among them. This close to the temple their increased presence just made sense. And made his skin crawl.

"Yes. I'm not really arguing with you or the need to be under your protection, Jack. I'm just trying to convince myself I won't be abused in there with all those men."

"Yeah. Let's do it then. Now or never," he said and felt better when he got a decisive nod from his lover. Jack stepped back from Daniel, taking a seemly pose, holding Daniel's hand high in the air on the back of his own.

"We are ... good to go?" Balin asked. When he got a nod from Jack, the big Champion stepped out with a haughty air, leading the small group across the boulevard.

As they moved out, specters flared around him. Daniel tugged his left ankle out of Gruber's restraining grasp and wrenched away from the guardian's tongue that had started trying to taste him again.

Walking across the boulevard, Jack stared at the way Daniel's hand was on his. He'd always thought of that hold as if he were merely supplying a resting place for Daniel, as if by having his hand facing palm down it gave the Sky the option, the freedom to move away or stay. But now he was struck with the mental image of showing everyone that he was capable of carrying Daniel. It felt as if he was carrying Daniel on his back. Because Skys were so weak they were incapable of taking even a step without support.

That's what Lemmel kept saying. As if without support Daniel couldn't take a step, couldn't make it anywhere without being carried on someone else's back. And to hold it high and out in the open like this was a continual statement to all around them. A Sky was weak.

"This is so wrong," Jack murmured. "The way I'm holding you like this."

"I know. I've known since the first time I had to submit to it."

"Submit to it," Jack snarled the words. He tried to see his lover's eyes but the veil was low, seemly. The gold beads kept the hem down firmly in place. No light breeze would reveal what no man should see out here on the streets. The old woman's accusation came back to haunt Jack then. Fuck him naked out in the streets was not as filthy as saying his lover's sweet name. How many times had Jack moaned that name in the height of ecstasy? Daniel, naked in Jack's bed, sprawled beneath him, his eyes half-lidded in passion. And Jack groaning out his name over and over.

He wouldn't slip again. He'd never let his guard down even for a moment until they were well away from Nirrti's damned influence. He needed to be what Daniel needed him to be.

Jack frowned. "I need off this damned planet, Sky. I need to be free to say your name any time I want. Any time I feel like it. I need that. I need ... "

"Jack?" Daniel said. "Are we together on this? We're almost at the entrance to the Champion's hall. Are you ... "

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay. I've got it together. This is just difficult. I don't want you hurt any more by all of this and I know going in there, trying to do what we're gonna do? You're gonna be more at risk. But, I know you'll be all right."

Faint music reached his ears. Jack realized it was emanating from the Champion's hall ahead. The sound of pipes and stringed instruments drifted out the open doors of the huge structure.

"You gonna be all right in there?" Jack asked again. Daniel's attention had turned from him and Jack followed his lover's line of sight to see what was so interesting. "Another Sky headed toward the Champion's hall," Jack murmured.

"Yes. Look at the jewelry. I do look beggarly if that's the way a hosted Sky is supposed to look. Those are sapphires on his veil and on his gold bracelets. Wrists and ankles too."

The Sky walked with his hand supported by a robust, well dressed Highborn. He wore the required attire, made of a material that shimmered with a rainbow of bold colors. He also wore sandals, mounted with heavy, faceted stones. His white veil was streaked with gold wire, linked like chain-mail, and bands of blue and green ribbons hung heavy in his hair.

He swayed his hips seductively as he strolled toward the Champion's hall, sending the tails of the gold chain around his waist swinging below his navel. Hanging just below the collar opening of his shirt was a circle of naquadah. The two Highborn were following a helmeted Champion who wore green and beige ribbons, his House's colors.

"He looks gaudy. All that junk on him. You look classically beautiful," Jack said and then flushed slightly with embarrassment. The only jewelry his lover wore was the naquadah circle hanging from its black leather cord around his neck.

Daniel darted his eyes to his lover's flushing face, his own face showing a slight smile. "Classically beautiful?"

"You know what I mean," Jack snapped, hating his own irritation.

"Yes, I do. You're saying you find me beautiful. In a classical sense." A very small grin played at the corners of Daniel's mouth.

"So what!" Jack said defensively. "I do. I'm man enough to say it. I think you're beautiful. I should be able to say that. I've had my tongue in just about every part of your body. If I didn't find it attractive I'd be pretty messed up now, wouldn't I?"

"Is that your reasoning? Your defense for being in a gay relationship?"

"We are so not having this discussion here on the streets outside Nirrti's temple. Gay or whatever. Man and wife or whatever, and you can hit me for that later. I'm not going to lie now. It's a bit late for that."

"Yes, it is," Daniel said decisively. "And we have a mission to carry out. Get in, do a recon, get what we came for and get out without raising further suspicion. Right?"

"Right," Jack said. He nodded firmly, feeling incredibly grateful for Daniel's ability to focus on the task at hand. Daniel could focus. Oh, how Daniel could focus!

Balin led and Lemmel trailed the group as they approached the hall of Champions. The other Sky along with his hosting House and Champion approached several yards in front of them and was inside before Jack and his party reached the bottom step. At the wide, marble steps leading to the substantial building Daniel tightened his hold on Jack's hand. Jack peered at his veiled lover.

"Still good to go?" he asked, keeping a wary eye on a guardian who was eyeing his group suspiciously.

"Yes," Daniel whispered, his tone so much quieter than Jack's.

"All right then. Just do what Balin said. Go in, stay on my hand and try to look relaxed. Everyone in the place is supposed to treat you differently inside here. Skys, Highborn and Champions, we're all equal within this hall. No guardians or commoners allowed."

"Lemmel," Daniel spoke over his shoulder, "you're sure you'll be all right in the steward's area?"

"Aye, sweet Highborn. Worry not for me. I will be seemly and possibly gain knowledge if there be another steward waiting this evening. Someone of my status for me to visit with. The women stewards all wait without, being women. Nirrti allows no other woman under her roof, and sore I would love to learn from one older and wiser in the ways of stewardship than our Asny."

"He'll be okay, Sky," Jack said in a hushed voice. "Quiet," he cautioned. They were passing two guardians, rough-looking worker caste men with unkempt hair. Both stood rock-still, their arms crossed, glaring at the people entering the Champion's hall. They turned their sullen attention to Jack's group. Jack ignored them and their sour attitude. He was going into the only place in the city where temple guardians were forbidden to enter.

Then suddenly Jack's small group was walking up the steps and he had to use two hands, one resting on the small of Daniel's back to urge him along, and the other holding his hand out for all to see how seemly a couple they were. Daniel seemed to be getting distracted too much. There was a lot to see around them. They passed carvings set in niches of the walls around the entrance. The pillars were covered in lines of runes, and the two wooden doors, easily twenty feet tall were fully open but also covered in runes. Jack strode in and found himself flinching in anticipation of some big blaring alarm going off.

Nothing happened. No alarm sounded. No lights flashed. No big glowing blue eyeball appeared. Nothing. A few steps into the marbled foyer of the Champion's hall Jack sighed audibly. Then he chuckled.

"So much for this big sign, Balin," he quipped.

"It will come in Odin's time, House. Not for the likes of us to say when or where the Allfather reveals himself."

The late evening sunlight seemed to follow them in the open doorway, lighting the interior well. Jack gazed around as he strode further in the structure, noting that they were alone now. Daniel pulled the party to a stop. He was staring straight up at the vaulted ceiling more than forty feet overhead. This part of the temple was one story tall. No balcony or second floor was in evidence. The ceiling was painted a soft blue, a hue similar to a dawn sky. Square windows high overhead kept it well lit, even at this late hour.

Ahead, another set of doors blocked their path. These doors were also easily twenty feet tall, and they were carved with detailed figures. The party with the Sky had already gone through them.

"The house of Aesir is carved on the left door, and the house of Vanir is represented in the carvings on the right. Both houses of the gods are paying respect to Odin, the Allfather on the lentil carving," Daniel said absently as he studied the doors and wall above them.

"Aye," Balin said. "Ye know the old ways. Much as we Champions guard and protect the old tales, much we fear has been lost to us in time. If Odin wishes, ye may explain some of what we have lost before returning to ... Best I stop my mouth now, eh?"

"Yeah," Jack said sarcastically. "Let's get on with blending in. So far we're doing a bang-up job of it."

"Lemmel, lad, ye may enter the great hall this evening, as no barrier mark has been posted. No need to stay out here, as it seems we have arrived before any edict has been posted. No Skys who are already within wish to be not unveiled in front of stewards. Ye may come, but as ye master said, posted by the entry. Stay out of the center ways. Ye may not step on the yellow stone floor in the center of the hall, understood? It be for Champions only, and such Highborn as we bring under oath."

"Aye."

Daniel had lifted his hand from Jack's, pulled away from Gruber's attempt to grab his leg and stepped up to study the door in detail. Jack swooped forward, retrieving him smoothly without appearing to do so. Then he kept moving, walking his lover through the door after Balin opened it.

The soft music they'd heard outside intensified, the melody even sweeter now as they entered the huge hall. Sound echoed in the vast space. Jack glanced up. The inner chamber was one extraordinarily tall story too.

The interior was an oblong room, with two defined spaces, one set inside the other, and their boundaries clearly identifiable by different ceiling heights and floor color. The outer oblong space where Balin's group now stood had a ceiling height equal to the doorway at their back, about twenty feet tall. The floor tiles here were a deep, rich brown. The outer space wrapped around the entire hall, extending out from the walls about forty feet. Chairs, benches, even beds were haphazardly arranged in the outer areas. It was a communal living space for the Champions who did not have homes within the city walls. There were curtains hung up to mark off smaller areas along the outer space, providing places of privacy for Champions. At the far end of the hall was a short wooden cubicle. Its contents indiscernible.

The inner chamber drew Jack's attention. The space had a vaulted ceiling that stretched up to a stunning height, probably over a hundred feet. The ceiling's light blue color was lit by oil lamp chandeliers suspended by ropes and pulleys in the vast overhead space. This light was assisted by late evening sunlight coming through a round window set in the center. The angle of the setting sun still pierced the upper part of the arched ceiling.

The floor in the center, under the high, well-lit ceiling was made of yellow marble pieces, each about a yard square. The lighting below was somewhat surreal, due to the number and volume of light above, and the utter absence of any candles or lamps on an immense banquet table that stretched down the center of the hall.

Jack took a firm hold of his lover. There was activity everywhere. Huge Champions, many with their horned helmets on, milled about, speaking boisterously, eating and drinking. Some were in various stages of dress, but those were only in the outer area. All within the center of the hall under the well-lit ceiling were dressed formally and had their helmets on. From where he stood Jack could see more than a handful of Highborn men dressed like himself. In comparison to the larger number of Champions gathered the Highborn were short, but each held himself in a regal manner. They were easy to pick out among the taller Champions who were casually slouched, or reclining comfortably in high backed chairs at the enormous banquet table. And Skys. Jack saw at least five Skys.

Their veils were off. Each Sky that he could see had the protective cloth draped around their necks or worn like a shawl over their shoulders. They were all dressed in flashy, gaudy clothing, with wrists, arms, necks and navels covered in jewels. Daniel, by comparison, looked virginal in his white veil and simple, white clothing. With his symmetrical features and straight posture he looked beautiful.

"Classically beautiful," Jack said.

"A Sky hosted by a Champion," Daniel said. "Jack, do you see that couple seated on the left side of the long table?"

"That's his host? How can you tell?"

"The colors in the Champion's clothing match the Sky's. And the Champion's not wearing house ribbons on his arm."

Balin was so close Jack could feel him breathing. The big guy seemed to be casually scanning the room as he spoke to Jack. "That be Roskilde, Champion bowman. A good man."

"You know most everyone here?"

"Aye. All Champions except perhaps a young whelp or two, newly of the hall. There be few of us on this world, that we not mostly know one another. The same would be true of

Highborn and Sky if they did not deign to live such isolated lives. Skys seldom speak together within the city walls, mostly clinging together outside it."

"Probably because outside the walls they have freedom," Daniel said.

"Ye are free within here, Highborn. Ye may move about, passing from the outer and inner court at will."

"And like you said, if I bump into anyone, it's not a problem?"

"Within these walls Odin rules. He gifted the Skys to us, charging us to champion them. Within our hall none may come to harm. Thus, a mere bump cannot be done with harmful intent. Ye need not fear such contact, as it may come and be thought of as nothing here."

"I like this place already," Daniel said earnestly.

"Also, impartings are not conducted here for coin. We give nothing to Nirrti except service to those she marked as her children."

"That's important, Jack. Do you notice a lack of a certain snake among the art in here?"

"Yeah?" Jack said, looking around for signs of Nirrti. "Not here, is she? That's hopeful." He stared around, his eye catching on one imposing tapestry depicting a naked Champion holding a sleeping Sky outstretched in his arms. A veil strewn with stars was draped over the Sky to fall down and hide the Champion's groin. Jack wrinkled his brow and then shook his head to clear his thoughts. "So if we manage to do this thing right, gate home and then come back and issue some edict then it's gonna have the support of the guys in here, isn't it?"

"I hope so. The guardians are going to be a hard lot to topple," Daniel said earnestly. He turned to see what Jack was staring at. "Incredible image," Daniel whispered.

Jack nodded.

Balin directed Lemmel to a small table with chairs near the entry, stationing him there with Jack's and the Champion's cloaks. "Ye watch, lad, and learn what be here for ye to add to ye knowledge. A rare opportunity this, to be within sight of such. Be certain ye grow not lusty among the unveiled Skys, though. They are not for ye taking here. Though some Champions and Houses may share their gifts this evening, no steward will partake."

Moving against his lover, Jack returned his hand to Daniel's naked waist, a protective and possessive pose. Sharing of a Sky's gifts, he wasn't really prepared to participate in. But Daniel seemed to be taking it all in stride okay. Jack was perfectly capable of following Daniel's lead when it came to whacked out cultural stuff, but sharing Daniel? No.

Along one wall about halfway down the long chamber two worker caste men dressed in leather armor like Balin's were playing musical instruments, a set of pipes and a stringed instrument that looked like a short, fat guitar. The music was pretty good, Jack thought; not too loud or obtrusive.

Balin's name was called out in a merry greeting from somewhere at the banquet table. Jack turned, craning his neck to see who had shouted the name. An outrageously huge worker caste man came striding across the yellow-tiled floor, his long black braids swinging wide and his horned helmet glinting diffusedly in the many glowing lanterns suspended high overhead.

"Ho and well met!" the approaching Champion bellowed heartily.

"Aegis," Balin answered in a much more restrained way. He held his arm out and Aegis clasped it, wrist to wrist, and then both thumped each other hard and repeatedly on the back.

Jack winced as he listened to the thuds. "Ow," he whispered and noted Daniel's inaudible chuckle.

"--be my House, the Highborn Jack Ondeil."

Jack tuned the big men back in by tearing his eyes off his lover. He was too relaxed in here. They were on a recon mission. This wasn't time to fantasize about his nearly naked lover. Not now. But definitely ... later. Definitely.

Introductions were made, Balin introducing Lemmel as his bonded life mate for which Lemmel got the breath squeezed out of him and twirled in a full circle. These were very tactile and boisterous people. Jack became even more worried about his lover. How had Daniel survived being under one of these men when they had an orgasm? Countless numbers of them? Even having seen the temple guardians hoisting him in the air, it didn't equate with what it must be like to have one of these huge men on top of him, holding him down, fucking him. Jack frowned.

The vision that burned its way into Jack's mind was of Daniel, helpless beneath one of these behemoths raping him, of Daniel forced to endure what the guardians had done to him, over and over. "No," Jack swore under his breath and shook his head vehemently. "Never again."

"-- twice blessed union," Aegis said, slapping Lemmel hard between his shoulder blades.

In his too-tight grip he felt Daniel jerk away and then settle back against his side. He looked at his lover to see what had caused the odd movement, desperately hoping it wasn't his own guilt he'd see there. It had been rape, and Daniel didn't need reminding of that right now. Jack was allowing himself to lose control. But what of Daniel's face he could see clearly showed a deep frown and his attention was focused on Aegis. Balin

cleared his throat and Jack glanced at the big Champion. He looked embarrassed but was meeting Aegis' smile boldly.

The eyes. Aegis was commenting on their blue eyes. Both men had the glowey blue thing going on. Jack tightened his jaw and felt Daniel give him a reassuring squeeze. "Sorry, babe," Jack whispered. Daniel was comforting him? Jack felt like a stupid bastard.

All the people in this room who looked their way would know that Lemmel and Balin had both had sex with his lover. A particular kind of sex. Hell, that was no different than anyone they'd met on their journey north. Still, jealousy darkened Jack's features. All the people who'd given them such a hard time on their way to Wulfstag's place, was it because of Lemmel and Balin's eyes?

Angry with himself, Jack shook his head to clear his thoughts. Too much was distracting him tonight. That damned image of the guardians, effortlessly restraining Daniel and then fucking him, that damned image haunted him tonight. Jack's stomach rolled.

Balin had led him and Daniel onto the yellow floor and found them seats at the massive table. The chair Jack perched on felt like a bar stool, it was so far off the ground. Across the table he caught sight of a Champion with the dazzling blue eyes that marked him as having Odin's smile. Jack scanned the room, seeing another Champion with the same blue cast to his eyes. He hadn't seen it on anyone other than his own men during the long trek north. It was startling. No wonder people had gawked at his small party.

He still had ahold of Daniel's hand and again Jack realized his attention had wandered. Daniel had removed his veil. The gold embellished cloth hung around his lover's neck and Daniel's hair sparkled. Freshly washed and brushed, it gleamed. And then Jack caught sight of Daniel's blue eyes.

How he'd missed seeing them in any but the most private of circumstances. Daniel was staring around intently, studying everything in the place. It was probably growing too dark for him though. His lack of glasses only bothered him in the dim light. Maybe the freedom from the veil made up for that.

"--never did I notice this before," Balin whispered to Jack as he leaned over Daniel who was seated between them at the huge banquet table.

"Noticed?" Jack asked, shoving his own troubled thoughts away.

"Aye. The way that in the hall of Champions a Sky be more as ye Sky was down in Brooksmet. They be more like men, not Nirrti's children."

Between them, Daniel shook his head. "I'm going to wander around. It's safe. You said so yourself. I'd like to get a closer look at the artwork in here. Read some of the runes on the pillars. They look like descriptions of tournaments, is that right?"

"Aye," Balin said. "As ye pass from the inner court to the outer, Lemmel will be available for ye support."

"I won't need it in here. Look around at the others like myself. They may be dressed like kept whores, but they're behaving like free men." Daniel drew his veil back on and then slid from his chair. The moment he moved Gruber and Joslin's grasping hands came from under the table, trying to hold him in place. Daniel jerked free of them and left.

Balin was right, Jack knew. He'd been aware of that since they sat down. The other Skys were chatting, milling about and having a good time. However, they were being treated with great deference. Choice food was constantly being offered to them. One Sky had two Champions on either side of him offering him wine which he was graciously declining. Another Sky was being regaled with tales of adventure while several Champions looked on him with adoration, but not with sexual lust. And that Sky had a naquadah circle hanging from his neck. He was like Daniel, Jack realized. He'd been used by these huge fuckers.

Jack brooded silently for a long while. Finally he dampened his own thoughts and turned away from the table to watch Daniel again. His lover's gaze was full of quiet delight. Daniel was in his element, exploring a new facet of a strange culture. He looked beautiful.

High overhead the circular glass portal was darkening. Night was coming. He watched Daniel walk away out of the well-lit, inner court into the dim living quarters where a much more relaxed atmosphere existed. Daniel looked confident, something Jack certainly didn't feel. He kept watching and saw Daniel lift his veil, holding it above his eyes for a while, and finally he pushed it back to lie across his shoulders.

Balin urged Jack to try several dishes, delicacies, he insisted. Jack ate a little but avoided the alcoholic drinks. He needed a clear head. As he'd done in Brooksmeeet so long ago, he sat quietly and listened, learning what he could. The place was pretty full, but not packed by any means. There were about two hundred people inside, only a couple dozen of that number were Highborn.

Slowly the noise level died down and the two Champions who'd been playing music wound their song down to a stop. Everyone seemed to stop moving, staying wherever they were. Silence filled the hall. Jack scanned around quickly, trying to figure out what was going on. Then the men, almost as one, turned their faces up to the glass portal high overhead.

The last ray of sunlight left the interior. The evening sky overhead turned from deep blue to violet and then began its delicate fade to velvet black. Then, as slowly as the activity and sound had stopped it began to build again.

Balin turned to answer a question from a fellow Champion. Jack pushed himself away from the too-tall table and went in search of Daniel. Lemmel was at his spot by the door

but there was no sign of Daniel there. Jack wandered off the brightly lit yellow floor into the dimmer living quarters. He weaved his way through the scattered furniture and small knots of people. He passed the musicians, having to weave back onto the yellow floor of the inner court for a few feet and then got back into the dimmer lit outer court. As he approached a large gathering of Champions, some with stewards at hand, and a couple of Highborn men, he saw they were gathered around a wide divan. Daniel stood among the small crowd. Jack walked up beside his lover.

"What's up?" he whispered.

Daniel stood still, his posture too stiff. Jack laid a hand on Daniel's naked lower back and got a startled response. "Sorry," he said.

With a hasty turn, Daniel faced Jack. "We should move along. Find something to ... "

Jack glanced from Daniel to the divan, having to lean to his right to see past another Highborn man, one with brown hair. On the divan a blond man, a Sky was naked. He was on his back, legs in the air. A worker caste man was kneeling between his spread legs, fucking him. Jack blanched. "Wha--"

"Come on," Daniel whispered harshly, jerking on his lover's arm.

Jack was too stunned to move. Fucking wasn't what he was seeing. The two men were making love. Right out here in the open, the blond man with his eyes closed in bliss. They were making tender, sweet love. Kissing. The dark skinned worker caste man was still dressed, with his pants laced closed but his shirt open. House ribbons hung from his upper arm. And he wasn't fucking the Sky. He was kissing him, caressing his face and hair. His touches were tender and solicitous. He was rubbing his well-defined abs along the Sky's hard cock. He wasn't even penetrating the smaller man. He was making love.

Jack felt Daniel's jerk again, and then nothing. Daniel had left without him.

Shouldering his way between two of the behemoths quietly watching the love scene, Jack lunged after Daniel. His lover was several feet further along the outer court, heading further in, away from the door. His jaw firm with sorrow, Jack caught up with him just as Daniel got his veil back on his head. He put his arm around him, careful not to tug the veil off. "Baby?"

"It wasn't like that!" Daniel whispered vehemently. "Not like that. I never ... Jack, I never made love with any of them."

"Baby," Jack repeated the endearment he'd sworn not to use, and then prepared to lie. "I know it wasn't--"

"It wasn't! I've never ... " Daniel clenched his mouth in a firm line and wrapped his arms across his chest. He was breathing rapidly.

Jack maneuvered him a few steps left, away from the well-lit inner court. "I know, Sky," he whispered, working hard not to coddle his lover. "Rape--"

"It wasn't rape!" Daniel insisted angrily. He also kept his voice as low as Jack's, but still drew a couple of startled glances from Champions a few yards away in the inner court. "I've told you that too many times. Can't you get that straight? Bargaining--"

"I've heard you!" Jack said, dropping his own voice low, but matching Daniel's constrained intensity. He flicked his gaze to the two Champions and waited until the big men turned politely away. This was not the time to draw attention to themselves! But Daniel wanted honesty, something Jack had been unable to face, to even contemplate. It was so much safer, he almost laughed, safer to think about Daniel's encounters as rapes. Like Thaid. As if it all began with Thaid. A rape. A Violent, forced sexual encounter. If they were all rapes, each one before and after, then Daniel clearly had no voluntary part in it, no wish to do what he'd done.

Odd, that Jack would even consider preferring it that way. What sane man would rather his wife or girlfriend to be raped than find she'd committed adultery? Truly an insane thought, Jack felt. And completely unworthy of Daniel.

He gazed hard into Daniel's eyes, trying to discern them through the thin veil, but in the subdued lighting of the Champion's hall, it was impossible to see what he needed so much to see. Yet he realized Daniel would be able to see him perfectly well, would know exactly what was going on in his mind, so Jack had bettered damned well know for himself what he was thinking.

It was time for Jack to stop hiding.

"All right," Jack said, his bottom lip in a firm line. "All right," he repeated, feeling sicker by the second. "It wasn't rape, but it wasn't something you did because you wanted ... " He drew a deep breath and brought his other hand up, lifting Daniel's veil a few inches. He had to see his lover's eyes.

"That I did because I wanted to?" Daniel said, his bottom lip trembling as he stabbed Jack with his accusing glare. "That's what he said, Gunnlaug. I didn't want you to know, anyone to know, to ever have heard what he said. The dirty words. Not dirty words. They made me feel ... dirty."

"What," baby," Jack asked solicitously. He ran a hand down Daniel's veil, smoothing it along his lover's cheek. "Tell me."

"He said, I liked it. That he knew I liked them doing it to me. He said he'd heard that I liked the young and lusty ones, so he thought I'd enjoy—My pleasure. This one man said it was my pleasure he wanted to—I didn't like it. God, I feel so dirty! But, Jack, it ... it wasn't rape. I did the bargains ... I chose ... to ... impartings ... "

Jack stared hard into his lover's eyes. He bared his soul to Daniel and spoke in a shockingly flat tone of voice. "It was prostitution."

Dead silence rang between the two men.

"Oh, God," Daniel whispered, his voice shattering as his face blanched with pain. "Oh, God, Jack." His hand flew up to cover his mouth.

As Daniel's voice broke with pain, Jack grabbed him with both hands, pulling him into an encompassing embrace, holding his head against his shoulder. He could feel the pain buffeting his lover's conscious mind like ocean waves battering a tiny boat. He could feel Daniel's chest heave as he fought to control his breathing, to fight back sobs. Jack held him, held him with all his might. "Desire," he whispered against Daniel's veiled ear. "Desire."

"Prostitution," Daniel finally said, his voice barely audible. "Yes. It was. You needed to know the truth, not pretend it wasn't. Some day you'd quit pretending and then we'd be over, wouldn't we?"

"Desire, I don't have to pretend—"

"We're almost to the gate. We'll go through soon and it'll just be me and you on the other side. I won't have Lemmel or Balin or even my veil to hide behind. And you'll see the truth. You'll stop pretending—"

"I don't have to try to fool myself so I can love you. I do love you. Nothing will stop me from loving you. Nothing will stop me. But I try too hard to protect you, to shelter you and I have from the beginning. I mean, I've fought that in myself, my need to coddle you, protect you. And sometimes I go too far the other way. I push you, I step back when I should step forward. I keep my hands off you when all I want to do is grab you just like this, hold you just like this. And I'm scared shitless that I'll cripple you if I do. And then you'll die because of me."

"Jack. No. I'm not ... "

"I can't stop having those feelings. I'd have to be a different man to not have those feelings. But I can control them. Most of the time. Pretending it wasn't prostitution was my twisted way of protecting you, of saving you from hurt. Like Charlie, I was setting up an unworkable boundary. It was absurd of me to think I could keep him from any exposure to guns, toy guns, pellet rifles, in the world we live in? Impossible. It was me fooling myself. I can't forgive myself for that. Even now. I can forget for a little while, but I can't forgive."

Daniel raised his head off Jack's shoulder and pushed his veil back to hang around his neck. "I don't want you to have that pain," he whispered hoarsely. "But I'd never wish you to be without the memory of Charlie. Never. To have one you have to have the other."

Jack took a deep breath and blinked away moisture from his eyes. "Thank you. Nobody's ever put it like that before. Guess I'll keep the pain because I'm damned sure not ever giving up my son." He drew another deep breath and ran a hand down Daniel's blond hair. "Or you. Never giving up you. I never thought anyone would be as deep in my heart as Charlie, but you are, desire."

With effort, Daniel cleared his throat and took a cleansing breath. He rolled his shoulders but didn't step back from Jack's embrace. "It was prostitution. I never made love with any of them. They were ... tricks to me, and nothing more. What I do with Lemmel and Balin ... and even with Ulfrik, that's very good, very intimate play. Like buddies horsing around sometimes, and sometimes like really good friends sharing intimate times. But I make love with you. No one else."

"You do, I know. I know the difference. I make love with you. Didn't at first. When we first started sleeping together it was, I guess, casual. I kept it casual in my mind. And then it was making love. Kind of, just all of a sudden one day it was me in my mind saying to myself, I'm gonna make love to Daniel later tonight. I'm a lucky man."

A little smile lit Daniel's face. He brought a hand up and cupped Jack's clean-shaven cheek. "Just kind of found yourself saying that, huh?"

"Yeah. Just kind of happened."

"For me too, I guess. Love grew from friendship."

"Best kind there is," Jack said confidently.

"And no pretending," Daniel said, more firm now. "No need for it. From me either. I can't pretend it was anything other than prostitution. And rape. I'll never confuse what Thaid did to me, or the traders in Drangaskogen. I won't confuse the two."

"Good."

"But can you really, honestly tell me, Jack, tell me that you're okay with me, with what I've become? A prostitute?"

"Are you all right with what I've become? Your pimp?" Jack squeezed his eyes shut. "And before you start trying to fix me, fix this by pretending, or by rushing off to save someone else, stop. Just ... stop." Jack opened his eyes and met his lover's painful gaze. "That's how I feel. I feel dirty, like I've used my lover as a prostitute, taken the money he's gotten from selling himself to men to fuck, and it's been making me sick all these months. But it's done now—"

"No. listen, Jack. A pimp, think about it. Be as honest with this as you have about the prostitution. You tried to stop me—"

"And how that must have hurt you, Danny," Jack hastily interrupted him and then glanced around furtively to see if anyone had heard his terrible slip. "Yeah. I tried to stop you. I tried to guilt you into staying in the room at nights. I made it so hard on you, just refusing to deal with it, to be honest with you. Made you have to hide it, didn't I?"

"Would a pimp do that?" Daniel asked him pointedly, gripping Jack's wrist hard.

Several heartbeats passed silently between them before Jack shook his head. "You're right. So what's eating me up is guilt, the same as what I talked about back in Brooksmet. I hate having been the cause of this, and I know if you'd crashed here alone you'd still have endured this, still have been forced by this society into a life of prostitution, and you'd have been alone. I know that. What happened, happened. We had no other way out. Still don't if we're not very, very careful. So let's both get our heads on straight, stop being scared of the reality going on around us and finish this mission."

"Mission," Daniel echoed. "Yeah," he said with a decisive nod. "Get that bitch's dirty clutches off this planet, and out of these people's lives."

"Ah," Jack said, this time giving his lover a lopsided smile, "I was thinking more along the lines of a little recon, and then hopefully getting the hell off this planet. But first things first. Recon. We good to go?"

"Yes, Colonel. Good to go."

With Daniel veiled, they walked on. Recon involved working their way around the outer court, avoiding a couple more scenes where unveiled Skys were being pampered, made love to, all by clothed Champions or Highborn men.

"Probably the opposite, you realize," Daniel whispered to his lover who walked with his arms around him.

"Opposite?"

"We're on the opposite side of the temple from the hall where Skys serve Nirrti's worshipers. Endless rapes. And over here the Skys are receiving everything, having to give nothing. Opposite. Very strange to think about."

"Does it scare you too? Being so close to that other hall?" Jack steered Daniel around two Champions leaning against a pillar, slightly drunk already.

"No. I won't end up there," Daniel said, bringing a hand up to wrap around his pendant. "I've got my get-out-of-jail-free card."

"If this were a game of Monopoly I'd be the cannon and just blow the damned temple up."

"That'd be great," Daniel said snidely. "Stick us here forever by burying the gate under a pile of rubble."

"Oh. No cannon then. Is that Balin ahead?"

"Yes. Let's see if he thinks it's time to show us the viewer."

"Well timed, House, Highborn," Balin whispered as he struck a casual pose with the two smaller men. "Yon curtained arch on the eastern wall near the north, that be ye destination. Go there now and enter. I will walk behind ye and none will question this. It be my right to show my House a private quarter for sex."

Jack fought a shudder, but stepped through the slit in the curtain with Daniel. Balin was right on his heels, and Jack found himself in a very crowded little space. "Kind of like seeing how many of us we can jam into a phone booth."

"Fonboo?" Balin asked. "I be not familiar--"

"Never mind. Not even a far northern reaches expression," Jack said. "So where's the telescope?"

"Tele--"

"Long viewer," Daniel interjected, shooting Jack a quick look of exasperation. Jack shifted to his left a step to make room for the Champion. They were within an arched niche set in the original wall of the temple, the top of the arch barely clearing Balin's head. The Champion reached up and slid a square stone from its firm place within the wall. He stepped back, indicating for Jack to look through the hole.

Jack reached up and touched the edge of the opening. It was about a half a foot over his head. He shot Balin a dirty look.

"Ah. I had not taken into consideration how tiny ye be, House. Shall I lift ye?"

"Oh, great," Jack said with disgust. "Yes. Hold me up."

Balin set the square stone on the floor and boosted Jack up by his waist.

Peering into the hole Jack saw a small passage leading off to his right, toward the front of the hall. There, a mirror could be seen, set inside several inches down the passage. It was angled in such a way that Jack was able to see a reflection of an opening in the stone wall that led into the interior of the temple. The place was very well lit, pinpricks of candles everywhere. His field of vision wasn't very wide but he could see what he had hoped he could.

"It's there!" he whispered triumphantly. "A gate, Sky."

"Let me see!" Daniel insisted as he tugged on Balin's sleeve. "Do you see the DHD? What else? Do you see--"

"Hang on a minute. There's a bunch of people rushing around now. What's ... Hold on. I can't tell what they're doing. There's a ... Yeah, that's a hologram. Definitely Asgard. That's their red flag, a big honking hologram. I bet it's gonna start booming out some edict or other."

"Let me see. Like in Thor's hall? Is it Thor?"

"No. Not Thor. I dunno who this one is. Take a look," Jack said as he leaned back. Balin sat him down and picked up Daniel.

Peering through the long viewer, a carefully positioned mirror in the narrow wall passage, Daniel squinted in the dimness. "The gate is there, but I don't see a DHD. Wait. This is the back side of the gate. Coming into the temple you see the back side first. How odd. So the DHD would be on the other side, closer to the Forbidden Garden wall that runs along the back of the temple. I can't ... I think I see something but it looks like a cube. Wooden or maybe marble. It has a cloth over it and candles on it. No DHD."

"My turn again, Balin," Jack insisted. He was hoisted up to peer through again and watched the priests moving around frantically. "That hologram looks a little brighter. Did you notice it? I can't hear any message coming from it. Course, the priests are making a hell of a racket. Some of 'em are falling down. Guess it's prayer time."

"Prayer time?" Balin said in surprise. "Nay. They do not-- Stand ye down, House." Balin unceremoniously dropped Jack on his feet and squashed the man against the wall as he leaned over him to peer into the hole. "Damn!" Balin swore. Then he shoved himself away from the wall, not even heeding Jack's frantic and angry efforts to get the big man off him. "Out. Seemly, now. Out," he ordered as he reset the stone. Then he was tugging Jack and Daniel toward the curtain. "Best we be out seated now and let see others from a place of safety."

"Let see?" Jack asked as he wrenched his arm from Balin's hasty grasp.

"Go sit down and watch people," Daniel explained, hastily complying with Balin's directions. "And I didn't even get to see the hologram, I was so busy looking for a DHD. You didn't see one, did you?"

"No. Saw a hell of a lot of candles in there, though. Lamps. Lot of glowing yellow flames everywhere. Hope they have good fire insurance. How could you miss the hologram?" he asked as he let Balin rush him back to the table. The minute they were all three in their seats the entry door of the Champion's hall banged open. A helmeted Champion rushed in, heedless as he bowled over two stewards in his path. He stepped into the inner court and raised his hands over his head.

"Heed!" the man shouted. "Close the door, lad!" he bellowed over his shoulder at one of the sprawled stewards.

A young man jumped to obey.

When the twenty foot tall door was shut the Champion turned back to those in the inner court. "Draw near. The witches have set trouble mystery afoot. The temple doors have been shut!"

"What!" the cry of disbelief echoed repeatedly around the chamber.

Balin shot Jack and Daniel a cautioning glare, enforcing it by reaching over Daniel to place a restraining hand on Jack's shoulder. "Be ye still and silent, House. This be Champion's business."

"Nay! The temple doors are not to be shut at night unless a call for judgment has been sounded. None such was! We heard no call!"

"Who claims to have seen the temple shut?" Aegis shouted from his seat down the banquet table.

A Champion came from the outer court onto the yellow floor, pulling his leather jerkin on. "I will see for myself. Let me out! I will see for myself."

Several voices were added to his own and a handful of Champions rushed out the recently closed door.

"Jack?" Daniel said nervously. "Do we need to get out of here?"

"Let's stay here, find out what's up. We came for recon. Let's see what's going on."

"Aye," Balin said as he watched Aegis move off to the curtained niche. Several Champions were joining him. The curtain was pulled aside and more big bodies than the space could hold tried to get in to see through the secret hole into the temple. One by one each had their turn to look into the vast chamber next door. When they'd viewed what was to be seen they returned one at a time to the banquet table, completely silent.

Jack shifted restlessly. He looked around until he found Lemmel. The low desert youth had moved up along the outer court until he was at the edge of the yellow floor, directly behind Daniel. He stood alert and ready to act. Jack lifted an eyebrow, caught the young man's gaze and gave him a warning shake of his head. Lemmel backed up a step but stayed ready to act if needed.

The hall entry door opened again, this time without banging against the stone wall. The handful of Champions who'd stormed out, returned, their agitated state even greater now.

"What be there to see?" Aegis called to them.

"Naught but closed doors. No guardians without! And the Sky hall be closed as it never can! Two blue banners showing, two Skys still within along with maybe twenty worshipers in there to use them--"

"Twenty?" Daniel gasped, grabbing at Jack's arm.

"--and none come out. Our watcher had the tally right enough. Said he saw none emerge before a guardian come and shut the way. Barred, it must be from the inside, as no more worshipers could enter."

Daniel was clutching his stomach, almost doubled over where he sat. Jack put his arm over Daniel's back and leaned down to whisper. "Get it together."

"Twenty?" Daniel clutched at the naquadah ring he wore. "Plus the guardians," he added, speaking as if in a daze now. "Got to end it, Jack. No matter what." Daniel pushed himself away from the table, and Jack grabbed onto him hard. Complying with Jack's demanding hold on him, Daniel sat back at the table, waiting silently. Gruber's tongue slid up his inner thigh.

"The long viewer shows," Aegis said loudly.

"Aye," another Champion who'd accompanied him to the viewing hole chimed in. "I will speak of what I saw, as the others will attest to. The visage of the Allfather has come into the temple."

Gasps and shouts of disbelief filled the hall only to be shouted down by testimony of others who'd looked through the viewer.

"Come into her temple," a Champion shouted. "Come to announce what changes he wants, I will have it be."

"Aye! Odin's gaze turns again to his children. We have kept the Nortvegr. We have honored Odin's laws. He has come to show us he trusts us."

"It be a foretelling!" Aegis shouted. "His visage be a foretelling of the new way!"

"Nay! Nay!" angry shouts rang all across the hall.

"Nirrti will return before we are ready for a new way!"

"Aye. Nirrti will--"

"He leaves!" a Champion shouted from the niche by the hole in the wall. "The Allfather leaves. He was not come to tell of a new way. He merely peered in and then left. We are

not ready. He has seen but he knows Nirrti has judged us as not ready. He appeared in her temple, not in our hall! We are not ready!"

Balin stood and banged his tankard on the table. "Ready! It be not for her to judge. It be only the Allfather, great Odin who will decide our fate, our path! Odin!" he shouted.

"Odin," Aegis echoed. "Odin," he said again with a firmer tone. "Odin! Odin!"

As shouts of Odin's name echoed endlessly through the hall Balin looked down at Jack, meeting his solemn gaze. "A sign, House," he said, his voice loud but inaudible below the shouts to any but the two Highborn at his side. "Ye have it. Go again to the long viewer and take ye Sky in hand to see ... does the Allfather come to see him? I think he does."

"Balin," Daniel said, shaking his head as he spoke, "this is not--"

"Not gonna happen," Jack interrupted, grabbing Daniel's wrist. "Time to go."

"No, Jack. The hologram must have been triggered by our proximity. Our DNA, I mean we've already seen evidence that our DNA reacts differently when introduced into--"

"Yours at least."

"For all we know it could have been your cum that caused the extended blueness," Daniel protested.

"I never thought about that. Either way it doesn't matter. We don't need to get more on the radar than we already are. We don't want to start a blood-bath here. If our presence does trigger this hologram then we need to be more careful, not fling ourselves into the fire."

"Hollow gram?"

"The image of Odin," Daniel explained. "It's triggered by the presence of someone, usually just anyone. But this one hasn't ever been triggered before, obviously. So there's something else going on. We just have to figure out what it is."

The shouting had started to die down. Lemmel was very close to the edge of the yellow floor of the inner court again, but so were the other stewards who'd accompanied Champions and Highborn. Balin glanced his way and motioned for him to step back and relax. Lemmel complied instantly, seeming to melt back into the milling group in the darker area of the great hall.

"I think we've learned enough for one night," Jack decided. "Best we head out of here amid all the fuss, get home and make some plans. I think the DHD is under that big lump of wood or stone or whatever that was. The thing with the candles on it."

"Aye," Balin agreed reluctantly. "DHD ye came to see and thus, may it be there. A way in can be bought, as ye have suggested. A joining ceremony. The witches will not be able to keep the temple shut, and I suspect will not do so as the Allfather's visage has departed, just as ye Sky left the archway. It may be though, that Odin be with us even now, invisible in this moment? Odin may be peering at us as we speak."

"Not likely." Daniel shook his head. "The Asgard are powerful, but not that powerful."

## **Chapter 34 The Steward's Adventure**

Four days later morning dawned with ominous clouds on the northern horizon. As they'd left the southern hemisphere fall was arriving, and they were now facing that deadline again, as fall would soon be arriving in the northern hemisphere. Time was not on their side. The council of elders in Brooksmoot, or some passing Highborn or Champion would send word north that House Ondeil's Sky had an odd effect on people blessed with Odin's smile. And winter was coming. Daniel could not be trapped within the city when festival time came. They'd have to be far from the city before either event occurred.

The four travelers sat in seclusion, having a solemn breakfast in the vast bedchamber where they'd spent almost all their time since arriving in the city.

Jack eased himself away from the table in the huge, marble-floored room, his stomach full of a too-hearty breakfast. "So the temple's finally back open this morning but if this big, honking hologram pops back up every time we go in the place, we're royally screwed."

Balin nodded sagely. "Aye. My thought was that the Allfather would give a sign, but this sign would be for the Champions alone to see and to know. We have long worshiped him above Nirrti, and kept the secret of his true altar that ... Well, though I feel ill to reveal the secret of where it be, ye may well know, House."

"Yeah, probably so," Jack said. "Under box number one."

Lifting the front edge of his veil, Daniel shot him a dirty look.

Jack shrugged apologetically. "Uh, you could take the veil off. There's no one else here," he said, but got nothing but another glare from Daniel.

With a heavy sigh, Balin nodded at Jack. "One box," he said, not bothering to ask for clarification. "If the Allfather had revealed his new Nortvegr to the champions and left the guardians in ignorance instead of warning them of the impending danger, then ye Sky could be recognized and have their might behind him before entering the temple. To face the guardians, them with Odin's image in their midst, this divides the power. There will be much bloodshed if ye mate be revealed to be the new Nortvegr before we gain entrance to the temple. Them within will merely shut the doors, bar us from entry."

"Yeah. No sneaking up and doing what we need to do with that altar," Jack said.

"I disagree," Daniel said, waving his fork at Jack and Balin. "It appeared once, but there's no reason to expect it to reappear unless whatever triggered it gets close to the DHD--"

"That's just it. If it's us, we're going to get close. Damned close."

"Balin, I understand your reluctance to confirm that the altar of Odin that the Champions have protected all these years is the DHD that Jack and I are looking for. I think it is. I think it's hidden under that wooden structure. Some time far back in history Champions hid it from the temple guardians, from the Highborn women and its existence has been forgotten, covered over by the prevalence of Nirrti's teachings in this culture."

The big man leaned back and stared down at the laces of his jerkin, his mouth in a deep frown.

"Okay, I know you don't want to betray any Champion oath. I won't ask you to confirm what Jack and I suspect. I'm right, though. The DHD is there. What I need to know is, will we be able to get to it? Is there a way that Nirrti's altar can be lifted off or swung out of the way or something?"

The frown on Balin's face drew tighter for a moment and then the big man shifted in his chair. "If Odin's true altar were hidden by that altar where Nirrti's worshipers gather, then it could be revealed by even one touch."

"Okay, now we're getting somewhere," Jack said as he leaned toward Balin. "There's a switch or a lever? How will we find it?"

"A cantilever, most likely," Daniel said, tilting his head back so his eyes could meet Balin's.

"I shall say no more, Highborn. The way will be plain to him who Odin has sent. None other."

"Crap," Jack swore softly as he sank back in his chair, matching Balin's posture. "How are we going to get close enough, and do it when it's safe enough?"

Lemmel leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table, having to slump as it was sized for Highborn men. "We must know more of what the guardians think and feel, master. My da always says, know a man's thoughts, or the trade goes against ye."

"He knew my thoughts," Daniel said with a nod. "I wanted Jack's survival as much as my own. He asked me, but it's not like we can stroll in there and ask these freaking bastards."

"I can, brother," Lemmel said with a confident smile. "As a worshiper I may enter the temple, seeking ... to worship her and I know how to keep my ears open. I know how to

see what some do not, how to trick out a man's thoughts if he's a tongue to speak with. Guardians, from what I've seen, they be too willing to waggle a tongue."

Balin pursed his lips and crossed his arms. He glared at Jack, and ignored the young steward.

Jack glared back at Balin. "You can't go in. You're too noticeable, too known."

The Champion sucked in a deep breath through his nostrils and frowned deeply. "Aye. The lad has the right of it. None would keep shut around him. He's a way about him, my Lemmel does. Make even a dead horse neigh out its life story, he could." Though his metaphor was light-hearted, his face showed his serious concern.

"Yeah, but this is not a safe mission. These guys," Jack objected, "they're fucking nuts. He makes one wrong step and they'll roast his. Nuts, I mean."

"Aye. And I've a fondness for his nuts," Balin said. His mouth slid back into its rigid frown.

"Guys, don't talk about him like he's not here. Lemmel's a grown up man, perfectly capable--"

"Aye," Lemmel interrupted Daniel. "I be grown. My ma says--"

"Kid, that's not exactly a point in your favor. Your ma says this and that. Or your da says."

"Aye, master. And ever they do say many things. So I will not repeat--"

"You keep right on repeating what they taught you," Daniel scolded. "You have decent parents. In this culture parents aren't just the people who raise you. They're also your teachers, doctors, political figures, law enforcement. They're everything. Don't stop telling us what your da or your ma said."

"Aye. A Sky be never wrong."

"Well, now, if your ma or your da ever told you that," Daniel said reluctantly, pausing to bite his lower lip for a moment, "Jack might have a point there."

A soft knocking on the bedchamber door drew their attention. Lemmel rose and moved toward the door but then turned back quickly to snatch up the dish he'd been eating from and set it on a sideboard where a seemly steward would have been eating, instead of at his master's table.

It was Heyerdahl at the door, coming to see what chore Lemmel might have for him today. It took a while for Lemmel to explain to Heyerdahl that he didn't have any chores

today, that household servants had at least two days off a week where they were expected to spend their time in idle pursuits. He was given coin and told to go buy himself a meal and enjoy the day in leisure. It didn't take him long to comprehend this, once Daniel explained it, one Sky to another. Skys were beings of leisure. But to be idle without having to worry where he would sleep later on or where his next meal would come from was a rare thing for Heyerdahl.

Closing the door behind the properly-veiled Sky, Daniel turned to the others. "I think he's feeling insecure. I was thinking we should eventually send him down to Brooksmet, but if I'm declared a heretic, that will end up putting everyone in Brooksmet in danger, won't it?"

"Would it?" Jack asked Balin.

"My thoughts are that it may, House."

"Great," Daniel said flatly. "All those people. Still depending on me to not fuck up their lives any more than I did when I rejected that damned master miner."

"We'll just have to not fuck this up, then. Right?" Jack said, making his words an order, not a question.

With a new recon plan in motion Lemmel jingled the pouch of round coins he would pay to enter the hall where Skys served Nirrti's worshipers. He peered down at Daniel's veiled face as the Sky patted his arms, readying him to leave the bedchamber. The blue sash he wore to mark him as serving a house with a Sky lay on the chest by the door. It would stay here today. Lemmel felt the heavy pressure of his master and Balin's watchful eyes on him. Lemmel stayed brave and smiled down at his blue-eyed brother.

"All right. You've got everything straight now?" Daniel asked as he lifted a corner of his veil to meet Lemmel's steady gaze. "You've memorized the map Balin drew, showing you about where he thinks the series of halls and rooms are within the eastern wing of the temple. You'll pay your way in, and then wander around, looking very casual, very confident."

"Aye, lad. In the eve be close as ye can to the only doorway that leads from the Sky hall into the temple. That way be how the guardians bring a Sky after he has done his time of service. In they bring him to the temple to receive his circle and then he be free."

Daniel smoothed the placard of Lemmel's spotless tunic. "Be ready to watch what goes on this evening when Balin takes Jack and me back to the hall of Champions. If Odin's hologram--visage appears again, you'll be on the inside and hopefully might hear some helpful information. Talk to any guardians you encounter, and just be your charming self. You're just there to worship Nirrti, nothing suspicious about that for a wealthy steward such as yourself. Anyone who looks at you can see you enjoy sex with ... Skys. So that's all you're there for."

"Aye," Lemmel whispered, bowing his head and closing his eyes. "But I shall not. I shall not lay with another of ye kind. I think ... betrayal as ye once said ... "

"Don't do anything you don't want to do. Lemmel," Daniel said as he put a finger under the taller man's chin to get him to open his eyes. "If it feels bad to you, don't do it with any of them. But for my sake, I mean, it won't hurt my feelings, won't betray me. I love you like a brother, and this ... this way of ... It's not my path, but if it's your path, then I won't deny you the right to go down it. Understand?"

"Our ways are not their ways? Nox wisdom?" Lemmel asked.

"Yes. Nox wisdom. It's not my way, but you and I don't have to have the same way in order to still be friends, still be brothers, do we?"

"Just as ye say, brother." Lemmel bent down and shocked Balin and startled Jack. He swept Daniel up into an embrace and kissed him deeply, kissed him thoroughly. "My way be to show ye that I love ye even without asking permission first. This be my way."

He sat Daniel back down on his feet and left. Daniel turned back to the others and saw Jack's shock and Balin's growing anger. Squaring his shoulders he confronted the rising Champion before he got out of the chair to pursue and probably beat Lemmel.

"That wasn't sexual, Balin. That was love. The veil doesn't forbid love."

A continent ago young Lemmel Larson had been a poor desert trader, spending endless days toiling through nonstop, blowing sand and subsisting on meager rations in a frozen wasteland. Now he stood alone on a grand boulevard in the richest city on the planet, before Nirrti's great and wealthy temple. He was a richly dressed steward, jingling a fat bag of coins in his hand, more coins than his da had to spare in a whole season of trading. And Lemmel served as steward to a great and prosperous Highborn house, a House that hosted a Sky. Odin's smile graced his face and he was wedded to a wealthy and beautiful innkeeper, mated with a handsome and powerful Champion. He even employed a Sky as his personal servant!

"Never could have possibled this in any ale-crazed dreams. Never." He shook his head and worked up a smile that looked as genuine as the sun that was peeking through a break in the dark clouds overhead. Then squaring his shoulders, Lemmel turned away from the temple's main entry doors, eyed the three blue banners hanging over the eastern hall of the big temple and set out for his goal. He climbed the short set of stone steps of the eastern wing, past four well-armed guardian sentries, and entered into the dark hall.

Three banners meant three Skys were serving Nirrti's worshippers this day, so ninety coins were due for an entry fee. Three Skys meant he could spend up to three days inside with them, partaking of the pleasures their bodies offered any wealthy enough to pay for the privilege. A frown flashed across Lemmel's face as his guard dropped for a moment

and visions of his little brother naked and defenseless flashed across his mind. He steeled himself and stepped across the threshold.

From a dark niche on his right a guardian emerged and Lemmel curtseyed respectfully to the man. "Well met, honored elder guardian," Lemmel said to the stooped, gray-haired man. This wasn't one of the enforcers who roamed the city looking for wayward Skys. He wasn't one of the raw-boned bastards who'd raped his brother, just one of their kind. This man was too old, too frail to be forcing anyone to submit to a test, but he was just the right age to be talkative.

"Ah, lusty young one. Ye look right smart there, lad. I've a mind to see how ye will fare in there," he said, hooking his thumb over his shoulder. "What with the doors closed these last few days, we had fair a run on the place this morn. Come ye to compete for the sweet bits of the three within?"

"Aye," Lemmel answered readily, carefully schooling his features as his da did when entering a negotiation with an unknown trader. "Sweet bits, as ye say," he repeated the man's phrase, aligning with him as any good bargainer would.

"Three this day, ye saw the banners? Come then, lad and give ye offering." Eagerly the elder held out his hand for the pouch of coins. "Pay and enter. Ye may remain for up to three days, but depart before then and ye are not coming back unless more coins cross my palm."

"Just so," Lemmel said with a nod as he handed over the fortune that would have fed his family for a season. "Three within, and I've plenty to compete with inside ye say?" He asked, giving the man another opportunity to show his knowledge and give advice.

"Aye. Since doors were shut until mid this morn. Though ye will have time to sheath that sword in ye pants there. Fancy dress. Serve ye a wealthy House?"

Lemmel grinned broadly, showing his straight, white teeth. "I've a mind I can go right through or over any competition. Shame though, that the doors been shut. Must have given ye extra work." He showed the man a great look of empathy, bolstering the negotiation with concern for his fellow bargainer.

"Oh, aye, lad. Aye. And me too busy here this morn to take time to walk through and taste the new one my own self. Always been my right as Senior in the worshiper's hall. New Sky this morn come to serve. His House come through the city gate at dawn but the Sky had to wait to enter until we brethren decreed all within safe to open the doors this day. Then in he goes and naked in the blink of an eye, they had him, the ones who had staffs hard enough to use him that very minute. Them, they shed that little one of his clothes and had him then and there. I'd done got me a taste as he come in, but just a taste. My time on the door here ends in the evening meal and I be for seeing what looseness they've made of him by then. I can't abide the tight ones no more at my age," he said sorrowfully.

"Ach," Lemmel said with a great show of sympathy. "Tight can be such a problem. And I hope the doors not be shut again some time soon. Best they stay open even no matter what comes, eh, Senior?" he said, giving the man the title he seemed to prefer.

"Aye. Then I'd lose my turn at the new one this day, I would. Lost me some time that evening when all the ruckus done come out and did happen. Them inner brethren, them who watch Odin's great ring, they done assured me and the other Senior who oversees the main temple that it could not happen again."

"What could not happen?" Lemmel blinked his bright blue eyes at the senior.

The elder man looked to his left and right, and then leaned closer to the big desert youth, hooking a wrinkled hand around his neck. "Odin come looking," he whispered conspiratorially. "Him, he did appear as if born on a cloud and stood there before his own ring, arms crossed and peering down the southern way to see who might come the northern way. Him, the Allfather stood there more than twice the size of life, even twice the size of the great goddess Nirrti's statue he was. Peering toward the doors to see who might need judging, it be thought."

"A wonderment," Lemmel whispered, his voice full of awe and delight. "Our Odin here and today me here. I be a lucky worshiper."

"Aye. Lucky lad. Lusty, too, I be thinking," the elder guardian said as he reached down and cupped his hand around Lemmel's genitals, keeping it there as he continued to whisper. "I've a mind to come look for ye in the rooms later. Want to see ye use that young staff there, me being Senior among the guardians herein, it be my right. Push it, ye will, into one of the blue-eyed wonderments, eh?"

"Blue-eyed," Lemmel echoed dreamily as he rocked his groin in the elder man's grasp. "Aye. Come look for me, Senior, please. That be if Odin does not return and keep ye from pleasures."

"That would be a regret for me, I be thinking," the elder man said as he stared into Lemmel's dreamy eyes.

"Then even if he come, we should not turn from our pleasures, should we, Senior? Odin would not wish it. If he merely comes to look, then he should look and we should be doing what we always do. We follow the Nortvegr."

"Aye. Ye've the right of it, lad," the Senior guardian said, his brow furrowed in deep thought. "Aye. We be merely following the Nortvegr, keeping our swords sheathed in them that are for that purpose. Though, I be thinking ye might be for such too, on occasion?" he said, with a hopeful smile up at the tall youth.

Lemmel grinned shyly and ducked his head. Then after a suitable silence he nodded quickly and raised his head to flash the elder a beautifully embarrassed smile. "Aye," he

whispered, his breath soft on the elder man's cheek. "I know the way to make my opening loose too, as to not be unreceptive to ye, Senior."

"Aye, there be a good lad. Good lad. Entertain me by plowing that mighty weapon into one of the blue-eyed wonders ye came to ride, and then on ye back, legs in the air to service me as how my lust makes me want ye, lad. Eh?"

Again Lemmel ducked his head but this time he sucked in a deep breath between his clenched teeth and thrust his groin harder into the elder man's grip. "Aye. Aye, please if it could be so, to be on ... as ye say, legs in the air for ye, Senior. It would be a ... wonderment I cannot even contemplate."

Then the elder man gave him a brutal squeeze and released him. With a lusty chuckle he swatted Lemmel on his ass, sending him deep into the bowels of the worshiper's warren of dark rooms and unlit halls.

With one last smile for the elder guardian Lemmel turned away and moved down the dark hallway, his face now in a tight grimace as he rubbed away the pain in his groin. The elder liked to cause pain. Some men did, he knew. They found satisfaction in the sexual pain of others.

Perhaps some of those guardians who'd raped his brother had gotten enjoyment from the act? Though, they'd appeared to be only and merely being of service to their goddess, seemly in manner, there was most likely more desire behind their actions. Testing, they'd called it. Rape, his master had said it truly was, and Lemmel knew which label was the right one. These men, the armed ones that blocked the only way out of this hall, that roamed the dark ways ahead had raped his little brother.

In the first room he came to, Lemmel figured out by observation that this was where he was expected to leave his clothes, but he passed it by. Cautiously he wandered on through the semi-darkness past a few more rooms, got a glimpse of some of the other worshipers, and then returned to the first one to shed his garments so he would blend in with the other naked men inside. A towel was provided, which he could wear draped around his waist or use to lie on or dry with. The hall had an expansive spa in the center chamber. With his mouth in a firm line, Lemmel made use of the warm water while he watched a blue-eyed, silent man be used continually on a hard bench by the edge of the tub.

It was difficult to judge the passage of time within the hall. There were no windows and only a few lanterns set high inside sconces on the dark walls. Few places had light enough to discern the color of a man's eyes, but that didn't seem to deter any of the worker caste men from their sexual pursuits.

Silent men moved about from room to room, seeking contact with a Sky, moving on after a while to watch or interact with another of the three blue-eyed men inside the hall. Many of the worshipers sought each other for release, and some, settling for merely watching the naked Skys being used by their fellow worker-caste men. The wait or competition

alluded to by the Senior guardian was conducted with civility but also with a raw intensity Lemmel was careful to avoid.

It was easy enough to find the guardian's restricted doorway to the temple. It was set in an archway of the stone wall that separated the two buildings, and covered with a black curtain. Painted in bright blue on the curtain was the stylized symbol for the Sky caste. This was the curtained doorway Skys went through to receive their freedom circle. Though, his master's Sky had never gone through there, had never endured the ten days of endless use, had never even stepped foot in the Sky hall or the forbidden garden. Strange!

The painting on the hanging cloth kept all non-guardians away from the curtain. None would dare come close enough to accidentally brush against it.

Lemmel turned away from the Sky symbol and kept exploring. Finally he found an exterior room with a tiny window set up near the roof beams. The sun was close to setting. Night was falling. It was time to move as close as he could get to that foreboding curtained door that led to the main temple where Odin's visage had appeared the night before. His master and his household would be entering the Champion's hall soon, and then would step into the long-viewer archway. If Odin appeared again, Lemmel planned to be in a place where he could hear what the guardians might say.

With his towel around his waist, Lemmel wended his way through the warren of dark hallways past unlit rooms. With only three Skys in the hall and only about twenty worshipers in the entire eastern hall Lemmel had still managed to stumble across many scenes of men engaged in sex. He'd seen all three Skys being used by multiple worshipers. Even the lack of lighting did nothing to hide the non-mutual acts. The worshipers did not stare into the blue eyes. Lemmel had. He'd leaned over one worshiper's shoulder as the man fucked a naked Sky. Lemmel had seen the blank stare of the Sky, a gaze locked on the opposite wall as if the smaller man were putting himself in a dream far from the Sky hall.

Lemmel shivered as he made his way as nonchalantly as possible toward his destination. How many times had his little brother stared blankly while taking an unwanted imparting?

"Ah, young lordling," the senior guardian called.

He stopped in mid stride and turned to regard the robed figure approaching along the almost pitch black hallway. "Senior," he said, putting just the right amount of eagerness in his voice. "How did ye dare recognize me in such gloom? Ye must have eyes of a hawk."

"Just so, little morsel. That I spend my days indoors be why. Never do I venture out into the full sun above. I have all the blue Sky I need in here, eh? Have ye partaken of the delights as ye so wished to do?"

"Ah, such sweet delights," Lemmel said, gazing up toward the ceiling as he sidestepped the question. "A wonderment just as ye promised, Senior. Delights, as ye so said there would be. Me, I be sore to being tired now from the things I have seen. This way I was walking to see what might lie ahead so as I could find a peaceful place to rest from it all." He smiled down at the shorter man as the elder guardian sidled up to him and wrapped a meaty hand around one curved cheek of his towel-draped ass.

"And me, little fine lad, I was hoping to find ye in one of the grand central rooms plowing ye hard staff into one of the soft Skys. But no bother. There be one in particular who ye must have plowed already. Him, he departs from us on the noon tomorrow, having served us nine days this noon. Tomorrow he earns a ring of precious metal given to us by the great goddess. Thus he may leave the temple with his House and move to some great Highborn castle in some distant backwater. A shame, really."

"Tomorrow?" Lemmel asked as he shifted under the guardian's hard squeeze. "I would sore like to see that. Never heard much of how it goes but I know some."

"Ah, not for the likes of even ye to see such. Only Highborn and Champions may attend and view with us guardians when the sisters come for their Sky pollen."

"Pollen?" Lemmel said, lifting his eyebrows and giving the man a youthful and innocent gaze. "I be too unschooled to know such a word. Forgive me, Senior. I have none so wonderful such as ye to teach me."

"Ah, lad. I could take ye in hand and," the elder man paused to tug Lemmel's towel away, "teach ye a thing or two. Service to a Senior ye could perform ..."

Lemmel caught his breath, feeling his staff grow heavy under the elder's manipulating fingers. He slumped back against the stone wall that separated the eastern hall from the temple and breathed shallowly in the darkness. It wasn't difficult to let the touch excite him. Lemmel liked to be masturbated, and it happened too rarely at someone else's hand.

"... ye could perform and then I could let ye in through yon guardian's door to view the gathering. I could seat ye in the gallery where Champion and guardian sit to watch. In a black robe and hood none would know ye not be my apprentice. None much unseemly to see in the temple anyway. The sisters come from the garden so veiled from head to toe, none of us ever did even see a bit of skin. No sin in that ye might view, eh?"

"Aye. Sore much I would ... like to see that, Senior," Lemmel said, feeling his cock growing more sensitive in the elder's hand. He was leaking precum now. The man was trying to wedge a finger between his ass cheeks. "O--only, though if Odin does return then the temple be closed so as I can view nothing. If it be closed the Sky will not have his pollen ceremony." Lemmel made a very pitiful face, and then batted his dark eyelashes at the Senior.

"Then even if Odin should appear, I shall convince my fellow Senior that all must follow the Nortvegr, that Odin watches as Odin will and we should not stray from what we know to do."

Then the man leaned close, bringing his lips to Lemmel's ear. "Would ye like that?" he whispered, timing his words with the thrust of his finger until he penetrated the younger man. "If I sit ye in the gallery among the brutish Champions with their lusty staffs and my fellow guardians? Some might be so moved by the Sky's milking that they might grab ye and use ye even as the Sky be done to, ye being such a beautiful, young lad. This I would so love to behold. Ye filled before Odin's great ring," he whispered vehemently.

"Ah!" Lemmel gasped. He tried to focus in the dark, to read the elder's face. Another towel-draped worshiper strode by then, and stopped to watch the guardian as he worked a finger deep into Lemmel. Then the other worshiper stepped up to Lemmel's side and began stroking his neck. Lemmel gently pushed the man away, focusing on the elder on his other side.

"May we go find that seclusion, Senior? It be down this way?" he asked, pointing toward the arched doorway that led from the eastern wing into the temple. "Dark comes, does it not? Night comes."

"Aye. Vigorous lad. Come and this way we will find solitude. Not many go down near the Sky curtain. Fear it, they do, and we prefer that. Keeps most from wandering back to our private rooms."

The elder withdrew from his body and Lemmel scooped his towel from the floor and then followed the man down toward the small, curtained doorway on the left side of the hall. He got a quick glimpse around the edges of the curtain, seeing what no mere worker caste was supposed to see. The temple glowed with a thousand tiny flames. He also saw part of Odin's ring, knowing full well where it was because of Balin's excellent map. The curtained doorway seemed to be directly across from the arch of the long viewer in the Champion's hall, which would put it slightly behind the ring. Perhaps at one time that arch was an open doorway too. But now it was sealed with stone, and kept the temple under the firm control of the guardians and the Highborn women who were their real masters.

Pondering the power of those mysterious women, Lemmel followed the elder a few more steps to the next doorway, this one on the right side of the hallway. The moment they ducked inside the room a shout rang along the corridor behind them. It had come from behind that mysterious curtain.

"Twice cursed!" the elder guardian swore as he pushed past Lemmel to retreat back down the hall.

With a careful look of ignorance on his young face, Lemmel followed the man as far as the curtain. There, he stopped, crouching down so he could see as much as possible as the

elder fled through the doorway. Before the curtain fell back in place Lemmel saw Odin. Shocked, he fell back, sprawling in the dark hallway on his towel-wrapped ass.

"Odin!" he whispered. A corner of the curtain had caught against the stone passage, leaving a gap that from his position on the floor, Lemmel could see through. Guardians were running back and forth in total panic. He heard loud clangs as the temple's enormous doors were shut and bolted. A smaller boom indicated that the eastern hall's front door had been shut also.

Before Lemmel a huge image of Odin shimmered and seemed to fade in and out. The father of the gods stood almost completely inside his great ring, facing toward the main door of the temple, as if looking to see who was coming.

"Just as Balin said," Lemmel whispered to himself. "Never shall I doubt my life mate. Nothing he could ever say could be a greater insanity than this, and indeed it has happened. Never ..." He shook his head and sat there, not knowing if he should try to leave, or wait for the elder priest to return. Would Balin want to know this now? Or, surely he did know already. If he were in the archway with the master and his Sky, then he knew. And what was Lemmel's duty? Ah! To stay and listen, to see what the bastards, the filthy guardians who'd raped his brother had to say about this occurrence.

"Stay and listen, desert lad," he whispered to himself. "Use the ears great Odin gave ye. Ah, Odin, I see ye. What come ye here for? To take my brother from me? Ye may gladly take him if only to a safer place where he be free with each breath in him. Not otherwise, great Odin. Allfather. No true father would put his child in slavery. My da says ... "

Silent now, he watched as one temple guardian stepped timidly up to Odin's huge leg and tried to touch it. His hand passed through the leg. This was apparently the expected result as the man merely nodded to others around him. Some tried speaking to the huge image but got no response. Odin's image flickered occasionally but remained just an image with no sound coming from it.

So much time passed that Lemmel's ass grew numb on the cold, stone floor. Finally the senior returned, just after Odin's imposing visage began to fade within his great ring. With an awkward scramble Lemmel climbed to his feet and greeted the frustrated man.

"Sore was some excitement," Lemmel said.

"Aye. And not all done. I've a mind to taste ye bits and then sad, I must go back to sit for them prattlers who want to make too much of this. We should follow the Nortvegr. Them, they're for locking up the temple again for a day and keeping this hidden. But me, I be senior among them, me and my counterpart, he being half of what I be half. Two seniors it takes to make rules here. Our decision will prevail, and half that decision be me, young lad. So come now, back to that bit of quiet we found and I be for a taste of ye before I have to return."

"Ah, honored Senior. Just so. If only I can return tomorrow, fresh and ready to have pleasure only with ye, as I am not now drawn to the Skys, but to ye. I be sore wealthy enough that I have another bag of coin to offer my way back in tomorrow."

"Truly?" the elder said with delight. "But that would be sweet, and I cannot allow ye spent coins! Here, lad," he said as he pulled a bag of coins from a pocket in his robe. "One I took just as my time on the door drew to a close. If it be me at the door, ye'll never need to pay coins to come in, but if it not be me there, take this to pay ye way back in and be here tomorrow at noon. But come first, and I have my taste. Then home with ye to return tomorrow. Ye meet me then at the worshiper's entrance and wear only black. Come and I will take ye to see the pollening, when the women come to milk their pollen from the little flower tomorrow at the nooning hour. Eh? Ye'd like that right nice, eh lad?"

Lemmel got his bits tasted. In the unlit chamber he perched on the edge of a sleeping platform while the senior guardian mouthed his cock and balls. Then the elder pushed him back to lie, legs in the air as he tongued around his tight ring. Lemmel stared up into the blackness willing his balls to rise and give the man something to drink, but that didn't come. He was painfully hard, but was not close to coming. No amount of envisioning Balin's hard cock, or the Sky's naked flesh helped. Lemmel even tried to picture his master and the Sky making sweet love as they sometimes did of an early morning while still muzzy from sleep, but none of it helped.

"I be too recently spilled, Senior. Sore I so want to give ye a taste--"

"Nay, lad. I be not caring for ye nectar. Only a Sky do I care for to wring that from. From ye I want this heat here," he said and then stabbed his thick tongue at Lemmel's opening. "Taste of ... young lad," the elder said, and then spoke no more as he worked his wet tongue another inch into Lemmel.

True to his word, Lemmel could loosen. And that was what the elder wanted from him. Used to taking Balin's hard staff whenever the time and place permitted, Lemmel easily loosened himself enough that the elder's tongue penetrated him well. He'd expected the old man to want to fuck him, and was surprised when the guardian finally withdrew and patted him on the leg.

"Off with ye, lad. If as ye say, ye have no more use for the three Skys here but are only for me, then off with ye and return tomorrow. Remember to wear black, as I've a robe to go over it. Ye will be for a day my young apprentice, eh? And none will know the wiser." He smiled and then cackled a shrill laugh as he left Lemmel sprawled and hard on the sleeping platform.

With his laces not yet tied Lemmel rushed from the hall the moment the door was reopened. On the steps outside he passed four guardians, returning to their post. Across the dark boulevard he caught sight of a man that had to be the Champion's watcher. Lemmel veered left, avoiding the man as he hurried across the cobblestone thoroughfare.

The man might recognize him as being of House Ondeil, and his master wanted less notice, not more.

Quickly, Lemmel reached the rear entrance of Wulfstag's city home and was quietly let in through the servant's entrance. Still moving swiftly, he climbed the rear stairs and found he'd returned before the others, so Lemmel stepped back into the hall and went to check on the Sky who labored for him.

He knocked at the grandly appointed bed chamber at the rear of the house.

"Come," Heyerdahl called.

Lemmel stepped in and curtseyed low. As he straightened up he saw that the Sky was properly veiled, seated comfortably on a padded lounge.

Heyerdahl rose from the lounge and curtseyed too. "Is there a duty for me to perform, steward?" he asked eagerly.

"Nay, Highborn. I have come merely to see that all be well with ye. Do ye want for anything?"

"No. I am servant to you, steward," he said softly. "If something is wanted should it not be me who fetches the wanted thing?"

"Truly and just so. Still, if there be something needed that I have not supplied ye with?"

"There is nothing. I have food," he said, holding his hand out toward the table laden with bowls of fruit, small loaves of bread and a large round of cheese wrapped in a wet cloth. "All that I may need. And shelter, and ... more than I could ever want. I have it, steward," Heyerdahl said as he bowed his head.

"Then all be well?" Lemmel asked, his brows drawn together in worry. He took a step toward the properly veiled Sky. "This day, after the things I have seen, it burns within me, a strong need, Highborn, a strong need to be seeing ye treated well. Strong need. Grant me some way to ease this need? It aches my heart."

"Treated well? Of course I am, steward," Heyerdahl said as he looked up at Lemmel. "I have a strong need too. To feel as though I am earning what has been paid to me thus far. Today I went to the tailor's shop and spent time watching him work. He says if I wish to learn the art of stitching he will allow me to learn from him, in exchange for a little help around his shop. This way I can sew for your master and his hosted Sky." He drew a deep breath and tilted his head back, looking at Lemmel from under the edge of the veil and spoke in a clear, strong voice. "I will earn my keep."

"Ah," Lemmel said with great effort. A lump had formed in his throat and he tried to swallow it away. "I fear I might have learned something from ye just now. Something of great value and so again I am even more in ye debt."

"What could you possibly learn from someone as poor and ignorant as me?" the veiled man asked, his voice slightly brittle.

"That when a man has hope, he has everything he needs to make a new life inside himself. My master's Sky give ye hope through simple friendship, he done that. He has done it before in other places, given this. And then a man, even a child or woman be truly changed from the dark path they were following. Ye are surely on a bright path of ye own choosing now, Highborn."

"A bright path?" Heyerdahl asked, his face softening. He took a small step toward Lemmel.

"No one told ye to go learn a skill to bargain and to make ye way. Ye did this on ye own as ye had not thought possible in all the days ye lived on the streets, eh?"

"I hadn't. Not until he ... Your master's Sky and the tailor ... Friendship gives hope." Heyerdahl bowed his head.

"Aye. All must have this friendship. This be merely what he wants to give. Just friendship. I seen him write the friendship runes on a parchment, I did. And my master says ten commandments may not be that simple, but my ... his Sky says they are. Though, I'm not knowing what ten--" Lemmel cocked his head to the side, hearing the sound of footsteps outside. "Pardon, Highborn," he said, giving Heyerdahl a deep curtsy. "My master returns. I must attend to my duties."

"And mine? Surely I can bring an evening meal or bathwater?"

"Ye have this and tomorrow for two days of rest. Maybe the next day also, I think, as I have duties that will keep me elsewhere. If ye wish to use more time to learn tailoring or practice with threads and cloth, then I've coin for ye to buy such supplies from the tailor. In the rose colored box by my Balin's bed be where I keep my marks and coins. Fair wealthy, I am, Highborn. Find ye a mark and buy for me what I need for ye to use. As many coins or marks as ye may need to use in whatever way, they are there to take."

"Ah. I can get the things tomorrow. I wish I could say thank you to a steward. If ever one deserved thanks, that would be you, Lemmel."

In the master bed chamber Jack swore as he threw his cloak on the bed. "We're royally screwed."

"Aye," Balin agreed, being much more restrained than his house when he took off his horned helmet and began shrugging out of his jerkin and leather gauntlets. He laid them on the round dining table.

"Let's hold off on all the doom and gloom until Lemmel gets back," Daniel ordered the two soldiers. He poured himself a glass of water and stepped away from Gruber's grasping hands. He was drinking the water down when Lemmel knocked and then entered the bed chamber.

"Master, did ye see Odin as I did? Amazing. He being as big as was told. Are ye not most amazed as I was?"

"Yeah, kid. Amazed," Jack said with disgust. He tugged off his boots and wiggled his toes. "Report."

"Aye?" Lemmel asked for clarification.

Daniel pulled the summer-weight veil off and exchanged it for the shorter one Lemmel's mother had given him long ago. "Jack means tell us what you saw, what you learned."

"Ah! Just so, brother. Me, I saw much! Me, I learned much more!"

With a grunt of discomfort Jack sprawled back on the bed. "That's helpful," he said sarcastically. "You saw the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain, did you?"

"Aye," Lemmel said with a decisive nod. "And me I was on my ass on the cold, stone floor and there behind the curtain he was. Odin himself. Though, a god, not a wizard. And then before that I had befriended the senior guardian who oversees the Sky hall. Him, he took a liking to my bits, he did. Called them lovely and tasty--"

"Ye bits!" Balin bellowed. "Tasty? Lad! I've--"

"Aye," Lemmel interrupted his lover, "and me liking to have him taste, I was. Not even seemly though it was, I had my legs in the air and he did taste me right good and deep he did. And for this, he says he likes the way I think. And what I think was that he should persuade the other senior that to keep the temple open, even as Odin does appear be the right way, the Nortvegr. So tomorrow my plan be this. That at mid day when a Sky will pass from the eastern hall to the temple to receive his circle, then if my master and his Sky are inside and Odin does appear, the temple will stay open, as this Senior wishes to please me. He will see that it stays open, as I am able to be loose for him because I often take ye hard staff in my backside. So, it be ye own sword sheathed in me that makes this possible, this plan, Balin."

Balin's eyes grew wide with disbelief. "My ... My ... Ye say ... How be this, that my fucking ye has caused this plan to come to be!"

"Merely, it has," Lemmel answered calmly. "And then a joining ceremony between my master and my broth-- My master's Sky tomorrow, twice blessed because of being right after a Sky earned his pendant. This will get them close as can be to Odin's great ring."

Holding his veil up, Daniel blinked several times at Lemmel, and then turned to stare at Jack's stunned face. "Did you get that?"

"I think I did. The kid's come up with a plan about how you and I can get inside the temple even if Odin keeps popping up. Damn," Jack swore softly as he shot the youth a look of admiration.

"My fucking ye?" Balin demanded, his face now a dark, ominous red.

"Aye. The senior's mouth did feel nice, though not a wonderment such as ye tongue does feel when ye put it in me, Balin, my love." Lemmel smiled seductively at Balin.

"Oh ... dear," Daniel whispered, his eyebrows high on his forehead. "Jack, what have we created?"

"I honestly couldn't say," Jack replied, shaking his head as he continued to watch Lemmel seduce the big Champion.

Lemmel crossed the room to his lover, not yielding in the face of Balin's apparently impotent rage. "Aye, and even did he return to me my coins, he was so enraptured with the beauty of my ass. Tomorrow I am to return so as he can make way for secreting me in to the worker caste gallery to watch the Sky ceremony. Sore taken with my ass, this senior guardian. Be it ever a powerful ass, lover?" Lemmel asked, twisting his hips around toward Balin.

"Fool, whelp!" Balin said, smacking Lemmel on his offered ass. "And sit ye in the gallery he would, this nasty old man. Then any guardian or Champion who's a hard staff might take ye for the wet-nosed babe ye are and plow that ass then and there! Know ye this?"

"Aye!" Lemmel said, managing to sound eager and fearful at the same time. "Just as the senior said it might happen. This be his wish."

"Agh!" Balin growled in anguish and swatted Lemmel again.

Lemmel shot Daniel a quick grin and then dropped to his knees, snatching at the laces on Balin's pants. He got them open and fished inside for his prize.

Balin pushed him away and fell on him, tearing Lemmel's laces open and jerking his pants down. Then Balin hauled him up to his feet, sat in one of the too-low chairs by the table and drew Lemmel over his lap like a child. Then he began to deliver open handed slaps to that delectable ass Lemmel had just finished showing off so well.

"Oh ... fudge," Jack said with strong dismay. He rose up on one elbow. "You think we should stop ..."

"No," Daniel said, his eyebrows drawn in concentration. "I think Lemmel's getting what he wanted. He's pretty manipulative. I never noticed that before." He tapped his fingertips on his chin as he watched the noisy display. Balin was cursing colorfully.

Lemmel had worked his own pants further down and was now spreading his legs as far as the clothing would let him.

"You think he wants this?" Jack asked, his dismay still clear to see on his features.

"He's hard," Daniel observed as he squatted to get a better view across the room between Lemmel's legs. "But if he arches his back any more Balin's going to miss his hole and pop him in the balls. That's not what he wants, I'm pretty sure."

"Oh. Uh ... think maybe we should kind of slide on out of the room for a while?"

Daniel rose and turned back toward his lover, his face showing his own surprise. "Leave? We've never left before when those two ... Are you worried about me? About my feeling upset over the rough play going on?"

"Uh. Kinda. Yeah." Jack sat up and reached out for Daniel's hand. He glanced past his lover. Balin had quit swatting Lemmel now, but was breathing hard. Lemmel was clearly humping his hard dick against Balin's leg. Balin's fingers rested lightly on the cleft of Lemmel's ass, and then they began to slide down into that inviting crevice.

When Lemmel groaned out in lust, Daniel chuckled. "Manipulative. I never noticed that. How come I never noticed that before?"

"Because you were too busy being manipulated?" Jack asked brightly. He reached a hand out and caught his lover's fingers. "Me too. Not saying it was just you, babe. Me too."

"I could use a little manipulation about now, Jack. That's something I find hard to say sometimes." Daniel's voice grew rough and full of emotion. "I mean, not just sex but honestly? I mean, honestly? I could use ... holding. I mean, if you could hold ... I mean, we don't ... or actually I don't ask ... Never have. It's just not how our relationship works--"

"I'm going to hold you now," Jack said as he pulled his lover down onto the bed beside him. Jack stretched out, rolling Daniel against him and wrapped both arms around his lover. He kissed Daniel, first on the lips lightly, and then peppered kisses across his nose and eyelids, heedless of Daniel's soft chuckles. Then Jack concentrated on making love to Daniel's left ear and the side of his neck. Daniel's chuckles changed to a quiet groan of appreciation, and then heavy breathing. Then Jack traced his lips and tongue down to Daniel's collar bones, so easily accessible in the nearly-not-there Sky clothing. He

ignored the leather cord that held a naquadah ring tied to Daniel. Jack moved back up, leaning up over his lover and brought their mouths together in a very gentle, passionate way.

Behind him Jack heard Lemmel and Balin wrestling on the floor. Eventually through the haze of kissing he heard the noises of rough, hard sex from the two worker caste men. Jack kept making soft love with Daniel's mouth.

Feeling secure and safe under Jack, Daniel was finally able to shake the sensation of Gruber's hands gripping his ankles. He opened his mouth, feeling Jack's tongue trace across his lips, and delve past his teeth. Jack kissed like he fought, with his whole being. Daniel groaned passionately and carded his fingers through Jack's soft hair. He loved this man with every bit of strength he possessed!

The next day when the sun was at its highest point Jack came to the bedchamber to retrieve Daniel. Their plan was in motion.

Daniel was ready, dressed in the shimmering pants and see-through top his tailor acquaintance had given him. Also he had a new veil, made by the Sky tailor just for the occasion and delivered to him by Heyerdahl. The shy man had expressed his gratitude at being given the privilege of helping Lemmel with the ceremony preparations and at being allowed to help place the veil on Daniel's head.

A joining ceremony was a sacred event and the veil Daniel wore today symbolized that. It differed drastically from anything he'd worn in the past, because it covered his entire head and shoulders. It was a simple circle of fabric, made of the same sheer material as his shirt. It was translucent to the point where anyone less than six feet away could clearly see his whole face. This veil was not tied on, but was gently draped over his head and held in place with clips in his hair. The hem in front hung down to his nipples, draping over his shoulders and coming down in the back just past his waist. It was the same stark white as the rest of his clothes.

There were no beads or gold sewn on it, and the tiny rolled hem did not add enough weight to keep the delicate cloth down. If a gust of wind caught it, Daniel would have to hold it down as he walked to the temple.

The only thing not white on his body was the circle of naquadah hanging between his visible nipples, and his new sandals.

Standing in the doorway with Heyerdahl at his back, Daniel met Jack's awe-struck stare.

"You ... you look ..." Jack's voice failed him.

"Ready to go?" Daniel prompted, holding his hand out to his lover.

Balin, standing a foot behind his House finally nudged him between his shoulder blades.

Startled out of his trance, Jack reached out and took his lover's hand. "Yeah. Uh, yeah. Go now."

When they stepped out of Sven's city home, the sun shone on the gleaming veil, making it almost opaque, and giving Daniel some sense of cover.

Leading Daniel along, Jack squinted to see through his wedding veil. "No makeup today?" he asked, his voice betraying a tiny hint of disappointment.

"Yes, I do have it on. You can't see it? Good. Thought the sun would make this more opaque."

"But you have on the eyeliner? I didn't get a chance to see you before that guy dropped the veil over your head."

"Yes, the eyeliner is on. Heyerdahl helped with it, put it on a bit more artfully I guess, than Lemmel and I had been doing. But I'm not supposed to show you. I think you're not supposed to see me unveiled before the ceremony."

"Oh," Jack said, this time his disappointment clear. "But you've got on the lip stuff too?"

Daniel cocked his head and grimaced at Jack. "You'll find out later."

The rest of the short journey was made in silence.

The two Highborn men followed Balin as he strode proudly up the steps of the Champion's hall. This was the third time in a week they'd been to the hall, but today as Balin had explained his part of the plan, they merely came to the front steps to gather as many Champions as possible to come witness the union of his House to the Sky he hosted. Any Champion could attend such an event, but to be invited by the House, to receive a coin as special guest was an honor. And Balin wanted as many safe eyes on them as possible.

The Wulfstag servants had been dispatched yesterday evening to the town taverns and inns, to known gathering spots where Champions frequented, to notify all that a Highborn House would wed his Sky the next day at noon. Any Champion or Highborn in attendance would receive a coin directly from House Ondeil. Ondeil was a generous and wealthy House.

"This still smacks of bribery," Daniel complained in a whisper at the big Champion's elbow.

"Aye," Balin said with a sage nod. He stopped on the top step, his horns glinting in the bright sunlight. "It be the custom, and we do so need the eyes so we bribe them to come. The guardians will follow the Nortvegr with such a number of eyes on them."

"Jack," Daniel objected, turning to his lover, "what if we can't figure out how to get to the DHD today?"

"Then we'll figure out a way to get back in later. We're bound to learn something today, one way or another. The extra eyes Balin wants can't hurt. Humor him."

"He's doing this because he thinks ... This has to do with that prophecy," Daniel argued under his breath.

"Humor him," Jack whispered harshly. "Would you be more comfortable if I made that an order?"

"Are you kidding?" Daniel whispered tersely. "And did you get a chance to see Lemmel go into the other hall?"

"Yeah. Some old dude was out there on the steps. Snatched him away from the younger guardians working the door and whisked him inside. I bet the kid's naked about now, getting his ... bits ... Oh man. That really doesn't sound good, does it?"

"It sounds like ... What the hell do you call it when someone uses sex to infiltrate the enemy?"

"Why are you asking me that question?" Jack asked indignantly.

"You're the soldier."

"I'm not that kind of soldier," Jack insisted.

"Never said you were that kind," Daniel retorted angrily.

"Could we drop this and focus on the task at hand? Namely, keeping our asses alive?"

"Finding the DHD," Daniel insisted. "A working DHD."

"Yeah. That task."

"Pay ye heed," Balin whispered harshly, interrupting the two men arguing at his side. "Comes now Champions to be received by ye. Greeting by ye, House and a nod they will give if ye Sky does acknowledge them." He shifted his grip on two heavy sacks of coins he held for Jack.

"I'm right here," Daniel started to object as he brushed at the wedding veil covering his face. He hushed as Balin glared down at him.

"Great," he whispered to Jack. "The man thinks I'm a prophet and still he gives me the evil eye. Great power these people give to their gods and prophets."

"Hey," Jack said insistently, "I thought that's what you said was so great about this culture in the first place? I mean before Nirrti came along and fucked things up."

Daniel rolled his eyes but realized that behind his wedding veil the gesture had little impact on Jack.

"Payoff," he muttered under his breath as Jack exchanged greetings and pressed a coin into a Champion's hand. " Bribery," he whispered again as another Champion stepped up to the top step to receive a greeting and a coin. " Payoff," he whispered.

Before the next Champion made it to him, Jack leaned over and appeared to lovingly caress his Sky's neck and seemingly whisper an endearment so delicate and intimate it had his Sky ducking his head in what looked like utter embarrassment. This caused a snicker to run through the small crowd of Champions and Highborns gathering near the bottom of the steps.

When the next man stepped forward to greet Jack, Daniel was absolutely silent.

After close to a hundred and fifty horned Champions and almost a hundred Highborn had come to collect a coin from Jack, a gong rang out, deep and bass, announcing that a Sky was making his way from the Sky hall to the temple to begin the process of receiving his pendant.

Those who'd gathered to receive blessed and honorable coins from House Ondeil moved up the grand steps of the temple, streaming past Nirrti's statue and in through the row of tall, arched doors. Many more Champions who'd come without knowing a union was to take place passed in along with the invited guests. There were close to three hundred Champions and over a hundred Highborn caste entering the temple.

They were all in high spirits, happy to be witnessing the joining of a great and wealthy House to his hosted Sky.

"Here we go," Jack murmured as he took Daniel's hand and led him forward with the throng. "In, sit for the Sky ceremony thing, and then we're on. Right?"

"I got it," Daniel said insistently. Gruber's nasty fingers were grappling with his left ankle. Joslin's with his right and Daniel tugged away from them, determinedly ignoring the ghostly feeling. "Balin announces you and then we come out of the Highborn gallery on the left. Then stand in front of the ring and after making our oath, step through toward what we hope is the DHD. Nothing to it."

"Yep. Nothing to it," Jack said. " Won't be too dark in there, will it? You think you'll be able to translate the markings on the side of that altar thing they've got where a DHD should be?"

"Yes. Probably from the gallery on the left of the temple. It's just behind, or actually from the way the gate is oriented, it's in front of the gate, but from where we're entering, behind the gate--"

"That's making my head hurt."

"Never mind, then. Just follow my lead," Daniel said.

"Don't I always," Jack said lightly, giving Daniel a warm smile, rare for the softness in his look. As they passed into the shadow of the temple, the direct sunlight was blocked from Daniel's veil, causing the material to lose its opaqueing glare. Jack could see Daniel's face now, and got a mirroring of that same love back from Daniel.

As they reached the top step of the temple, the throng that had come with them parted and formed two lines on either side, making a tightly bordered path through the door. Many men moved on inside to stand along the aisle of the great temple. Balin went down on one knee at Daniel's side and tugged on his sandal.

"What?" Daniel asked. As Balin tugged again he lifted his foot and the Champion removed the sandal. Then he lifted his other foot, offering it to the Champion. To Balin's right there was a low set of shelves that held slippers and sandals. All Skys entered the temple barefoot.

When Daniel's sandals had been placed with some of the other Sky guests footwear Balin stood and bowed his head, indicating for the two smaller men to enter. Around them the Champions and Highborn who'd come to see the Sky inside receive his circle and to see a joining ceremony began to murmur rather loudly. Words of admiration for Jack's strong visage, or Daniel's graceful manner were briskly being exchanged.

"They're getting up for the game," Jack spoke quietly out of the side of his mouth.

"This, I could do without. What if it's too dark in there and I can't see well enough to translate the symbols and open the altar?"

Jack's eyebrows rose as he shot his lover a stressed look. "Wasn't I just saying that? And didn't you tell me to shut up?"

"Shut up," Daniel whispered harshly. "I said never mind before. Now I'm saying shut up. They're staring at your face, remember. Mine's off limits."

"Oh, right!" He plastered a review board smile on his face and led Daniel through the huge arched doorway.

The second they passed under the archway all hell, the proverbial all hell, broke loose. A wavering image flickered and then solidified within the huge ring dominating the center of the temple. Odin appeared.

Shrieking in alarm, robed, tattooed guardians ran for the doors only to meet solid lines of Champions and Highborn, some with delicate, sacred Skys at their sides. The Champions stood their ground, blocking the frantic guardian's attempts to push the visitors out and close the temple.

Jack and Daniel were not singled out in this mad dash. As Odin's previous appearances had seemed to be random, with no Sky or Highborn entering, no connection was made to Daniel and Jack's entry this time, or to the handful of Sky and Highborn clustered around them in the welcoming line.

Amid the scrambling guardians an elder came pushing his way through them. "Nay! Nay! We leave it thus! We follow the Nortvegr," the stooped guardian shouted as he pushed his way among the larger, more physically powerful temple attendants. "Daft, witless ... Ah, gentle Highborn. Big, mighty Champions. Come to see the little Sky get his-- But nay. Ye come to do a joining. Many fine, gold marks for a joining," he said with undisguised greed.

Another elderly guardian made his way through the imposing rank of strong guardians. He stared hard at Jack and only then seemed to see Daniel veiled in white at his side. "Ah, aye. Many, many marks for a fine joining." Then he turned and threw up his hands, shooing the burlier guardians back to their duties within the temple. "Get ye where ye should be! Daft ... " he said to the other aged guardian. "But speak not so unmannerly in front of the little Skys," he said as he and the other senior guardian tottered quickly away. "All seemly ... all ... aye ..."

Balin had sveltely stepped in front of his House and the veiled Sky. As the guardians fell back, and the other Champions and Highborn stood transfixed at the shocking sight of the Allfather flickering in the temple he pointed forward and to the left, indicating the gallery where Highborn and Sky sat to observe ceremonies.

Though every Champion in the city knew of the recent appearance of the Allfather, many of the Highborn had obviously doubted the validity of such tales. But now they saw the reality, the fact behind the tales. It was shocking.

Around the shimmering hologram the temple interior was amazingly well lit, festooned with candles in golden holders and glowing lanterns hung from golden chandeliers. The place shone like a golden cathedral, with light flickering off gold leaf covering scrollwork on the wooden trim around the doorways and bases of huge interior pillars. Whole panels of wall were covered with hammered gold. The pillars were the same marble as the floor. High overhead lantern light combined with multi-hued stained glass windows in the east and west dormers to shed light on a blue ceiling. Paintings hung along the walls depicted Sky caste men, naked in surrealistic poses. Interspersed among the Sky art were huge paintings of masculine Norse gods, displayed in thick gold-leafed frames. Golden incense burners were suspended from hooks along the walls. The floor in the front part of the temple was bare of furnishings.

Nirrti's influence on the Viking culture was never more evident than in her temple. No women, no female gods were depicted anywhere. Nothing feminine detracted from the statue of the goddess on the steps outside. Nirrti would have no other woman before her, or, as the interior attested, anywhere near her.

This bare part of the chamber was about fifty yards wide, and stretched before them about a hundred yards. Halfway down that length stood a stargate, ringing a hologram that represented the father of all Norse gods, Odin. Just beyond the ring the temple spread out east and west. To the west was a large gallery, an elevated seating area boxed with a solid railing. It had enough benches to easily hold about four hundred people, with plenty of standing room along the sides and the back. To the east was a matching gallery, this one reserved for Champions and guardians. There was no other type of furniture anywhere in the vast temple, except the wooden altar that, though Balin had never admitted it, Jack and Daniel suspected, hid a DHD.

Beyond the altar was an arched space reserved only for Highborn women. They would emerge through a doorway back there, coming from the forbidden garden only as far as the altar, and only on one particular occasion, when a Sky came to earn his freedom from the city.

Jack and Daniel strode down the center of the vast chamber, approaching Odin's huge visage. When they reached a point within a few feet of Odin, the place where they were to turn left or right depending on their caste, Odin spoke.

"I am Odin," a deep voice boomed out, speaking in goa'uld, "Supreme Sovereign of the Asgard Mentality. The High Council of the Asgard has designated this planet a safe world for developing sentient species by unanimous decree, Era 40.73.29."

Then the hologram voice stilled.

"Goa'uld?" Jack asked, whispering in English. "He spoke in goa'uld. Supreme sovereign? I get that right? Don't know the Nortvegr word for sovereign. Or supreme for that matter."

"Yes," Daniel answered in English, giving Jack an admiring glance. "Supreme sovereign. You're goa'uld has improved drastically--" He was interrupted as the voice boomed out again, repeating the statement exactly, but this time in English.

"Interesting!" Daniel said. "I wonder ... " He glanced behind him, seeing somewhat frozen posture of the Champions and Highborns behind him. Then he turned back around.

"Spreekt u het Nederlands?" When Odin's hologram repeated his declaration of the planet's status, this time in Dutch, Daniel grinned. "My grandfather would love this."

"Yeah," Jack said sarcastically. "Slip in, grab a seat and don't get noticed. So much for plan A."

"English!" Daniel called to the hologram, and got a repeat of the declaration in that language.

"He speaks in a god's tongue to the Sky!" an elderly guardian screeched out.

"While you're at it, why don't you tell it, nyet. We're not Russian spies!" Moving with a careful appearance of calm, Jack latched onto Daniel's forearm, digging his fingers in and returning to the language of the planet's inhabitants; spoke in a saccharine-sweet voice, "Let's move along, honey-dear. Other folks want a chance to play with the hologram too." He pulled Daniel left toward the gallery reserved for Highborn men.

With a quick jerk, Daniel moved his bare feet, getting back in step with Jack. "Sorry. Got a little carried away there, didn't I?"

"Don't you always? Look at the ruckus you've caused now."

"Well, we never stick to plan A anyway. It's usually plan C or D that you end up calling perfect, or saying works like a charm or some such nonsense." With his face set in an embarrassed grimace Daniel looked back over his shoulder as Jack dragged him along.

One elderly guardian was now at Odin's feet, leaning back dangerously far to stare up at the huge figure. He was imploring the god to speak to him but the hologram remained silent. More guardians were coming to the hologram now.

On the eastern side of the temple, Lemmel stood inside the railed gallery section amid a handful of similarly robed worker caste men. His youthful face was stark under the black hood and his gaze flicked hastily to the two Highborn men, to Odin's huge image and to Balin trailing among a group of Champions toward the great ring.

The two most senior guardians began conferring in hushed tones at Odin's feet. After a few short moments they split up, waving for the worshipers to come forward, to proceed down the correct path for their caste. As the Highborns turned to the west and the Champions to the east, the younger guardians finally began to back off, to return to whatever station they normally kept in the temple during ceremonies.

An armed guardian was stationed about every ten yards around the outer wall, a mighty show of force. Some stood by the entry way into the two galleries, and two of the burliest ones flanked the curtained doorway where Lemmel had been smuggled through an hour ago. During their planning session at Wulfstag's city manor, Balin had given an estimate of how many guardians should be present in the temple under normal conditions. This was more than twice the number he named. Almost every single guardian in the city was present in the temple.

Daniel felt Jack tug hard on him and he turned to his lover.

"In," Jack urged quietly as he guided Daniel into the gallery area.

They moved among rows of padded benches to the center and then stood attentively facing the altar that sat halfway between the stargate and the rear door of the temple, the door to the forbidden garden.

"Yeah," Jack said resignedly. "Time for plan B."

"Not necessarily," Daniel objected as he laid his hand over Jack's that still gripped his forearm. "Look. See the symbols along the top of the altar? Even from here I can make out ... That's not futhark. Not the Viking runic alphabet. It's a paternoster."

"What?" Jack asked, not unexpectedly.

"The precursors of runes were pictograms arranged to represent what you might call a magic spell. Symbols that are considered to be powerful. I'm not surprised the guardians haven't figured it out. These predate the Viking alphabet, the futhark. I haven't seen these used anywhere else on this planet. I think it's died out over time. Maybe even the Champions no longer possess the skill to read it."

"Look. Someone else is going to play with the hologram video game. Think they'll score as many points as you did?"

Jack pointed at a barefoot, veiled Sky, his House urging him forward to speak to the hologram. The Sky was balking at being pushed toward the towering statue but finally relented. He yelped out a high-pitched hello and then ran toward the Highborn caste seating area. His House pursued him and then embraced him lovingly. The hologram had not responded.

"Yeah, you're toy's safe, Sky. Looks like nobody else has figured out where the on button is. And," Jack added with a grimace, "are you gonna be able to find the on button on that altar? Balin refused to tell me anything else about how it hides the DHD, or how to open it. Some great big honking Champion life-secret or some such. Swears, absolutely swears you're gonna be able to open the damned thing because you're the magician behind the curtain. Frankly, I don't think he really got that you're Dorothy. It's the lack of ruby slippers. You keep forgetting to pack your ruby slippers every time we get taken off in our sideways tornado."

"Does that make you Toto?" Daniel retorted.

"Toto?" Jack asked indignantly. "I'm the tin woodsman." He glared at his lover and then suddenly his face softened. He reached out and took Daniel's hand, bringing it to his chest. "I'm going to get real mushy here. When you met me, first met me, I had lost my heart. I mean, really. I had no heart. It had been ripped right out of me."

"Jack," Daniel whispered, leaning forward until his veiled forehead was touching Jack's. "I remember looking into your eyes and seeing ... so much pain. A man has to have a heart in order to feel pain."

"Yeah," Jack breathed the word almost soundlessly.

Highborn men were filing into the gallery around them, some sitting on the padded benches, others choosing to stand near the front rail or along the sides. A few shot Jack a nervous glance, but then turned politely away. They seemed to have dismissed Daniel's interaction with the hologram too, perhaps thinking there was nothing more significant than that he was the first Sky to approach it.

There were other couples in intimate embrace around Jack and Daniel. No one seemed to think the personal activity was unusual, but all were giving each other privacy. The Highborn didn't seem to have the comfortable camaraderie Jack could see among the Champions gathering across the temple.

Jack ran a hand up under Daniel's veil and caressed his cheek. "But I'd like to think you started it ticking again. Felt empty in here," he said, tapping their joined hands against his chest. "Felt empty. Probably sounded empty too. You got it ticking again."

"So," Daniel said slowly, "does this mean that Dorothy and the Tin Woodsman live happily ever after?"

"If Dorothy can figure out how to click those ruby slippers and get us back home? Yes."

"I'll click. I'll click," he said, his face in a broad smile.

## **Chapter 35 Ruby Slipper Magic**

The two lovers stayed in their close embrace as more Highborn men came to join them in the gallery. There were about seventy-five men with them now, barefoot Skys and wealthy Highborn men. Many began to sit down, so Jack pulled Daniel down to the padded bench, keeping his arm firmly around his lover.

"The mixed couple," Daniel said, nodding toward the procession line nearing Odin's feet.

Jack looked back at the people coming to the point where the two castes were split.

The Champion they'd seen in the great hall next door was walking forward, his hand supporting a Sky.

"Them?" Jack asked.

"That's the Sky who's hosted by a Champion."

As they reached the point of separation the Champion bent down and lifted his Sky's gold embellished veil. He kissed the shorter man, their lips lingering for a long moment. Then he lowered the veil and the barefoot Sky continued on alone to the side where other Highborn sat. He held his head high, light gleaming off the heavy jewelry, the rich adornments on his body.

His Champion watched him for a moment and then turned toward the eastern side of the temple. The gallery of worker caste men was very crowded already and more were still filing into the railed space.

"Oh, Lemmel!" Daniel said a bit too loudly as he gazed across at the gallery where the Champion was going.

"I see him," Jack whispered, patting Daniel's hand. "He looks okay. There's another dude sitting near him in a black robe too. That the new recruit uniform?"

"Acolyte. Yes. He looks confident. This is incredibly dangerous. We should have told him to stay at the manor."

"Let's just--"

Jack was interrupted as a gong sounded through the temple. A big, brass gong, as tall as a worker caste man stood near the rear of the temple. All the guests were now confined within the railed galleries and the temple doors were being closed. There was a flurry of activity at the door on the eastern side, set within the stone wall a few feet from the eastern gallery. The curtain was pulled aside and a naked, very pale man was brought in.

"Sky," Daniel whispered, sounding very absorbed in the moment. He scooted forward, perching on the edge of the bench. "He's stumbling. He looks exhausted. Do you think he's drugged?"

"I dunno," Jack said, pursing his lips as he concentrated. "Lemmel's up at the railing now. I've lost count. Maybe two hundred Champions over there. It's standing room only. How many guardians do you think are in here today?"

"A hundred," Daniel said. "I'm not good at counting the enemy. Recon is not my thing."

"I'd say that was a fair assessment. Champions outnumber them two to one. I'm not going to count on any backup from these dudes," he said in a much quieter tone as he nodded at the Highborn men and the Skys in the gallery with them.

"He looks frightened," Daniel said.

"What?" Jack asked, turning back to watch the Sky being brought toward the ring.

The man was being held tightly between two guardians. These two were dressed in the usual garb, but also had black veils over their heads. The veils hung down completely covering their faces.

"Executioner's hood. That's what it looks like," Jack said.

Daniel nodded.

The Sky saw the hologram of Odin and began to balk, but was held firmly and lifted off his feet. The guardians circled around and carried him out in front of the eastern gallery, stopping a few feet in front of the railing there. Then more guardians came from the doorway to the Sky hall, these, carrying a large tub, some buckets and sponges. They proceeded to give the naked man a bath, soaping him vigorously. Then they bent him over and used a sponge to clean him out as thoroughly as possible. He submitted to all the hands on him, the cleaning, only protesting occasionally when the cleaning got too rough.

"Glad we're way over here," Jack said. He turned to Daniel. "You okay with--"

Daniel's head was down. He'd leaned forward, pressing his face down to his knees.

Jack let go of his hand and wrapped an arm over Daniel's bowed back. "It's just a bath. They're bathing him."

"They're going to rape him, aren't they?" Daniel asked frantically. "Why didn't I make Balin explain this ceremony in detail? My God, after what they did to me in front of you, I should have thought to ask. If they rape him, Jack ... I can't ..."

"Sky," Jack whispered urgently, "you've got to ... I don't know. Don't look. We can't just get up and leave. We're stuck here. They'll ... Desire ..."

"What are they doing to him now? I ... I never wanted you to see what they do to me. "

Jack glanced back across the temple and saw the man being lifted out of the short tub. He was towed dry and then a guardian began to comb the man's long, golden hair back from his face. Behind the naked Sky the gallery of Champions and the few acolytes was full of action. Sex. Some of the guys were beating off. Jack looked closer and saw fucking, sucking. The ones along the front railing were having a clothed orgy. Lemmel had been leaned over the front railing and was being fucked by a Champion that Jack didn't even recognize. The other acolyte beside him was similarly being used, his robe pulled up in back like Lemmel's. A couple of Champions had one Champion on his knees and they were both trying to fuck his mouth at the same time. He looked pretty eager, trying to get both cocks in his mouth together. The two men over him were staring at the naked, unveiled Sky.

Jack kept a firm grip on Daniel, kept him down so he wouldn't see the orgy.

Balin pushed through to step up behind Lemmel. When the man fucking him came and stepped back, Balin pulled Lemmel off the railing and turned him around, taking him from the others who had started reaching for the young steward. Possessively, Balin put his hands on Lemmel's shoulders, lowering him to his knees. Lemmel's back was now to the naked Sky as he pulled Balin's pants open. The big champion's strong fingers clamped around Lemmel's black hood and tugged the younger man's mouth down onto his cock. They stayed like that until the naked Sky was taken in the arms of four guardians, and carried toward Nirrti's altar.

Jack rubbed Daniel's back and leaned down to whisper to him. "The bath part is over. They're taking him to the altar. Do you wanna sit up? You don't have to," he said as he glanced around at the other Highborn. A couple of Skys in the gallery with them had hidden their faces against their partner's shoulders or necks. "Don't have to look, babe."

"He's ... This has to stop." He kept himself pushed against Jack, kept that part of his body safe from the grasping hands and wet tongues of Gruber and the nasty guardians who'd snuck in and joined in on Daniel's waking nightmare.

Nirrti's altar was a few feet from the end of the stargate ramp, right where a DHD would be, safely out of the splash zone. It was just tall enough to conceal a DHD within, and about six feet square. It was also positioned centered between the two galleries. Any action on it would be in the best possible place to be seen by both groups of men.

Jack scanned around the temple, checking to see where the guardians were, how the mood was over among the worker caste men and what the reaction was among the Highborn around him. Everyone near Jack was quietly attentive. The orgy across the temple had ended. Balin and Lemmel stood together at the front rail. The guardians along the walls were at attention.

The Sky was carried to the altar and then lifted onto it. He was placed on his hands and knees. Then the four guardians each produced a short length of rope and tied his four limbs to rings protruding from the top of the altar.

As they stepped back the gong was rung again, its deep tone reverberating off the temple walls.

"Makes my teeth rattle," Jack said. "Oh, crap." The man on the altar looked as if he was just waking up. He began to struggle, to tug at his bonds.

"What?" Daniel asked, rising up to peer out at the altar. "He's tied?"

"Yeah. They cleaned him up and then tied him on that thing. Everyone's being quiet, babe. You've got to be quiet. If we try starting something now all we'll succeed in doing is getting Lemmel and maybe Balin killed. Then everybody else."

"All of Brooksmeeet," Daniel whispered. He sat transfixed, watching the tied man jerk at the ropes. "But he wanted this. He knew what he was getting into, didn't he? Did he come here by ... Not choice. But he came to get a naquadah pendant. He wants to be free and if this is what he had to do to get it ... He knew they were going to tie him up, didn't he? Jack, if one of the guardians starts raping him you're going to have to tie me down too. I'll lose it, Jack. I'll--" Daniel clamped his lips together as Jack grabbed him in a tight hug. He breathed deeply as Jack's embrace chased Gruber and his minions away.

An answering gong sounded from somewhere behind the garden wall. It rang four times.

Over his lover's head Jack saw another Sky being held the same way. The veiled man was shaking, sobbing against his lover's neck. He had a naquadah pendant on, just like Daniel did. He'd been through whatever that guy was going to go through. His lover, or whatever the guy holding him called himself, he was looking on eagerly, taking in the spectacle.

"Listen to me," Jack whispered tersely. "There are other Skys here sitting around us. They're reacting the same way you are. They don't want to look either. Just keep your head down. Blend in. You've done some incredibly hard things on missions before. You can do this. You can do this, Sky."

Daniel clutched at Jack's tunic and pressed his face hard against the finely tailored cloth. His thin wedding veil, stiffer than his summer veil, scratched his face. He wound his fingers in Jack's tunic, tugging the man even closer. Then he drew a deep breath. "You're right. I can deal--"

"Door," Jack said. "The garden door, where the women-- Oh, here they are."

Daniel pushed himself up, giving up for a moment, the sanctuary of Jack's arms, and peered toward the rounded recess where the temple met the wall of the forbidden garden. That area was slightly higher than the rest of the temple. Three steps that led up to it bordered the entire arched recess. "The way the wall curves inward, they can come out here and still be within the boundary of the garden, can't they?"

"Guess so," Jack said, smoothing a hand down Daniel's back. "If it gets tough, close your eyes. We still have to be okay to get up and go out there later."

"Not if any of the guardians rape him. How could I? I have to, though. I have to."

The doorway into the garden was very small compared to the grand entryway at the south end of the temple. The entry from the forbidden garden was only about eight feet tall and about four feet wide. It swung inward, spilling soft light into the arched, northern area of the temple. White-robed figures stood in the opening. As they moved in their appearance became more discernible.

They were small, graceful and feminine forms dressed in stiff, white clothing that covered them from head to toe. On their heads each wore an elaborate hat. Peaked out in

front, the hats had wings of sorts that swept back and down, reminiscent of the bow of a ship cleaving through an ocean wave. Hanging from the hat was a veil of equally white material, it hung down to the tips of the woman's fingers. These veils were unlike the one Daniel wore. They were of thick material, allowing no glimpse of their faces. Under the veil they wore white, floor-length dresses, belted with wide, white sashes. Their skirts were full and bellowed out as the women moved. Though the sleeves of their dresses hung down past the tips of their fingers, when one lifted an arm to adjust her veil, it was revealed that she wore long gloves. No skin showed. Not one single inch of skin would be seen by the men gathered in Nirrti's temple.

As the first four moved from the doorway several more came through and joined them. They all stopped, standing in a line across the edge of the arched area where four steps stretched across the entire width of the temple and led down to the floor where the altar rested. There were ten women in all now, gazing toward the bound man, and past him to the hologram in the ring. Odin had his back to them.

One woman turned to another and whispered.

Jack and Daniel both leaned forward, studying the women carefully.

"Think they're the blond ones?" Jack asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine. What are they talking about? The hologram? Think they didn't know it was here?"

The one spoken to clapped her gloved hands, producing a sound that was muffled and barely audible in the huge chamber. One of the elderly guardians came scurrying forward and crouched at the bottom step and then fell to his knees in front of her. Stiffly, she bent over and whispered to him for a moment. He turned, glancing over his shoulder at the huge hologram. It still hadn't faded. He shook his head and then turned back to her, speaking animatedly for a moment.

Then she hushed him and waved a white-gloved hand at him, shooing him away. When he was gone the women drew together and spoke for several long moments.

"They're really not happy, are they?" Daniel asked. "Think they know more than the guys out here do? Think they know what a hologram is?"

"Guess it doesn't matter. They're on the move. Going down to check out the guy on the altar. Any of them carrying his pendant?"

"She is," Daniel said, pointing to one of the identically dressed women.

"What's that one got?" Jack asked. "And the one on the other end is carrying something too. It's white. Every damned thing they have is white."

"I'm surprised they're not in blue," Daniel said. "Blue is a powerful color to them. Why not wear it?"

As the women descended the stairs the Sky tied to the altar began to thrash about. He tried to rise up onto his feet but the ropes binding him were too short. One of the women reached him first and she touched her gloved hand to his shoulder. He stilled, peering at her veiled face. He shook his head but she didn't back away. The women now surrounded him, reaching up, touching him everywhere.

The altar was just barely high enough to conceal a DHD. The top of it came up to just above the women's waists. Some of them had to stretch a bit to reach the bound man. As he jerked from them and began to emit little cries of panic one woman used a small set of steps to climb up and kneel by his shoulders. She wrapped an arm around his neck and clamped a hand over his mouth.

Another woman brought a small packet to his face and held it there. Then she pressed her own veil to her face and leaned over the packet. A big puff of powder shot up into his face, fogging the air around the altar.

"She blew something at him," Jack said. "He's inhaling it through his nose."

"Drug," Daniel whispered.

To their right in the gallery a Sky moaned. Jack peered at the man. He was swaying. His companion gripped him firmly.

"Drug," Daniel repeated, his voice sounding too flat. "I smell it now. Smell that? Jack, do you smell that?"

Someone to their left was swearing. Jack glanced that way.

"I'm never coming to another one of these," a veiled Sky was whispering vehemently to the Highborn who had ahold of his hand. He wore a naquadah circle. "If you want, come alone. I can't witness this any more. You don't know how that powder feels inside. It gets in my head even this far away. I can't stand it. I'm never coming back here--"

"Hush. You want us to be looked at? All right. We'll leave the city tomorrow. I just had to see for myself. I wanted to know."

"Jack, I smell it," Daniel said.

"Cover your nose," Jack whispered urgently. "It's that damned drug."

A painful moan emanated from Daniel's throat, only to be matched by the Sky who'd spoken so angrily.

Jack held Daniel firmly and fished in the pocket of his tunic. He had a little square of cloth Lemmel had tucked in there, something to use to clean his hands if he needed to. He pulled it out and pushed it into Daniel's hand. "Cover your nose and mouth. We're too far away for that stuff to reach us but still ... "

Daniel did as Jack urged him to, pressing the cloth over his lower face under the white veil. "Why?" he asked, his voice muffled.

"Don't talk. I don't know why anyway. I don't know squat today. Why the hell would they use that crap on him? It prevents his sperm from giving Odin's smile. If that's what they're after they're not gonna get it."

One of the women got up on the altar behind the kneeling man. The others pushed him back up high on his hands and knees. She held a small pestle-shaped object in her hand.

Jack winced as she pushed it into the man's backside. He heard the bound man cry out. "Damn," he swore. "That's gotta be rough. Oh, crap. I know what they're doing. Prostate massager."

"Massage," Daniel repeated questioningly, keeping the cloth firmly pressed on his face. "I feel weird, Jack. I don't feel like I'm getting hard, but things are looking odd. The room looks too ... Seasick. Oh." He clutched at Jack.

Seeing his lover sway, Jack tightened his grip across Daniel's lower back and used his other hand to keep the cloth pressed across his nose and mouth. "They're going to make him come. They're going to get sperm out of him."

"Milk him," Daniel said dreamily. He swayed more. "Milk him. Look under him. That one. She's doing it," he said slowly. "Milking ... Bad thing, this rough sea. God, I want off this boat." He turned and pressed his face against Jack's shoulder.

"Boat?" Jack asked. "You're hallucinating. Damn. You've inhaled some of that stuff."

To his left the Sky who'd been whispering so harshly began to pant. Jack looked at him. The man was panicking. All around them Highborn men had grim faces, were glaring at the altar scene or were pointedly staring in another direction.

"Why come to one of these if it's this rough on them?" he whispered a little too loudly.

"Because we must see," a well dressed Highborn at Jack's right said. "This is our legacy, what binds us together. This is our origin and what controls our lives and the lives of our future sons. But to go through that to gain a son? Have the forbidden women touch me thus?"

"The herb doesn't render the sperm completely useless?"

"Sperm? What word is this?" The man squinted his eyes at Jack and then glanced down at Daniel.

Jack shook his head. "So you want a son."

"Yes," he answered, still studying Jack and Daniel with unease. "And you have freedom to leave the city with your mate. I wanted that with mine and willingly so, but to have him touched by them ... "

"Yeah, touched by those women," Jack said, nodding toward the display on the altar. "But what about the Sky hall? What happens in there, that's got to be so much damned worse."

"Merely service," the man said, shaking his head at Jack's disapproving look. "But the women's touch, each of us knows it cannot be easy to bear. Still, he loves me enough to do it, as much, perhaps as your mate loves you? Your Sky wears the circle. He has endured sexual maltreatment for your sake." He turned back to watch the display.

Jack grimaced and turned his attention to the altar. "They're done, Sky," he whispered. "They've let go of him. The pendant. He's getting it now and ... they're leaving. Going out--"

"I have to see," Daniel insisted, raising his head from Jack's shoulder. "Out to the forbidden garden. When they open the door be sure you look through ... Still dizzy."

"Just sit still. I'll-- Never mind. They went through damned fast. Nothing to see. But the guardians are untying the naked guy, letting him go now."

"My head hurts," Daniel complained. "I really think some of that stuff spread over here."

"Inhaled it," Jack said, whispering very low now. "Inhaled in the powdered form instead of drinking it like you did. The effect would be short-lived, and probably momentarily more intense. Well, less intense actually because you had a major overdose. Lasted longer because of the overdose, but also because you absorbed it through your stomach, not your nose."

"Inhaled. And more sensitive to it than you. Like the Skys around us who've had it before. See? They smelled it like I did."

"Well, at least that's over. The guy's all right."

"If you call that all right. He's only half-conscious. Look at him."

The naked Sky was released, untied from the altar and lifted down. Two guardians steadied him on his feet and draped a plain veil over his head and pressed a bag in his hands. The Sky dropped the fist-sized bag. When it hit the floor Jack heard the clink of

heavy coins. A guardian picked up the bag and again forced it into the hands of the dazed Sky only to see it fall to the marbled floor of the temple again.

A Highborn man left the gallery to go to him. He was carrying a cloak over one arm. As he reached the reeling Sky a guardian scooped up the bag of coins and thrust them into the approaching Highborn's hands. He snagged the bag and then draped the cloak over the disoriented Sky.

"That's the guy who was sitting on my right, the one I was . . . Well, if that's his Sky no wonder he was pissed off at what I said."

Clutching the cold circle of naquadah hanging from his neck, Daniel shook his head. "Think he doesn't understand what it's like in the Sky hall? What Skys have to go through to get out on that altar?"

"We're up next. You have to be ready for this. All we have to do is stand in front of the ring, do our vow thingie and then step through. Ready? Are you?"

The Sky was escorted into the gallery reserved for the Highborn caste. As he and his host sat Balin strode boldly across the temple toward the same gallery. He waited at the railing and Jack took that as his cue. He rose and helped Daniel to stand.

"I'm okay," Daniel whispered as he shuffled along with Jack toward Balin.

"Sure," Jack said. "Hard to tell behind that longer veil."

"Yeah, that's why I decided I should tell you. Not leave you guessing. I'm all right. Let's get this done."

As they'd rehearsed back in the privacy of Sven Wulfstag's city manor, the three walked to the back side of the stargate ring. With Odin's hologram flickering in the way, as they'd thought it might be, Daniel and Jack stopped a foot in front of it, avoiding the possibility of insulting any of the watchers by standing within their Allfather.

All the guardians in the place had withdrawn to the stone walls, standing in a relaxed posture, but watchful of the ceremony that was now underway.

Balin curtsied to the couple and then strode to the temple doors. Every eye in the place was focused on him as he waved, indicating for the two guardians standing there to open the way. Loud murmurs of delight and appreciation rang through the temple as Freyfaxi was led in by a stable hand. His black coat gleaming, Frey was saddled and also draped in gold-hued cloth. In the old ways a sacrifice was called for, to honor the goddess, Freyja. But more modern people knew that an animal could be dedicated to her and live as a sacred animal, as Freyfaxi's namesake, the first sacred horse was. The handsome, well groomed stallion was brought into the temple, stamping his hooves on the marble and

snorting great gusts of air. He began dancing sideways, shying from the strange surroundings.

"He's frightened," Daniel said and then left Jack's side and went to the animal, stroking his nose. Frey settled down and let Balin wipe sweat off his flanks with the dull side of his knife.

"Good old Frey," Daniel whispered as he stood on his bare toes to reach up to the animal's nose.

Frey lowered his head and nudged Daniel, looking for a treat. "You're a sacred animal if ever there was one, Frey."

When the scraping was done, when Balin was satisfied that he'd deposited enough sweat from the blade into a large silver bowl that already held a good quantity of mead, he nodded to the groomsmen and stepped back. Daniel kissed the steed on his velvety black nose, patted him as the groomsmen led the stallion from the temple, and then returned to Jack's side.

"Are we on plan C now?" Jack asked, taking a firm hold of his lover. "You just blew right through plan B, the one where you were supposed to stop attracting attention. You smirking under that veil?"

"Oh, I didn't stop to think. Frey was close to panicking. I just ... "

"Look around," Jack murmured. "You've scared the shit out of all the guardians.

Daniel glanced around and indeed, all the guardians in this end of the temple were almost plastered to the walls now, staring wide-eyed at Daniel.

"Skys are supposed to be scared of horses. Remember how Ashild was?"

"Crap," Daniel whispered.

Jack snorted and turned to face Balin.

The champion put the bowl on the floor in front of Jack and Daniel. Then he produced a bundle of fur twigs from his sash and dipped them in the mixture. He slung drops of the liquid on the two men, moving his hand down quickly, and then sharply left and right, as if sketching Thor's hammer in the air.

Then Balin moved to the Highborn caste gallery and sprinkled the guests. Then it was the worker caste's turn to be sprinkled with the mixture of mead and sweat of a sacred animal. Balin left the bowl on the ground there and returned to kneel on one knee before his House. He pulled a short sword from his waistband and presented it to Jack. Jack took the sword, substantial compared to his shorter stature, and turned to Daniel.

"The sword of my ancestors, I give to you to hold in trust for my ... my son."

Murmurs of admiration rose from the gallery of Highborn.

"He'll try for a son," a Highborn said loudly.

During the planning and rehearsing back at the manor Balin had warned them to expect these shouts of bravado. Most were from Highborn who were themselves trying to work up the courage to try for a son.

As Jack leaned forward to hand the sword to his lover, Daniel leaned close and whispered. "I take this sword as a symbol of your memory of Charlie, that memory being the sacred trust I will keep for you, Jack.

Jack swallowed and straightened up, feeling his heart squeezing tight as he gazed at his beautiful lover.

"A son for his household," another Highborn agreed, his voice loud enough to carry to the middle of the temple.

Now Balin held a sword out to Daniel. He took it and turned to Jack.

"I acknowledge you as my guardian, and as my protector," Daniel said loudly as he held this sword out to Jack.

Jack reached to take the sword and again Daniel whispered to him.

"As you were in the beginning days of the stargate program, my protector and my guardian, and now you are that for me in our private lives."

"Sky, as you are protector and guardian now of my heart," Jack whispered earnestly.

Then Jack pulled a ring from his pocket, a piece of gold wire coiled three times around in a circle. One end of the wire of gold had been hammered out flat, into a mold showing the goddess Freyja. He placed this ring on the hilt of the sword Daniel had given him and then held it out for Daniel to take.

Daniel took the ring and placed it on his finger. Then he took a ring Balin held out in the palm of his hand, and placed it on the hilt of the sword Jack had given him to keep in trust. He presented the ring to Jack.

This ring had a small piece added to one end of the wire. It was a small hammer of Thor, denoting Jack's might as a husband. When Jack put it on, the hammer of Thor lay along his knuckle.

Then he handed his new sword to Balin and Daniel did the same. Balin rose and backed away. He returned to the gallery and got a bottle of wine and a two-handed, blue cup, and then he walked around the huge naquadah ring to stand before the altar of Nirrti.

Alone now with his lover in the center of the huge temple, Jack took the front hem of Daniel's veil and lifted it up off his face, laying it back to hang by its pins from his long hair. "You okay?"

"Love you," Daniel said. "I realize this isn't the best time to say it. We're in the middle of a mission, but ... Love you."

A smile played across Jack's lips for a moment, and then the silver-haired man burst into a big grin. "It's a perfect time. I love you, desire."

Then solemnly, Jack took Daniel's hand and led him by Odin through the stargate.

"Remember, don't trip going through the ring. Huge honking bunch of bad luck if you do," Jack cautioned the now unveiled man.

The moment they stepped through the ring, Odin spoke, again using English, the last language Daniel had used when addressing the great hologram.

"I am Odin, Supreme Sovereign of the Asgard Mentality. The High Council of the Asgard has designated this planet a safe world for developing sentient species by unanimous decree, Era 40.73.29. The Goa'uld System Lords were so informed.

"Passage of an unauthorized Goa'uld exiting this world was detected. Do not attempt to activate this stargate. You have been warned."

"Well," Jack said, tugging Daniel through the other side of the stargate, "I don't like the sound of that last bit there."

"What should we do?" Daniel asked, carefully stepping down the incline from the ring with Jack.

"Check out the DHD. I don't think we have much to lose at this point."

They proceeded toward Balin, where the big champion stood holding out a two handled cup full of wine. Daniel took the cup, holding it by both handles, and Balin withdrew to the outside of the worker caste, gallery to stand before Lemmel.

Daniel knelt down and offered the cup up to Jack. Jack took the cup and made an oath to Odin before he drank. Then he helped Daniel to rise and held it for him to drink. Daniel's oath was to Freyja. By drinking together the couple were made one in the eyes of the law and the gods, symbolically affirming their new kinship before all the witnesses.

"There's a triggering lever," Daniel whispered. It's on this side. I can see the pictogram, third row from the bottom. That one that looks like a man reaching up. If I push that in and slide it up I think the altar will open."

"Worth a chance," Jack said. "Push it."

Daniel darted forward, dropping to one knee swiftly. He pushed the symbol and sighed in relief as it moved under his hand. He depressed it hard and slid it upward. The gold-leafing over the wooden structure split down the middle, and the altar swung away, in two pieces.

"A DHD," Jack said happily. Hastily he set the cup on the floor and stepped past Daniel to the other side, now facing the front side of the stargate.

Guardians began shrieking and bellowing as they ran toward Jack and Daniel. Daniel got to his bare feet and joined Jack in front of the DHD just as Jack laid his hand on a frosted white glass dome that covered and blocked their way to the ruby dome that activated the DHD. Suddenly a blinding flash of white light filled the temple. A whirring sound deafened the two men at the DHD.

"What the hell--" Jack bit off his swearing.

Daniel blinked to clear his vision. "What was that? We've been transported somewhere. This is a ... where the hell are we?"

All around them was a white foggy light. The DHD was still in front of them, solid and real.

"I think ..." Jack paused and squatted down to touch the floor, "think we're still in the temple."

"We haven't been transported anywhere?" Daniel asked. He took a couple of steps away, reaching out toward the foggy whiteness that surrounded them. "I can see through this but can't get through. Look. There's Balin. He's trying to get to us. And guardians. There are guardians all around us, Jack." Daniel backed up toward the safety of Jack's side.

"Huh? Yeah," Jack said. "We're in a tube of some kind. Shield." Jack walked the small perimeter. It extended only a few feet in all directions from the DHD.

"The wooden altar's gone. It was sticking into this shield when it popped up. Must have vaporized it."

"Damn," Daniel swore. "What if Balin had been closer to us?"

Jack shook his head and returned to the center. "We're stuck in here with this DHD and the damned thing's inactive. It's got some kind of thing over the middle of it. Damn. We need Carter here."

"Let me see." Daniel stared at the white dome that covered the center of the DHD console. "Well, even if we could activate it, we can't get out of this." He pressed a few symbols but none activated.

"I wasn't expecting to get trapped in with the thing. When you and Carter were on Cimmeria you ended up in some hall."

"I touched the obelisk and it transported us to Thor's hall."

"Well, touching strange things has never led to much good," Jack said. Then he reached out and laid his hand on the dome. The white glassy look changed instantly, becoming a smoky blue. Odin's hologram appeared on the other side of the DHD, facing them. This time his image was only about eight feet tall.

"Shrunk a bit, hasn't he," Jack said.

"I am Odin, supreme--"

"Yeah, yeah," Jack spoke over the recorded message, "we got that part already. Anything new, big fella, or are you just a broken record?"

"-- protection device was triggered by the passage of an unauthorized Goa'uld exiting this world. On that date the gate was locked.

"When I populated this world with my children I placed within them a gene that is necessary to deactivate the force field around this stargate. That gene is not present in you. The locking mechanism on the activation device cannot be released by any but the four races or one of my children who has matured. Any unauthorized person trapped within the force field will be assumed to be an agent of the goa'uld who chose to violate the decree and will be held captive within this energy field until such time as they expire. This is your fate for breaking the treaty agreement and attempting to infest this protected world."

"Expire?" Jack said. "Expire?" he repeated, ire strong in his voice. "Did I hear expire in there somewhere, Sky?"

"Yes," Daniel answered distractedly as he studied the swirling blue and white glass-like dome over the center of the DHD. "There was definitely some reference to expiring. Leave the recording alone, Jack and look at this. Here," he said, pointing at five symbols that had appeared on the blue glass. "We've seen almost this same grouping before. Remember when we rescued Ernest Littlefield?"

"Yeah, course I do. We were just talking about it a couple days ago. Why? You making some sense out of this? Any of it an off button? Turn off the force field that's got us trapped in here?"

"No," Daniel leaned closer, pulling absently at his lower lip as he studied the symbols. "This at the top is the Asgard race. Here, the Nox. I know that symbol now. And over here, the Ancients. In the middle this fifth symbol, this is the Norse pictographic combination, a paternoster that symbolizes the northern way. Nortvegr. These symbols are the four races surrounding the symbol for the protected peoples of this planet. Do you realize what this means?" Daniel asked, his voice growing more animated as he spoke. "The meeting place of the four races? The Ancient repository of knowledge where Earnest was trapped all those years."

"Means we're gonna be trapped here for years? That's putting the odds for our expiring pretty far up there. How do we get out of this?"

"Just give me a minute. Look. Here we have the Asgard, and they left a warning here. What Odin just said, that was in reference to Nirrti leaving through the stargate. She might have come here by ship and when she gated off world that activated this lock. She couldn't get back here to finish fucking up these people's lives."

"From what I've seen of her handiwork, that's a good thing. These people got off lucky. She didn't turn any of their children into human bombs, or deform them so bad they were unable to live decent lives."

"And here on the right, the Nox," Daniel continued, ignoring Jack's comments. "Every time we've seen these symbols together it means the place was at one time a meeting place of the four races. Might not be a knowledge repository. I've seen no evidence of that, but who's to say what's inside the forbidden garden? But Nirrti would have found it. she would never have left anything like that here."

"Yeah. She wasn't too shy about making off with anything she thought could be useful. So what's your point?"

"Well, this was obviously a meeting place at one time. Then it became a protected planet when Odin, who by the way is obviously an Asgard--"

"We already assumed that," Jack argued.

"Never assume anything," Daniel insisted. "As I was saying, later it became a protected planet and this safeguard was installed to keep goa'uld from using the stargate. Then Nirrti activated it. So now what?"

"I'm asking you," Jack said, his frustration clear to hear. "You're supposed to come up with a bright idea."

"Well, we try out the dome. It said one of the four races. Thor told you when you had the knowledge of the Ancients downloaded into your brain that you were genetically close to them. Try it. Touch the dome and see what happens."

"What if I don't wanna? I never thought touching strange things was a good idea."

"Oh for-- Just touch it again, Jack."

"You first. You're genetically closer to these people. Touch the Nortvegr symbol."

"I won't have the gene Odin put in these people," he said, his agitation clear in his voice. "Oh, all right! For all the times you've told me not to touch," Daniel groused as he reached out and laid his hand on the middle symbol. Nothing happened. "There. Satisfied? You finally let me touch something and nothing happens. Happy?"

"Not really," Jack muttered. With his lips in a firm grimace, Jack reached out to touch the symbol of the Ancients on the dome. He squinted hard, then shut his eyes and turned his face halfway away. Then he laid his hand on the dome. Nothing happened. "Hey, nothing happened, Sky. Sky?" Jack called, as he opened his eyes. "Oh, what a rush."

## **Chapter 36 Future Possibilities**

"Greetings, Colonel O'Neill."

"Thor!" Jack called up toward the gray being who addressed him. He was now standing in the vast chamber of the high council of the Asgard. Lots of little gray guys were staring down at him.

"How's it hanging?" Jack asked, flashing the aliens a broad smile. "Not that it hangs, mind you. Least, I haven't noticed anything hanging, as it were. But we've already covered that ground." He raised his eyebrows and cleared his throat.

Another of the aliens addressed him now. "Supreme Commander Thor is not available at this time. I am Kel."

"Ah. Hi ya," Jack said as he waved a jaunty salute to the being. "Well, nice to meet you. Kel. How's every little thing? Been busting any goa'uld ass lately?"

"We have all been extremely busy of late, Colonel O'Neill, and are quite surprised at your call."

"Call?" Jack asked, lifting his eyebrows high. "How's that?"

"You sent a call to us through a protected planet, O'Neill," another Asgard explained. "We are speaking to you through long range holographic means, in answer to your summons."

"So, I'm not really here?"

"Correct. You are not here."

"Oh. Well, I was kind of hoping I was, cause it seems my Sky—my team-mate and I are kind of stuck, you see. Need some ... assistance getting off this planet we've been stuck on for a while. Got a bit lost."

"We had heard you and Doctor Jackson were misplaced. Supreme Commander Thor has been in communication with Earth military command and also with Tok'ra forces who even now search for you."

"Yeah, it's nice to be missed," Jack quipped. "So, about that help, getting us out of the jam we're in?"

The Asgards blinked their huge black eyes at him.

"The DHD? It's locked. We can't open it."

"Ah. A very serious problem. You are a great distance from the known routes. It will take several weeks to reach you by ship," an Asgard on a high row said.

"We don't need a ship. We just need the DHD unlocked. Can't you do that from here? Click the remote control or something?"

"Unfortunately we cannot. The ... locking mechanism has been triggered by an unauthorized goa'uld use."

"Yeah. Nirrti was messing around here a few centuries ago. You folks didn't know anything about that?"

"We do now. With your triggering of the call device, we have also received a transmission from the ... lock, that a goa'uld passed through the gate there, just as you say. I fear she may have done much damage in her time on Nortvegr. Am I correct?"

"Yeah," Jack said with a nasty sneer. "You could say that. So how about getting us the hell outta there?"

"The locking mechanism may be released by touch from one of the four founding races. The Asgard, the Nox, the Ancients, and the Furlings. We built a safeguard into the device, hoping that some day the Nortvegr people would progress to the point where they would be mature enough to greet us in our true form, and take their place among the gate traveling races."

"Well, it's just me and him stuck inside the force field. Just lower that and we'll get one of the locals to release the lock."

Another Asgard closer to Jack spoke. "Part of the lock is the force field. You may not leave it until one of our ships arrive to release you."

Jack glared up at the assemblage of advanced beings. "Not leave that little circle for weeks. Yeah, we'll be dead by then, thank you very much. Next plan?"

He met a wall of silent, blinking faces. "Next plan, I said. Another option?"

The Asgard began speaking together among themselves. "We must do what is necessary."

"But to put in motion the means of his release, we endanger his very existence."

"His continued existence is what we must consider to be of primary importance."

"Not the loss of future possibilities?"

"Without existence there can be no possibilities."

"There will be others of his kind."

"None have appeared in centuries. We must risk it."

"Risk what?" Jack asked glancing from one to another of the speakers. "I know you guys like having me around--"

"We would sacrifice much for you, O'Neill. But your future is not what we would endanger."

"What do you mean? If you don't come up with a way for us to get out of there, I for one will have no future."

"Yes. You, for one. But your future will not be risked by your gaining freedom. Daniel Jackson's future would be risked."

"By my living?" Jack asked as his frustration turned to ire. "Come on, fellas. Play it straight with me."

"We must ... play it straight with him. He must know."

"No. He will be unable to guard Daniel Jackson's future."

"Hey, I've done a pretty damned good job of that so far. But what are we arguing about here? You guys got a way for us to get out. Spill it!"

"We have already told you the only way out. The dome must be touched by one of the races depicted on it. By the original inhabitants, the Nortvegr race with their DNA marker designed by Odin, or by one of the four founding races. The Asgard, the Nox--"

"You're not going to recite them again for me, are you?"

"--Ancients ... and ..."

"And the Furlings. Whoever the hell they are," Jack said angrily.

"There," an Asgard said, pausing to point a bony gray finger at Jack, "is your misconception, one we have promoted I am afraid."

Jack decided to take an Asgard tactic. He crossed his arms and blinked at the tiered rows of gray aliens stretching out above him. Finally his lack of patience betrayed him. "What damned misconception?"

"That the Furlings are a race. They are of all races, and of none. Furling is a state of being, not a state of physical existence."

"O ... kay," Jack said dubiously. "State of being. Furling. Got it. How does that help? Is there a Furling on that planet? Can we get him to come to the temple and get us out of that force field?"

"No one outside of the force field may enter and help you, O'Neill. All help must come from within the confinement."

"Well then we're shit-out-of-luck. I'm pretty damned sure there wasn't a Nox in there. Though they do have a tendency to be invisible. And I didn't see any little gray butts hanging around the place. No glowey Ancients either."

"You are correct on all accounts, O'Neill. No Ancients, Nox or ... Asgard are trapped within the confinement field with you and Doctor Jackson."

"Okay, so we're back to shit-out-of luck on that front." Jack glared at the aliens.

"He fails to see. How can we give him the responsibility of knowing? It is beyond his ability."

"We must. Future possibilities must be guarded."

"Fellas, I'm getting really pissed off about you talking over my head. And don't tell me it's easy to do. My Sky's back alone on that planet waiting for me to get back with some good news--"

"He waits beside you, though his image is not transported here. He sees you even now. He is not alone."

"Yeah, whatever. Give. What's the way out?"

"The way out, O'Neill, is for us to reveal to you something we had thought to keep hidden forever. You must know what a terrible thing Ra caused to happen centuries ago, and why he never returned to quash the rebellion on your planet."

"Huh?" Jack said, glowering at the Asgard faces around him. "What the hell does that have to do with me and him being trapped now?"

"I fear telling him is the wrong thing."

"It must be done." The Asgard turned toward Jack. "Ra thought to create a being, a member of what you think is a race called the Furlings. He sought to do this by artificial means, gestating an altered being within a human woman, and making for himself a host who he thought would be far more powerful than a mere Harcecus or, the advanced being, a hok'tar that Nirrti sought to create. Ra tried to make a Furling and failed for many decades. He finally came to believe it was impossible. This is why he abandoned your home world during a rather small rebellion."

"Create one, like Nirrti was doing?" Jack asked, rocking back and forth on his heels.

Another Asgard joined in the explanation. "Furling is a state of being, not a race of beings. Furling is what you would call enlightened. Those among the three other founding races each have equal chance to rise to the prime, the pinnacle of existence. This would be what we call Furling. Daniel Jackson is an anomaly. He was born ... a Furling.

"It has never happened before, that one would be so artificially created. The Ancients in their human form attempted to achieve this status en masse with their evolving into a higher plane of existence. Instead, they moved in a different direction, a mistake in their effort, and have had to satisfy themselves with this. They are evolved, but not enlightened as a Furling is. They produce no children. Their numbers do not grow, as you may have come to realize, O'Neill."

Another Asgard leaned forward and spoke. "We had thought the few Furlings among us had left this universe forever. And yet, here he is."

"You may wonder how this came to be, as we did. Ra attempted to bring about the birth of a Furling. He used Earth for this. Have you never wondered why, with its absence of naquadah why Ra would take such an interest in your insignificant planet? It is because the Ancients originated there, and the first Furling had come from among their number. He experimented with humans on Earth much the way Nirrti experimented here, though, not with body, but with mind. Daniel Jackson is the result."

"He can't be," Jack argued animatedly. "He was born in the sixties. Ra was long gone by then. His parents were never a part of Ra's experiment."

"His parents were not his birth parents. His birth mother is the one you call Catherine Langford. His fathering was by a device she discovered at the excavation of Earth's stargate, even while still a child. The eye of Ra."

"Yes," another Asgard joined in the telling. "When Daniel Jackson solved the riddle in the hall of Thor and appeared before one of us we were more startled than you realized. He came to our attention then and we realized he was possibly a Furling. We have watched him closely since that time. We investigated his past and found his true ancestry, Catherine Langford. His grandfather who dwells with the cloud giants confirmed many things for us, and facilitated our investigation. He confirmed that Daniel Jackson does not know of his true birth origin."

"This is crazy. Catherine would have been a child when she found the eye of Ra necklace."

"When conception took place, the day she put the amulet of Ra on, she was a child. The device was activated when she put it on. Her fertilized egg matured at an astoundingly slow rate for many years, many years of her continually wearing the eye of Ra. When the gestation reached a critical mass we suspect that the pregnancy then progressed at the accelerated rate normal for humans.

"Though the conception of her child was abnormal, the birth happened in a, for a human, routine manner in 1965. Though she is fully aware of who her son is, Catherine does not know how her child was conceived, nor of his unusual status."

"That's nuts," Jack protested.

The Asgard who had been speaking tilted his head far to the side and blinked his huge black eyes at Jack. "Indeed the conception of her child was beyond her comprehension. We believe that her young age, combined with the years of exposure to the device is what ensured a successful gestation. This is why Ra's scientists failed. Ra never allowed them the proper time needed to conclude successful gestation. His experiments were on mature women, with the misunderstanding that maturity was necessary to produce a viable fetus."

"Whoa," Jack said softly, his lip curling in distaste. "So you're telling me Catherine got exposed to something inside that necklace and then years later she gave birth to a baby from it? From Ra? That's what you're saying."

The rows of gray aliens blinked at him. After several moments of stark silence one Asgard spoke. "The fetus had no DNA from the being known as Ra."

Jack shook his head, denying what he was hearing. "Catherine cares a lot for him. She ... cares a lot. Why haven't you said anything to him? In fact I've kind of gotten the impression that you pretty much ignore him. You've always bypassed him and spoken to me instead."

"This is true, and has been the topic of many ... shall we say, boisterous arguments among the Asgard high council. We were afraid to take notice of him, afraid that in doing so we might destroy the only Furling who has appeared in the past two thousand years. You understand our dilemma, do you not? It was he who used you, your mind as a tool to solve the replicator problem. We believe that he is our only hope of solving our cloning problem. Some day it will happen, as long as we do not interfere. We cannot force his destiny to come to pass. If we attempt that, we will destroy him."

"So if he's a Furling does that mean he has special powers? X ray vision maybe? And did he lose that status when he ascended and then came back as a human? Mind you, I still think this is a load of shit."

"No. His status as a Furling merely means he is enlightened. Nothing more. One cannot lose enlightenment. It may be temporarily blinded, but not taken from one."

"How the hell do you know he's really one of these enlightened Furlings? He could just be a plain old human. Catherine could have had an affair. This could all be some mix-up."

"It is not a ... mix up, O'Neill. Daniel Jackson is undoubtedly a Furling. When we look at him we see the blue aura around him clearly. He is a Furling. The Nox are in agreement as they too see the Furling aura around Daniel Jackson. It is not a mistake."

"And you didn't even tell Catherine the truth, did you?" he asked angrily. "So then help us. Get us home and set these people free."

"As I said, we cannot interfere in his destiny. You ... must do so. You are the only one who can, as you are highest among what is left in flesh and blood of the Ancients, the original source of Furlings. Place his hand in the symbol, but do not reveal to him that he is a Furling. He must realize this on his own when the time is right. This is the one thing we can do to set right what Ra did to him. We have done much to ensure Daniel Jackson has the time to grow and mature into an adult Furling on his own. Otherwise we fear it would mean his death."

"How? His death? How?"

"We do not know. He achieved his status as a Furling through artificial means, not through the slow, natural evolution of mind and spirit. Some in the council argue that revealing his status to him would cause his mind to lose cohesiveness, that he would sink into madness. Others argue that he is strong enough now to know the truth."

"So you're trying hard not to meddle?"

"Yes."

"And basically you're gonna leave it up to me to meddle? So if I screw up I'm responsible for my lover's insanity or death?" Jack said, revealing his relationship to Daniel and not caring at all that he'd done so.

"Yes."

"Bastards. Okay, send me back and then leave us the hell alone."

"Yes. Just as we planned to do. You will not reveal to him what we have told you. Daniel Jackson will be able to open the gate on Nortvegr at will. His touch on the correct symbol will deactivate the locking mechanism and disable the force field until such time as a goa'uld may come through."

"You want me to lie to him, right? That's real honorable there, guys. Really enlightened of you. Send me back right now."

"Lie to protect him until the time he is ready to comprehend what he is. We shall notify your comrades of your location so that, once you unlock the stargate they may retrieve you."

"Fuck off. Tell them we're okay but not where we are. We'll get home on our own, thank you very much. Now, send me back."

A light surrounded Jack and for a moment he forgot he was only being projected into the Asgard high council's chamber. He was not really traveling back to Daniel. He never left his lover's side. The moment he saw Daniel, Jack reached out and pulled him into an embrace, wanting to just feel the man, just the mortal human being he had fallen in love with so deeply.

"Well?" Daniel demanded, pushing at Jack. "You were talking with the Asgard, weren't you? You had that look on your face and you were frozen the whole time. Did they have a solution?"

"Yeah. They ... fixed it up from their end. We just have to touch one of the symbols and we'll be out of here." Jack fought the urge to wrestle Daniel back into a full bodied hug.

"Then go ahead, Jack. Touch one."

"Uh, you do it, Sky. Go for it. Try the ... Furling one. That squiggly one there."

Daniel reached out and then stopped, regarding Jack suspiciously. "Of all the times you've told me "don't touch" now here you are again saying go for it. Why am I feeling like you're not telling me everything?"

"Because I'm not," Jack said, his brows furrowed. Damn! This was going to be impossible. Impossible. He clamped his lips together and stared at his lover. Behind Daniel he could see a foggy image of worker caste men, guardians ringing the white force field. They were down on their knees. It looked like they were praying, all of them except what was most likely Balin's big, foggy form.

"Sky, there are a few things they said while I was there, Thor's buddies. They told me stuff and said to keep it a secret."

"Even from me?" Daniel asked, his voice betraying his hurt. "You know they do that to me a lot? I'm tired of them shoving me aside. This makes no sense. I'm the linguist. I know you're stronger in your ability to control Ancient technology--"

"Not really. We don't know that, do we? You've never tried. We've always held you back. Didn't want to risk you, Danny. I've pulled you away, or stood between you and just about any working Ancient technology ... and until today I never thought there was any other reason than my need to protect the SGC's top expert."

"Is there another reason?" Daniel asked suspiciously. "For all the Asgard's snubbing me, and for your over protectiveness, is there a reason?"

"No. But, yes," Jack said, and at the same time, shaking his head to deny it. "There is, and I can't tell you what it is now. I agree with the Asgard. I have to keep a secret from you, just this one. Just for now."

"This is not acceptable!" Daniel slammed his fist down on the edge of the DHD.

"You sound just like Teal'c," Jack said solemnly. "Except for the yelling part. Teal'c never yells."

"He doesn't need to. He could just knock it out of you if he wanted a secret you had. Now tell me, Jack. What did they say?"

Again Jack shook his head, but he stepped closer and wrapped a hand around Daniel's right wrist. "They told me you were very important in the scheme of things. I already knew that. I know how smart you are, how your mind works ... sort of on a higher plane. Like Carter sort of. Except you think through solid walls. When Carter thinks of a way to open a door no one else can open, you just sort of think through the wall, take a shortcut sort of. I'm going to leave it at that. They let me know you are important, and I already knew that. So, they told me nothing new, babe. Nothing new. Put your hand on the symbol and let's get out of here. It'll work. I promise."

With his face reflecting the tension he felt inside, Daniel regarded his lover silently. Doubt and puzzlement flickered across his features. Slowly the doubt left, replaced by a look of acceptance. Jack cupped his cheek and Daniel leaned into the caressing touch. "If you say so Jack. I've followed your directions in some incredible situations before--"

"Just like I've followed yours when I had no idea what the hell was going on," Jack said tenderly.

Daniel smiled ruefully. "True." He nodded decisively, and then turned back to the DHD. He laid his hand, fingers splayed, on the symbol for the Furlings. For a moment nothing happened, and then in a very anticlimactic way, the blue and white protective shield shrank down to become nothing more than a symbol-etched coating over the dome-shaped, ruby activation node that was in the center of every DHD. Then the force field around them vanished.

"Dial," Jack said quickly. "Dial Chulak."

Swiftly, Daniel depressed the symbols, the last one being the rune for North, the northern way which was Nortvegr. He pressed his hand over the ruby dome and the gate began to cycle. "Then close it like we planned? Not going to leave Balin and Lemmel in danger here. Nothing the Asgard told you changed that plan, did it?"

"No. Open the gate and then shut it down," Jack ordered. "Show 'em we mean business so they'll back off." Jack stood by the DHD, his arms crossed stubbornly as he glared at the ring of guardian faces gaping at him.

Daniel watched as the vortex formed in the center of the gate. Odin wasn't there any more. His warning had been delivered.

"Will the force field pop back up?" Daniel asked.

"It's not supposed to. They said it was off for good or until some goa'uld comes through again. But just in case, if you get trapped in here alone, remember, touch the Furling symbol, okay?"

"Got it. Gate's open, closing it down now."

Jack listened to the whoosh of the gate closing. Then there was a brief moment of absolute silence that lasted only a couple of seconds. All around them the temple erupted in frightened shouts. Guardians called for Nirrti, beseeching her for help. Champions sang out Odin's name in bold, challenging tones.

"Showtime," Jack muttered, his voice swallowed up in the pandemonium.

"Let's do it," Daniel responded, his words too drowned out by the shouts.

Jack leaned into his lover, his mouth by Daniel's ear. "Considering the force field and all the extra smoke and mirrors, we need to lay it on pretty thick."

"Extra theatrics? Okay."

Jack stepped around between the DHD and the gate and held his hands up, glaring silently at the gathered throng of worker caste and Highborn alike. When they fell silent he spoke.

"You have waited long for a messenger from Odin. He has finally arrived." Keep it simple, Jack had said to the others when they discussed different scenarios for this.

Daniel waited a beat into the silence following Jack's words and then he spoke loudly in the ancient Norse language as Jack was doing. "Odin sends his greetings and his blessings to his children who follow his way, the Nortvegr."

A clamorous murmur ran through the temple. As the noise rose Daniel leaned on the DHD, one hand propped on the outer edge, and the fingertips of his other hand touching the symbol for the Furling race.

With his face grim, Jack stepped to the side of the DHD and prepared to raise his hands and shout them down but before he could do anything Odin reappeared. "Damn. Thought they turned that thing off."

This time the hologram was as large as it was when it had first appeared, again standing within the stargate. But this time he was facing the DHD, facing Daniel.

"Well come, honored one," Odin's deep voice boomed out in the tongue of the Vikings. "These are my beloved children. I welcome you among them and know that they will fair well in the presence of your wisdom and enlightenment."

As silently as it had appeared, the hologram vanished. This time the hall stayed dead silent too.

Turning back to Daniel, Jack murmured. "Well, that was helpful."

With his face betraying his startlement, Daniel nodded. "I guess you could say that. Nothing like an endorsement from the local god ... We should get on with it."

Amid the ring of kneeling guardians and Champions Balin rose to stand tall and proud.

"Hail. Odin sends us his messenger, the Nyrnortvegr."

"Uh," Jack started to speak, raising his finger to silence Balin. This wasn't what they'd rehearsed.

"Before ye now stands he who be the Nyrnortvegr. Three times have we witnessed his will taken, ripped from him for the mercy of defenseless ones. Three times was he tested by the Allfather and three times he has passed. In Brooksmet, a small southern village he was wronged for defending a child, and the vile cretin who dared touch him now lies face down, molding in desecrated ground. In the stronghold of two mighty warriors he was wronged for daring to protect a Sky caste, and the vile bastards do lie also in desecrated ground. In Drangaskogen, a northern port he was tested a third time, again, to save a defenseless one, and there as ye see, he survived the challenge.

"Three times the Sky was tested and tempered to become the Nyrnortvegr and three times did he prove himself worthy. Thus he stands before Odin's great ring and Odin himself tells us, the Nyrnortvegr has come."

"It be true?" a Champion called out as he rose from the floor by the stargate. It was Aegis, the man who'd greeted Balin so heartily in the hall of Champions. "Witness?"

"Aye," Balin answered. "Witnessed and seen by us, the three aesirs he did gather on his journey. Tested he has been, and found pure by the guardians so that even they could not halt his fate from coming full circle. Witnessed his glory and so ye may too, that four nights ago did he come into the archway of our hall to peer through the long viewer. Once under the temple roof Odin appeared."

"Ah!" Shouts of surprise rang through the gathering of Champions. Some were asserting that they remembered having seen Balin and his House's Sky in proximity to the secret viewer that first night.

"And the second time?" Aegis called out. "I was not there. Who here saw him then?"

"I did!"

"Also I! In the hall he was with this Champion at his side. They were by the curtained arch when the call came that the temple had been closed. I witnessed them myself. He was the only Sky in the hall that eve."

"And!" Balin shouted loudly, pausing as he raised his hands, "who witnessed his third entry into the temple this day, and Odin's third appearance?"

"All! We all! Thus, he be. Odin's messenger. The Nyrnortvegr."

"Nay!" a guardian shouted, scrambling to his feet to stand amid a knot of Champions. He received bone-jarring shoves and glares for his objections.

Daniel took a step away from the DHD and Jack hastily stepped in his way. He whispered urgently. "You can't figure out that this isn't our fight?"

"We have to do this with as little bloodshed as possible," Daniel whispered tersely. "I won't stand here and let them hurt that man--"

"And we. We of the Highborn," a richly adorned brown-eyed man said as he left the gallery. None of the Highborn men had left the railed area, as their counterparts across the temple had. He strode among the much larger men, his deep maroon cloak swirling around his booted feet. "We saw Odin appear. Guardian, you won't wish this away. Be silent now. Follow the Nortvegr. Follow the Nortvegr as we do, as our mates do, and as you have forced our children to these many eons. A change comes. Odin rules here today."

Balin lowered his hands and strode past Daniel and Jack. He reached a spot about ten feet to the west of the DHD, stopping where a gold symbol was etched in the marble floor. Then he crossed his arms, facing the mass of men. "Comes before ye now, Balin, Champion and master swordsman. Here be Odin's new way. By my sword and might, by the traditions, the code of honor of the Champions blood in my veins, I bring to the Nyrnortvegr the oath of every man with allegiance of the west, of the Champion's hall. From the west!" he shouted. "From the west, strength in mind. Of body, endurance. Support and adherence to traditional life of a Champion, protection of the weaker, and honor! From the west!"

"West! West!" shouts rang around the temple. Champions pumped their fists in the air for several exciting moments.

As the shouting continued Lemmel pushed his way between Champions, lined shoulder to shoulder, getting glares at the back of his black-robed head. He shed the robe, pulling it over his head and let it drop as he kept walking. Underneath, he wore black linen pants and a black shirt with billowing sleeves. The front was laced up to the middle of his chest. Lemmel's long, black hair was unbraided, and fanned back over his broad shoulders. He strode forward, his head held high. His eyes were locked on Balin and he stopped on a spot ten feet to the east of the DHD. His booted feet straddled a golden rune inset in the marble there. Then he turned and regarded the gathered throng.

Instantly the noise died down, replaced by a tense silence.

"Comes before ye now, Lemmel Larson, common man and poor, low desert trader and now steward to a Highborn's House. Here be Odin's new way, as I witness to ye. By my word bond and by the traditions and code of honor of trade and also of Highborn service, by the traditions of my common-folk forefathers, I bring to the Nyrnortvegr the oath of every man and woman with allegiance of the eastern way, the common folk of Nortvegr. From the lowest tip of this world to the glory that be the City of the Highborn, have I trod. None may say they have come farther than Lemmel Larson. None may swear this oath more than me. From the east!" he shouted. "From the east, strength of spirit, heart, knowledge and adherence to tradition of family and friend! From the east!"

"East!" a single shout rang out from within the gathered throng of horned Champions.

"He be not guardian!" an elder guardian shrieked, ending the triumphant shout. "He comes not from among us."

"Aye. But did I see him come through the Sky hall door my own self! Sat by me, he did, in yon gallery. And he be of the common folk!" a Champion declared.

"Blaspheme," the curse was whispered repeatedly, fearfully among the guardians. Several drew back from Lemmel, as if his mere sight were deadly.

"Come through the eastern door! What more proof could we need! East! East!"

Shouts rang out until the high beams of the temple reverberated more than they had when Balin had ended his short speech.

Jack shifted nervously from foot to foot. Balin was glaring at him now and Jack glanced behind him at Daniel and shrugged. Then he turned around to look at Lemmel. The kid was glaring at him too, and then Lemmel shifted his gaze to a spot on the floor on the south side of the DHD. Jack peered down there and saw another one of those gold squiggles. He took a few steps toward it, squinting, trying to make it out. A couple steps more and he was looking straight down at it. He turned, pivoting right and then left and finally made out the symbol. It was a copy of the Asgard symbol up on the DHD lock thingy. "I'll be ... Well, shit," Jack swore under his breath. He glanced up at the two glaring men and then looked back at Daniel standing on the north side of the DHD. Was there a symbol on the floor back there? Was it a match for the Furling symbol?

"Well, shit," Jack repeated, a bit more strongly this time. "This is definitely not what we rehearsed." His cursing was drowned out in the continued shouts of support for Lemmel.

"What?" Daniel mouthed the word.

Jack shrugged and pointed at the floor where he stood. He saw Daniel glance down where Jack stood and then look down at the floor by his own feet. He was straddling the symbol and the temple was falling once again into a tense silence.

"Shit." Over a thousand eyes were on Jack. Multiplied by two, two for all the Highborn and Skys across the temple. Two for all the big, really big and very well-armed Champions. Two for all the temple guardians, them with their pointy, jabby spears and knives and no telling what else they had hidden in their damned robes. That was a lot of eyes. "Well, shit," Jack said again, and this time his tone had a note of resignation about it.

He shrugged at Daniel's pale face one more time and turned to face down all the pissed off guardians and the testosterone-overdosed Champions. Then he gave a rather apologetic glance toward the spiffy dressed Highborn and the nearly naked Skys.

"Comes before you ... me. Jack. Jack Ondeil, that's me. Highborn. Okay, comes before you now, Odin's ... new way and I'm a witness to that. I'm the south. And the south is, uh. I got this one, just give me a minute. Yeah. South would be ... ancestors! Ancestors. And past. Definitely past. A way of doing things that have been passed down from ancestors. Uh, Midgard. I'm from ... Well, let's just leave that part out, but it makes sense. I come directly from your ancestral past, and I represent your history, the true history as Odin wanted you to remember it. He's sent you a messenger and you're going to listen to him. The one thing he's going to tell you is to go back to the past. Go back to the way things were when Odin first put people on this planet. From the ... south," Jack said, and then he stared around at the tall men. "I said, from the south!" he shouted, using his command tone.

"South," echoed one of the temple guardians. His fear-filled eyes were locked on Jack's face. "Mind, body and spirit. South be the body," he repeated with obvious dread. "Mind, body and spirit together be the three directions."

"South," a Champion said. Then he shouted it, "South!"

"South!" the call rang over and over from the temple walls.

"Mind, body and spirit," the guardian repeated amid the shouts. "The three directions that combined, point to ... north." He stared at Daniel.

Satisfied that he'd carried off his part of the act, Jack crossed his arms smugly and then he glanced over his shoulder at his lover. Daniel was glaring at him. Jack's smug look melted away. He shrugged his shoulders again, adding an apologetic smile. "Sorry, babe," he mouthed. "What could I do? No choice."

Daniel frowned at him and then took a half step back from the DHD. The moment he moved, the temple grew deathly silent.

Standing in the bright glow of candles and lanterns, Daniel studied the throng spread across the temple from side to side. He turned a bit to look at the gong by the back wall. "Ring it," he said. "Ring the gong. Someone ring the gong."

Before any of the guardians could respond a Highborn man vaulted over the railing from the gallery and sprinted up the temple. He snatched the huge mallet from its resting hooks and took a full-bodied swing with the huge mallet, hitting dead center on the tall gong. It rang, deep and low, sending a rumbling out to vibrate the air in the temple. The brown-eyed man drew a deep breath and swung at the gong again, then again, beating the metal surface with gusto. After the tenth ring he stepped back, breathing heavy for all his exertion. He dropped the mallet back onto its resting pegs and retreated to stand among Champions by the gate. The rest of the Highborn and their Skys filed out of the gallery to stand with the people whose ancestors Nirrti had altered long ago.

Behind Daniel the garden door opened. He did not turn around.

Jack did. He stayed on the golden squiggle, but peered over Daniel's shoulder at the white-draped women who came in. They filed along the top of the steps, seeming very agitated. They knotted together and were whispering frantically, pointing at the recently revealed DHD and at Daniel.

After a moment, Daniel reached up and pulled the veil pins out of his hair. He took the wedding veil off his head and laid it across the DHD and then he spoke.

"I am the new northern way. I have come to deliver a message to the people of Nortvegr. All the people. Those inside the garden, those outside, people of all castes. Odin has decreed that Nirrti's reign here is over. He has ... removed her for all time. She will never return to Nortvegr. It is time for a new way, but also an old way," he said gently, smiling to the south, toward Jack who represented the past. "It is time to honor the way your ancestors lived, and to return to that way, women and men as one, highborn and worker caste living together."

Amid the crowd the tall Champion who hosted a Sky moved slowly among his fellow helmed and armored men to stand beside his small, veiled mate. The Sky looked up at him and then took his hand, holding it palm to palm as lovers do.

"This is Odin's way. It is both old and new. The south and north together. It is east and west joined. Strength of mind, body and spirit is Odin's way. The new way is Odin's way, the old way."

Daniel drew a deep breath and stared around, bare faced at the men in front of him, and then he turned to the women standing at the back of the temple. "Odin's way rules here again. You will make changes to follow the old path. No man will come into the garden to see that you do. No man will enforce this. The role of the guardians on this planet has ended, as Nirrti's reign here has ended. No more Skys will come to the temple to receive a pendant. No more gold or food or supplies will be brought to you other than gifts given freely by anyone who chooses to. In time you will find a way to open the garden, to free your children."

A stooped, short woman moved a step in front of the others. She held out a thin, gloved hand and pointed a bony finger, shaky with age at Daniel. Then she spoke in goa'uld. "Come you, messenger, to make our sons be nothing more than mortal men?" Her voice was dripping with accusation and barely controlled revulsion. "Judge you, we've the right to."

"You would seek to judge me?" he asked in goa'uld. Then he switched to the language of the men at his back. "What is the meaning of my name, old woman?"

She leaned forward, as if straining to see him through her veil.

"God is my judge," Daniel said, tracing the simple design of a paternoster in the air before him.

The knot of white-shrouded women gasped and drew together.

Daniel calmly turned his back on the women and held his hands out toward the small knot of Skys among the Highborn men. "Odin's message to you is simple friendship. You were once considered the way to him, and this was Nirrti's decree. Her reign is over. Her laws are through. Odin has not turned his eye from you. You will still pass on Odin's blessing, his blue gaze. This is something he bestows upon you so that all will know you for who you are now. Friends of Odin. When you leave here today you leave as a friend of Odin, as are all Skys on this planet. All people, all castes on this planet will treat you as they would treat a friend of the Allfather."

"Charity, kindness and respect does not hurt a friend. This temple that once belonged to Nirrti and her guardians now returns to the ownership of Odin. And Odin shares with his friends, the Skys. Any Sky may enter freely, may live here and use the wealth within. The guardians will leave within the hour, taking nothing with them except what they now wear. Protection of Odin's hall now returns to the Champions, where it belonged before Nirrti came. All trace of Nirrti is to be removed."

"Leave?" a senior guardian shrieked. He pushed at several horned Champions around him, shoving them away from him and shook his fist in the air. "Leave within the hour?"

Daniel ignored him. "Friends of Odin are free to leave the city, to travel freely wherever they wish, to wear what they want and work, own things, live however they wish."

"The final message for the women is," Daniel paused and turned to the north again, "if you leave the garden you too will have the status of Odin's friend. You may live here in the temple with your sons and brothers. You may also go out in the world and be free to work, to live as you please, with your sons, your brothers and ... someday ... husbands."

He turned his back on them again. "Call the city council of elders. Bring them into the temple."

"Nay! They be common folk!" A guardian shouted. He stepped toward the DHD, drawing level with Jack. "No common folk are allowed within. Nirrti would strike them dead!"

"Hey, pal," Jack said, his eyebrows raising and lowering as he spoke. He hooked a thumb toward Lemmel. "Nirrti's been sent packing. See the kid over there? Commoner. And he's not dead, in case you didn't notice."

"They've known it, master," Lemmel said in a tone just barely loud enough for Jack to hear. "Lest he would not have smuggled me in, now would he? They've known." Lemmel glared at the senior who'd disguised him and brought him in for sex. "Bring the council!" Lemmel commanded a group of the horned Champions near his side of the temple.

Jack shifted his stance, turning to look at Balin. The big Champion looked intimidatingly confident, with his arms crossed, and his head slightly bowed as if he were only paying a little attention to the proceedings. Several Champions looked too calm at this latest command. They must have known too, that the death decree for commoners was superstitious nonsense.

"But women be on the council. Never has such stepped foot in Nirrti's temple--"

"It ain't her temple any more!" Jack shouted. "Odin has removed," he paused to let the word sink in, "removed her! She's a forgotten one. Buried face down. Never speak her name again!" He shook his fist at the protesting guardian, letting for just a moment, all his anger at Gunnlaug seep out. Buried face down.

A dark rumbling rippled through the crowd. Several Champions began eyeing guardians with foreboding glares. Jack's resolve wavered. Had he let his anger over Daniel's rape get the better of him?

The council hall was close, just across the boulevard, and the wiry elders were toted into the hall within moments. Jack grimaced at the screeches and wailing they were doing as Champions hauled them inside. "Jeeze, you'd think they were being dragged to their deaths. Oh, maybe that's what they think. If this place is supposed to kill common people ... Oh, yeah. And worker caste women." He shrugged and stopped talking to himself.

The group of elders was much more numerous than the one in Brooksmet. There were easily two dozen wizened, old people being forced to kneel on the right side of the stargate. The women in the group were weeping in abject terror. Jack shifted uneasily. They were expecting to be killed for daring to enter the temple, even though they'd been dragged in against their will.

"Not good," Jack whispered to himself. Then he looked at Daniel. "Now what?" he mouthed.

Daniel pursed his lips and met Jack's gaze. Then he took a step toward the DHD and held his finger over the symbol on the bottom of the center dome. Lightly, he traced the pattern that represented the mysterious race, the Furlings. As his finger touched the pattern, Odin's hologram shimmered into existence. Daniel pulled his hand away and Odin faded slowly. Daniel's eyebrows drew together and he met Jack's gaze.

Standing halfway between the DHD and the stargate, Jack shifted his stance again. He met Daniel's hard stare and held steady. Daniel was thinking in too many directions at once, and Jack was starting to sweat. He had a big secret to hide.

Finally Daniel drew a deep breath and looked at the kneeling elders. "Odin has sent you a message. He has removed Nirrti's reign, removed all of her power from this planet and commanded you to return to the old ways. From this moment on, Nirrti is to be forgotten. Skys are no longer the way to the gods. Odin has named them as his friends. You will

make new laws across Nortvegr. Send word to every village and every council of elders. Sky men and women are to be treated as friends of Odin, nothing less, nothing more. They are free to do as they wish, as you are free to make whatever laws you deem necessary that fit within Odin's decree. Go now."

"Keeping it simple," Jack said. "This is what we rehearsed." Then he nodded his head toward his lover. "All done?"

Daniel stared at him a moment, glanced over his shoulder to see the women going back into the garden and then faced Jack. Finally he nodded.

With a heavy sigh, Jack stepped off the gold squiggle and went to join Daniel at the DHD. "Well, not exactly like we planned, but all in all, I think it went off well."

Balin stepped up to Jack's elbow and stared down at the two men. "All be well, House. My lad done good, he did."

"That wasn't what we rehearsed," Daniel said as he looked past Balin and Jack.

The guardians were being rounded up and shoved out the temple doors. For the most part the Champions were showing restraint, but were occasionally lifting the balking, robed servants of Nirrti and hurling them through the doors. No weapons were put in play by either side. Odin had spoken.

Jack stole a quick glance at the squiggle on the ground under Daniel's feet. It was the Furling symbol.

"Aye, Sky," Lemmel said from Daniel's left. "Not as rehearsed at all. But when Balin did step on the symbol and there it was for me to step on one also, I could not fail to do it. Odin wanted it thus."

"Yes. I guess he did," Daniel said softly. "Odin ... " He grew quiet as his gaze met Jack's. "It was Odin who wanted this, wasn't it, Jack? An Asgard? Not ... a Furling."

Jack drew in a breath and looked Daniel straight in the eye. "When I went to the Asgard council they were all kind of speaking at once. I don't know if one of them was Odin. Only one guy said his name and truthfully, I didn't catch it. Thor wasn't there, but the Asgard do want this to stay a protected planet, yeah."

"Odin gives the elders all their rightful power," Balin said. "This be wise."

"Yes," Daniel said, his gaze traveling around the temple, searching out the other Skys. "They should make their own laws. This planet has been interfered with enough already." Daniel pulled his veil from the DHD and wrapped it around his shoulders. After a moment he slipped it up over his head to trail down, covering his eyes. Not having been designed to be worn that way, Daniel had to hold it in place.

Jack reached out and stroked his right palm down the back of Daniel's head, feeling the thin veil that was barring him from running his fingers through Daniel's beautiful hair. He gave his lover a comforting smile.

Several of the elders were shuffling toward the door, conversing with Champions and dark-eyed Highborn as they went. The elder women, having stepped foot in a place where no worker caste woman had ever trod in remembered history were more than anxious to leave, all but one who had become rooted to a spot and was staring around at the artwork, her mouth hanging open.

"Friends," Lemmel said, his voice light and almost dreamy. "My servant Sky will be sore amazed to hear this. Him, wanting to be a tailor and all. He will make many new style clothes for Skys in the future."

"Probably not any time soon," Daniel cautioned. "Change takes time. I imagine it'll be a long time before Skys start wearing solid pants and real shirts. Change happens slowly. A lot of them will go on bargaining for impartings, Lemmel. And they'll have plenty of customers. Traditions don't change quickly." Then Daniel reached out and laid a hand on Lemmel's wrist. "How long do you think it will take before you can say my name?"

"Ah," Lemmel sighed apologetically, "ye teach me in a right way, brother. This I can understand. Not soon. Not quick, comes such deep and difficult changes. Think ye in my own lifetime I might see the Forbidden Garden come open?"

"Probably," Jack answered the youth. "No more supplies going in, they'll open up pretty soon. No more sperm means no more kids born inside there—"

A small tussle at the entrance interrupted them, drawing their attention. A temple guardian was resisting being ejected. He shouted that he had the right to return to his chambers, to gather his money and possessions. His lance was torn from his grip and he was bodily hurled through the doorway to roll down the steps outside."

Jack turned his back on the scene and continued "The women, they'll come out. And doing it on their own with no threat of invasion, that'll make the change come quicker."

"Yeah," Daniel said softly. "I'm not going to be ready to give up this pendant any time soon." He looked down as he wrapped his fingers around the circle of naquadah that had meant his freedom only hours ago.

"We have a lot to do," Jack said suddenly. "Gonna get things squared away here, Sky. Gate's operational. We can ... "

"Yes. Any time we want to."

"But not just yet," Jack said decisively. He slid his right arm around Daniel's shoulders, drawing him into a thorough embrace. Daniel's head was still bent low, and Jack pushed

his left hand up, under the veil to cup Daniel's cheek. He guided his lover's bowed head against his chest and held him tenderly. "This is where we need to be for now. Here, together." Jack kissed Daniel's veiled temple.

End book 7

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#### *The Four Directions*

*Asgard - West, Mind - intellectual realm - introspection and thought, strength of mind, endurance, support and adherence to tradition, protection of the weaker.*  
*Ancients - South, Body - physical realm – physical prowess, intelligence/learning, history, connection with ancestors and past.*  
*Nox – East, Spirit - emotional realm – spiritual knowledge and enlightenment, emotional strength, heart.*  
*Furling - North, Mind, Body and Spirit combined - all realms – comprehension of the meaning of life, future, change, growth, a desire to understand all ways of being. Seeking a higher plane of existence.*

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**Author's Note:** Yes, I love to receive feedback. I love to know that people are reading my work. \*\*self-pimping message\*\*