



NORTHERN LOVE

Nica Berry

Loose Id

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Chapter One

Now

Biting wind stung Emmanuel's nose and cheeks, the only parts of him exposed to the winter storm. He was mad to do this, to run from the captain into the middle of an icy wilderness, but after a year of hoping, waiting, dreaming that his lover was still alive, Emmanuel had to find Jerek or die trying.

Jerek wasn't—couldn't be—dead, no matter what the *Tophet's* captain had told him. A year ago, Jerek, feverish and ill, had jumped over the side of the ship naked into the frigid waters of the bay. "*No one survives that,*" the crew had said, but Captain Harper had made them search anyway, combing the waters and asking the Northerners camped on the shore. Nothing. The captain had raged and had taken that fury out on Emmanuel for one terribly long year. At the queen's orders, they'd come back to the North. This time, Emmanuel had escaped, and he was certain the captain wouldn't leave him for dead.

"*My dear Emmanuel.*" The words echoed in his head, as chilling as the air rasping his skin. With them came the remembrance of Harper's hands stroking him, arousing him, and fucking him. And food. There had always been food—chocolate or fruit

dripped upon his skin for the captain to kiss away. Thinking of Harper, of the captain's possessive grip around his cock, aroused as much as repelled Emmanuel.

The wind tore the words from his throat. "I'm not going back to you. Not ever. And I'm not going to let you destroy Jerek's dream!"

Emmanuel clung to the thin, fragile hope that Jerek was alive much as he clung to the fur-lined hood of his parka. He stumbled onward, the seal-hide boots too large for his feet. They'd been stolen, like the thick caribou mantle and mittens he wore. It wasn't enough. Cold seeped through every crevice, and his unprotected eyes and face burned from the glare and hard, blowing snow.

Ice King. A legend, nothing more. A childhood fairy tale about a citadel made of ice and full of riches, high in the mountains. A dream for anyone, especially a pair of gutter brats from a Southern city. Emmanuel began to long for the filthy, unpredictable streets he'd escaped. He'd followed Jerek, though, because Emmanuel loved him.

Another step. Another. He forced himself onward, seeking a citadel that existed only in myth. Maybe Jerek had found it. Maybe he hadn't, but Emmanuel was determined to see Jerek again before he died. Somehow.

The horizon went on forever, a vast expanse of bright, painful white. If the privateers decided to look for him, he wouldn't be hard to track. His trail through the snow was obvious. He wondered if Jerek had come this way the first time and how he'd survived. He'd certainly taken nothing from the privateers to help. Clothes had to be bought or stolen from the locals. If Jerek had managed such a feat, he could have lived for a while, at least. If he hadn't...

If he hadn't, then his quest, as well as Emmanuel's, was futile. Their hard life with the privateers was worth nothing.

Emmanuel's knees buckled. Hard flakes pricked his sunburned face. Every time he tried to rise, his arms went shoulder-deep in the snow. After a while, he gave up. Better to die out here than to remain the captain's pet. How easy it was to relax into this

cradle of snow while the wind cried above him. Sleep. If he rested for just a little while, maybe then he'd have the strength to keep going.

His fevered, overwrought mind sent him hallucinations. Jerek's blond hair, his lightly tanned skin, the look of wonder he'd worn the first time they'd fumbled through lovemaking. Emmanuel sank down into that memory, warmer than he had been in months. To his ears, the howling winds morphed into human cries as Emmanuel relived his most precious moments with Jerek. Jerek had smiled when Emmanuel had touched him gently, delighted and embarrassed at the way his cock had reacted. But it had been bliss, pure bliss, to lie there and explore Jerek's body. Emmanuel could still smell him, musky and masculine, as well as taste him. He'd been nervous at first, taking Jerek's cock into his mouth, but then it had become easier, more natural. He'd used his fingers to toy with Jerek's balls while swallowing him as deeply as he could. Jerek hadn't lasted long, that first time, and he'd come inside Emmanuel's mouth. Emmanuel hadn't minded, had welcomed the taste and had fellated him plenty of times since. And after that, they would hold each other, reveling in sensation as if nothing else in the world existed...

The warmth and pleasure of the recollections were abruptly stolen from him. Something heavy and furred nudged him. Emmanuel batted at it, desperate to return to his memory, but the creature would not let him. He opened ice-rimmed eyes. A huge, shadowed form loomed over him.

Ice bear, he thought. He wouldn't die from freezing then. He'd be eaten.

* * * * *

King Jerek's steward, Suluk, prostrated himself before the dais. "My liege? We've found a person of interest."

"Oh?" Jerek hardly looked up from the clockwork dog with which he played. His guards had brought him several "persons of interest" over the past few years, and none of them had been the one man he'd hoped to see. Several had fit Emmanuel's basic

description—dark-haired, brown-eyed, skin near the color of pine bark, but none had been *him*.

Piaktok, leaning against the side of the throne, regarded Jerek with the doleful black eyes that mirrored his Seal form. The metal dog awkwardly ambled forward along the arm of his throne. Piaktok caught it when it fell off. He cupped the toy in his hands as if wanting to crush it, but he didn't.

So, if this turned out to be Emmanuel, Piaktok wouldn't be happy about it. Jerek had taken no other lover for the past year. Jerek wished he could have reassured the Seal that he had no intention of replacing him, but they couldn't talk now. Not here.

The steward spoke again. "This one babbles, my liege, in the Southerners' tongue."

This piqued Jerek's interest. "Where is he?"

"Just outside, my liege. The Bears found him."

The king allowed himself a small smile at that. His Bears, Inuq and Nutaaq, were superb trackers, far better at finding the living than ordinary men. "He's alive, then?"

"Yes, my liege, and well enough, except..." Suluk paused, obviously fearing Jerek's wrath.

"Go on."

"He's...snowblind."

Blind. At least for a while. The bright light on the snow could be brutal indeed to those unprotected. He took the dog back from the unhappy Piaktok and wound it up again. "Does he know where he is?"

"No, my liege. We've said nothing to him."

"Good. Keep it that way. No one is to speak to him without my permission."

The steward bowed. "Aye, my liege."

"Bring him in. I want to look upon his traitorous face."

Suluk left the room. Piaktok placed a hand on Jerek's knee. "It's all right," Jerek told him. "I only want him because he's done me harm. It's time he paid for his wrongs."

Piaktok's mournful expression didn't change. He watched the dog as it ambled along the throne. This time, he made no effort to catch it when it fell. It clattered to the stone floor. After a couple of mechanical seizures, it went still.

Jerek didn't have time to worry about it. Suluk returned, accompanied by two Bears supporting a bent, struggling figure. It wore a thick, hooded parka of caribou hide, decorated in the style of the tribe that lived near the shore. The clothes were stolen; no one of the tribe would have given a visitor clothing laboriously designed for a hunter. Jerek's derogatory opinion of the man dropped even lower. He didn't tolerate thieves in his land.

The two Bears, dressed in parkas of the same white fur as their ice bear counterparts, looked to their king for direction. Jerek waved his arm in an impatient gesture. As soon as Inuq and Nutaaq let go, their prisoner dropped to his knees. He fought again when the Bears stripped him down to a pair of ragged undershorts, but exhausted as he was, he was no match for the two powerful men. Sweat glistened on his bronze skin. Black hair hung in clumps to obscure his face. Iron rings surrounded his ankles and neck. His shoulders drooped in defeat.

The Ice King's heart skipped in his chest. Could it be him? At last? He couldn't be sure at this distance. He kicked the dog aside and took the dais's stairs at speed until he stood before the prisoner. Jerek grabbed the man's chin and wrenched it upward. The prisoner's sightless red eyes blinked profusely. He jerked his head in a failed attempt to loosen Jerek's grip.

Emmanuel. Jerek mouthed the name but did not say it aloud. Angry as he was, he hadn't actually expected to see his former lover, much less Emmanuel's weakened, ravaged condition. Lash marks corded Emmanuel's back, and he'd lost most of the muscle he'd gained while working aboard the *Tophet*. The skin beneath the iron collar

and fetters was raw and bleeding. Jerek's free hand went to the scars at his own neck. He knew full well what the iron collar meant. He'd worn it himself for a time.

The old Emmanuel would have been full of solid support and love, always aware of what Jerek needed. Then Jerek had been the weaker of the two, easily exhausted by the labors aboard the privateer ship while Emmanuel had been the stronger. Strong enough to betray him.

Now they'd traded places. This Emmanuel looked to be little more than a madman. He was filthy and scarred. And like the steward had said, he babbled in the Southern tongue.

"Let me go, whoever you are," Emmanuel said, voice raspy as if his throat was raw. "I'm looking for someone. I have to find him. Have to. I won't give up until I do."

Jerek held his breath. Looking for someone. Him? Possibly. Hopefully. The frigid mountains had a way of twisting a man's greatest need into reality. Jerek said nothing, wishing to draw out Emmanuel's anguish as long as possible.

"Captain?" he asked, tentative. "I'm sorry I ran. I had to."

The mere mention of the captain made Jerek's anger flare. Nails dug into his palms as he made tight fists.

The silence frustrated Emmanuel. "I won't be your slave anymore. At least give me an honorable death instead of letting me die like a mongrel in the street."

Tempting as the offer was, Jerek refrained. Torturing him for his betrayal was going to be far more fun. At last, he let go of Emmanuel's chin. He spoke in Suluk's ear, too quiet for Emmanuel to hear. "This is the one I've been waiting for. Get Tupilek to see to his needs. Make him comfortable. Ensure that he feels safe. I will see to his punishment in time."

"And the collar, my liege?"

"Leave it on for now, but take off the ones at his ankles."

The steward bowed again. He gestured to Inuq and Nutaaq. They hauled the man to his feet. This time, Emmanuel made no move to resist.

The parka lay where the Bears had dropped it. Jerek crouched beside it. He felt Piaktok's gaze upon him. This wasn't betrayal. It was revenge, something the Seal wouldn't understand. Lifting the parka to his nose, he could smell the musk of the caribou and, mingled with it, the scent of the man he'd been craving for the past year.

Emmanuel.

Chapter Two

Then

Jerek and Emmanuel had grown up together in the Southern city of Whist, hot and muggy. Neither of them knew their parents. They'd scrounged a living on the streets for as long as they could remember. Neither recalled their parents, so whether they'd been orphaned or abandoned, they didn't know. They weren't brothers; stocky, muscular Emmanuel had dark hair like the natives of Whist, while Jerek, thinner, paler, and with hair the color of pale gold, looked as though he might have been an oversight from one of the hundreds of ships that ventured up and down the river to trade.

When not picking pockets or begging for money, the two skinny boys, like others of their age, spent the long afternoons swimming in the river that led to the sea. Huge steamships came and went, delivering cargo and visitors. The port was a good place for fingering unsuspecting tourists, and a good location for the constables to pick up any boy who looked too poor and desperate.

So Jerek and Emmanuel stayed away from the port except to gawk and to guess where each ship came from. Some were easy; they recognized the goods that originated

from the nearby coastal cities. Others ships defied description, loaded as they were with fur and bone carvings.

"That one," Jerek said, dreaming one day as a metal-hulled ship with red and black flags steamed into port. "I bet that's one of the Northern ships. I wonder what it's like to live where it's cold."

"Anything would be better than this," Emmanuel said. "I'm tired of being hot and sticky. Want an ice bar?" He held out a palm with two sweaty pennies.

"No. You go. I want to talk to the people on that ship."

Emmanuel left him. Jerek tried to get close to the ship, but the constables used sticks and shouts to keep them away from the traders. Jerek waited until nightfall, then followed one of the women from the Northern ship to a nearby hotel. To his joy, the woman, short with a round face and narrow eyes, was telling tales of the Northern lands. In her odd accent, she spoke of enormous creatures that swam in the sea, as big as a ship, white ice bears far taller than any man, seals with spotted coats.

After the rest of the patrons had drifted away to leave the Northerner sitting alone, Jerek lingered. The questions Jerek had most wanted to hear had been left unasked. At the woman's side was a wooden box carved with some of the fantastic creatures she'd talked about.

"You may come out now," the Northerner said kindly. "I saw you there in the shadows, enjoying my stories."

Jerek stepped into the light. He felt shabby in his dirty, tattered shirt and shorts. Now that he was face-to-face with the woman, he didn't know what to say. "My name's Jerek."

"Jerek, I'm Atka."

Silence stretched while Jerek tried to think of something to say. All the questions had suddenly fled his mind. "What's in your box?"

"Medicines," she said. She lifted the lid to show Jerek layers of small bottles and paper packets. Each was neatly labeled. Even if Jerek had known the language, he wouldn't have known how to read it. "I've come south seeking knowledge about the ways of your physicians."

Jerek had never been to a doctor, nor even seen the wondrous things inside the woman's box. He yearned for a closer look but didn't dare.

Atka studied him. "Come here, boy. Take a peek if you'd like."

Jerek did, and she spent a while showing him the various bottles and telling him their uses. It was fascinating. He'd heard of potions and draughts, of course, but he'd never thought about how much skill and knowledge went into preparing them. The few medicines he'd been lucky enough to get hadn't seemed to help at all.

"You're a bright, curious youngster," Atka said, and Jerek blushed at the praise. "Shall I tell your fortune?"

Living on the streets, Jerek had seen every fortune-telling scam there was. The good ones knew the tells and crafted a believable story from the person's reactions; the poor ones made things up. He didn't believe that one's future could be told. Still, curious, he took another step forward.

Atka held up a leather pouch. "Reach inside. Draw out a trinket."

Jerek did. Everything in the pouch felt the same, smooth and round, yet when he selected one, what he saw wasn't at all like what he'd felt. "What is it?" He'd pulled out a flat pendant of bone or ivory carved in the shape of a building. He'd never seen anything like it; everything in Whist was wood or brick, one story with the exception of the governor's house, which had two levels.

Amusement glinted in Atka's eyes. "That's the Citadel."

"The what? It looks like it's made of stone. And it's got these tall, pointy bits." His lack of words made him feel ignorant.

"Spires. That's what the pointy bits are called." The Northerner smiled. Wrinkles formed at the corners of her eyes. "Do you have time for one more tale?"

"Yes, please," he said, trying not to sound too eager.

She pointed to the pendant. "It's more than a castle. It's a fortress far to the north carved into the ice mountain itself. There's no city, no kingdom around it, yet it has a king. The Ice King. A very special man, called to the place from far away. The Citadel is magical, they say, and the king is not so much a ruler as he is a guide, someone who's seen the world and who can be an emissary between the Northerners and those who wish to trade with them. It's the heartbeat of the world. A place where dreams are made real. It takes a unique man to govern there, one who possesses a strong mind, heart, and soul."

The role sounded daunting, but Jerek had the sudden gut feeling that he could do it. "How do I find it?"

"Find it?" Atka shook her head. "No one finds it who isn't meant to. Hundreds have died trying. They say magic shields it from outsiders. There are rumors of a great wealth, of supplies that never dwindle, and every possible comfort."

Jerek's mind ran at the thought. To never starve, to have clothes that stayed clean and more money than he could count—it was too fantastic to be believed. "But the king?" he prompted. "You said he came from far away."

"Yes, he does. The Ice King never comes from the land itself, but from somewhere far away. Someone who is strong and wise and who has seen both the best and the worst of the world, a man who has known both love and betrayal. He will be a kindred soul to those of us in the North. The magic will call him home."

"I'm going to find it. Me and Emmanuel. Together." He ran his fingers over the bone pendant, tracing the towers and windows and a magnificent drawbridge.

The Northerner shrugged. "A tale. That's all it is. Much like my whales and bears and seals." She gently shut the lid. One callused finger traced the carved shape of a bear.

"But those are real. You have the furs to prove it!"

"I do, but I might be telling you more tales. How do you know anything's true unless you've seen it for yourself?"

"I believe you about the animals. I believe in the Citadel. You're too—" He broke off, fumbling for words. "Honest. You're too kind and honest. You wouldn't lie to me about such a thing."

Her expression grew sad. "You are young yet and have much to learn about men."

"I grew up on the streets. I know plenty," he said stubbornly. "But you haven't seen the Citadel?"

She smiled. "No, lad, I haven't. It's a task for the young and ambitious. Now go on. I've a long day tomorrow and stayed up far later than I should."

"Can I...?" Jerek hesitated. "Can I choose a token for Emmanuel? He'll be sorry to have missed you."

Nodding, Atka held out her bag for a second time. Jerek reached in. He smiled at the pendant he withdrew. "A dog. It's perfect. Dogs are loyal and loving, like Emmanuel is to me."

"That's the Southern interpretation," Atka said, sounding cautious.

Jerek dismissed his concern. "It's true. Emmanuel loves me. I love him back. We'll always be together. He'll like this. Thank you," he said, unable to look away from his pendants. Atka patted him on the shoulder before collecting her box and heading upstairs to her room.

Emmanuel was thrilled with his token and swore to Jerek that he'd never take it off. Jerek looked for the Northerner the next day and the next, hoping to introduce Emmanuel to her. But it was not to be; he never saw Atka in the city again.

* * * * *

And then one day when they were fifteen, a huge gray steamship docked. Jerek and Emmanuel had never seen anything like it. The hull was entirely metal with two

smokestacks rising from the center, yet it still had a complete set of sails. Everyone aboard wore a uniform and looked clean and well fed. Two men in blue uniforms, one huge and blond, the other thin and dark-haired, disembarked to speak to the group of boys loitering in the river shallows.

"My name is Harper, and I'm captain of this vessel, the *Tophet*," the dark-haired one said. "My associate Fritz and I invite you to see the world." He had a sharp, discerning face and studied each boy in turn. "Join his majesty's navy. We'll feed you, train you, give you a place to live. If you can't read, we'll teach you. As long as you're healthy and at least fifteen, all you have to do is make your mark on this paper here." He held out a sheet with words none of the boys there could read.

Jerek knew Emmanuel signed because he wanted more than anything to quit the awful city he'd been born to. Jerek signed, certain that any step out into the world brought him that much closer to the Citadel. He clutched the pendant as he awkwardly grasped the pen and drew a shaky X.

"What do you have there?" Harper asked.

Jerek reluctantly opened his fist. The man's eyes held far more interest than Jerek was comfortable with. "Just something I found. Sir," he added hastily.

At this, the captain raised an eyebrow. Fritz, behind him, narrowed his eyes. "I'll have no liars aboard my ship," Harper said. "No secrets. Remember that."

Jerek nodded. "Aye, Captain. I will. We both will. Won't we?" He jabbed Emmanuel with his elbow, and the other boy nodded too.

Fritz ushered them aside. A dozen other boys, none of whom had a home, other than alleyways and attics with broken windows, had no hesitation either. Several of them were younger than fifteen, but they lied when asked, and neither of the recruiters questioned them on it. Fritz gave them all a brief, cursory check to make sure they were fit, sent them to get their possessions if they had any, and then showed them to a bunk aboard the ship. With no parents, no hope of income or food, the offer was too good for the boys to refuse.

And they found out later, too good to be true.

The ship didn't belong to the navy. Or rather it *had*, but it didn't anymore. The captain and his followers weren't naval officers; they were privateers, thieves with the blessing of the queen, and on the prowl for fresh blood to do the work the regular crew didn't want to do. Belowdecks was an entire colony of young men, just like them, who'd signed themselves into a sort of slavery.

Jerek and Emmanuel found out later the privateers had boarded a navy ship, killed the crew, and stolen the uniforms to impersonate them. They were constantly on the run from the real navy, but they kept out of navy waters and visited ports like Whist that weren't under the navy's control and that had likely never seen a real navy ship or officer. They stopped to refuel, restock, and recruit.

The recruiters kept part of their promise. The boys had food, clothing, and a place to sleep, but none of them received any sort of education beyond their immediate duties. If they needed to read, they learned; otherwise they were handed mops, brooms, or shovels and put to work doing the lowest of chores. Their days started before sunrise when they all lined up to scrub the ship from stem to stern. Every day. They did laundry, washed pans, and served food in the mess hall. Those with nimble fingers learned to mend sails, ropes, and nets. As the youngest, rawest recruits, they ate last. Any complaint earned a swift, hard slap from whichever crewman was nearest.

When they came to a port, none of the boys were allowed off the ship for fear they'd run. One unlucky youth, Lyle, leaped from the side of the ship only to be quickly caught by a sailor far more adept at swimming.

"Chain him to the mast," Captain Harper ordered. Harper might have been short and thin for a man with a life at sea, but he was no less intimidating for his lack of size. The dripping, terrified young man was quickly chained with his arms and legs wrapped around the wood. One of the officers tore the shirt from Lyle's back.

Jerek couldn't bear to watch. He hid his face in the crook of Emmanuel's shoulder, flinching every time he heard the sound of the captain's whip strike flesh. The young

man couldn't hold out for long. After three lashes, he started to scream. After nine, he fainted.

Ten lashes were enough. When Jerek dared to look again, he saw Harper prodding the young man's lolling head with the butt of his whip. An officer came forth with a bucket of seawater and dumped it over Lyle's head. He came to, spluttering and moaning as the salt water touched his abraded back. Worse, the same officer clapped an iron collar around Lyle's neck and fetters around his ankles.

"Look well," the captain said. "No one leaves my crew until death. Anyone who tries will be severely punished. Loyalty will be rewarded. Understand?"

The witnesses nodded. The officer unchained Lyle, then hauled him down the corridor that led to the engine room.

"They'll lock him down there," another young man said. "They don't see daylight. Not for months. They just shovel coal. The captain forgets about them on purpose."

That night, in the darkness and safety of their bunk, Jerek and Emmanuel clung to each other. Below them, the great engines went *thump, thump, thump* and reminded them of the souls chained below to feed the monstrous ship.

"I want to go home," Emmanuel whispered. His warmth was a comfort to Jerek's tired, aching body. He spoke quietly, knowing that what he said could be considered treason.

"I don't," Jerek said. "Not ever. I have to find the Citadel."

"And if we do, how will you get there? We can't leave. They'd rather kill us."

"We'll get there. You and me both. I swear." Jerek squeezed his hand for comfort. "I believe in the Citadel. We'll find it."

So they worked and hoped and helped the privateers repaint their vessel three times over the years to fool their victims. They neither distinguished themselves among the other recruits, nor got into any trouble. While others tried to befriend the officers,

Jerek and Emmanuel kept to themselves. They waited and hoped and survived, and when night came, they took comfort with each other.

Quiet and insular as they were, their love did not go unnoticed.

Chapter Three

Emmanuel hadn't meant to start an affair with the captain. He'd actually done his best to stay away from the man, but on a ship with limited space, it wasn't always easy. The bridge had windows all the way around it, and Emmanuel would often look up to see Harper gazing down at his crew. It always made Emmanuel uncomfortable, especially when the men had stripped to their breeches for work on the deck.

He and Jerek had been on the ship for five years, performing little more than slave labor, when the captain's cabin boy, Fritz, cornered him one night near the mast.

Fritz wasn't a "boy" by any means. He was huge, muscular, and blond, skin tanned from being in the sun. Everyone kept their distance from him. "The captain requests your presence for dinner tonight," Fritz told him in a low, rumbling voice.

Thump, thump, thump. The ship's engines pounded as hard as Emmanuel's heart. "I have plans." He'd heard about these "invitations" and wanted nothing to do with them.

Fritz's strong fingers grabbed Emmanuel's shoulder in a bruising grip. "It is not a request. You'll do as the captain says, or..." He nodded to someone behind Emmanuel. Emmanuel looked, and his heart sank when he saw Jerek. "Or your boyfriend will be keelhauled. Got it?"

The last man to be keelhailed had been brought up from the water nearly drowned and cut to pieces. The wounds had been left untreated, captain's orders, and it had taken him a week to die screaming from his injuries.

"Got it," Emmanuel said. He glanced up. The captain stood on the foredeck, watching him with a smile that sent shivers down his spine.

He didn't tell Jerek where he was going that night. He mumbled something about unfairly being made to do some extra work, and Jerek believed him. His lover looked exhausted, drained from the life of hardship they'd both been misled into. Jerek lay in his bunk, the only place he could be found when he wasn't working or eating the tasteless gruel that had become their only staple.

"I still believe," Jerek said—a nightly ritual. "We're going to get out of here one day. We'll live in the Citadel. We'll have everything we need and servants to look after us." In so many ways, he still looked like the handsome young man he had been when Emmanuel had first fallen in love with him. Age had made him more handsome, with blond hair that curled at his shoulders and skin tan from constant sun. He hadn't given up on his dream, not in all these years at sea, and Emmanuel adored that about him. Jerek's hope kept Emmanuel's alive.

"If you say so." Emmanuel didn't have the heart to say anything else. He felt suddenly guilty at what was about to happen. He leaned over and kissed Jerek, savoring the saltiness of his lips. Jerek reached up to clasp him behind the neck, to hold him there. The only comfort they had in this wretched place was each other.

Emmanuel sank down beside him, closer, wishing with all his heart that he didn't have to go. Jerek was warm, alive, his only reason for not going mad. The constant *thump* of the steam engine added a primal rhythm to his urges. He slid his body against Jerek's, worked his hand beneath Jerek's drawstring trousers to the treasure that lay within. Jerek groaned at the touch. Tired as he was, his body still responded. "We shouldn't. Not now..."

"But I want to," Emmanuel said. He fisted his lover's limp cock, coaxing it to life. He needed this, had to have it fresh in his mind before he went to face the captain and whatever horrors the man had in store.

Jerek thrust his head back, wide eyes never leaving Emmanuel's. Emmanuel continued to fist him, gently, then faster and harder. Jerek's cock stiffened in his hand. Emmanuel thumbed the tip, feeling the slickness hinting at a greater pleasure. Jerek's hands clenched tight. He whimpered, breathed faster, but practice and necessity kept him quiet.

The spasms racking Jerek's body jerked the bunk as well. Emmanuel hung on, as if afraid that he would never be able to touch Jerek again. A warm stickiness spread over his hand. All they had left was this moment.

Jerek broke the embrace. He nuzzled Emmanuel a little before saying, "Go. Otherwise they'll beat you for disobeying."

"I love you," Emmanuel said. "Always. Believe in that."

Jerek murmured in reply, already half-asleep. Glad that his lover would sleep soundly tonight, Emmanuel headed up the stairs to meet his hulking escort.

* * * * *

Captain Harper's cabin was, as Emmanuel had expected, far more lush than anything else on the ship. Thick carpet covered the floor. Curtains hung over the windows. He had a table, chairs, and bureau in addition to the bed. A clock, its turning gears visible, sat on top of the bureau. Books filled one entire shelf. *Books*. Emmanuel had never learned to read, since the crew had never kept its promise to teach him.

Emmanuel swallowed when he looked at the bed. It was large enough for two, a feather mattress covered with silk sheets and a gold brocade cover. The coverlet had been partially pulled back as if to hint at the evening's activities.

Thump, thump, thump. Emmanuel's heartbeat matched that of the ship. He tore his gaze away from the captain's bed and to the table, upon which sat a feast such as he'd

not seen in years: roasted chicken, glazed yams, fresh pomegranates, and a loaf of rye bread. Emmanuel's stomach growled. The scents alone made his mouth water uncontrollably.

The captain himself watched with some amusement. He'd set his jacket aside and wore only a loose linen shirt and pants. His feet were bare, bits of carpet sticking up between his toes. "Welcome, Emmanuel. I trust this night finds you well?"

Emmanuel could only nod, too taken by the strangeness to trust his tongue. In the comfort of his cabin, the captain appeared far more relaxed and approachable than he did on deck. The top button of his shirt hung open to reveal a patch of smooth skin beneath. He'd pulled his dark hair back into a ponytail. Emmanuel refused to look below his shoulders lest his tight pants reveal a telltale lump that Emmanuel dreaded seeing, no matter how handsome the captain might be.

The captain nodded. Fritz, still behind Emmanuel to prevent his escape, began to undress Emmanuel. "Stop that!" Emmanuel said, fighting to get Fritz's hands away from his body. "What are you doing?"

"Following my orders," Harper said calmly. Emmanuel lost sight of the captain for a moment as Fritz yanked his shirt up and over his head. "Can't have you bringing any concealed weapons into my quarters." A faint smile crossed his face. "Do be sure to search *everywhere*, my dear Fritz."

Before Emmanuel had time to contemplate what that mean, Fritz had slid Emmanuel's pants down around his ankles and forced him to bend over at the waist. The dog pendant dangled from his neck. Rough, thick fingers pried his buttocks apart. Emmanuel yelped at the sudden invasion as one finger, then two worked their way inside his body. Emmanuel flushed, both from the uncomfortable position and the embarrassment.

The captain, he noticed, was still amused, even more so when Emmanuel whimpered after Fritz found his internal pleasure point and toyed with it. Emmanuel gritted his teeth, praying for this to be over soon.

It was, but when Fritz brought his fingers out, it left Emmanuel with a needy, uncomfortable feeling in his groin. He straightened, only to have Fritz suddenly in his face. The cabin boy pried Emmanuel's jaws apart and stuck fingers down his throat. He gagged, retched, then coughed when Fritz let him go. "He's clean, Captain," the big man said.

"Good." Harper gestured to one of the chairs at the table. "If you would care to take a seat, Emmanuel?"

He sat and made the mistake of eagerly reaching for the chicken. Fritz struck him so hard, he landed on the floor.

"Now, now," the captain said, "that's *my* dinner. Yours is there." He gestured to a plain blue bowl filled with the same damn gruel that he'd been eating every day for years.

Heart sinking, Emmanuel climbed back into his chair. Fritz took a chair next to him, watching to see if Emmanuel made any more careless moves.

Across from him, Harper had taken a chicken leg and nibbled at it, obviously savoring every juicy bite of meat that crossed his tongue. Emmanuel couldn't bring himself to touch the gruel, not with all this fresh food taunting him.

The captain noticed his hunger and again smiled. "What's the matter? Your own dinner doesn't agree with you? I don't think that all this rich food could be good for a stomach so used to blandness as yours, but I might be willing to let you try a bite, if..."

The captain let the word hang there. Emmanuel hated himself for his desperation. He'd do anything, *anything*, for a taste of the chicken.

"...if you suck Fritz," the captain finished.

"No." Emmanuel had never intimately touched another man besides Jerek. The captain might have been tolerable, but...Fritz?

Harper shrugged. "As you wish. Fritz, in the morning, be sure to find some excuse to keelhaul... What's the boy's name? Jerek? It's been far too long since we've set an example on board."

Emmanuel went cold.

"What are you waiting for, Emmanuel?" Harper's mouth half curled in a sneer. "Get out, if you won't accept my hospitality. Fritz —"

"Wait," Emmanuel said. Harper toyed with him, certainly, but the captain had no hesitation in making his threats real. He glanced at the hulking blond. Fritz didn't seem the type to go for other men, but then there weren't any women on board. Emmanuel steeled himself. Watching Jerek be keelhailed for no good reason at all would be far worse than sucking an ugly man's cock. "I'll do it."

The big man leered at him. "What's the matter? You don't sound very enthusiastic."

"Now, now," the captain said. "He's nervous is all. Don't make it worse. If he's truly hungry, he'll do as I say. It's really not so much to ask, is it, Emmanuel?"

One little suck was a small price for Jerek's safety. He shook his head. "Not if you leave Jerek alone."

"Agreed. On the floor with you then, and make sure you swallow. I don't want a mess on the carpet."

Emmanuel slid to the ground. He crawled forward to where Fritz had thoughtfully spread his legs wide. The brass buttons strained against the man's crotch. Emmanuel shook as he rubbed the big man through his clothes. The organ hardened. He kept it up until Fritz squirmed a little, then carefully undid each button. The cock strained behind a pair of linen undershorts. Emmanuel put his mouth to it, using his tongue to massage the cock through the thin layer of fabric.

"Is that all you've got?" the captain asked mildly. Silver clanked against dishes. "I'd hurry if I were you, boy, otherwise I won't have anything left for you to enjoy."

Equally impatient, Emmanuel yanked the undershorts down around the thick cock and balls. The dimness beneath the table made it difficult to see anything more than the shape. He ran his tongue along the underside and then swirled it around the tip. The taste was...different. Not as disgusting as he would have imagined from a man like Fritz, but disconcerting all the same.

This earned Emmanuel a kick from the captain. "I'm waiting, boy. Swallow it."

He hated being called boy, but he did as the captain asked. Mouth wide, he took in Fritz's cock as far as he could. The man's thick, musky scent overpowered him. Emmanuel closed his eyes, trying not to think about what he was doing. He could pretend it was Jerek, and it would be all right.

Except it wasn't Jerek. Jerek didn't smell like this, and Jerek didn't tangle his fingers in Emmanuel's hair and brutally guide his head where he wanted it to be. The cock pounded at the back of his throat, making him gag. Emmanuel couldn't breathe, and Fritz wouldn't let go long enough for him to get air.

A bitter liquid trailed down Emmanuel's throat before it erupted into a rush. Tears ran from his eyes as he coughed and choked. His lungs burned from the lack of air.

Fritz stopped, finally, and let him go. Emmanuel gasped and coughed some more. Fritz tucked his limp cock back inside his pants. The captain bent over to look under the table. "Good. Come out now, but stay as you are on all fours, just like that little dog you're wearing."

Emmanuel did, emerging at the captain's side. The captain held out a half-eaten chicken leg. "Here, boy."

He wouldn't let Emmanuel hold it. Instead, he taunted Emmanuel with it, letting him get a taste before yanking it away again. Emmanuel swiped for it once, but Fritz gave him such a painful blow to the temple that he didn't try again. His vision narrowed. His nudity and humiliation didn't matter; now that Jerek was safe, all that mattered was the food.

Eventually he learned that if he sat still and patient, the captain would give him time to eat. Harper held the leg to Emmanuel's lips and let him nibble at it. Lost in the ecstasy of taste and smell, Emmanuel hardly noticed the captain's hand pushing his hair behind his ear or caressing his neck and face.

Food. The captain took to feeding him small bites, leaving them on his fingers for Emmanuel to lick off. The captain's next trick was to take a bite of pomegranate and lean forward with the fruit's pith still between his teeth. Obediently Emmanuel kissed him, savoring both the sweet fruit and the captain's soft lips.

Only when a hand caressed between his thighs did Emmanuel come to his senses. Not the captain's hand, but Fritz's. The big man nestled behind him and nudged his legs apart. Fritz's rough work made his hands coarse, but he was gentle, an abrupt change from his earlier treatment.

The captain continued to feed Emmanuel dainties while Fritz explored Emmanuel's body. More chicken, bits of warm, buttered bread, all of them treats given as long as Emmanuel stayed pliant and cooperative. He craved the food so badly that he pushed the knowledge of Fritz's intrusive hands to the back of his mind. He couldn't bear the idea that he was selling his body for a few scraps of meat; no, he did this to save Jerek the pain they would have visited upon him had Emmanuel not cooperated.

Another long, lingering kiss from the captain. Pomegranate juice touched his tongue, trickled down his throat. Between the stimulation of food and Fritz's wandering hands, the last of Emmanuel's inhibitions fell away. He no longer cared how he'd gotten here, only that he was. His own cock, rock hard and needy, throbbed beneath Fritz's hand. He craved more than the edible delicacies.

And then something cold and slick found its way between Emmanuel's buttocks. He shuddered, half dreading, half craving what would happen next. Jerek never topped him; he preferred to be on the bottom, just as Emmanuel relished his role on top. For the second time that night, Fritz's fingers explored his innermost parts. Fritz teased him.

His thick fingers became a minor discomfort compared to the agony of being so near climax and unable to reach it.

With that tender grip, Fritz lifted him to his feet. The dishes on the table had been neatly stacked on the far end to leave most of the surface clear. Emmanuel felt a sudden, gnawing uneasiness in the pit of his stomach. Fritz forced him to bend forward so he lay half on the table, the edge digging into his sensitive cock. His head was turned toward the captain, who watched the proceedings with a lewd pleasure. Harper held another bowl in his hands, one filled with opaque dark brown syrup.

Fritz pinned Emmanuel's head to the table so he could not turn away from the captain. His cock pressed between Emmanuel's buttocks, seeking an entrance not ready to admit something so large. A surge of terror made Emmanuel's body even less willing.

Harper read the pleading expression on Emmanuel's face. "Easy, Fritz. I don't think our puppy here has done this before. And as for you..." The captain stroked Emmanuel's cheek with his thumb. "Relax. It'll be much more fun that way."

Fun for whom? Emmanuel wanted to ask, but didn't dare. Fritz continued to nudge him from behind, slowly driving forward into Emmanuel. His mouth opened wide at the new, uncomfortable sensation, but he could not scream.

The captain dipped a finger into the bowl and brought it up dripping. He put the finger inside Emmanuel's mouth and swirled it around. Chocolate. The sweetness provided an abrupt juxtaposition to the discomfort of Fritz's entry. He sucked eagerly at the captain's finger, then opened his mouth wide, wanting more. The captain obliged, dipping his finger again and again.

Thump, thump, thump. The ship's engine reverberated through the table straight to Emmanuel's groin. Fritz finally sank the whole of his shaft and held it there to let Emmanuel get used to it. A minute later, he pulled back until he'd nearly released his cock, then put it back in, again and again, gaining speed until his body slapped against Emmanuel's. The captain's feedings continued, and Emmanuel couldn't tell which was

more pleasurable, the sweetness from the captain or the pleasure Fritz stoked from behind. The pain had disappeared, leaving him with a luxurious heat that spread throughout his body. Pressure built inside of him. He couldn't stave off the inevitable.

Thump, thump, thump.

Emmanuel climaxed just as the captain inserted another mouthful of chocolate. Again, he could make no sound as his body twitched and spasmed. His fingers clawed at the table. The captain, his finger still caressing the inside of Emmanuel's mouth, smiled.

The spasms ceased. Emmanuel could only lay there like a rag doll, spent and exhausted. Little by little, his mind cleared. Jerek. Gods, what had he done? *Bastard*, he wanted to say but dared not for fear of punishment.

Harper noticed Emmanuel's change of heart. "Get him dressed and get him out. I'll be inviting him back later." He stood abruptly and went to the window. Stars punctuated the darkness. He dipped his finger in the chocolate, and this time brought it to his own lips to lick.

Still languid and dazed, Emmanuel didn't protest as Fritz yanked him upright and thrust his clothes at him. By the time Fritz had taken him as far as the deck, however, Emmanuel felt like being sick. He stumbled downstairs and stood in the doorway to the bunks, swaying, unable to take his tainted body anywhere near Jerek's sleeping form.

The engines pounded, slow and ominous. *Thump, thump, thump.*

Chapter Four

The next day, Emmanuel couldn't look at Jerek. Neither could he stomach the gruel the cook slopped into his bowl. His mind kept wandering to the captain and the look of satiation on his face as he fed Emmanuel chocolate and watched Fritz fuck him.

"What's wrong?" Jerek whispered as they sat in the crowded mess. They weren't supposed to talk while they ate. Emmanuel shook his head. In response, Jerek put an arm around his shoulder. It felt like ice.

Fritz wandered among them, slapping the butt of a whip in his hand as a threat to any who dared defy the rules. Emmanuel glanced at him and then promptly ran from the mess to the port side of the ship to vomit.

Jerek arrived a few moments later. He rubbed Emmanuel's back and tested the heat of Emmanuel's forehead with his palm. "You're hot. Are you sick? Should I take you to the surgeon?"

Both of them knew the question was rhetorical. The surgeon never bothered with the recruits unless they were dying or the captain had ordered him to. If they went, they'd be lucky to be given a medicine that didn't make them sicker.

"No. I'm fine, I—"

He was spared further explanation by the bell that alerted the men to the start of the first work shift. He left Jerek standing there, confused, and went to grab a brush to scrub the deck. Instead, Fritz caught him and pulled him aside. "Captain's orders. You're to clean his cabin."

Emmanuel shuddered. His one hope of refusal was quickly dashed.

"You'll come, or I'll fuck your little friend so hard he won't be able to sit for a week. Got that?" He shook Emmanuel's arm for emphasis. Emmanuel nodded. "Good. The captain likes you, so behave yourself."

Fritz took him inside the cabin. This time, though, the captain wasn't inside, nor was there any sign of food.

"Take it off. All of it," he said.

Emmanuel's face burned. His hands shook as he undid the buttons on his shirt and trousers. Fritz watched as he stripped the clothing from his skin and stepped out of his pants and undershorts. His cock hung limply between his legs. For now.

Once again, Fritz subjected him to the same humiliating cavity checks. When he was satisfied, he said, "You're to clean," and pointed to a bucket with soapy water, a few rags, and a carpet brush. "I'm to watch you. Any disobedience and you'll be punished. Break anything and you'll be punished. Start with the carpet."

On his hands and knees, Emmanuel dipped the brush into the bucket and scrubbed at the carpet. It didn't take long for his arm to burn from the force he used to clean. And it was hot; sunlight streamed through the large window, making the cabin stifling. Uncomfortable as he was, he soon lost himself in the focus of cleaning, thinking of nothing else...

Until his brush scraped the top of one bare foot.

"I say," said the captain, "I don't think my carpet has looked so good since it was new. Do you, Fritz?"

The big man grunted his assent.

"My crew member, however, is in a serious need of washing. Fritz, would you do the honors?"

Emmanuel froze.

Harper watched him, a sly, knowing grin on his face that made Emmanuel's gut quiver. "That is, unless you'd rather take your bath in salt water with barnacles to scrub you clean."

"No, thank you, sir."

"Then in the tub, in the tub!" Harper waved his hand at the long, thin wooden tub in the corner. One of the captain's luxuries and far better than the round metal basin the rest of the crew used for baths.

Hands tucked under his arms, Emmanuel stepped toward the bath. Fritz shoved him. "In!" There was room enough to sit with his legs almost fully extended. His feet met lukewarm water. When he didn't move fast enough, Fritz barked, "Sit down!"

He did, tucking his legs up to his chest. The captain pulled up a stool to sit in front of him with a clear view of Emmanuel's body. He held a bowl of fresh grapes and oranges. Emmanuel's mouth watered.

Fritz, rough carpet brush in hand, proceeded to scour Emmanuel's neck and shoulders. He yelped from the pain. Another slap from Fritz and he clenched his jaws together, determined not to let his discomfort show.

Harper watched him, face unreadable. One by one, he plucked grapes from their stem and put them into his mouth, purposely rolling them around so Emmanuel could see. The bowl was so close, so tantalizingly near, but Emmanuel knew better than to reach for it. Harper, seeing his anguish, cupped Emmanuel's chin. His thumb traced Emmanuel's lips. "Be good, won't you, my dear Emmanuel? I'll give you such a nice reward if you are."

Food? Or something else? At that moment, Emmanuel didn't care. The captain's touch made his skin tingle and drove away all thought of what Fritz was doing. He

wanted more, but to do that, he'd have to be good and please the captain no matter what. So he held still and let Harper do as he would.

"Good." Harper rewarded him with a kiss on the lips that sent a spike of desire all through him. His cock hardened. He let his knees come apart a little so Harper could see. The captain laughed. "Good boy."

Fritz shoved Emmanuel forward to rake the brush down his back. It felt like sandpaper. Emmanuel wondered if he would have any skin left, or if Fritz would scour him down to bare bone.

"On your hands and knees," Fritz ordered.

Emmanuel obeyed. His gut clenched when he realized that he couldn't see Fritz behind him and had no idea what the big man meant to do.

He was, however, facing the captain. Harper must have seen the flash of unease; he stroked Emmanuel's face and spoke to him soothingly. "It's all right, dear Emmanuel. Fritz won't hurt you."

He believed it. Between the captain's touch and his voice, Emmanuel was entirely at Harper's mercy and quite content to have it so. The captain plucked a grape and slid it between Emmanuel's lips. He bit it, nearly overcome by the sweet juice that trickled into his mouth.

Harper smiled. "Now tell me something, my dear Emmanuel. Your...friend always seems preoccupied. I see him gazing from the side of the ship every time we get to port. What is he looking for, I wonder?" Harper poked at the dog talisman still hanging from Emmanuel's neck.

The abrupt intrusion of reality disoriented him. Why talk about Jerek now? Emmanuel didn't want to even think about his lover, not here in the captain's cabin in the midst of a betrayal. "He's not looking for anything. He's a dreamer, that's all."

"Is he?" The captain held another grape to Emmanuel's mouth. Emmanuel bit, savoring the taste. Harper fed him two more before he wet a washcloth. The rough fabric tickled as it traveled down his chest. "Tell me. What does he dream about? I'm

sure you know." The cloth moved below his belly to wrap around his rigid cock. "You're lovers, after all."

The captain fisted him like that, tugging the cloth back and forth along his cock. Fritz attended to him from behind. The massive hands kneaded his shoulders and back. Between that and the warmth of the water, he felt only half present.

The captain's voice spoke softly in his ear. "What does he dream?" This time it wasn't a grape at his lips, but the captain's soft mouth. "Tell me."

Heat spread within and without. Fritz behind, the captain in front, lulled him into a relaxation that loosened his tongue. "A citadel. He thinks he's going to find a citadel carved in ice somewhere in the mountains and that he's going to be king."

The captain didn't laugh as he'd expected. The grip on his cock grew firmer. Harper increased the friction he used. Emmanuel winced from the sudden burst of pleasure that went through him.

"This...citadel. Where is it?"

Pressure built within him. Fritz's hand went under the water. One thick finger rimmed Emmanuel's asshole, creating an almost unbearable need. Gods. He actually *wanted* Fritz to fuck him. For a long time he couldn't think of anything but Fritz's wandering hand. He wriggled a little, maneuvering his backside in the hopes that Fritz would understand what he wanted.

"Oh, no. Not yet, my eager little whore," the captain said. "Tell me a secret, and then I'll let Fritz give you what you want. Maybe I'll even give you a treat of my own."

"But..."

Another sweet, juicy grape found its way into his mouth. "Tell me where it is."

"I don't know."

The captain's hand stopped. Emmanuel's cock ached, missing the movement intensely. "What was that?"

Fritz's hand gripped one of Emmanuel's buttocks hard enough to bruise. Emmanuel could barely speak. "I don't...know...where it is."

The cloth moved again with an irritating slowness. "No, Emmanuel. The correct answer is, 'I don't know *yet*.' Isn't that right, Fritz?"

The big man grunted his assent.

Emmanuel took that as his cue. "I don't know *yet*. Sir."

"That's better. But you're going to find out for me, aren't you, Emmanuel?"

The cloth wrapped around his balls, clutching them in an exquisite, possessive manner. Emmanuel could hardly speak, certain that at any moment he'd explode. "Yes, sir."

The captain let the cloth drop into the water. "I promised you a treat, didn't I? Fritz, if you would."

The cabin boy needed no urging. In moments, Emmanuel was jerked to his feet and hauled dripping out of the tub to stand directly in front of the seated captain. Fritz unbuttoned his trousers to reveal his own thick erection. Emmanuel shuddered in anticipation.

Fritz brought over one of the other wooden chairs and set it behind Emmanuel. He'd also brought some of the cool gel, which he slathered generously in and around Emmanuel's asshole. Then Fritz sat on the chair, legs together, cock pointed straight in the air. The massive hands grasped Emmanuel's waist and lowered him onto the eager, waiting erection.

This time, Emmanuel welcomed the thick cock. His legs went around Fritz's, and he braced himself on the big man's knees so that he had some control over how fast Fritz's cock moved within him. Fritz didn't quite relinquish all control; he kept an iron grip around Emmanuel's waist and continued to move him up and down.

Mouth wide, Emmanuel breathed hard from his exertions. The captain's eyes met his, and Emmanuel found he could not look away. Bowl in hand, Harper coated Emmanuel's mouth and lips with chocolate as sweet as the sensations in his groin.

The captain gently ran a fingernail along the underside of Emmanuel's cock. He gasped. Another dab of chocolate followed, and Emmanuel sucked at the offered finger as long as the captain allowed.

The three of them moved together in time with the ship's engines. *Thump, thump, thump*. Emmanuel's world narrowed. There was no Jerek, no danger, only the bright, brilliant need of his body. Whatever shame he had, he buried deep. Nothing else mattered but *this*, pleasing the captain and therefore being rewarded by reaching heights of pleasure that he'd never before imagined.

He and Fritz came at the same time, the big man loosing himself deep within Emmanuel, Emmanuel letting go just as the captain stroked him one last time. A painful cry of release escaped his throat as climax tore through him. His vision went white. His body ached and throbbed, and Fritz's hands at his waist felt like unbreakable iron bars.

But climax could not last forever. Emmanuel went limp against Fritz's broad chest, gasping from the force of his body's spasms. The captain grasped his chin with his clean hand and gave him one last, lingering kiss. "You can't tell your lover about this, Emmanuel. If you try, we'll subject him to the most awful of tortures. You'll watch him hang with his entrails out, food for the flies and gulls."

All memory of pleasure vanished. "But—"

"Hush." Two of the captain's fingers vertically crossed Emmanuel's lips. "You can't tell. I'll know. And Jerek will suffer for it." He leaned over to dip his sticky hand into the lukewarm bathwater. "Fritz will escort you out."

That he did, giving Emmanuel only a scant amount of time to dress before shoving him out the door. Emmanuel fled, determined he would never have to come back here again, certain it was inevitable.

* * * * *

Later that night, Emmanuel lay still, feigning sleep, but it wasn't enough to dissuade Jerek from bothering him.

"Emmanuel?"

Jerek gently pulled a lock of hair behind Emmanuel's ear and kissed his cheek. His lover jerked his head away. "Not tonight, Jer."

"What's wrong?"

"*Nothing's* wrong." He mentally kicked himself for snapping. If anything, that would only make Jerek more curious. "I'm tired, that's all. I had to clean the captain's cabin. Scrub the carpet and all that."

"Mmm. So that's why you smell like soap."

Emmanuel's stomach curdled. Scrubbing the *carpet* had nothing to do with the way he smelled.

"Is the rest of you this clean?" Jerek teased Emmanuel's shirt up. He bent over to sniff Emmanuel's skin. "You smell so *good*. I can't keep my hands off you tonight."

A shudder racked Emmanuel's body as Jerek slid in the bunk behind him.

"You must be sick, shivering like that. Let me warm you up."

"Not tonight, Jer," Emmanuel said. "Not tonight."

If Jerek was hurt by Emmanuel's words, he said nothing. He rolled over, back to Emmanuel's, leaving his lover alone with the memory of Fritz fucking him for the captain's amusement.

Chapter Five

Emmanuel couldn't stay completely out of Fritz's way, but he did his best. During the morning deck scrub, he situated himself among a large group of men and kept his head down. He didn't go anywhere alone and didn't bother going to dinner. He couldn't eat, anyway. The smell of gruel nauseated him. Fritz had no chance to get him alone, but being crafty about avoiding the big man didn't allay Emmanuel's fear.

"What's wrong?" Jerek asked day after day, but Emmanuel had no answer for him. He huddled in their bunk, feverish, leaving it only long enough to do his chores.

"Emmanuel?"

Jerek, again, with a glass of water, a blanket, a touch that used to be comforting but now burned. "Leave me alone. Please, Jer. I'm sick. That's all."

"That's *not* all. You haven't eaten for days," he heard Jerek mutter under his breath, but he left Emmanuel alone except when it was time to sleep. And then, Emmanuel lay awake, sensing the familiar, unwanted body next to his. He fiddled with the dog talisman that still hung around his neck. Jerek's gift. He still hadn't been able to part with it.

"Did the captain do something to you?" Jerek asked one night before bed. "Did Fritz?"

Emmanuel rolled over, pretending not to hear. Even if he wanted to tell Jerek, he couldn't.

"If they hurt you..."

"I'm *fine*, Jer. Really."

"You're not fine," Jerek grumbled. He slid into the bunk behind Emmanuel, careful not to touch him.

Thump, thump, thump went the ship's engines. Like his heart. Like Fritz pounding him while the captain watched. Like Harper's fist along his cock. "Jer? When are we going to get there?"

His lover's voice said sleepily, "Where? Our next port is four days away. Two, if they use steam the whole way."

"Not the port."

"Oh." Jerek rolled over to look at him. "I don't know."

"How will you know when we get there?"

"I don't know; I just believe I will."

His next words had to be forced out. "So you don't know exactly where it is."

"No. I don't." Jerek's burning hand clasped Emmanuel's shoulder. "Tell me what's wrong."

Emmanuel said nothing. Eventually, Jerek let him go and rolled back over to sleep. Jerek might have been lying about the Citadel, but Emmanuel didn't think so. It wasn't fair to deceive him, Emmanuel knew. Jerek deserved better. But Jerek had his dream, the Citadel, and Emmanuel had...nothing. Nothing at all, except the captain's dangerous, fickle attentions.

And then one day Jerek slipped while scrubbing the deck. His hand clutching the brush hit the railing. He lost his grip, and the brush flew out into the water.

Fritz pounced on him. Hands around Jerek's neck, he shouted directly into Jerek's face. "Clumsy oaf. You'll not eat tonight, nor all of tomorrow until you make up for the

cost of that brush." A good shake and Fritz slammed Jerek to the deck far harder than he needed to.

Emmanuel fought the urge to go to Jerek, knowing he'd only make the situation worse, but Jerek didn't move for a long, long time, not until Fritz gave him a swift, sharp kick to the gut. Fritz grinned. His eyes met Emmanuel's, and Emmanuel's stomach twisted with a sick, cold fear. Not for himself, for Jerek.

The next day, Fritz hovered over Jerek as he would a child with a penchant for trouble. "Harder," he said, "faster," despite Jerek already scrubbing as hard and fast as he could. The moment he slowed, Fritz jabbed him with the butt of his whip. Long after the other cleaners had gone on to other chores, Fritz kept Jerek on his hands and knees to go over the entire deck again for no good reason at all. Jerek endured Fritz's threats and kicks in silence. So did Emmanuel, although fury and guilt raged within him. This was his fault, Emmanuel knew. If he'd only cooperated with the captain, Fritz would have left Jerek alone.

"Bastard," Jerek mumbled that night as Emmanuel put cool cloths against his lover's bruises. "He's got it in for me, but it won't be long now before we're gone. I believe."

"I'm sorry," Emmanuel said. It wasn't enough. If he didn't do something, Jerek might not live long enough to fulfill his dream.

"For what?" Jerek caught Emmanuel's hand. "This isn't your fault. Fritz is in a mood, that's all. Gods!" he said when Emmanuel pressed too hard. Emmanuel snatched his hand away, but Jerek said, "No—don't stop. It feels good. It always does when you do it."

Emmanuel continued to soak the cloths in a bucket of cold water. He, too, had a bruise to match every one of Jerek's, only they were on his heart and conscience. Seeing his lover like this hurt worse than any beating he'd ever endured.

"I love you," Jerek said when Emmanuel curled behind him. "Forever and always. We'll get through this."

Emmanuel held him, gently, until Jerek fell asleep. No more, Emmanuel decided. His own pain and humiliation didn't matter, not when Jerek's life was at stake. He couldn't endure another day of watching Fritz's torments.

When Fritz opened the door to the captain's cabin a short while later, he found Emmanuel on his knees, naked, bent in obeisance. "Please. Please let me see him."

"Let him in, Fritz," came the captain's voice from deep inside.

Relieved beyond belief, Emmanuel crawled forward to lay his head at Harper's feet, hating himself for having to debase himself like this, yet longing for the captain's forgiveness. Harper crouched to stroke Emmanuel's hair. "Tell me why you're here."

Emmanuel shuddered at the awful, wonderful touch. "Leave him alone. Do whatever you want to me, but leave Jerek alone."

"Anything I want? You *are* loyal to your little friend, aren't you?" Harper stroked Emmanuel's bare shoulder, then over every bump of his spine. "I missed you, my dear Emmanuel. You look hungry..."

Emmanuel opened his mouth, a loyal dog hopelessly caught in the captain's net of lust.

* * * * *

After Emmanuel had accepted his fate, the fever eased, and he could act normally around Jerek again. Well, almost normal. Where once making love to Jerek had been natural and pleasurable, Emmanuel had to fight to continue through with it. One slip of the tongue and he could get his lover killed.

Jerek, for his part, said little, although Emmanuel was certain he'd begun to suspect something. Emmanuel was gone too long too often, with the same excuse. "Chores."

"Chores. Every night? Fritz has it in for you, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does," Emmanuel said. It hurt how close Jerek was to being right.

Jerek took Emmanuel's face in his hands and looked him straight in the eye. "Tell me the truth."

"I love you, Jer. I don't want to hurt you. Not ever."

The blue eyes searched his. From his expression, Jerek didn't quite know how to respond. "I couldn't stand it if you betrayed me. I'd go mad. I love you too much."

Emmanuel struggled to keep his voice even. "I know, Jer. I know. Everything will be fine, as long as I know you're safe."

Jerek smiled faintly. "And why wouldn't I be? Fritz has gone back to ignoring me, and I know we'll be gone from here. We'll be safe in the Citadel."

"But when?" Emmanuel asked, pleading, but Jerek, as usual, had no answer.

A month later, one of the officers shouted, "Land!" Everyone rushed to look. There, in the distance, Emmanuel could just make out icy white cliffs. His heart sank as he saw them.

"That's it," Jerek whispered in Emmanuel's ear. "I know it. When we get there, we can find a way off. I knew we'd make it here someday."

Emmanuel said nothing, seized by a sudden burst of fear. The captain would pry Jerek's words out of him. If they caught Jerek escaping, he'd be killed, Citadel or no. "Maybe we shouldn't. It's a life here, after all. Food, work—"

"*What?*" Jerek said. He looked at Emmanuel, aghast. "I can't believe you. You hate it here. Anything, *anything* would be better than this shithole of a ship." He stroked Emmanuel's cheek. Emmanuel flinched. "What's wrong with you? You hardly even touch me anymore."

"It's the extra work. It makes me tired. I'm sorry."

The caress changed to a slap. "Don't lie to me. Don't you think I can tell you've been with another man? I can smell it. His sweat. His scent. I can taste him when I kiss you. I've tried to ignore it, because I was waiting for you to tell me. I'm not waiting anymore. Who is it?"

Emmanuel's cheek stung. Several of the other men had turned to look. Any argument, along with the ensuing gossip, was always a way of entertainment. Emmanuel kept his voice low. "I can't tell you."

"Bastard." Jerek looked him straight in the eye. "Don't come back to me until you can."

* * * * *

Jerek, for once, didn't mind kitchen duty. He scrubbed at the filthy pots, his mind miles away from his work. Emmanuel's betrayal hurt him worse than any beating he'd ever had. He loved Emmanuel with his entire being, and to be thrown aside, unable to be touched... His throat tightened, and he fought to keep back the tears. No one cried on this ship without being teased unmercifully.

He did anyway. He couldn't help it. Thankfully, the boiler that serviced the ship's engine also provided hot water for the kitchen and baths. Steam filled the dish room, hiding his tears. He scrubbed harder, taking his anger and disappointment out on the bits of hardened gruel clinging to the pots like glue.

Thump, thump, thump. He imagined taking out his anger on Emmanuel, pounding him in time to the ship's rhythm. But then his imagination slipped, and instead of pounding his lover, he was on top, slamming his hips against Emmanuel's buttocks while reveling in the heat and tightness of Emmanuel's ass.

"Stop it," he told his unwelcome erection. "Stop it. *Stop it.*" He put all his effort and focus into scrubbing grime from the pots.

Thump, thump, thump.

By the time the cook released him from his duties a couple of hours later, Jerek was hot, sweaty, and mercifully unaroused. He went up to the deck. After the heat of the dish room, the cold air made him shiver uncontrollably. His breath looked like the steam rising from the smokestack. Campfires shone on the distant shore. Beyond those, growing ever larger, were the glaciers.

He reached under his shirt and pulled out the pendant that he'd kept all these years. The white bone shone eerily in the moonlight. His gut told him that up there, somewhere, he would find what he'd been seeking since childhood.

He would go. Tomorrow night.

With or without Emmanuel.

Chapter Six

That night, Emmanuel knelt before the captain at the table, hands tied behind his back, enduring the man's awful, wonderful caresses. Fritz was behind him, as always; the muscled man preventing any thought of injury or escape. "Your friend seems particularly interested in this port of call," the captain said. "He's been staring across the water for hours. And it's cold outside." He shivered for emphasis. "He wouldn't be planning to leave us, would he?"

Emmanuel wished he could find some reason not to answer, but the captain would employ some despicable way of making him talk. Fritz's possessive arms draped around his waist. Fingers stroked the length of his cock. Emmanuel groaned at the sensation.

"This citadel. It's supposedly carved in ice. What sort of fool would want to live in a frozen waste such as that?" The captain rapped his fingers on the table. "Surely your boyfriend has told you something more about it. What's in the Citadel? Treasure of some sort, perhaps?"

Fritz kissed Emmanuel's neck and down his knobby, bare spine. "He thinks the place calls to him, and he'll find it if he believes hard enough. He says he's meant to be king. Ice King. The place has some sort of magic for the right man." He twitched as

Fritz's lips sucked at his ticklish waist. "I don't know about any treasure. He never said. The place is more important than what's in it." A pity he wasn't brave enough to bite his own tongue out. It galled him to be spilling all his lover's secrets to the captain.

"So he does want to leave." The captain picked up the bowl of chocolate and held it tantalizingly close to Emmanuel's mouth. "You wouldn't know anything about how he means to do that, would you?" He dipped one finger in. It came up dripping.

Emmanuel couldn't take his eyes from the captain's finger nor could he think of anything else besides the chocolate and how to get it. He hadn't eaten yesterday or today. After being taunted with the captain's fine food, he couldn't touch the gruel without being sick. "No. I don't," he said, praying the captain would believe him.

"Oh but I think you do." Instead of Emmanuel's mouth, the captain put his finger in his own, making a show of licking off every bit of chocolate. He dipped his finger again and held it out. "Don't you, my Emmanuel?"

He shook his head. "No. Please." It was a plea both for the chocolate and to leave Jerek alone. Fritz fisted Emmanuel's cock, every so often stopping to rub the smooth skin below it. Emmanuel wriggled from the sensation, but he could not escape.

"You do know, my dear Emmanuel, the punishment for deserters, don't you?" The captain raised his finger, letting a single drop fall onto Emmanuel's lips. "I know you love him. It's obvious to everyone on board. Telling me what he plans might well save his life. It would be selfish and foolish of you not to tell me."

Another drop. Emmanuel licked at it. The taste only inflamed his hunger.

"If you love him, you will keep him safe. Here, beside you. I don't want to have to punish him. I don't want to hurt you." With the chocolate, the captain drew markings across his cheeks, forehead, and chest as if painting a warrior for battle.

Emmanuel could do nothing but shiver. The scent sharpened his hunger as well as his desire.

The captain's face moved tantalizingly close to his. "How will he do it, Emmanuel? How will he leave?"

Emmanuel gasped as Fritz inserted a finger into his ass. The big man deliberately massaged the internal pleasure point. Emmanuel writhed in his grip, wanting an escape, wanting the constant teasing to have an end.

"The captain asked you a question," Fritz said. He pressed harder, but not enough to give Emmanuel any hint of release.

It broke him. Starving, body aching from unfulfilled need, Emmanuel blabbed everything he knew about Jerek and the Citadel. "Tonight. He means to go tonight."

The captain's enigmatic smile hadn't altered throughout the telling. "Good boy. I think he deserves a reward." Another dip of the finger, and this time Emmanuel was allowed to lick it. Again and again, the captain fed him, then took Emmanuel's face in his hands and licked away the chocolate he had put there. Fritz exchanged his fingers for his cock and pummeled Emmanuel from behind. It hurt, but not as much as the deep confusion.

Fritz had primed him well. In moments, Emmanuel's body clenched with a climax so hard he felt as if he would be torn in two. The captain held Emmanuel's head firmly and didn't allow him to look away. The man's eyes blazed with a cruel, lewd satisfaction that terrified Emmanuel. He was caught, helpless in the grip of a man who manipulated him with food alone. Bile rose to Emmanuel's throat, along with an intense hatred for himself along with the man who had captured him.

Utterly drained, he laid his head on the captain's thigh. Harper petted him, running his fingers through Emmanuel's hair as if he were a beloved cat.

He thought of Jerek and choked back a sob. What had he done? *What had he done?*

* * * * *

Emmanuel was later than usual coming back to his bunk. Jerek fretted and cursed in silence, wishing that things didn't have to end this way. They were supposed to go together.

When he saw the familiar shape in the doorway, his heart leaped. Emmanuel had changed his mind.

But a quick look at his lover's face said otherwise. Emmanuel wore a haunted, distant expression. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

It seemed to be the only thing he could say. The dull repetition frightened Jerek. "You should be. Come on. There's still time." He took Emmanuel's hand, to find it cold and clammy.

"Don't try. Please, don't try."

"I have to. I don't have a choice. It's calling to me. I *have* to go. And if you won't come with me"—the words hurt to say—"then stay. Be with whatever man you've chosen over me. I hope you're happy."

Emmanuel jerked as if Jerek had thrown stones instead of words. Jerek was torn; the urgency to get away now grew unbearably, but he still felt uneasy about leaving Emmanuel behind.

"Come with me. This is the last time I'll ask."

Silence stretched in the cabin. Emmanuel said nothing, wouldn't even look at him.

Heart aching, Jerek headed outside. It hurt too much to be able to say good-bye.

He shivered in the chill night air, grateful for the extra layers of clothes he'd put on. He didn't have much in the way of supplies; he didn't have access to warm clothes or tools. He took the blanket from his bunk. The only other things he'd managed to steal were a bowl, spoon, and a napkin filled with crumbs from the bottom of the cracker box.

He threw the pack down into the dinghy and climbed in after it. He'd just started to reach for the pulley to lower it when the captain's smooth voice spoke behind him.

"Going somewhere?"

* * * * *

In their quarters, Emmanuel huddled against the wall. Putting his hands over his ears didn't drown out the sound of Jerek's screams.

Chapter Seven

They'd shackled Jerek to the smokestack in the middle of the ship. Emmanuel couldn't bear to look, but the captain, with Fritz behind him for assurance, took him to see. An iron collar kept Jerek's head immobile, and they'd chained his arms and legs wide. Bruises and cuts scored his naked body. The warmth from the smokestack kept Jerek from freezing to death in the frigid air. Fritz had thrown buckets of cold water on him to wash off the blood. Blue tinged his lips, and his shriveled cock and balls had withdrawn into his body as far as they could.

He refused to concede to his circumstances, though. When Emmanuel approached, he looked up and spat. "Bastard," Jerek said. "Liar. Traitor. Ship's whore."

The words stung, even more so when the captain laughed.

"You don't understand," Emmanuel said.

"What don't I understand? That you sacrificed me to save your own skin and to keep your warm bed? I will never forgive you for this. Never."

"Jerek, please."

"Save your breath," the captain said. "It's obvious your lover—*former* lover—doesn't understand the favor you did for him. If he would have made it any further in his attempt, his death would have been excruciating."

"Better that than stay here with a snake like you!" Jerek spat again. The globule landed on the captain's shoulder.

The captain's smile was deadly. "Fritz. Perhaps you'll remind Jerek of what happens to those who are insubordinate?"

"Twenty lashes, Captain."

"No!" Emmanuel lunged toward the captain. "Don't. Please. He's had enough." He knelt at his superior's feet. "I'll do anything you want if you'll leave him alone."

The captain arched an eyebrow. "Anything?"

The curiosity in the captain's voice made Emmanuel's stomach twist. "Aye, sir. Anything. As long as you agree to spare him another beating."

"You *coward!*" Jerek shrieked. "Go on. Thrash me. Let me show Emmanuel what it means to be a real man! I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid of death."

The accusation stung. "If you only knew. If you only knew —"

The captain's hand over his mouth prevented Emmanuel from saying anything further. His other hand roamed freely down Emmanuel's chest and stomach, stopping to rest on his groin in a possessive gesture that Jerek could not mistake.

"So this is why you didn't want to leave?" Jerek asked. "Because of *him?*" He jerked his head at the captain.

Caught and helpless, Emmanuel tried to shake his head, but the captain prevented it. "I always reward those who are loyal to me," Harper said.

Jerek looked as if he was about to be sick. He continued to speak to Emmanuel. "They beat me. They tortured me. And all because *you're fucking the captain!*"

His shout drew stares from everyone else on the deck. Emmanuel's face burned.

Jerek struggled so that the chains clinked against the smokestack. "I have to get out of here. I have to get away from *you.*"

Emmanuel closed his eyes. Grief bit deep.

"Was that what you came here for? To beg me to be cooperative? To tell me that if I behave, they'll let me down from this wretched thing?"

This time, the captain let Emmanuel go so he could nod.

"Well, I won't, do you hear me? I *won't!*" He continued to scream at the captain. "I won't give up, you bastard! Go ahead and beat me some more. I won't give in to you!"

"Shut up, Jerek! *Shut up!*" Emmanuel lunged forward to put a palm over Jerek's mouth, but it was too late. Fritz intervened. A heavy blow sent Emmanuel sprawling to the deck. From behind him came the sounds of flesh pummeling flesh.

Emmanuel couldn't bear to look. He barely made it to the side of the ship before he lost the meager contents of his stomach. He stayed there, heaving, until he heard the captain's voice.

"What a pity. You've done your work too well this time, Fritz. Take him down to the surgeon. I don't want him to die."

Chains clattered on the deck. Emmanuel glanced back long enough to see Fritz bearing Jerek's limp body away. Heavy, hollow footsteps made their way toward Emmanuel.

"Mercy is lost on men such as that," the captain said. "You, my dear, loyal Emmanuel, set a shining example to the rest of the crew. Your actions shall be rewarded."

Emmanuel shuddered. As soon as the captain had departed, Emmanuel leaned over the side of the ship and retched again.

* * * * *

Down in the surgeon's cabin, Captain Harper bemoaned the fact that Fritz had put the wretched boy into such a state. Careless. Utterly careless. Between the exposure to the air and the drugs to ease the pain of his thrashing, Jerek became delirious and seemed to have no coherent thoughts whatsoever.

He rambled about the Citadel, a place always thought of as a legend. Like many, Harper had dismissed it as a children's tale until the queen had sent word that a madman had been brought to her, raving that he'd been chosen to be the next Ice King. But mad as he was, he'd given no details as to its location, so the queen had sent Harper to search for it. Jerek knew something, but whatever it was, neither Harper nor Fritz could pry it from him. The bone pendant might have provided some clue, but even in his fevered state, Jerek refused to let go and clung to it as if it were a lifeline between one world and the next.

Jerek ranted, clawing at the air and pointing as if he could truly see the Citadel before him. "See. It's all sparkly. Bright. So bright. The towers are tall, tall an' pointy. It's mine. I hafta get there. I b'lieve."

"Mad fool," Harper muttered before turning to the surgeon. "Will he live?"

The surgeon hadn't bothered to secure Jerek's irons to the bed, believing him to be too ill to move. "Four days and he hasn't died yet. He's got the strength of will to survive."

"Good." The captain rested a palm on Jerek's forehead. "His fever has gone down. Why is he still ranting? Has his mind turned?"

"Hard to say. Either the drugs haven't worn off yet or he could still be in pain." The surgeon prodded at Jerek's stomach. Jerek yelped at the indelicate touch. "He must still be bruised inside. You're lucky Fritz didn't kill him."

"And Fritz is lucky *I* didn't kill *him* for this." Though killing Fritz wasn't an option; Fritz was Harper's bodyguard as well as the cabin boy, and no one else could possibly fill the position. Harper patted Jerek's sweaty cheek. "Tell me, Jerek. Where is this citadel of yours?"

"High in the cold, cold mountains, too far for most anybody t' reach. A long ways. A really long ways."

"But *where*? How do I get there?"

Jerek grinned like a madman. His eyes flitted back and forth, never truly focusing on anything. "You can't, 'less you're special. Only a few can. Only those who b'lieve."

"You believe, don't you, Jerek?"

He nodded effusively.

"So do I. Why don't you take me with you? We'll be able to carry more supplies if there's two of us."

"Not you. Not s'posed to be you. Only 'Manuel. He b'lieves."

"So do I, dear Jerek. Think on this. Your precious Emmanuel betrayed you, but I...I will be loyal to you in ways that that dog of yours never was. I believe in your citadel. Take me."

"Can't. Only me. It's mine. I hafta find it. Hafta, hafta, hafta."

"But *why*?" Annoyance clawed at the captain. Perhaps Emmanuel had been telling the truth; Jerek made absolutely no sense and gave no hints. It only reassured Harper as to why Emmanuel had been the better man to seduce; nothing could be gotten from Jerek directly, and only the man he loved had any chance of getting it indirectly. "Treasure?"

"Gold 'n diamonds. Jewels from a dozen nations. Crowns for kings, necklaces for queens. Swords for jacks, scepters for jokers. Hearts and spades and clubs and diamonds. Lots of diamonds." He laughed. Briefly. It probably hurt too much. "Nothin' for a man like you, though. Nothin'."

Harper only just managed to keep his anger at bay. Threatening his fevered prisoner had had no effect; striking him would make things worse. Harper gestured to the surgeon. "Keep watch over him. Our trading here is nearly done, but I don't want to leave until I get some sense out of him. I want him able to talk by morning."

"Aye, sir."

Halfway up the stairs, Harper could still hear the surgeon muttering. "Miserable sot and wretched captain, expecting me always to clean up after his mate's handiwork."

'Patch him up. Make sure he lives.' As if I don't know what he's going to do with you later. Stay mad. You'll be better off."

The surgeon wandered off, still grumbling and cursing. Harper went up the stairs, jacket pulled tight against the chill air. "Damn this cold." Fritz, who'd been waiting just outside, nodded in agreement. "Of all the wretched places the queen could have sent us, it had to be to the coldest. I want a hot bath. And then I want Emmanuel. And then...then I am going to get some answers out of that miscreant you nearly killed."

* * * * *

Jerek woke with a start sometime in the night. At least he thought it was night; but in a windowless cabin with nothing but an oil lamp for light, he couldn't tell for sure. His head ached terribly. Merely breathing hurt. Every movement sent jolts of pain through his body, but he was alive and inside the infirmary from the scent of medicines and antiseptic.

Emmanuel. Where was he now? Probably fucking the captain again, delighted that Jerek was out of the way. Gods. A different kind of pain shot through Jerek's chest. Tears of anger and rage stung his eyes. It should have been different. Emmanuel should have loved him. Always.

Sore and ill as he was, he had to leave tonight. The captain's voice resounded in his head: "*Where is it? Where is it?*" And more frightening: "*Take me.*" They'd left Jerek loose, but they gave him nothing to wear. No one, they thought, would be stupid enough to swim naked in the icy waters of the bay, not with the iron collar and fetters still attached.

The brass bell clanged to announce dinner. Jerek waited until the shuffling footsteps had ceased, then cautiously rose to his feet. He felt unbearably hot, as if he were back in the harsh sunlight of Whist. "I believe," he said. He held tight to the railing as he climbed the stairs out of the infirmary. Frigid wind tore at his bare skin. "I will find the Citadel."

Step by aching step, he made it to the port side. Far below, black water licked the sides of the ship. He cleared his mind of everything but one image—himself, standing proudly within the icy halls of the Citadel. “I believe.”

He jumped.

Chapter Eight

Emmanuel huddled in the captain's bed, too miserable to care about Fritz's rough hands on his cock or the captain's thigh beneath his head. The captain had just finished taking a bath, leaving the room warm and muggy. Harper's wet hair occasionally dripped onto Emmanuel's cheek.

"You shouldn't worry so, my dear Emmanuel," the captain crooned. "We'll be leaving tomorrow, and I'm sure your friend will give up his ridiculous notions. A citadel carved in ice that no man but one can find. Really."

Emmanuel said nothing. They had no idea how deep Jerek's belief went. Deeper, now, than his love for Emmanuel. No one would allow himself to be tortured if he wasn't obsessed.

"Are you certain he has no idea where it is? I find it hard to believe that anyone could set out alone in the snow and mountains and have no idea where he's going."

"He doesn't know. He's never told me. I've said so, again and again!" The captain's continued questions grated at him. This time, Emmanuel welcomed Fritz's touch, desperate for anything at all to get his mind off the memory of seeing Jerek's ravaged body. He angled his hips toward the big man's hands. A temporary respite, but a needed one.

"Ah." The captain curled a finger in Emmanuel's hair. "I see you've come to your senses at last. Perhaps it will take less coercion to gain your cooperation now?"

"I'm always at your bidding, sir." Especially now that Jerek had repudiated him. "You have my loyalty."

"Yes. I believe I do." As a reward, Harper bent down to kiss him. Damp hair tickled Emmanuel's neck.

Then muffled shouts came from outside on the deck. Harper jerked away. Three shots rang out, followed by cursing. The captain reached the door, opening it just as one of his crewmen reached it, breathless. "Sir. Jerek is gone. He jumped overboard."

Emmanuel's heart raced at the news. *Please, let him escape. Please.*

"Fool!" The captain brushed past him. "Get crewmen in the boats. Go after him. *Find him!*"

"But, sir. He's surely drowned. The water is too cold —"

"Get the men. Get the boats. Or tie yourself to the smokestack and be beaten!"

"Aye, Captain!" The man left at a run.

Harper turned to look at Emmanuel. His calm expression had turned to fury. "We'd better find him, dear Emmanuel. If we don't..." He licked his lips, considering. "If we don't, his punishment will be visited upon you. Secure him, Fritz, then join me on the deck. We have a fugitive to find."

With the captain gone, Fritz cared little for niceties. He nearly suffocated Emmanuel as he used his weight to press the smaller man into the bedclothes and finish what he'd started. Emmanuel endured the pummeling and, afterward, the humiliation of Fritz tying him in a position of obeisance and securing him to the table legs so he couldn't escape. Jerek was gone. Whatever happened to him now, it didn't matter.

Jerek would fulfill his destiny.

* * * * *

"Wake up. You must wake up, now."

The urgent voice cut its way through Jerek's fogged senses. He was *cold*. Bone-deep cold, despite the heap of furs covering him. A warm body curled against him from behind. Emmanuel? He wanted it to be, but something felt off.

"Wake up. Drink. This will give you life."

Someone lifted his head and held a cup to his lips. He swallowed without thinking. A moment later, he coughed and spluttered. His eyes teared from the hot, coppery beverage that slid down his throat.

"Good," the voice said when Jerek had caught his breath. "Seal blood. It will give you strength."

Seal blood? The thought disgusted him, but he felt a welcome warmth surge through his body. Now that he wasn't shivering so badly, he recognized that accented voice. "Atka," he said. The round, dark face came into focus.

"The same. The one offering you warmth is Piaktok. Welcome to my home away from home." Her gesture encompassed the inside of a round tent made of some sort of hide. A small fire burned nearby, the smoke vented through a hole in the roof. Stones lined the fire, and every so often, Atka threw a handful of water on them. The water hissed, evaporated immediately, and filled the tent with steam to warm Jerek on the inside.

Jerek swiveled his head around to look at his companion, a handsome, brown-skinned man with eyes so round and black that he reminded Jerek of a seal. He wasn't Emmanuel, not by a long shot, but Jerek was grateful for his presence. Another bout of cold made him shiver. Piaktok chafed his skin with short, strong strokes. Slowly, Jerek warmed and relaxed.

"Atka?" Jerek asked a while later. He was still utterly confused as to how he'd ended up here, and why he was so damn *cold*. "How... Where...?"

"Where is easy. You're in a tent in my homeland in a place hidden from view. As to how..." She nodded at Piaktok. "The Seals found you in the water and brought you

to shore when it was clear you wouldn't make it on your own. Quite brave—and foolish—of you to jump from your ship."

"Ship?" It took him a long moment to remember. This time, his shivers had nothing to do with the cold. He struggled to get up. "The *Tophet*. Privateers. They'll find me! You don't know what they do to those that escape."

Piaktok embraced him tightly. Atka rested a hand on Jerek's shoulder. "They won't find you here. You're safely hidden. Those on the shore will say they saw nothing. There are no tracks to follow."

Jerek's hand went to his throat. The iron collar had vanished. So had the fetters around his wrists and ankles. The pendant, he was relieved to feel, remained.

Atka noticed his movement. "Yes, *Nukilik*. You're free."

Free. The full realization hit him then, hard as one of Fritz's blows. Tears ran freely down his cheeks. If only Emmanuel were here to share this with him. If only Emmanuel hadn't betrayed him, and with the *captain* of all people! After all they'd been through, he should have been here.

He should have *been here*.

Piaktok held him as he sobbed, offering what comfort he could. Atka turned politely away until Jerek had finished. After a while, Jerek was able to speak again. He held out the pendant. "Where is it? Where is the Citadel?"

"So you haven't given up on that, have you, *Nukilik*? I didn't think you would." Atka smiled kindly. "Far from here, if it exists at all. Deep in the mountains. It's for each man to find on his own. Or not."

Jerek tried to fight off a bitter disappointment at the lack of information. "What is that word? Nuk-Nukilik?"

"It means 'strong' in my tongue."

"I don't feel nukilik," Jerek said. He tried to sit up and failed. His fingers and toes stung from the spreading heat inside his body, and now that he was warm, the aches from Fritz's attentions returned.

Atka noticed him wincing. "Give yourself time. You are safe here and may stay as long as you need." The Northerner looked up as something scratched the tent flap. Jerek followed his gaze as the flap opened and a tiny white fox —

Jerek blinked. Not a fox. A girl, small and quick, dressed in white fur. She jabbered at Atka in the Northern tongue, then glanced at Jerek. She grinned, winked at him, then turned to go back out the way she came. Jerek blinked again, and he could have sworn it was a fox's hindquarters he saw, not a girl's.

At Jerek's quizzical expression, Atka explained. "She said the privateers have gone. They came ashore to question the tribesmen there and found nothing. They assumed you'd died in the water. The captain was very angry."

Vaguely, he remembered the captain visiting during his illness. "*Where is it?*" "The captain wanted to find the Citadel. For the queen, he said. He kept asking me. I didn't know. Better that he thinks me dead." Even if it meant Emmanuel believed it too. He felt stupid asking his next question. "That girl. For a moment, I thought she was a fox. And you said something about seals? We didn't see any seals."

"Of course you didn't. They wouldn't take the risk of being shot, swimming so close to your ship. As for the girl, perhaps for a moment she was a fox. The North hides many little magics, which you will learn in time. Now rest, Nukilik. Piaktok will stay with you as your companion. He will provide you with anything you need. He is unable to speak, but his hearing is intact and he understands your tongue."

Jerek wanted to ask if his silence was by birth or accident, but thought it would be rude to ask. Atka threw a few more handfuls of water on the rocks before she departed.

He was exhausted. Piaktok's presence was welcome, but Jerek couldn't help thinking about the lover who'd betrayed him. "Emmanuel. You bastard. You should have *been* here." Tears flowed freely down his cheeks. Jerek let them come until, lulled

by the warmth of the tent and the comfortable stranger at his back, he slept and dreamed of his citadel.

* * * * *

The scent of fish sizzling in a pan brought Jerek out of a strange, twisted dream in which he'd been chained again and Emmanuel had laughed and laughed. Dreaming of him brought back all the pain of his betrayal. He clenched his fists, driving his nails into his palms in an effort to distract himself with a different kind of hurt.

Emmanuel. Gods. If Jerek ever saw him again, Emmanuel would be made to regret every bit of his wrongdoing. Jerek had seen more than a few punishments dealt out aboard the *Tophet*, and knew what hurt the most and harmed the least.

Frying fish hissed, bringing him out of his reverie. His stomach growled. He hadn't had anything besides gruel in... Gods. He didn't know when.

Piaktok crouched beside the fire. The firelight played over his naked body, inciting a different sort of hunger within Jerek. He'd never been with anyone but Emmanuel and had never considered straying. But Emmanuel wasn't here. Jerek doubted he would see his lover again, and if he did, he was more of a mind to punish Emmanuel for his betrayal rather than embrace him.

Piaktok scraped the fish onto a large shell that served as a plate. The scent was so strong and tempting that it was all Jerek could do to wait politely for Piaktok to help him sit up to eat properly. Worse was the wait while Piaktok picked the bones from the tender white flesh.

At last, Piaktok allowed him to eat. Jerek took the shell. He used his fingers to scoop fish into his mouth. It was *good*. Better than good. The fish nearly melted on his tongue. He felt like a glutton eating so fast, but he was hungry, and it had been so long since he'd tasted anything so delicious.

A few moments of that, and Piaktok swiped the shell from his hands. The Northerner waved his hand in a gesture of caution. He held his thumb and forefinger close together.

"But I'm starving!" Jerek protested. To his dismay, Piaktok picked up a scrap of fish and held it to Jerek's lips. "All right. All right. Little bites."

Piaktok fed him. At first, Jerek was embarrassed. He wasn't *that* weak, after all, but then he saw Piaktok's quiet enjoyment. The Northerner truly cared about him, a complete stranger who'd been hurt and needy, and was determined that Jerek not inadvertently harm himself.

And when a piece of fish stuck to Jerek's chin, Piaktok didn't use his fingers to pick it away. He used his lips.

The shock of another man's mouth against his sent a flush of desire through him. He felt ridiculous, utterly ridiculous. His injuries had yet to heal, and the pain hadn't left yet. He'd never given himself to another man. He knew nothing about Piaktok, a Northerner with ways far different than his own.

But Piaktok was warm and alive and vibrant, and Jerek needed him.

Piaktok fed him another few mouthfuls of fish, then calmly took Jerek's face between his hands and kissed Jerek on the lips. Jerek closed his eyes and savored the sweet sensation that flowed through him.

The Northerner leaned his head back just enough to meet Jerek's eyes. He didn't let go, but from his expression, he was wondering if Jerek was all right or if things were moving too fast.

"You're fine," Jerek told him. His voice had dropped an octave. "Please..."

Piaktok's mouth returned to his. Jerek kissed him back...and soon discovered why Piaktok could not speak. He had no tongue.

"How?"

Two fingers across his lips silenced him. Piaktok shook his head. When he let go, Jerek asked a different question.

“Atka said the seals saved my life. Were you... Are you one of them?”

Piaktok smiled. His form seemed to waver. An eyeblink later, a seal lay with his length along Jerek’s body. He was as beautiful in this form as he was as a human. Sleek and glossy, he had black fur with thick lines of white twisting around him like ribbon. The same black, doleful eyes regarded him with curiosity. His whiskers twitched, tickling Jerek’s skin.

Gingerly, Jerek petted the seal’s head. Piaktok twisted his head, angling it to encourage a scratch. Jerek did, marveling at the thick, soft fur. “You’re quite handsome like this too, you know.”

The seal nodded. He batted Jerek’s shoulder with his head, then rolled onto his side. Jerek saw why; the ribbonlike stripes went around his neck and torso and another pattern covered his stomach. Jerek laughed and rubbed the seal’s belly. “Show-off.”

A moment later, he was showing off more than his belly. Jerek watched in horrified fascination as the seal’s cock emerged, stiff, pink...and unbelievably *long*.

“Um...” He tore his gaze away from the wriggling member and looked the seal in the eyes. “That’s fascinating, but I really don’t think —”

He blinked, and once again, Piaktok the human lay at his side, his cock refreshingly human. A grin split his face. His shoulders shook with mirth.

“That’s better. I mean, I’m sure you wouldn’t do anything that hurt, but it’s a bit unnerving to see —”

Jerek didn’t get to finish his sentence. Piaktok pulled Jerek’s face in for a kiss.

Piaktok’s gentleness surprised him. Where Emmanuel had been aggressive, often dominating, Piaktok was sensitive and cautious. Mindful of Jerek’s still-healing body, he pressed harder here, lighter there, all the while stoking the heat burning inside Jerek.

Searching hands found his erection and pressed it upward toward his belly. Both hands stroked him up and down, from the tip of his shaft to the tender area beneath his balls.

“Oh, gods.” No one had done anything quite like that, not even —

Emmanuel. *Emmanuel*.

Emmanuel, that bastard, wasn't here anymore. There was no shame in taking another lover in his stead, especially not when Jerek could enjoy himself without fear of being caught. No reason he shouldn't enjoy himself or chase away that empty, aching feeling that came with Emmanuel's loss.

Piaktok left him with no wits to think about anything other than the pleasure racking his body. The smooth motions on his cock turned into twisting ones, and soon Jerek couldn't contain himself any longer. Climax surged through his body. Piaktok smiled.

So did Jerek.

Chapter Nine

For Jerek, taking the time to rest and heal was an utter nuisance. There was so much he wanted to do—especially to Piaktok—that his weakness frustrated him. Piaktok noticed and did his best to entertain Jerek as much as he could, such as teaching him a few of the gestures Piaktok used to communicate. Some, like *fish*, were easy, since the gesture mimicked the animal's movement, but others took a lot of guessing before Jerek was able to identify the meaning. The Seal also made sure he ate; Piaktok brought a variety of fish, squid, octopus, and shellfish, but he also found fresh caribou and seal meat.

Jerek balked at the latter. "Isn't this like...like being a cannibal?"

The answer took more gestures than Jerek could understand. Frustrated, Piaktok went out and brought Atka back.

"Ah," she said and helped herself to a piece of the seal meat. "These are common seals, nothing like the Seals among my people. We hunt them because we need the food and because seal meat strengthens us and keeps us from illness. Each animal is given respect and gratitude for its sacrifice. Be grateful I sent along the meat alone; I did not think a Southerner such as yourself would appreciate the brains or ribs."

The idea of eating such things made him feel nauseated. Eager to change the subject and to spare his delicate stomach, Jerek asked, "Can you shift too?"

"No. I was not blessed with that gift. Those like Piaktok were born with two souls, one human, one animal, and can easily shift from one to the other. Not all of us have two souls, and perhaps it is better so. Many keep a few wild traits in our human form. You saw the Fox, just as quick and nervous as a human as she is a fox, and Piaktok..." She smiled at the Seal. "Piaktok can have quite the temper when he is roused."

Piaktok made an obscene gesture. Atka laughed. "And be sure to eat what you like or don't. Food is given and shared freely here. There is no need to ask."

"Thank you," Jerek said. Atka bowed and left. Jerek finished the seal meat, quietly watching Piaktok eat. His meal certainly did make him feel stronger, just about enough to...

He pounced. Piaktok's lithe body crumpled beneath his. The Seal looked up in surprise. Then he grinned.

"My turn," Jerek told him.

For all that he couldn't speak, Piaktok was quite adept at letting Jerek know what he did and did not like. He did not, for instance, like the way Jerek rubbed his cock, and didn't hesitate to cuff him. He did enjoy the way Jerek kissed his salty skin and grabbed hold of Jerek's hair to guide him to stay longer *here* or to nuzzle that secret place *there*.

"Roll over," Jerek told him. A new excitement kindled within his belly. He'd never been on top; that had always been Emmanuel's disposition. Now he wanted to try it, if Piaktok would let him.

The Seal's gaze flicked down to Jerek's erection and back up. He handed Jerek a bowl of something that looked like grease—Jerek didn't want to know where it had come from—and rolled over to pillow his head on his arms so he could look back at Jerek with patient amusement.

Jerek knew what to do. Sort of. Nervously he rubbed the greasy stuff on his cock and took a bit of it on his fingers.

Piaktok rolled his eyes.

“Oh, quit it, won’t you?” Anger gave him determination. He pried apart Piaktok’s firm buttocks and rubbed the grease there. Then, more daring, he nudged one finger past the thick ring of muscle. Piaktok inhaled but didn’t rebuke him.

Inside, Piaktok was warm and soft and slick. Jerek felt a little thrill, as if he’d just done something forbidden. Emmanuel had never let him do this.

He added another finger, slowly, waiting to see if Piaktok would object. When nothing happened, Jerek found more courage. He pulled his fingers out, got more of the grease, and put them back in. This time he slid them in and out, ensuring that his partner had enough lubrication. That much, he knew from experience. After a few moments, he wondered...

Piaktok jerked. Jerek grinned as he massaged that place just behind the Seal’s cock. “See? I do know what I’m doing.”

Piaktok snorted.

“What? Think you can do better?” Stupid question. “Well, fine. I’m sure you can. But it’s *my* turn.” He looked at Piaktok’s behind and felt stupid again. “What’s the best way to —”

Another snort.

“Stop that!” Jerek lightly slapped Piaktok’s right buttock. “The least you could do is help me a little.”

Piaktok continued to gaze at him, not bothering to hide his amusement.

“You...” Gods, he was making this difficult. Jerek crawled forward with his body atop Piaktok’s. He supported himself on one bent arm and used his free hand to guide his cock. Little by little, he eased himself inside, reveling at the hot tightness that surrounded him. “Are you all right?”

Another useless question. Piaktok rolled his eyes.

Slowly, Jerek maneuvered his hips so that he slid his cock inside and out. He never realized it could feel this good. Being on the bottom had its pleasures, but being on the top gave him a taste of power. It terrified him as much as it thrilled him. As he picked up speed, Piaktok writhed beneath him, entirely at Jerek's mercy. The Seal's hands raked the furs.

Seeing that, feeling the spreading heat and tension in his groin overwhelmed him. *He* was in charge. *He* could make Piaktok wriggle in pleasure or jerk in pain. This was all *his* doing.

But before he could consider why that new feeling of power had descended on him then, and why it felt somehow wrong, he climaxed. He released himself deep within Piaktok's body and stayed there a minute, relishing his throbbing cock. All concern vanished; this was the perfect moment, the ultimate unity with another man. It had never felt like this with Emmanuel. Jerek had never been so confident.

His exertions overcame him. He drew out, easing himself onto the furs at Piaktok's side. The Seal searched his face, and Jerek had the uncanny feeling that Piaktok searched his heart as well. There was a flicker of concern and worry. Jerek couldn't stand to see it there. He angled Piaktok's head in for a kiss. Soon they were joined again, the worrisome moment forgotten.

* * * * *

He enjoyed every minute with Piaktok, but the more time Jerek spent with him, the more his resentment for Emmanuel grew. He kept comparing the two. Piaktok was sweet, gentle, determined, and cared for him in ways Emmanuel never had. Piaktok also encouraged Jerek to experiment, while Emmanuel had been content with their usual sexual roles, him the dominant, Jerek the more submissive.

Jerek shoved away the nagging voice that told him Emmanuel hadn't known, that he'd been raised in as much ignorance as Jerek. But in the end, Emmanuel had left him for another man. This affair with Piaktok couldn't last anyway, not since Jerek had to

leave to find the Citadel, but he'd never felt so free to be himself and to discover depths of desire that he'd never dreamed existed.

Piaktok might not have a tongue, but he could still do the most marvelous things with his lips and throat. He swallowed Jerek's cock as deeply as he could and somehow managed to use his throat muscles to massage the tip. "Gods," Jerek muttered as he came with Piaktok's warm mouth surrounding him. The Seal grinned.

They took turns as to who topped whom, and Jerek soon found out that Piaktok *did* know better. They tried as many positions as Jerek's healing body allowed. His favorite was sitting on Piaktok's lap, facing him, with his legs and arms wrapped around the Seal's body. He enjoyed the closeness and the warmth and the ability to ride Piaktok as slowly or as fast as he wanted. Control, again, minor though it was. He was beginning to find it terribly important.

Another day in the tent, and Atka came in to find them twined in each other's arms. Jerek blushed and reached for a covering, but Atka dismissed his recent intimacy with a wave. "Feeling better, I see. Good. I have more to show you but first, here."

Atka gifted him with clothes, a handsome caribou parka and matching pants lined with fur and a thick cotton shirt and pants to wear underneath. The latter surprised Jerek.

"Our own undergarments are fur; they take some getting used to. These are better suited to your Southern disposition. Dress and meet me outside." She left an extra set for Piaktok.

Piaktok helped Jerek to don the new clothes, and they headed out into calm, sunlit weather. "You are lucky it's not quite winter," Atka said with a nod at the sun. "Later in the year, we're lucky to have it for three hours."

"This isn't winter?" Bundled in furs, he was already shivering. Jerek and Atka wore fewer clothes than he did and were fine.

"Your Southern blood is thin. Ah, here we are. Still the best way to travel in the North."

The last of her words were nearly drowned in the barking of over a dozen dogs, each one tied to one of two sleds. Tails wagging, tongues lolling, the animals were all excited at the prospect of traveling.

Atka guided Jerek to the empty sled. The other was piled with supplies. "Sit. You are still too weak to travel as far as we need to on foot."

She made him comfortable and piled yet more furs around him. Piaktok stood at the rear of his sled while Atka took the other. A whip cracked, and the dogs were off.

They sledged onward for nearly two hours. Since Piaktok needed both hands to guide the sled, conversation with him was impossible, and Atka was too far away to be heard. Jerek settled for huddling in his furs, content to watch the scenery. Pines stretched upward to the sky. Mountains rose in the near distance. Jerek's heart leaped; up there, somewhere, was his citadel.

They stopped long before reaching the mountains, however. At last, they came to an area empty except for a tall pine and a snow-covered lump to the east. Atka pulled her dogs to a halt, and Piaktok did the same. "Here we are." Atka chuckled. "More than once, I would have missed my home in a storm if it weren't for that tree there."

Two women emerged from the lump. They kissed both Atka and Piaktok but gave Jerek a wary glance. They set about unloading the supplies and seeing to the dogs. With Piaktok's help, Jerek extricated himself from the sled and followed Atka to the lump, which turned out to be a doorway. Electric lights ran the length of the staircase. Curious, Jerek followed her inside.

The corridor led to a comfortably warm anteroom, where Atka removed her outer clothing. Jerek and Piaktok followed suit. They stepped into the main room, and Jerek's jaw dropped.

Atka's home was a marvel. Clockwork gadgetry covered every available space: clocks and toys and steam-powered heaters. Kettles simmered. Electric lights lined the walls. A small train, steam powered from the puff of smoke coming from its stack, traveled along a shelf near the ceiling. It made a round of the room, then disappeared

through a hole in the wall to some unknown destination. Jerek laughed in delight while Piaktok remained singularly unimpressed.

"Just a few things I've collected on my travels. Not all of my kinsmen are so appreciative," she said with a nod at Piaktok. "Most prefer the old, traditional ways, but they still come to me when they are in need. The technology I gather is meant to support our traditional ways, not to usurp them. Though, I admit, I have picked up a few things for my own amusement." She wound a clockwork dog and set it in motion. Jerek watched it, suddenly, painfully reminded of Emmanuel. The loyal dog who'd bitten his master's hand.

The tour continued with a look at a fully stocked kitchen, complete with an oven and a sink with running hot and cold water, two sleeping rooms, and then the room that was obviously Atka's pride and joy.

"A full surgery," she said when he opened the door. "I spoke the truth when I said I gathered knowledge of medicine from as many people as I could."

This, too, made Jerek's head spin. Even the infirmary aboard the ship hadn't been so fine. Here, the steel instruments were new and clean. Neatly labeled bottles and jars filled the shelves. A brass microscope sat as the centerpiece on a wooden desk carved with elaborate images of whales, seals, ice bears, and other animals.

Atka, seeing Jerek's awe, grinned like a child. "We could not bring you straight here, much as I would have liked to. When someone is hypothermic, as you were, too much movement can be extremely dangerous. If we jolted your heart out of rhythm, there is little I could do to return it."

The thought frightened him. "The tent was comfortable. Truly." Especially when Piaktok had joined him to keep the nights warm.

"I'm glad you found it so. Still, you will stay here for the duration of your recovery. It's safer, being farther away from the shore and hidden to anyone searching by air."

That, he didn't want to think of. He'd seen the huge dirigibles in two or three ports, loaded with bombs and cannon. "I'm not worth that," he said.

"Aren't you? From your tales, your captain does not relinquish his pets easily."

"Pets. Emmanuel was the pet. Not me." Anger surged through him. Suddenly dizzy, he groped for the edge of the desk to steady himself. Both Piaktok and Atka came to his aid.

"Forgive me," Atka said. "My excitement got the better of me. Here. Sit." She pulled out a wooden stool from under the counter, which Jerek used with gratitude. Atka spent a few moments prodding him, checking his pulse and his eyes. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. A little tired," he admitted. Before Atka could suggest more rest, he caught her wrist and asked, "Why are you doing this? Being so kind to me?"

"Because," Atka said with a smile, "I believe."

Her words were a comfort, but they weren't enough. "But why me? Why were you in the South? Why give me the pendant?"

"My reasons for being in the South were entirely legitimate. I do seek knowledge in the healing arts from whatever source I can find. As for the rest, I am but a mere messenger. The magic works as it will. In truth, I gave out nearly a dozen of the things. Two others made it this far, but they perished in the mountains. It's possible you will too."

"So I'm not so special after all." He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice and failed.

"They were not nukilik. They had a dream, but you have fought far longer and harder to get here. You possess a strength they did not." She disengaged herself from Jerek's grasp.

If he'd been stronger, he would have been able to bring Emmanuel too. The traitor. He looked over Atka's shoulder at Piaktok. "Did you give them lovers too?"

Atka chuckled. "No. They didn't have the same...need for warmth as you did."

He flushed. He'd needed healing in more ways than one and accepted it, but Emmanuel's betrayal was still as fresh and painful as a knife wound that would not heal. Perhaps it never would. "His pendant. The dog. When I said it meant loyalty, you said that was the Southern interpretation. What is the Northern?"

"In the North, one of our gods is represented by a dog. He is an evil god, given to tricks and betrayal."

So that was it. No wonder Atka had been so concerned. "You knew." Jerek's voice cracked. "You knew he would do that to me when you saw the pendant."

Atka shrugged. "It was not for me to say. I do not predict the future but merely give a push to those to whom it might make a difference. Mayhap you would have found this place anyway, without my help."

"And maybe I wouldn't have." He fingered his own pendant, tracing the familiar points and curves. "And perhaps I won't find it. Maybe I don't deserve to. What kind of king would I be? I am a poor judge of men. I can't even read!"

"If you doubt yourself now, you will fail."

Atka was right, of course. Jerek took a moment to breathe deeply. His next words were hard, but they were right. "Teach me then. Teach me to read and about your people, so I might better serve you."

She rested a hand on Jerek's shoulder. "You honor me by asking, but you must prove yourself worthy first. Find the Citadel. Become king, and we will make you a better one. The role is not so much as a leader of men, but a negotiator, someone to speak to the outside world on our behalf, yet keep our interests at heart. There is much to learn about my people."

"I understand." He covered Atka's hand with his own. "I will gather my strength and find the Citadel."

And forget about Emmanuel, he told himself, but anger at his betrayal burned ever bright.

* * * * *

He passed another week in Atka's home before the physician declared him fit enough to travel any great distance. "I would keep you longer if I dared," Atka said, "but the winter snows are near, and no strength can hold out against those for long."

So Jerek gathered a few meager supplies, his warm fur clothing, a bag of dried meat, and a flask to wear against his skin to keep the water from freezing. Wonderful gifts, though he wondered if they would be enough.

Parting from Piaktok hurt. Jerek hated to let go of him, and only a fraction of the reason was because Piaktok's warmth kept the chill from his bones. They embraced outside of Atka's home just as the pale sun rose. "Will you join me there?"

The Seal's black eyes grew round and worried. His only gesture was to lovingly stroke Jerek's cheek.

"I love you," Jerek told him. "It's insane, and it hasn't been long at all, but I do. I will live to see the Citadel, and I want you there beside me. Will you come?"

No answer but one last kiss on the lips. Piaktok abruptly broke from his embrace and headed back inside Atka's home. Jerek readjusted his caribou coat and pantaloons and wiggled his toes inside his sealskin boots.

Atka had watched Piaktok leave. "Do not toy with his affections," she cautioned Jerek.

"I don't intend to. I wouldn't lie to him."

"Then let go of your hatred for the other."

Jerek thrust his head up, defiant. "Emmanuel has nothing to do with—"

"We live simple lives here, kind and generous compared to your people. Any incidents are handled swiftly and to mutual advantage. Piaktok does not understand hatred; it will drive him away even as you seek to keep him close."

"I'll keep that in mind." He wasn't in the mood for another lecture. Now that he'd been dressed and supplied, he wanted to start his journey. The Citadel called to him. "I must go, Atka. One day I will repay your kindness."

"Do not speak of payment. What we have, we give to those who do not. That is our way. A good journey to you, Nukilik. May the gods guide your steps." And with that, she turned to follow Piaktok inside.

It was time. Jerek had waited and prayed for this day for years. Now that it had come, he took strong steps forward, just as he'd always imagined. Thin-slitted goggles went over his eyes to shield them from the reflected sunlight as he headed north toward the trail deep into the mountains.

The movement kept him warm. For quite a while, he enjoyed it. He hadn't been off the *Tophet* in years. Walking felt good, reminded him of his freedom. Step after step through snow deep and shallow, over rocks and sheets of ice, he traveled onward toward his goal by instinct alone.

The weather changed as soon as he started climbing higher. He clung to a narrow ledge, heart in his mouth, and tried not to look down as the temperature dropped even lower. Icy snow battered the few bits of his face exposed to the air. The goggles slipped down his nose and made it difficult to see, but their scant protection from the biting snow made him grateful to have them.

"I believe," he kept telling himself. Each step made his legs ache worse. "I believe."

He made it off the ledge and headed upward, ever upward. The sun disappeared, leaving him in near blackness. An eerie howling swept through the canyon. Wolves? The wind? Both, he decided, and wanted to deal with neither.

Another step and he sunk to his waist. It was cold. So damnably cold and he was more exhausted than he'd ever been on the *Tophet*. There, at least, he'd known his day would come to an end at some point. Here in the mountains, he had no such promise. There were no caves, no shelters besides the break from the wind he could carve out of

the snow. Shivering and numb inside and out, he scraped at the snow until he managed a makeshift shelter and crouched down, grateful to be out of the wind. Food and water did nothing to warm him, but they did give him a little energy.

He didn't dare go to sleep. Atka had warned him of the danger of that. So after a while, Jerek struggled onward, managing to get on top of the snow only to sink again and again. Cold. Gods, he was cold. If he stopped again for a moment or two, then he could get his strength back.

No, he told himself. Keep walking. Right foot. Left foot. Right. Left.

And that was it. Every muscle hurt. No matter how much he wanted to, his body refused to cooperate.

"I believe." Harsh, biting wind stole the words as soon as he spoke them. "Help will come for me tonight. I will not fail. I believe."

Over and over, he repeated those words, a mantra to keep his hope alive against impossible odds. Wind swirled snow around him, leaving the sky dark and ominous as the sun rose. Nukilik, the Northerners had called him. He was still nukilik. He would survive.

He managed to find enough strength to struggle to his feet. One step. Another. Ever onward into the driving wind. By some miracle, he found a thin canyon. Two icy walls rose straight into the air, blocking the scant light but mercifully protecting him from the wind.

Grateful for the respite, he fumbled with frozen fingers for a strip of meat. Onward, his gut told him. So he kept walking, finding the ground firmer underfoot. Surely this meant he was getting close. He believed it.

When the canyon opened up enough for Jerek to get a glimpse beyond it, he sank to his knees and started to sob. Straight ahead, spires chiseled straight into the wall of ice reached to the sky. Colors shifted blue to white with hints of rainbows where the sun hit. It was beautiful, the most awe-inspiring thing he'd ever seen.

The door in the center stood open to welcome the new Ice King home.

* * * * *

Jerek followed Suluk, polite and reserved in his position as steward, around the Citadel. The place was enormous, and an oddly comfortable temperature despite being carved from ice and stone. "These pipes," Suluk said, "are fed with water from an underground hot spring and set beneath the floors. The water also powers the electric lights."

And there were hundreds of those illuminating the dining hall, the reception area, the kitchen, and the numerous bedrooms and housing for the servants who lived there. "The lights are recent, something our last king wanted. Atka brought the technology."

"What happened to him? The old king?"

"Four years ago, he went peacefully in his sleep with his wife at his side. She lives with her own family now. He'd known his time was near, and he sent Atka to search for his replacement. She found several potential kings, but you're the only one to have made it this far."

The tour ended in his own bedroom, where Suluk left him alone to attend to other matters. Jerek had everything he needed: food, comfort, new clothes, servants to tend his every desire. Everything, except someone to share his bed.

His first night as king, he slept terribly in a warm and comfortable four-poster bed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept alone. Even when Emmanuel had acted distant and angry, he'd been *there*. And then came Piaktok. Jerek curled up, his groin hot and tight with need as he thought of the Seal. Warm. Handsome. Attentive. But Jerek pined for more than the sex they had shared. Piaktok was...different, yes. Exotic, patient, and kind like no other man since Emmanuel.

He was overreacting then. He didn't love Piaktok; how could he, after less than a month and so soon after Emmanuel's betrayal?

But he did. He knew it by the second night of tossing and turning alone in his bed, his mind filled with erotic dreams that left him damp and aching. He needed Piaktok

just as much as he'd needed the Citadel. More so. He needed Piaktok's warmth, his wit, his company. He wanted to go back to find him, but how? He didn't relish the thought of another trudge through the ice and snow.

In the end, Suluk solved his quandary. "If you wish to visit Atka, there is a much easier way to return."

A short time later, Jerek found himself on the back of a sled hauled by a team of dogs. "They know the way," Suluk assured him. Jerek hoped so; he had no idea how to guide the dogs and no sense of where he was going anyway.

But the steward was right. While walking in the storm had taken a day and a night, the dogs' brisk pace took him back to Atka's home in a much shorter time than he could have imagined. "Either that or you took a shortcut," Jerek said to them when they'd halted. Tails wagging, they started to wrestle with each other.

The noise brought Atka outside. She looked at him approvingly. "Ice King. A pleasure to see you again." A few well-placed snowballs broke up the dogs long enough for her and her helpers to get the harnesses off. The dogs bounded off to play.

"Won't they run off?" Jerek asked.

"No. They know their place. Come in. Warm yourself. I would ask the purpose of your visit, but I think I already know."

Inside, after they'd shed their outer clothing, she poured him a cup of tea. He drank, grateful for the heat. "Now that I am the Ice King," he said, "I would ask a boon of you."

She arched an eyebrow expectantly.

"It's the same as I asked before. Will you teach me?"

"I would be honored, Ice King, for I see that you have an open mind and a willing heart."

"Thank you," he said.

She nodded, and for a while, they drank in companionable silence. "But my guidance is not the only reason you've come back, is it?"

His sudden flush had nothing to do with the warmth of the tea. "No. Is he here?"

She took a long moment to answer, and when she did, her face was grave. "Tell me what you want of him. Speak truly, for my answer depends on yours."

Jerek's heart pounded, wondering if this was a typical Northerner courtship ritual. Atka seemed much like a concerned parent grilling her son's would-be lover. "I want many things of him. His friendship, his companionship, his..." He blushed, but he forced himself to say it anyway. "His body. I love him. I don't have words enough to say it. It's more than lust. More than the sex."

Her face didn't change. "And what will you give him in return?"

"My love. My loyalty. Anything he wants, for as long as I live. I *need* him. He's as much a part of me now as this land is. I have a great deal to learn; he will be my teacher as much as you will be."

She seemed to consider his words, then said, "Do you swear to me, Southerner, that you will let no harm come to him? That you will consider his needs before your own and that you will allow no ill feelings to fester between you?"

"I swear," Jerek said. He felt giddy, as if he'd just exchanged a marriage vow.

"If you break this, our agreement will be null and void. An agreement with one of our people is an agreement with us all. They take this far more seriously than you can imagine."

"Agreed. I intend to do nothing that might offend either Piaktok or your people."

Her face softened at last. "He's in his room. Go to him. But remember, while I give my permission, it is still his choice of whether to accompany you or not."

Those few steps down the corridor seemed far harder than the ones he'd taken in the ice storm. His life wasn't at stake this time, but his heart was. He knocked at the door to announce his presence, then slowly opened it. Piaktok sat cross-legged before

the hearth, his bare skin glistening in the firelight. Jerek had never seen anything more tempting. The Seal's black eyes watched him, curious, but it was clear he wasn't going to make the first move.

Jerek found himself at a loss for words. To his embarrassment, his cock already spoke for him; his erection was painfully evident beneath the thin underclothes. He could see that Piaktok missed none of it; his eyes glistened in amusement at Jerek's predicament.

"I came because...because..." Gods, why couldn't his cock have waited just two more minutes?

Piaktok slid his pinkie finger in and out of his fist while maintaining a quizzical expression.

"Yes, I want to fuck you. Wait. That's not why I came," he said, flustered, and Piaktok's face fell in mock disappointment. "I mean...gods. I came to ask you something." He dropped to his knees at Piaktok's side. Being this close with the hot, flickering fire and Piaktok's scent in his nose made it terribly difficult to keep his mind on what he wanted to ask. "I came because...because..."

Piaktok's shoulders shook in ill-concealed mirth. Once again, he made the lewd gesture.

"Oh, shut up for a minute!" Jerek grabbed Piaktok's hands and held them between his own. "I need you. Gods, I want you. Atka made me swear I wouldn't hurt you, and I won't. Not ever. I know what it feels like, and I could never do such a thing to anyone." He took a deep breath, calming himself, willing his body to behave for just a little longer. "Piaktok. Will you come with me, to be at my side, teach me, talk to me..." He paused long enough to make a fist and slide Piaktok's finger in and out. The Seal smiled. "And make love to me?"

Piaktok's response was immediate and unequivocal. He surged forward, one hand wrapping around the back of Jerek's head to keep it still for a kiss, the other diving below Jerek's waistband to grasp his cock. Jerek groaned at the hot, slippery hand

fisting him. He just managed to tug his pants down around his buttocks when Piaktok's weight made him sink backward. The Seal slid the pants the rest of the way off and did the same with Jerek's shirt.

From somewhere, he produced a jar of that strange, greasy lubricant. Jerek squirmed when Piaktok smeared several dabs of it onto his cock. Piaktok squeezed slightly as he did so, surrounding Jerek's erection in a smooth, slick warmth and varying his speed.

And then—much to Jerek's delight—he straddled Jerek at the waist and slowly lowered himself onto Jerek's straining cock. Jerek gasped as the tight ring of flesh drew him inside. Piaktok's eyes never left his; their gazes locked and stayed there while Piaktok undulated his body. The flames cast eerie, flickering designs across his skin. Piaktok looked more animal than human then, a fierce fire elemental in this frozen wasteland, so much more than the mute, diminutive Northerner he seemed to be. Jerek felt humbled and honored to possess such a creature. No other man in the world could be so lucky.

Faster, faster, and only when they both reached climax did Piaktok look away. He tilted his head back, mouth open in ecstasy. Jerek loved him all the more in that moment and set that image in his mind to remember. Piaktok in love, Piaktok in the throes of orgasm, Piaktok spilling his seed across Jerek's flat belly.

When Piaktok looked down again, he wore an expression of deep satisfaction. "I take it," Jerek said between pants, "this means yes?"

Piaktok swatted him, then eased himself off Jerek and stretched alongside him. The Seal kissed him, long and hard.

"I love you. Always." Jerek said the words before he realized they were an echo of those he'd shared with Emmanuel. But Emmanuel wasn't here. Only Piaktok. Jerek had all the love he needed.

Chapter Ten

Now

Beneath the Citadel was a cave that housed the one thing that made the place truly bearable, a hot spring. The pool was open to everyone at the Citadel, servants and king alike, but a special area had been set aside for Jerek's use alone. This portion of the pool had natural steps leading down that allowed the bather to sit as well. Electric lights, powered by an underground river, lined the walls, lighting the place with a comfortable, if ghostly, glow.

It was here Suluk and the two Bears took Emmanuel. Jerek watched from the shadows. Tupilek, the physician, joined them, carrying a tooled leather bag filled with medicines, bandages, and various medical instruments. Emmanuel continued to struggle feebly. When Nutaaq let go to reach for something, Emmanuel actually managed to slip free. He ran, arms groping the air.

His escape was short-lived. He tripped over a rock, falling forward onto the ground. The Bears were on him in an instant. They pinned him down. Emmanuel cursed and screamed as Tupilek calmly used a syringe to give him an injection. A few moments later, Emmanuel quieted. He didn't move when Inuq rolled him over, or

when Nutaaq took a hammer and chisel and struck at the manacles. The sound of metal against metal echoed in the hall. Iron finally clattered to the floor.

A hand brushed Jerek's. Piaktok. The Seal watched the goings-on with something akin to contempt. "He deserves it," Jerek said. He kept his voice low, well aware that sound carried here. "I'll treat him well enough. For now. But later..." His mind wandered to the terrible things he would do to Emmanuel. Tie him down. Beat him. Fuck him until he screamed for mercy and then do it some more.

Piaktok gripped Jerek's hand. He shook his head as if he'd read Jerek's thoughts.

"He deserves it. He *does*. If you only knew what he did, you'd understand why I'm so angry with him."

The Seal still didn't look happy. Jerek kissed him on the cheek. It didn't help. Piaktok remained distant, disapproving. Fine then. Let Piaktok have his snit. The Ice King had finally gotten what he'd been waiting for.

Free now to work, Tupilek cleaned the wounds around Emmanuel's ankles and neck. He made a compress that he tied around Emmanuel's swollen eyes. With the Bears' help, he roused Emmanuel enough to get him into the warm waters of the bathing pool.

Piaktok let go of Jerek's hand. The Ice King wanted to call out to him, but Piaktok was already too far away. He dismissed the steward's attempt to help and disrobed, his body lean and brown in the glow of electric lights. He stepped into the water beside Emmanuel with hardly more than a ripple.

Jerek watched Piaktok, more than a little envious. He'd been in the bath many times with Piaktok and had been on the receiving end of his careful ministrations. The Seal's hand sliding a soapy cloth down his back, around his stomach, and down between his thighs, pausing to stroke his cock and bring back a little of the excitement that the warm water had lulled out of him.

The last he didn't do with Emmanuel, but he did ensure that every bit of the semiconscious man was clean. He soaped Emmanuel's scraggly hair and rinsed it. As

the layers of filth left Emmanuel's skin, Jerek could see the damage life aboard the *Tophet* had caused. Jerek longed to touch him, to be the one running his hands across his tattered body, but he would not. The only thing Emmanuel would feel from would be pain.

Jerek closed his eyes and leaned against the stone wall, listening to the small splashes arising from Piaktok's movements. The sounds, and knowing what they meant, made his groin quicken with excitement. He gritted his teeth and prayed for the feelings to fade. He didn't want them. Not here. Later, when he had Piaktok all to himself.

Face pressed hard against the cool rock, he felt the burn of the others' curiosity upon him. They knew, he thought. They knew he'd loved Emmanuel, and they couldn't understand why he tortured the poor man so. The Northerners were far more straightforward in matters of love, preferring to solve arguments with words instead of a prolonged game of silent manipulation. As long as he guided justly and with respect, they allowed him his few quirks. It was a sign of their respect that they obeyed him despite their cultural differences.

With the Bears' assistance, Piaktok got Emmanuel out of the water. Emmanuel sat on the ground and shivered a little while Piaktok dried him off with a towel. It confused Jerek to see them both naked, skin glistening, each one with a body he knew intimately. He wanted to be the one Piaktok held and comforted, but he chided himself for acting so foolish. He'd soon have Emmanuel imprisoned, and Piaktok wouldn't go near him again. Jerek needn't worry about his Northern lover.

They didn't dress Emmanuel but left him with only the iron collar for adornment. Piaktok watched, forlorn, as Inuq and Nutaaq took Emmanuel away.

Jerek walked over and grabbed the dripping Seal's arm. "You're not to go near him again. Understand me? Emmanuel is *mine*. I will do with him what I please."

Piaktok made a quick, derisive gesture with his free hand to indicate he wasn't a fool.

The throbbing in his cock hadn't diminished. Kissing Piaktok made it flare, worse when the Seal yielded to him. The scent of his damp skin caused Jerek's head to reel.

"I'm sorry," Jerek murmured in Piaktok's ear. "I need you now more than ever. I couldn't bear to hurt you."

Any response Piaktok might have made was lost in Jerek's lust. The Ice King pinned his lover's arms to his chest, warmth against warmth, needy cock nestling between Piaktok's buttocks. He could hardly contain himself until they got to his room with the huge bed in the center.

He lifted Piaktok and tossed him onto the feather mattress. Jerek stripped as quickly as his fumbling fingers would allow, then vaulted after his lover. His arms straddled Piaktok's waist while his knees nudged the Seal's legs wide. Jerek's cock ached unbearably, but the sight of Piaktok's erection was too much to resist. Head bent, Jerek took Piaktok into his mouth. It had a faint tang of salt, like the rest of Piaktok's skin. Jerek sucked and licked, loving the feel of it as it grew even harder.

The Seal, oddly, had no reaction, save for watching Jerek with a bored, irritated expression. "What's wrong?" Jerek asked when he released the delicious cock to breathe.

Piaktok signed, "Nothing. Just get it over with."

Not liking that answer, Jerek crawled forward so his body lay atop the Seal's, groin to groin. He wriggled his hips a little to rub their cocks together. "Tell me what's bothering you."

At last, a little of his physical need showed in Piaktok's expression. His mouth widened, and he screwed his eyes shut for a moment. When he opened them, he framed Jerek's face in his hands. Their eyes met, Piaktok's searching Jerek's for something the Ice King couldn't name.

Now, Jerek was getting angry. "What is it?"

Piaktok let go so he could gesture. "I worry about you."

"Don't." Jerek ground his hips harder as he felt climax edging closer. "Emmanuel is my business. This is between two Southerners, all right? Don't interfere."

Piaktok glared at him, but the effect was quickly broken as Jerek brought him to climax. The Seal's body arched back, tense and throbbing. The sight of his lover brought Jerek over the edge; he, too, surrendered as wave after wave of pleasure crashed through him.

When the spasms had subsided, Jerek collapsed at Piaktok's side, eyes closed, drunk on sensation. He lay there for a minute or two before he opened his eyes and was startled by what he saw.

Piaktok's face hovered inches from Jerek's own. His lips drew back over his teeth in an expression more animal than human.

A warning.

Jerek shoved him away. "Stay out of it." He grabbed his clothes and strode out of the room. "And stay away from Emmanuel."

* * * * *

Emmanuel screamed when he came to his senses. *Ice bears*. It was one of the few things Emmanuel remembered clearly, the big, hulking shapes, a cold nose and hot breath against his cheek. The ghostly outline of the bear had been the last thing he'd seen, because his eyes... Oh, gods, his *eyes*. They burned as if he'd bathed them in hot oil, making Emmanuel wish he could claw them out. The itchy poultice he could do something about. In one violent swipe, he tore it off and found himself in total darkness.

He waved a hand in front of his face. No. *No*. Surely the room was dark because the lights had gone out. He couldn't be blind. He *couldn't*.

But the sickly feeling came that blindness was the only logical explanation. He hadn't thought about protection from the sunlight, but he remembered how his eyes

had ached after enduring the bright, glaring white. Stupid. Oh, gods, he'd been stupid, and now he paid for it.

He did his best to recall what had happened after he'd seen the bears. Running, falling, then a heavy body holding him down while someone stabbed a needle into his arm. Warmth and someone touching him, gently, with more tenderness than he'd felt in years. They hadn't hurt him, and now he was warm, bathed, and sheltered. Where, he didn't know. None of the damnable people here spoke, and he couldn't see a thing. He lay on something exquisitely soft. Silk, he thought, but it didn't make sense. No one would have silk in a land this harsh.

The realization came to him that he was naked, and there could only be one reason for that. A new kind of fear crept into his gut and stayed there.

Carefully, Emmanuel prodded his body to examine it. He fingered his cock, relieved to find it still intact. He found bruises on his arms and legs and raw, sore skin around his ankles. From the fetters, he remembered. Those, at least, had vanished, but the hated iron collar still circled his neck and leashed him to the wall with a length of chain.

Hard to tell which was worse, knowing that he'd failed Jerek or knowing that he'd gone blind. It terrified him, not knowing his location or what his captors meant to do to him. He'd panicked when they'd torn off his clothes, certain they would rape him. Captain Harper had taught him to expect the worst.

He seemed safe, for now, but how could he find his lover, blind and chained? *Jerek*. He tried to summon up the drive that had gotten him this far, but failed. The agony in his eyes kept him awake despite his exhaustion. The silence of this place bothered him. Either he'd managed to find a group of monks who had taken a vow of silence, or someone didn't want to be recognized by their voice. More of the captain's mind games, probably. Footsteps, the swish of clothing, the clattering of dishes, all these he heard, but they gave him no idea about the intentions of his rescuers.

And if he'd become the captain's prisoner again, he'd rather die than endure more of Harper's methodical tortures. Death seemed a welcome release now that he wouldn't be able to fulfill his quest. Whoever his captors were, they had no interest in letting him go. "I'm sorry, Jerek," he said. The roughness of his voice startled him. "I tried."

With sleep impossible, he decided to explore. The chain prevented him from going more than two steps in front of the bed. Arms outstretched, he couldn't feel the far wall or a door, only stone walls. No air stirred, meaning he was completely enclosed. The place must be carved into a cliff or underground to keep the temperature so comfortable while a blizzard raged outside.

More groping, and he found a bucket for his personal needs and a small wooden table holding a basin of fresh water and a plate of —

He snatched his hand away, not wanting to know. The mere thought of food made him feel queasy. Back to his bed then. The soft fabric covered a sort of rough mattress, filled with what smelled like straw. Behind it, his hands found metal rings driven into the rock wall just like the one his chain was attached to. It took little imagination to guess their purpose. He was imprisoned, after all.

Chapter Eleven

"How long will it be before he is well?" Jerek stood outside Emmanuel's cell with Tupilek. The noises from within boded no good. Emmanuel cursed and whimpered. The bandage had been torn from his eyes. The chain clattered as he thrashed, arms wide, groping at the walls. Every so often, he stopped to touch his swollen eyelids, hissing in pain.

"A few days for the wounds to heal. They're clean and mending well."

"And his eyes?"

"That I cannot say. He may regain his sight in a few days. He may not regain it at all." Tupilek glanced inside. "At least let me give him something for the pain."

"He can endure it." Jerek didn't know whether to be upset or grateful for Emmanuel's blindness. He still didn't intend on showing Emmanuel any mercy, not after his betrayal. Nursing a grudge for the past year had given him ample time to steel his resolve, and he meant to visit every ounce of his anger on his former lover.

"Anything else?"

"Food is a problem."

"Why? Don't tell me our stores are low already."

"It's not that. He won't eat."

"Won't?"

Tupilek shook his head. "Just the smell of it is enough to set him off. I haven't gotten anything inside him besides water."

"Keep trying. There must be something he'll eat." What was Emmanuel playing at? Trying to starve himself to death? "Leave us. I want a few moments alone with him."

The physician bowed and went to attend his other duties. Jerek unlocked the cell door and pulled it open. Emmanuel froze, listening to the sounds. "Who's there?"

Jerek didn't answer. He pulled the door shut behind him.

Emmanuel swung his fists in a rage. "Tell me who you are, dammit! If this is some new ploy of yours, Fritz—"

The Ice King easily sidestepped his blows. Emmanuel looked much better now that he was clean. Smelled better too. His hair hung in long, shiny locks past his shoulders. Jerek ached to run his fingers through that hair, to bring it to his nose and inhale deeply.

He didn't. Emmanuel swung again and again at the foe he could not see. He was a pleasure to watch, his lean body moving with a quickness Jerek hadn't seen before. This sort of torment amused Jerek, taunting Emmanuel by taking advantage of his disability.

Piaktok would chide him for it. So would Atka, for that matter. As king, he shouldn't deign to treat anyone this way, but Emmanuel didn't belong here. He wasn't one of the Northerners with their own codes of conduct.

Bored, Jerek caught one flailing fist. Emmanuel froze. "Tell me who you are." His free hand rose cautiously, patting the air, searching for the body he knew was there.

Jerek laced his fingers through Emmanuel's hand, increasing pressure until he'd bent it painfully backward. More pressure, and Emmanuel had no choice but to lie back on the bed. His face showed no signs of fear, only resignation to the inevitable.

This close, Jerek could smell Emmanuel's musky scent. With it came a wave of nostalgia. The nights in their bunk, skin to skin and deeper. The feel of Emmanuel's hand on his cock.

No. Jerek gazed down at the face of his onetime lover. The hands Jerek held had been with the captain, had betrayed him with the captain. The cock that lay limp and whole across Emmanuel's thigh had been in the captain's mouth, his hands, his body.

Anger surged through Jerek. Emmanuel's head jerked to the side as Jerek slapped him. Again and again until Emmanuel's cheeks turned red. He didn't utter a sound, and that, in Jerek's mind, made his crime all the more real. Emmanuel *had* betrayed him; otherwise he'd be crying for mercy.

But he just lay there and *took* it, which made Jerek all the angrier. He wanted Emmanuel to protest, to scream, not to passively accept his fate. Pounding harder did nothing more than gain Emmanuel a few more bruises.

Panting, Jerek stopped to look at Emmanuel. Piaktok had touched him everywhere, but Jerek's stomach turned at the thought. What use did he have for soiled goods?

Except that he still craved Emmanuel's body.

And his own cock had grown hard and thick and needy.

With a cry, Jerek shoved his prisoner hard into the wall. Emmanuel whimpered when he hit, but said nothing and did not move. Jerek hated this, the tumult within. Deep down, he still wanted Emmanuel badly, still believed that Emmanuel had loved him once. His body still thought so. Gods, oh gods, why did it have to end like this? Why couldn't Emmanuel have just kept his hands to himself?

But a year of believing in Emmanuel's betrayal had made it so. Jerek had created a wall of ice around his heart as hard and solid as the Citadel itself. Any affection toward Emmanuel was impossible.

One last shove and Jerek left him. He shut the door and glanced through the tiny window for one last look. Emmanuel's shoulders shook. Laughter? Or tears? Jerek didn't care to find out.

* * * * *

A long time later, the door opened again. Emmanuel didn't bother moving toward it, knowing that the chain on his collar was too short to go much farther than the edge of the bed. "Who's there?"

Whoever it was didn't answer. Damn this place and all the inhabitants. The silence would drive him mad.

"Who are you?"

The bed shifted from additional weight. Emmanuel tensed. His first silent visitor had tried to get him to eat; Emmanuel had refused. The next one had hurt him. Much as he knew he deserved it, he was still cowardly enough to be afraid of the unknown. This one held a cup to his lips. Water. He smelled nothing more. Emmanuel drank, grateful for the coolness down his throat.

Water dripped. Emmanuel found out a moment later it was from a damp cloth now wiping his face and neck beneath the hated collar. It dabbed at the scratches he'd gotten from being slammed into the wall.

Not Jerek, not the cruel man who had been here before, and similar to but not quite like the first visitor. This one smelled completely different. Clean, masculine with a tang of something foreign, almost fishy. With a hint of the sea. One of the Northerners then? Maybe they'd captured him and meant to punish him for stealing.

"I didn't mean to." Emmanuel pushed the hand away. "I'm sorry I stole. I didn't have a choice. I have to find someone. Let me out. Please, before it's too late!"

Two fingers pushed his lips together. *Don't speak.* Maybe they were in danger then. "Please," he said quietly. "Please help me."

The visitor refused to say anything. The gentle cleansing continued. His cheek stung. Emmanuel hated that he was reduced to begging, but he'd grown used to it as Captain Harper's victim. Beg for food. Beg for sex. Begging for his life and freedom seemed commonplace.

So he did as he'd been trained to do, became limp and subservient in the hopes of earning favors. He lay down on his side, stretched out so as to give his visitor more area to work on. He—at least, Emmanuel assumed it was a he—kept dipping the cloth and bringing it back, spending extra time cleansing Emmanuel's wounds. A physician then? Gods, Emmanuel wished he could see. And he wished the burning in his eyes didn't hurt so damn much.

"Are you a doctor? Will I be able to see again?"

Still no answer. The cloth rubbed at his chest, down to his stomach to clean a scratch he hadn't felt earlier.

Annoyed, Emmanuel grabbed the visitor's wrist and squeezed it hard. "Talk to me, damn you. Talk to me! I've had enough of this secrecy. I want to know where I am!"

The arm moved. Not enough to jerk away, but an attempt to guide his hand somewhere. Emmanuel cooperated for the lack of anything better to do. The visitor brought Emmanuel's hand to his face. Understanding, now, Emmanuel let go of his wrist and set his fingers on the rounded cheeks. Definitely not Jerek. This man had a face too wide and not bony enough to be Emmanuel's lover, and there was no sign of facial hair. The skin was as smooth as Emmanuel's behind. A woman then? He supposed it made more sense. He'd never known a man to be so tender, not even Jerek.

The visitor's hand caught his again and guided Emmanuel to his—her?—lips. The visitor kissed Emmanuel's finger, then sucked on it, presumably to show him why speech was impossible.

No tongue.

Emmanuel jerked his hand away, horrified at the realization. To be blind was frightening and terrible, but to be rendered mute seemed a tragedy all its own. But Emmanuel palmed the visitor's face. "Nod if you can hear me."

A nod.

Thank the gods. Progress. A way to communicate. Emmanuel's heart raced. "Can you tell me where I am?"

A shake of the head.

"Will someone hurt you if you do?"

Yes.

"Is it Jerek?"

No answer.

"Do you know a man named Jerek?"

Again, nothing. The silence in itself became an answer. But what kind of cruel man had his lover become to render his servants mute and afraid?

"Are you a Northerner?"

Yes.

"Am I in trouble for stealing from your people?"

No.

That was a relief, at least. "Will I be able to see again?"

The visitor moved one of Emmanuel's hands down to a shoulder. A shrug. He didn't know.

"Will Jerek let me go?"

The fingers were back at his lips. Harder, more insistent.

"I'm afraid," Emmanuel said. "I have to tell him. There's so much I have to tell him."

A nod. Understanding.

“Please tell him. Please.”

This time lips, not fingers, rendered him silent. It took Emmanuel aback, as did the stab of desire that drove through his groin. This was a stranger, someone he couldn't even see. And yet Emmanuel found the mystery, the impossibility of it all too enticing to ignore. Jerek might be there, watching as another trick, another extension of his cruelty. The captain had done such things and more once Jerek had escaped.

The chain—that damnable chain—restricted his movements somewhat. He settled for sitting on the edge of the bed with his visitor between his legs, doing wonderful things to his cock with a tongueless mouth.

Emmanuel reached for the visitor's head, the hair thick, long, and loose over his shoulders. “Are you a woman?”

The shoulders shook. Laughter? There came the soft *whump* of clothing hitting the floor. The visitor took Emmanuel's hand and set it upon something hard, warm, and protruding, leaving no doubt as to the sex of his partner.

“Oh. Good.” Emmanuel took his time exploring his partner's body. So different from Jerek and that horrible Fritz. His cock was short but thick. It fit into Emmanuel's palm as if it had been made to be there. Two compact testes nestled in a thatch of wiry hair. “You're lovely.”

More jiggling. Laughter.

He touched the visitor's cheek. “Are we being watched?”

A moment, then a shake of the head.

“Good.”

Chapter Twelve

After his silent lover had left, Emmanuel started to plan. Jerek was still furious with him; that hadn't needed to be said. Every blow had spoken just as loud as if Jerek had railed at him. Emmanuel still remembered all too clearly the last day he'd seen Jerek, screaming and furious, and the guilt that had followed because he knew that he'd deserved every bit of Jerek's rage.

If only he knew, Emmanuel kept thinking to himself. But that was selfish; he'd been the one to betray Jerek. More than once, he'd enjoyed what the captain and Fritz had done to him. He'd betrayed Jerek in body as well as in mind.

But not in my heart, some small part of him insisted. Always, throughout his captivity, he'd loved Jerek and believed that he would find Jerek again. Love had been the catalyst for Emmanuel's actions, but Captain Harper had used it to pit Emmanuel against Jerek. There was a chance that love could bring them together again; he just had to believe.

The next day, the cruel man returned. Emmanuel could tell by the way he walked and the strong, callused grip around his wrists. The man put Emmanuel's hands through the iron rings in the wall and tied them there. Emmanuel had no choice but to kneel on the bed with his chest and groin against the rough stone surface.

"Jerek." His voice emerged in a cracked whisper. "I know it's you."

The words were his last for the day; Jerek pried his mouth open and shoved a foul-tasting cloth between his teeth. The ends of the cloth wrapped around Emmanuel's head to tie in the back. Emmanuel's heart sank as he realized he would have no chance of reaching Jerek today. Not with words anyway.

But his years with the captain and Fritz had taught him how to have some control even while he was submissive. Show no fear and show no pain; it was the easiest way to disconcert his so-called lover.

Hands touched his back, tracing the scars that the captain had left there. Harper hadn't believed Jerek was dead, not really, but he could find no trace of his escaped crewman. In a fury, Harper had torn the dog pendant from Emmanuel's neck, then tied him spread and facedown on the table, flogging him until Emmanuel had fainted from the pain. The surgeon had treated the wounds and staved off infection, but the evidence had remained. So it pleased Emmanuel, in a way, to know that Jerek caressed the scars that were entirely his fault.

I took these for you. Because of you, he thought, wishing he could speak aloud, but he was as mute as his other, secret lover. He arched his back a little, pressing it toward Jerek's seeking fingers.

The movement earned him a stinging slap on the buttocks. Another slap followed on the other side, but then Jerek paused to examine the thick scar on Emmanuel's left hip. That one, Emmanuel remembered too well.

Fritz had literally sat on him to keep him from moving. Harper had grinned as he set his bronze seal in the charcoal brazier he used for heating water. The coals glowed red-hot. *"You should be honored, my dear Emmanuel. This is a gift I give only my most loyal crew. Even Fritz has one. Ask him; he might show you someday."*

Emmanuel hadn't wanted to see. The captain had plucked the seal from the coals with a cloth to protect his hands. Then, carefully, he had set the heated metal against Emmanuel's unprotected skin. Fritz's hand had muffled his scream of agony.

Jerek's nails dug into the flesh around the seal, as if he wanted to rip it from Emmanuel's skin. Emmanuel wished he could; he didn't want reminders from his time as Harper's pet. Neither did Jerek, apparently.

Touch me, Emmanuel willed him. Just like you used to. Touch me and remember how we loved each other before Harper destroyed it all.

Jerek moved as if he'd heard. He couldn't help himself; he drew Emmanuel's long hair aside to kiss his the nape. Steady breaths warmed Emmanuel's skin as Jerek lingered there, taking in Emmanuel's familiar scent. He'd done this years ago. Emmanuel had woken to feel him there and had lain still, content to bask in the warmth of Jerek's love.

Now, he rested with his cheek against the chill stone, hands extended upward at an uncomfortable angle. Jerek's nearness aroused him, made his groin ache with year-old need. His love for Jerek had never waned; not then, under the captain's influence, and not now, when Jerek vented his anger on Emmanuel's helpless body.

Jerek kissed the outline of Emmanuel's shoulder blade, nuzzled his back with his cheek and lips. His hands curved around to toy with Emmanuel's nipples. Fingers tweaked them until they grew stiff and firm. Emmanuel arched his head back. The captain's touch had been seductive, yes, but this was Jerek, the real Jerek, the man who loved him. These hands knew his body and knew his most intimate places.

Jerek went after them now. He fondled Emmanuel's ears, the soft arc of his throat, and the tender spots just below his shoulders. Each knobby bone in his spine received a kiss, right down to the small of his back. Jerek's hands stroked the back of Emmanuel's thighs, between his buttocks and up to the soft patch of skin between his legs.

Emmanuel groaned into his gag, his cock so hard now that pressing up against the wall made it painful. And then, to Emmanuel's relief, Jerek reached around his side to grasp his cock. Emmanuel froze, worried, yet not wanting to frighten Jerek away. Somewhere, deep inside, Jerek didn't want to hurt him.

But the angry Jerek, who rested close to the surface, did.

Emmanuel winced as Jerek's grip tightened around his cock. His other hand clenched Emmanuel's left buttock bruisingly hard. Emmanuel bit down on the gag, keeping himself from making any noise that might provoke Jerek further.

Jerek's dry cock nudged between Emmanuel's buttocks. Emmanuel felt a stab of fear. His lover obviously wanted to feel pain; such an invasion wouldn't be pleasant for either of them.

This isn't you, my love, my dreamer. He tried to relax despite knowing the pain that would come. *Jerek. Enough. Don't do this.*

Jerek kept prodding, angling himself just right...then let out a cry of agony that went straight to Emmanuel's heart. Instead of spearing him, Jerek settled for pounding on him. Droplets flicked against Emmanuel's back; snot or tears, he couldn't tell, but Jerek was definitely crying. Emmanuel could hear how his breathing had changed to that of someone trying to stifle his sobs. Jerek's fists rained blows upon Emmanuel's back, buttocks, and legs, driving Emmanuel against the stone wall and knocking the breath from him.

It was over as soon as it had started. The door opened and clanked shut behind Jerek's retreating footsteps. Tears of pain stung the corners of Emmanuel's eyes. The anger Jerek took out on him was directed more at himself than Emmanuel. It made it easier to understand, though not any easier to deal with.

Afterward, his silent lover came again. Gently, he loosed Emmanuel from his bonds and removed the gag from his mouth. Emmanuel sat with his back against the wall, chafing his sore wrists. His shoulders hurt too, thanks to the strain the awkward position had put him in.

This time, the mute had brought food and a carafe of tea. Emmanuel accepted the tea, grateful for anything to get the nasty taste of the rag out of his mouth, but when the man offered him food, he refused. "I can't."

The man broke a chunk of bread into smaller pieces and held it to Emmanuel's lips. Emmanuel pushed it away. "Please. I can't." Not that he wasn't starving. His

stomach protested the continued lack of food, but the nausea brought on by the thought of eating overpowered the hunger.

The quiet one gave up, but Emmanuel could sense his unhappiness by the tension in his hands and muscles as he set about tending to Emmanuel's newest bruises. The liniment he used tickled Emmanuel's nose with the scent of salt and something sharp that he couldn't name.

"It's my fault," Emmanuel said.

His visitor snorted as a sign of disagreement. He turned Emmanuel's wrists upward and tenderly kissed them both. He settled on the bed and turned Emmanuel to reach his back. Gentle hands massaged his sore shoulders. Emmanuel relaxed, lulled by the feeling of safety and security his companion induced. Emmanuel leaned against him, soothed and sleepy.

Another scrap of bread rubbed against Emmanuel's lips. "No. Please..."

But the silent one wouldn't take no for an answer. He pinched Emmanuel's cheeks, so Emmanuel had no choice but to open his mouth. In went the bread. The man worked Emmanuel's jaw for him, fingers across his lips so Emmanuel couldn't spit it out.

He swallowed and waited, still expecting to have a bad reaction. Nothing happened. He palmed his visitor's face, amused to feel the smile there, as if to chide Emmanuel for his fears.

More bread came in small, innocent bites. Emmanuel ate, savoring the taste and the fact that he enjoyed his company. Maybe that was why he could stave off the panic associated with food. The warm hand around his cock didn't hurt either.

The quiet one didn't hurry. He continued to feed Emmanuel bits of bread and now a little dried meat, while he slowly stroked Emmanuel's cock from base to tip.

Climax, when it came, was exquisite, not the manipulative or violent thing the captain and Jerek had caused. The sensation, coupled with the man's body encircling his, was so warm and wonderful he wished it would last forever.

It couldn't, though. "He'll come back," Emmanuel said.

The silent one patted his cheek in understanding.

* * * * *

For the past two nights, Piaktok hadn't come to Jerek's bed. Jerek had hardly seen him. Piaktok would sometimes take off for a day or two and go visit Atka, but the Seal always told him first. This time, Piaktok still lurked around the Citadel but actively avoided his king. So did others; the steward came when called, but remained stiffly polite and left as soon as he was able.

"Fools," Jerek muttered. "This doesn't have anything to do with them." Still sulking, he went to visit Emmanuel again.

The man annoyed him. None of these visits had made Jerek feel better, only angrier. Emmanuel didn't fuss or act afraid; instead, it was as if he enjoyed Jerek's brutality, and the harder Jerek made it, the more Emmanuel liked it.

Tupilek seemed to be doing his job, though. Save for a few bruises, Emmanuel appeared none the worse for wear. Even the plate of food looked as if Emmanuel had nibbled at it.

Jerek had a gag in his hand, meaning to use it before Emmanuel could tell more of his lies, but this morning, for some reason, he hesitated. His identity had long since been discovered, though Jerek didn't know how. He stayed silent, rather enjoying the effect it had on Emmanuel.

"Ice King." Emmanuel's voice broke. "I'm sorry for everything. There's so much I couldn't tell you. I wanted to, but he said he would kill you. I had to do it. Don't you understand? I had to." His hands groped the air, seeking the presence he knew was there.

Jerek stayed out of the way. Emmanuel was tired, broken. Mad, most likely. And Jerek hated him. And loved him. And hated himself for knowing no other way to deal with his confusion.

"It was my job to protect you. Maybe I didn't need to, but I felt like it because I was bigger and stronger. You were the dreamer. I loved that about you. You had a goal. Me? I was happy to follow along, to be wherever you were."

Lies. Emmanuel had always wanted to leave Whist, to find a productive life. He'd only used Jerek to get what he wanted, the privilege and attentions of the captain.

Emmanuel babbled. "The captain and Fritz rowed to shore with me. I was their bait. They didn't believe in the Citadel, but they believed you were among the Northerners somewhere. The Northerners were kind. They fed us. But the moment I had a chance, I ran. I had to find you, to explain.

"They were angry, so angry when you'd gone. If the queen hadn't sent them new orders, they would have followed you right then. The captain, he...he's mad. After you left, everything got worse. It wasn't good to begin with. He wouldn't let me out of his sight. I became his pet, his toy, his servant. I didn't care, as long as you were safe. Whatever happened to me didn't matter.

"One mission turned into another. Storms kept us at sea longer than we should have been. It took a year to get back here. The captain never let me forget that your escape was my fault. I should have prevented it. I should have known.

"Ice King. I believed I would find you. And I did." Emmanuel held up one tentative hand. Jerek stepped away so it met empty air. "Do whatever you want to me. The gods know I deserve it for hurting you. But believe me when I say I had no choice. I would do anything, anything at all to keep you from getting hurt."

Jerek's throat tightened. Tears burned his eyes. Emmanuel's wild, awful tale couldn't be true. His lover had betrayed him to earn a captain's privileged attentions. Emmanuel's tortured, ravaged body wasn't Jerek's fault. For dreaming. For being the weaker of the two.

In one part of Jerek's mind, everything made a horrible kind of sense. Why Emmanuel couldn't eat without becoming ill. Where the scars on his body had come from. Why he was half-mad from despair. The tale could be true.

Yet he kept talking, maddening, crazy things. "They're coming for you. Queen's orders. They couldn't find you from land or sea, but they have airships now. They will find you by air. The captain was the advance scout for that. I ran when I could. I had to warn you."

But Jerek couldn't, wouldn't, believe it. It was all too much. Year-old hatred came spilling out. "They let you go, you fool! They're tracking you to me! You've put us all at risk to come here and tell me you love me! Traitor." He spat in Emmanuel's face. "How could you lie to me like this? That bastard of a captain sent you, didn't he? Tell me. *Tell me!*"

Emmanuel's skin had gone ashen. He sat perfectly still, face void of emotion. "If that's what you believe, then kill me now. I've lived long enough with the pain of knowing I hurt you. I'll take the beatings. I'll take the torture. The gods know I deserve it. But I will not be called a liar." The sightless eyes stared straight at Jerek, sending a chill through the Ice King. "Maybe the captain let me go. Maybe they have a way to track me on foot. I don't know. But I swear to you that he didn't send me, and if I would have known how much danger I would put you in, I would not have come."

It was the truth, Jerek knew, but he couldn't bring himself to accept it. A few moments and a confession could not erase the pain of betrayal. "I don't believe you. Not then, not ever. When the captain comes, I'll throw you naked into the snow at his feet."

Jerek walked out, ice around his heart.

* * * * *

Emmanuel battered at the wall. Without sight, it was too easy to lose track of the time, making it hard to tell if he'd been a prisoner here for days or months. Everything ran together when his life consisted of nothing but pain and waiting for pain. The agony in his eyes had receded, but he still couldn't see. He spent a long time waving a hand back and forth, hoping that he might at least see a shadow, but he saw nothing.

The chain and collar remained a continued nuisance. It chafed, and his lack of mobility annoyed him further. So he pounded at the stones out of boredom, frustration, and the need for a different kind of pain to distract him.

Footsteps, soft and light, paused outside his door. Emmanuel waited, hoping for his silent lover. The door clicked open. In moments, the visitor launched himself into Emmanuel's waiting arms.

"I wish I knew your name," Emmanuel said for the hundredth time and, just as before, received no answer. Tonight his companion was subdued and sat still long enough for Emmanuel to trace his face and body. Emmanuel's gentle explorations found tears. "What's wrong? Tell me what happened."

Emmanuel held him close and rocked him back and forth as if he were a child. The quiet one's shoulders heaved with sobs. "Hush, now. It's all right," Emmanuel said. Not that he believed it; it was just an innocuous phrase to say at times like this.

They didn't make love. Emmanuel didn't offer, and anyway, he didn't think his lover was up to it. They settled for lying skin to skin, in a communion mourning a betrayal of a man they both loved.

"He came to me too. He didn't believe me. I shouldn't have come here. I should have run in the opposite direction, but I believed if I found him, it would be all right. It isn't."

Soft lips kissed his.

"You're the only good thing to come of this, but you can't stay, can you? You came to tell me good-bye." He put a hand to his lover's cheek.

Yes.

"Take me with you."

The cheek grew damp beneath his fingers. Yes.

One last kiss on the lips, one last caress, and the silent one left. Emmanuel waited anxiously, wondering for a few fevered moments if his lover had lied to him. He

needn't have worried. The silent one returned. A few clicks, and Emmanuel's chain clattered to the bed. The collar remained, but he didn't care.

He was free.

Chapter Thirteen

Emmanuel's flight to safety was terrifying because he still couldn't see and his rescuer couldn't talk, much less explain what was happening around him. The silent one gave him thick, furry clothing and helped him to dress. Then a hand clasped his mittened one and led him down, down, and out into the frigid air of the North. He shivered. Something nudged his chest. He groped the air and found a head with a long snout—

He snatched his hand back. Oh, gods. His lover had been teasing him all along. The ice bears were going to eat him after all.

There wasn't time to think. His lover shoved him a little ways down the bear's side, and Emmanuel's hand found a sort of harness that went up and around the bear's chest. The silent one grasped Emmanuel's foot and pushed, and Emmanuel finally understood. He clambered onto the bear's back, and before he could do anything further, he felt his legs and waist being strapped into the harness. One last pat of encouragement from the silent one, and the bear took off at a steady, jolting lope.

Emmanuel soon saw the wisdom of being tied on. The bear's back was slippery, and his mittens made it hard to hold on to anything. A bit of experimentation, and he

found out that by leaning forward a little and moving his body with the bear's motion, the ride became a little more tolerable.

Fears kept circling in his head. Out here in the middle of a snowy wasteland, he had nothing but a few furs between him and freezing to death. He rode an ice bear more than capable of killing him with one bite, and only the gods knew where the beast meant to take him. To another captivity? Back to the captain? At least it was away from Jerek and his cruelty.

He couldn't have said how long the ride took, only that by the end of it, his legs and back ached terribly. Despite the warm clothing, the cold had seeped into his bones. His fingers and toes felt as icy as his surroundings. The bear slowed and finally stopped. Emmanuel waited, nervous and uncertain.

"Ah. You must be Emmanuel." The female voice to his right spoke clearly in Emmanuel's own language, but with a faint Northern accent.

"Yes, ma'am." Better to be polite, though fatigue and fear made his temper short. "Where the hell am I now?"

The woman laughed. "My home. My name is Atka." Presumably, it was Atka who yanked at the bindings keeping Emmanuel tied to the bear.

"Is this...is this an ice bear?" He felt stupid for asking.

Another laugh. This time, it came from his left. "Of course he is. Haven't you ever seen — Ah. That's right. Piaktok told me; I'd forgotten. Forgive me, Emmanuel."

"Piaktok? Is that his name, the one that can't talk? I left him behind. I don't know where he's at. He shoved me onto the bear, and I didn't even have time to say thank you."

"That's him. He will come. There were two bears. He must have fallen behind." Worry tinged her voice, although she tried to hide it.

Atka released the last of Emmanuel's bindings. Stiffly, Emmanuel eased one leg over the bear's back and slid down its side, unsure of how far the ground was.

"Here you are." Strong hands clasped his waist. Emmanuel let go and slid against the bear's side for a short distance. Snow crunched under his boots. "You're tired and cold, I'm sure. Let me take you inside. Please, accept my hospitality. You are safe; no one here will harm you."

Emmanuel accepted the offer and the arm threaded through his. Atka led him through a door and down a narrow staircase. A third set of footsteps followed. "Who else is here?"

"The Bear. His name is Inuq."

"But..." Emmanuel was confused. "An ice bear can't fit down here."

"Not a bear. A Bear." Atka chuckled. Emmanuel failed to see the humor.

They went through a larger room, one with dozens of clinking, clanking metallic things. "My toys," Atka said. "I'll show you later." A little farther and, "Ah, here we are. Sit, sit."

Emmanuel found a wooden stool and sank down onto it, grateful to sit on something that held still. "Now where are we?"

"My surgery. All the latest modern medical equipment and no shortage of the traditional." Pride tinged her voice. "Food will be here shortly. In the meantime, let's get you out of those clothes and into something more comfortable. Are you hurt?"

"Sore mostly." And glad to get out of the furs. They were warm but bulky. "You're a physician then?"

"Yes. With tools and learning as modern as I can find them. I enjoy traveling, though these past years I have spent much time with the Ice King."

"Ice King." The words tasted bitter. "Do you know what kind of man your Ice King is? Take a look."

Off came the caribou hide coat. Atka said nothing. Emmanuel wondered what she was thinking, or if she was even looking.

"Everything, if you don't mind," she said at last. All pleasure had vanished from her voice. "Inuq can help me get that collar off. As for the rest, I have some liniment that will help with the soreness and bruises."

Emmanuel obeyed. Atka walked to the door and called out in her own language. A minute later, in came the shuffling footsteps he'd heard on the stairs. Atka's reference to him still confused Emmanuel. A bear of a man, maybe? He certainly sounded large, and the hands that chipped away at the hated iron collar felt thick and strong.

A memory returned, of when he'd been in the Citadel, running, and someone with hands like Inuq's had pinned him down. "Were you in the Citadel? With Jerek?"

Atka translated. Inuq grunted, replied, and Atka spoke for him. "He was. He apologizes for the way he and his brother treated you. It was at Jerek's request, but had he known what would happen to you later, he would have refused."

"Tell him I accept his apology, and thank you for getting this collar off," he said, right as Inuq pounded one last time and, for the first time in a year, the collar fell from Emmanuel's neck. He felt ten pounds lighter.

Another translation. Inuq grunted something that sounded like, "You're welcome," and departed.

Emmanuel touched the area around his neck, raw from recent chafing. For a long moment, he could say nothing, remembering all those days when he'd believed that he would never be free of the collar or the captain's attentions.

"Let me work now." Atka gently moved Emmanuel's hands out of the way. Her touch was expert, chaste, and did a great deal to relieve Emmanuel's stiffness. The physician cleaned the wounds around his neck, which stung but felt better after a minute or two.

"You weren't the physician in the Citadel."

"No. Tupilek is one of my protégés, one who can walk the line between traditional and modern as I can." She traced one of the scars across Emmanuel's chest. "These are old. Jerek did not do all of these."

"Those are courtesy of the captain and his cabin boy." He shivered. Atka handed him a shirt, pants, and undershorts of a soft, cottonlike material. "What about my eyes? Am I going to be blind forever?"

"May I?" At Emmanuel's nod, Atka examined his eyes and the area around them. "The swelling has gone down, but you still see nothing?" Emmanuel shook his head. Atka sighed. "I cannot say whether your sight will return or not. I do know that it is better to keep your eyes covered to give them a chance to recover. Did no one tell you this?"

Emmanuel felt a stab of fear at that, wondering if he'd permanently harmed himself by tearing the bandage off. "I had them covered. It itched, so I took it off."

"Do they still hurt?"

"No. Well, a little. Not nearly as bad as they did."

Atka wrapped a soft cloth around Emmanuel's eyes. "This should be better. Leave it on this time," she chided with a bit of humor.

A soft knock came at the door. Atka opened it, spoke quietly in her own language, and came back toward Emmanuel accompanied by another person and clattering dishes. The scent of cooked meat reached his nostrils. His stomach churned.

"Dinner," Atka said.

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry."

"You don't eat meat? I have some crackers here. A few tubers, fish. There might still be a handful of late blueberries; I can send her to look."

"No. Nothing. I'm fine. I just...I'm tired. Too tired to eat." He waved his hands in front of him in a vain attempt to ward off the smell. It didn't work.

And suddenly, he was back in the captain's cabin, on his hands and knees, letting Fritz fuck him from behind while the captain fed him tidbits of meat or cheese or whatever else the cook had found for him that day. "*My dear Emmanuel,*" the captain had cooed, forever wrapping pain and pleasure and food all into one confusing bundle.

"My dear Emmanuel." Ever since the captain had taken him for a pet, food had become inextricably linked with sex. The few bites with Piaktok had been an anomaly, managed only because the man had been able to keep him so calm.

"Emmanuel?"

His name recalled him to his current surroundings. The food must have gone. All that remained was a bearable, lingering scent. A warm hand clasped his.

"Emmanuel. Where did you go?"

"I'm tired. I want to rest now, please." He felt guilty evading the question, but it was none of Atka's business. No one's but his own. He'd gotten himself into that mess; he could deal with it alone.

"All right." Atka didn't sound convinced. "We'll talk later. This way."

Another short walk, and Emmanuel found himself next to a comfortable, down-filled bed.

"There's a washroom a few feet past the end of the bed. The main door is to the right. There's a button on headboard that you can push to reach me if..."

Emmanuel fell asleep before hearing the rest of Atka's words.

* * * * *

When Jerek reached his room, Piaktok was there, waiting. A half-full satchel lay on the bed. The Seal's dark eyes watched him.

"What are you doing?"

Piaktok snorted and continued to pack.

"Please." Jerek sat on the bed. He snaked one hand around Piaktok's waist and tugged him around so that he fell off balance and onto Jerek's lap. The Seal sat there, stiff as ice. "I still need you."

He'd had a year to learn Piaktok's gestures, but his angry hands flew so fast that Jerek missed one word in three. "You are the Ice King. King of the ice, not made of ice. You treat your lover badly. I will not keep company with a man such as you."

"He's not my lover. Not anymore." Jerek's heart thudded in his chest. He'd never seen Piaktok, nor any of the Northerners, so upset. "But you don't understand. He's put us all in danger. Because of him, the captain put me in irons and tortured me. Because of him, Captain Harper is on his way here in a fucking *airship* to destroy my citadel!"

The Seal recoiled as if Jerek had struck him. He struggled to escape the grip Jerek kept around his waist, and when that failed, slapped him hard across the cheek.

"You're *not* leaving, do you hear me?" Heat and tension accompanied his anger. "You're *not*. You're my lover. Not that son of a bitch that betrayed me. He deserves everything I've given him and more." It took most of his strength to subdue the flailing Piaktok, but he did, using his body to pin the Seal flat against the bed.

Unable to cry out for help, Piaktok lay there, murder in his eyes. Jerek ignored it. He'd proven he was the stronger in this match, just as he was the stronger with Emmanuel. Seeing the Seal helpless roused that deep, awful part of him that he hadn't felt since he'd been chained to the smokestack and screaming at Emmanuel.

This time he could fight back against the unfairness, and he did. "I am your king. You will do as I ask." He managed to keep most of his weight on Piaktok while he reached down to unfasten the laces on his pants. He was already hard.

Piaktok's body tensed beneath him. Jerek didn't care. Rage overpowered and consumed him. Then, he'd been helpless, vulnerable to whatever the captain and Fritz chose to do to him. Now, he was free, a king, able to do whatever he desired.

And he desired Piaktok. He only bothered with the barest of preparations, grabbing a nearly empty jar of lubricant and spreading the remains between Piaktok's quivering buttocks. Piaktok jerked forward at the brutal thrust, eyes and mouth wide with pain. Jerek ignored it, too deep in his own fantasies to pay heed to his partner's needs.

"You will not leave me. Not ever." The tight ring of flesh gripped Jerek's cock. He slid in and out as fast as he could, desperate for the friction. Piaktok continued to squirm and fight. Jerek struck him once, twice, in the small of the back. Finally, he quieted.

Jerek continued his thrusting. His world narrowed to the fire in his groin. Pressure built, overwhelmed him as climax hit. Wetness rushed out of him. Victory.

He gripped a hank of Piaktok's hair and used the momentum to jerk the Seal's head around. "There, you bastard, I—"

Tears sparkled in the round black eyes. Worse yet was the expression of utter hatred. When he saw that, Atka's words came back to him in a rush. "*It will drive him away even as you seek to keep him close.*" Jerek's rage drained as suddenly as it had come.

"Oh, gods." Jerek stumbled backward, one hand over his mouth. The Seal's body darkened with bruises. "Piaktok. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*."

It wasn't enough. Would never be enough for violating his lover's trust and hurting him on purpose.

Crack. Jerek's cheek stung from Piaktok's hand. Piaktok's fingers flew. "You talk big. You dream big. But you don't listen. You may be king, but you do not control us. You believe"—here, his hands shook so badly, he had to calm himself before he could continue—"what you believe is what comes to pass. You see traitors everywhere, and they appear. You believe what you want, and it is not always right. Our agreement is now void."

Piaktok gave him one last shaky, obscene gesture before he painfully gathered his clothes and left Jerek sobbing in the corner.

Chapter Fourteen

Long after Emmanuel had fallen into an exhausted sleep, Atka returned to the surface. Yet another worry added to those she already had. Emmanuel bore scars inside and out. Atka had never seen anyone panic as Emmanuel had over the mere mention of food, but she was willing to bet it had something to do with his time on the ship. His eyes—Atka could only hope for the best. She could do nothing besides protect them from the light and hope they healed. The cuts and bruises, the newest ones, had no excuse. No king should treat any of his subjects that way, and it made Atka furious to know that a man she'd taught these past years could condone such ill-treatment. Piaktok had been right to free Emmanuel, who had endured far more than he let on. No wonder Piaktok had become so attached; Emmanuel needed a solid, healthy relationship far more than Jerek.

But where was Piaktok? The Bear Inuq and his brother seldom strayed far from each other for long. Something had to have happened to delay them.

Snow crunched beneath Atka's boots. Pacing did little to ease her nerves, but it kept her warm. She hadn't let the Southerner know of her concern for Piaktok. Emmanuel cared for him; Atka was glad of that.

The moon rose, half-full yet still bright enough to grace the snow with silver light. Atka kept watch on the horizon, waiting, hoping, fearing the worst.

There. A shadow moved, grew larger, transformed into a recognizable shape. Another ice bear, but the figure on his back was bent over and unmoving. It lurched to a halt right in front of Atka.

Atka forced herself to be calm, knowing that rushing would make undoing the straps on the harness more difficult. At her touch, Piaktok roused, his face a mask of pain and weariness. "Come on," Atka said when she worked Piaktok free. "Easy now."

He practically fell into Atka's arms. A moment later, the ice bear disappeared, replaced by Nutaaq. "He put the Southerner on Inuq and went back inside," Nutaaq said. "When I saw him next, he was like that, barely able to tie himself on."

Piaktok drooped against Atka, worrying the physician even more. "Thank you for your efforts. Come inside and be welcome. Your brother is waiting."

"I carried him this far. I can carry him a bit farther." At that, Nutaaq scooped Piaktok into his arms. Atka headed quickly downstairs but directed the Bear to Piaktok's room instead of the surgery. The moment Nutaaq set him down, Piaktok shifted. A handsome black-and-white seal lay very still with his eyes closed.

Atka knelt beside Piaktok. She ran her hands across his body searching for injury; wounds gotten in one form always had an analogue in the other. The fur and the layer of fat made it difficult to pinpoint the bruises. She must have hurt him a little, but he didn't move.

Nutaaq voiced Atka's fear. "I think he held on to the last bit of his human soul just long enough to make it here."

She gazed into the round, pain-glazed eyes. The cause of Piaktok's listlessness felt more spiritual than physical. It made Atka worry. For a Northerner, the spiritual was far more damaging.

Gently, she set his head in her lap and chanted a quiet prayer to the spirits to help her find Piaktok's human soul. Then she sang, a soothing tune that spoke of love and

safety. She sensed him just out of her reach, but he wouldn't come. Again and again, she tried, reaching for him with spiritual hands, but he danced away, too hurt to trust even her.

She fought back tears when she let the last notes of her song die. Piaktok had closed his eyes. She stroked his furry head, more for her own comfort than his. "Piaktok, love, come back."

Piaktok didn't move. Atka's tears fell freely. If she couldn't find a way to call his human soul back, Piaktok would remain a seal for the rest of his life.

* * * * *

Jerek had screamed the first two times Tupilek approached, and refused to let the physician touch him. By the third time, he was too weak and tired to put up much of a fight. Tupilek held him down and then jabbed the point of a syringe into his arm. The drug weakened him, made him feel lethargic, but inside he still railed at the unfairness.

Nightmares assailed his dreams. Piaktok, the hatred in his eyes a live thing, reaching out to burn Jerek. Emmanuel, his body ripped to pieces yet somehow still alive, calling his name over and over. The captain's leering face, asking him again and again why the Citadel and where it was. And then all three beating at him, cursing him.

He woke with a throat dry and raw from screaming and a head that throbbed worse than any hangover he'd ever had. No one came. Not to feed him, not to bring him fresh clothes to exchange with the ones he'd soiled, not to see if he was still alive. The Citadel seemed deserted.

Emmanuel, he thought guiltily. Did anyone still look after his blind lover? Or had they abandoned him because he belonged to Jerek?

He stumbled out of bed and found a pitcher of water. The cool liquid soothed his throat. There wasn't any food. Clothes he found in the wardrobe.

More sure on his feet now, he wandered through the silent corridors. No one was there. He stopped in the kitchen long enough to get some dried fish, then down, down to the cells.

He knew before he arrived. The cell was empty, the chain loose and dangling from the wall. Jerek dropped onto the bed, running his hands over the covers rank with sweat and fear. His anger had gone, replaced by the knowledge and sadness that this time he'd gone too far.

There was only one place he could go now, one person who might listen.

* * * * *

The door to Atka's home opened to reveal the frowning physician. Red rimmed her eyes. "You are not wanted here, Ice King."

Jerek had expected that. At least Atka had answered the door instead of ignoring it. "Emmanuel's gone. Piaktok left me, and I know he would come here first. Where is he?"

"Come in." Her expression was unusually grave as she led Jerek downstairs. Jerek took off his outer layer of fur in the anteroom before joining Atka among her gadgets. Atka fiddled with the gauge on a steam-powered bear before she spoke. "He doesn't want to see you. I don't blame him. I'm not happy with you myself."

That meant Piaktok was here, at least. Jerek allowed himself a bit of hope. "I want to apologize. I was angry."

"I warned you what hatred would do to him." Atka's brown eyes studied him. "I don't think he's of a mind to listen to you right now." She set the bear walking. It ambled along one of the shelves, emitting little puffs of steam.

"There's got to be a way. I'd do anything..." He trailed off, knowing how futile his answer seemed. "I didn't mean to hurt him. I still...I love him."

The bear ran into the wall. Atka turned it around. "More than Emmanuel?"

Jerek hung his head. He couldn't choose between the two. Emmanuel he'd loved since boyhood, faults and all. Piaktok was...different. Exotic, skilled, and a large part of who Jerek was as the Northern king. Jerek needed them both, body and mind.

"Listen, Nukilik. Piaktok knew your heart when he offered to take up with you. He was aware of the most likely future, that you would be reunited with Emmanuel and eventually break off relations with him."

"But I don't *want* to break relations with him. Not after what he's done for me." Gods. Atka was making this far more difficult than it needed to be. "I want him too."

His wants didn't go over well with Atka. She grabbed Jerek's cock none too gently. "You think with *this*, Ice King. Your men are not toys. Not for you to beat and not for you to fuck whenever you feel like it. We gave you leeway when we found you. It isn't easy for a man taken into slavery and tortured to find his way in the world." The metal bear fell off the shelf and landed upside down with its legs flailing uselessly. "You should have been angry then, but you were not. You buried it, and now it comes like an avalanche starting at the highest peak and growing and growing until it obliterates everything in its path. Emmanuel caused your avalanche. Piaktok was your first victim. Will there be more?"

The tight squeeze around his cock made it hard to think, but her meaning was clear. "No. I swear it." The hold lessened. "Let me talk to him."

Atka jerked her head. "He's in his room. Hasn't left since he's been here. If you hurt him again, king or no, I'll..." She waved her fist as evidence of her threat.

Jerek nodded. He righted the bear under Atka's angry gaze, then steeled himself for his next encounter. Piaktok's room hadn't changed. Though instead of a human, a handsome black-and-white seal lay within, eyes closed, body stretched on top of a pile of furs.

"Piaktok?" The Seal didn't acknowledge him. Piaktok lay terribly still, barely breathing. Jerek dared to touch him, and the Seal shuddered beneath his fingers. "I'm sorry."

The black head swept around. Jerek jerked his hand back just in time to avoid the sharp teeth. Piaktok hissed.

"I'm sorry. I don't have enough words to say how much. What I did was wrong and unforgivable. No one deserves to be treated that way, especially someone who has been as good to me as you have."

Another hiss.

"I'm sorry. What would you have me do?"

A snort.

"I would do anything, *anything*, to make this up to—"

He held out his hand to stroke Piaktok's head. Before he could draw it back, the Seal sank his teeth into Jerek's hand. Piaktok jerked his head and snarled before he let Jerek go.

Jerek cradled his bloody hand against his chest. The agony of it went straight up his arm, far more agonizing than the beating he'd taken from Fritz. This he deserved. Tears stung his eyes, partly from the pain, partly from grief at his anger and stupidity.

"Is this what you want then? One hurt for another? Go ahead. Chew the rest of me up too." He put his good hand near Piaktok's head. "If it will make you feel better, do it. I love you, Piaktok. I will do anything to make you understand that."

The Seal looked sorely tempted by Jerek's offer, but he settled for a snarl. Tears trailed down Jerek's cheeks. The door opened. "Come with me, Ice King," Atka said. "He's little more than an animal with an animal's response to being threatened. Leave him alone now and let me have a look at that."

"I'm sorry," Jerek said again. Piaktok refused to acknowledge him.

In the surgery, Atka gestured at a stool at one of the tables along the wall. "Sit." As Jerek did, she brought out a syringe and dipped it into a glass jar.

"I don't need—"

"Shut up." Atka took Jerek's injured hand and jabbed the needle in at his wrist. Moments later, blessed numbness blotted out the pain. Once Atka cleaned up the blood, Jerek could see jagged puncture wounds on either side. Atka gently manipulated it. "At least he didn't bite hard enough to break anything. It needs stitches."

Jerek bit back a retort, figuring it wasn't wise to anger a woman pushing a needle through his skin. He meant to wait until Atka was done before asking questions, but she beat him to it. "Do you still want to be king?"

"Not if it costs me the men I love."

"The kingship has nothing to do with that."

"Then yes. I do. I'm meant to be here; I've felt it ever since I met you."

"Yet you let your anger fester and grow into a sore that troubles your rule. Tell me, Nukilik, did you ever ask Emmanuel why he betrayed you?"

Jerek felt a pang of mixed guilt and anger. "There was no need. It was obvious enough when I saw him next to the captain."

"Appearances deceive. Coming here, you came to understand the power of belief. Did you ever once consider that Emmanuel might have a reason besides ambition to ingratiate himself with the captain?"

"No." Because it had been far easier to believe that Emmanuel was fickle and power hungry.

Atka had finished sewing up Jerek's hand. She examined her handiwork, then met the Ice King's eyes. "The power of your mind is strong. Believe in life. Believe in love."

"But how can I when...?" He felt too ashamed to say the rest of it.

"Say it."

"When both the men I loved betrayed me. It's my fault, I know, but I don't know how to make it right."

Atka wrapped a bandage around Jerek's hand. "Rest until I come for you. I will take you somewhere. You will know what to do then."

“But—”

“No more words. This way.” Atka led him to a room down the hall from Piaktok’s. Unlike the Seal’s, this one had a feather bed, electric lighting, and a small washroom at the back. “Stay here. I will fetch you when it is time.”

She left Jerek alone to fret about his fate.

Chapter Fifteen

Emmanuel woke from a deep sleep to find Atka shaking his shoulder. "Will you come with me? I need your help with Piaktok."

"He's here?" Emmanuel shot to his feet, groping the air. "Is he hurt? What the hell did Jerek do to him?"

"I will take you to him in a moment. Let me take a look at your eyes."

A brief examination confirmed that he had not yet regained his sight, and he still resisted the modicum of food that Atka offered.

The physician sighed. "Drink then."

Tea, at least, didn't provoke Emmanuel's fears. He wrapped both hands around the warm cup and drank deeply of the brew inside. A little bitter, but drinkable. The physician had likely put some sort of medicine in it.

When he'd finished and seen to his other needs, Atka took him down the hall to a room that smelled of salt and fur. "He's right here." She urged him to crouch, then guided his hand. Emmanuel balked when he touched fur rather than skin. A little prodding assured him that this wasn't merely a fur parka, but a fat and round live animal.

He snatched his hand away. "Is this some sort of joke? Where is he?"

"I told you. He's *here*." Again, Atka placed his hand on the creature.

None of this made sense. "I don't understand. I didn't make love to an animal. He was human." Another, more frightening thought occurred to him. "Gods. Is he reincarnated? Did Jerek kill him, and now he's an animal?"

"Jerek didn't kill him, though he came close," Atka said with a hint of impatience. "Many of my people carry two souls, one human and one animal. Piaktok's second soul is that of a seal. Right now, that soul is dominant. I need your help in coaxing the human back."

Northern magic. So that was the difference between a bear and a Bear. Emmanuel's mouth went dry. "What do I do?"

"Touch him. Talk to him. He trusts you."

Gingerly, Emmanuel stroked the thick fur coat. Piaktok shuddered.

"It's all right. It's me. Emmanuel. I'm not going to hurt you, nor will I let Jerek anywhere near you again." He didn't know if the words helped or not. He explored a little, finding the tail, flippers, and the soft, round head. "Piaktok? I never got a chance to thank you. I'm free thanks to you, and your friend Atka is taking care of me."

He spent a long time enjoying the feel of the seal's body, murmuring to him while he worked. After a while, some of the tenseness left the muscles beneath the layer of fat. "I think it's working."

"Good."

"Did Jerek cut out his tongue?"

"No. Piaktok was young when it happened, just discovering the delights of his two souls. He went too close to a ship as a seal and got caught by the fishermen. They hooked him in the mouth and then cut his tongue to free it. He shifted. Once they saw he was a boy, they returned him home, but the damage was done. He was brought to me for help. I gave him a room. He never really left." She spoke with fondness. "His name means glossy and slippery in my language."

"It suits him." Piaktok moved enough to set his head in Emmanuel's lap. Emmanuel stroked the whiskered face. "What do we do now?"

"Now it is time to call his missing human soul home. It was vital that it had a reason to return. I love him as a son, but he needs more. You."

"I hardly know him." The idea scared him, that he could be so vital and necessary to another's life. "What do I do?" he asked, failing at keeping his voice steady.

"Love him, as you have. Let him know he is loved."

"Of course he is," Emmanuel murmured. Piaktok's whiskers twitched beneath his fingers. He stroked the long, soft neck down to the center of the barreled chest. "You freed me. Come back, so I can give you proper thanks."

The seal was perfectly calm and relaxed until Atka started to chant. Emmanuel couldn't understand the words, but the chant felt old, ancient. The air within the room became charged with an energy far different and more visceral than electricity. Piaktok twitched uncomfortably. Emmanuel wanted to reassure him but didn't dare speak lest his words interfere with Atka's.

So he settled for touch. "*Love him,*" Atka had said. Emmanuel intended to. The oddness of holding and speaking to a seal soon faded. If he wanted to hold his human lover again, it would be here, in this room, but only if he proved to Piaktok that it was worth it to return.

He put his face near the seal's, smelling the fishy breath and letting the seal scent him. At length, he dared to place his lips to the side of the seal's face. Sharp teeth pricked his skin. Piaktok nuzzled him, the big, heavy head butting gently against Emmanuel's chin.

Emmanuel wrapped his arms around the thick neck. The seal slid up against him, almost toppling Emmanuel over with its weight. The strain of sitting upright soon became too much. Emmanuel eased himself down onto the furs with Piaktok comfortably warm atop him.

The chanting continued. It affected Emmanuel too, rousing him, making him feel that much more aware of his body and its needs. Piaktok's body wriggled atop his. Something firm nudged between his legs. Emmanuel had little doubt as to what it was; he just hadn't imagined a seal's cock could be so *long*. Making love to a man was one thing. Doing it with a seal was another, and something Emmanuel didn't want to contemplate. The seal was strong; if he lost control...

Come back, he willed. Come back to your human form, and I'll let you do whatever you like to me.

Atka's voice changed pitch, going a little higher. Piaktok reacted badly. He twitched and jerked, raking his enormous cock against Emmanuel's. The movement sent waves of desire through Emmanuel despite his fright. They writhed against one another, Emmanuel hardly aware of where his body ended and the seal's began. They were one, both caught in a torment not of their making.

The pitch went up again. Piaktok thrust his head back. If he'd had a voice, Emmanuel felt sure he would have been crying out in pain or ecstasy. Silently he screamed with Piaktok, not knowing how long either of them could bear this in-between state.

And then his hands went *through* Piaktok as if the seal weren't really there. The next moment, he was solid, furless, and then he'd turned back into a seal. Whatever allowed Piaktok to shift caused Emmanuel's entire body to tingle. Every nerve was afire as if he, too, might transform into another creature.

"Stop," Emmanuel begged him. "Come back to me. Be human. You can do it. I love you. Be human for me."

Then Piaktok was solid, human once more. Human hands scrabbled at Emmanuel's skin, a human cock nudged him between the thighs, seeking relief from the building energy. Lips sought his; Emmanuel's tongue touched teeth no longer sharp and deadly.

Relief flowed through him as he struggled to touch every part of Piaktok, to ensure that he was really and truly human once again. Head, hair, shoulders, erect nipples on his chest. Stomach, hips, buttocks, and a refreshingly human cock that surged forward when Emmanuel touched it.

His body might be human, but his mind remained in question. Piaktok grappled with him as if his feral persona—caught up in the madness of rutting—still ruled. Emmanuel did his best to fend the Seal off, but Piaktok either couldn't or wouldn't let up. Piaktok forced Emmanuel to roll over onto his stomach and used his weight to pin Emmanuel down. Teeth dug into the back of Emmanuel's neck as Piaktok mindlessly used his cock to pummel at Emmanuel. It hurt, but not badly enough to deny Piaktok's need. Emmanuel angled his behind to allow Piaktok easier entrance. The Seal took it. Emmanuel jerked, his body sliding back and forth on the furs as Piaktok thrust. The friction made the growing need in his cock worse.

Atka raised her chanting yet again. All knowledge of pain and discomfort fled Emmanuel's mind. There was only him and Piaktok, the desperate hope that somewhere in the madness a human soul remained.

Piaktok tensed and arched back. Warm wetness rushed inside Emmanuel. His own climax followed moments later.

Then Piaktok collapsed on top of him, the tension gone from his body. The chanting slowed and stopped. Emmanuel lay very still, feeling the other man's ragged breaths until they slowed into a more regular pattern. "Piaktok?" he said into the silence. "If you can hear me, my arm is going numb."

At that, the Seal eased himself up. The caress upon Emmanuel's face was gentle, the lips upon his used with gratitude instead of need. Emmanuel's arm tingled, a numb, deadweight for several uncomfortable moments. When the worst had passed, he groped the air for Piaktok and found his chest. He was sitting upright. Emmanuel's hand traveled upward to discover slick, wet cheeks.

"It's all right," he whispered. "I'm here. You're safe. I'll never hurt you."

Piaktok's swift embrace squeezed the air from Emmanuel's lungs. Neither of them heard Atka leave, lost as they were in the love and security of each other.

* * * * *

Atka brought them breakfast, a hot stew with bits of seafood and caribou meat. For once, Emmanuel didn't panic at the scent of food. He attributed it to Piaktok's calming presence. Piaktok didn't bother with a spoon; Emmanuel listened to his delicate slurps. After a while, Emmanuel gave up on the utensil, finding he dripped as much on his skin as in his mouth. He and Piaktok sat against the wall, shoulders and forearms touching, one leg entwined. They hadn't let go of each other all night.

"You two have a choice to make," Atka told them when they'd finished eating and her helpers had spirited away the dishes. "You should know that Jerek is here, and that he wishes to make amends."

"He doesn't deserve it," Emmanuel said. "Bastard. After what he did to Piaktok and me."

The movement of air and light slapping of flesh meant that Piaktok was talking in gestures. Before Emmanuel could ask what he'd said, Atka translated. "Piaktok agrees with you and has no regrets about biting him when he visited."

Emmanuel set a hand on the side of Piaktok's face. "You bit him? Really?"

Piaktok nodded beneath Emmanuel's hand.

Atka continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. "Jerek broke his agreement, a pact held sacred by my people. They have, in effect, abandoned him. There is room, now, for a new Ice King."

Emmanuel didn't like the suggestive tone in her voice. "I can't. That was always Jerek's dream. I don't have the mind for it; he's the one who thought and planned and decided. I just followed along."

"Then either the search must begin again," Atka said wearily, "or Jerek must be redeemed."

Piaktok snorted, and Emmanuel heard the sound of several more gestures. Atka spoke for him. "He wonders if there is any chance for Jerek and asks if you, who have known him far longer, can speak to his innermost character."

Emmanuel had to take a minute to think. His own hurt and turmoil over Jerek's actions were still too close to the surface. In the cell, Jerek had hurt him, but nothing damaging, nothing lasting, when it would have been easy to do so. On the *Tophet*, he'd been loving and tolerant for years despite their terrible circumstances, and there —

"It's my fault he's like this. I'm the one who made him angry."

The Seal's hand rested on Emmanuel's upper arm as a question. Atka said, "I think you had better tell us how you managed this."

Piaktok squeezed his hand for support. Emmanuel spoke, haltingly at first, then as if he watched someone tell the tale from a distance. He told them of their childhood and how Jerek's dream had led them aboard the *Tophet* and how he'd betrayed his lover with the captain. He left nothing out. By the time he'd finished, he was curled against Piaktok's chest, seeking whatever warmth and comfort he could get.

The silence that followed made him uneasy. He felt tainted, certain that Atka must regret ever taking him in or letting him near Piaktok.

Instead, to his surprise, she said, "It wasn't your fault, you know."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Piaktok silenced him with his palm.

"The captain seduced you and threatened both you and Jerek. He was a cruel man, forcing you to do cruel things to survive. You do not believe me, that you earned none of his attentions or Jerek's wrath, but in time, I think you will learn to understand and forgive yourself. With Piaktok's help, you have already begun to heal. Your former lover has not been so fortunate, though it is not for lack of trying on Piaktok's part. Your tale gives reasons for his actions, though not excuses." Her voice hardened. "It is your choice. If you wish to see Jerek again, to give him one last chance, then you may. Tonight. If not, I can assure you he will be spirited away from these lands, and you will not see him again. I will return in an hour for your decision."

A rustle of clothing; then the door opened and shut.

"Do you still love me?" Emmanuel asked. "After all that—"

Piaktok silenced him with a kiss. Relief poured over Emmanuel like rain. Confessing to his friends had lightened his spirits considerably; knowing they forgave him and didn't hold him responsible was a blessing he never would have believed possible. And yet... He had one more admission that risked Piaktok's disappointment.

"Would it...would it hurt you if I said I love him still? That despite what he's done, I can't imagine life without him?" Piaktok didn't move. "I need him. He's a part of me. And so are you. Maybe it's selfish, but I-I want you both. I can't give you up either."

Emmanuel waited, but Piaktok remained still.

"If you don't love him... If you don't want to see him again, I understand. Just... He *is* good. He's angry and hurt, and understandably so. If we can give him any sort of a chance, I want to give it to him. I want us—the *three* of us—to be happy together." He framed Piaktok's face in his hands. "Tell me what you want."

In answer, Piaktok took one of Emmanuel's hands, balled it into a fist, then tugged at the first finger. One. He pressed it against Emmanuel's forehead, then pulled up a second finger. Two. These, he used to touch his own forehead. Out came a third finger, and Piaktok used all three to touch both Emmanuel's chest and his own.

"You mean it? You want the three of us too?"

Piaktok took the three fingers and set them over his heart. Emmanuel could feel it, strong and steady.

"I love you. Always," he said.

Piaktok, without words, said it too.

Chapter Sixteen

Jerek followed Atka through the cold to a round tent far larger than any he'd seen. Nearly a hundred Northerners had gathered inside, all of them curious. They stared at Jerek, unabashed, many of them whispering or taunting him. He'd long since learned that the Northerners didn't follow anyone because of his title, but because they respected him. Until Emmanuel, Jerek had felt worthy of that respect. Now he felt as if they could all see the darkness and guilt within him and pick at his flaws until he broke apart.

Atka took him to the center of the crowd. There, she began to undress Jerek. The Ice King used his good hand to grip Atka's in panic. "Easy," Atka said. "No one will harm you. This is a way to redeem yourself in the eyes of my people." A few more moments, and Jerek stood naked save for the bandage around his wounded hand.

The drumming began, a steady, primal rhythm that went straight to Jerek's gut. The drums were circular frames with hide stretched over them. The drummer held it by a handle and used a beater to strike the edges of the frame. He danced and ducked as he beat the drum, moving from person to person to encourage them to join his chant. Jerek couldn't understand the words, but they had a pure, sonorous quality that calmed his nerves.

"Cleanse the soul," Atka said in his ear. "Bring us life. Believe in yourself. Believe in love."

And then the people drew back so he was in the center of an open space. Two men, naked as he was, stepped forward. Piaktok and Emmanuel, clinging to each other with gestures that spoke equally of lust and love. Jealousy licked at Jerek's heart until he realized he could be a part of that. No, he was already a part of it.

Heart, mind, and soul: the three things Atka had told him a man needed to rule here. He could see it now, made clear now that the three of them were together. Piaktok was the soul, his black eyes carrying the traditions and mysteries of a people thousands of years old. Emmanuel, the heart, the loyal dog who'd always supported Jerek and loved him no matter what. Which left Jerek as the mind. He felt shamed at having used his so poorly.

But the two men before him were no longer his. He'd broken their trust; to earn it back and repair their bond, he would have to give himself completely, something he could hardly contemplate. Giving up his control terrified him.

The Seal's face had taken on a look of calm. Of course. These were his people; he knew what would happen and welcomed it.

Jerek, however, didn't share his certainty. His heart lurched at the sight of the two naked men he'd loved and wronged. Their skin glistened in the firelight. He wanted them both, equally. And he needed their forgiveness. He dropped to his knees, back arched, arms held wide in a gesture of submission. Whatever they chose to do to him, he would accept. Love him or leave him, he would abide by their judgment.

Emmanuel stayed behind, swaying on his feet, while Piaktok moved toward Jerek. Piaktok's features held some of the animalistic quality of his seal form, teeth bared, insensate of anything but the most basic drives and desires. He already had a fierce erection that mirrored Jerek's own.

It didn't matter that Jerek had an audience, that the Northerners watched him in his most vulnerable moments. He felt no shame here. He was their king, and exposing his worst flaws and working to redeem them only raised his status in their eyes.

Piaktok crept forward, step by sensuous step. The expression on his face chilled Jerek to the core. If he'd been able, he would have fled, but his legs refused to work. Piaktok came nearer and nearer until Jerek could smell his masculinity along with the tang of salt. Beautiful brown skin, strong legs that joined together with the perfection of manhood. Jerek could have had it for the asking once. Now he would have to earn it.

His cock came tantalizingly close to Jerek's mouth. Jerek's lips parted. He could almost taste Piaktok, wanted to badly.

Piaktok didn't let him. He pounced.

Jerek didn't fall back as he'd expected. Piaktok held on to him, swinging him this way and that. His strength surprised Jerek, as did the determination with which he acted. Piaktok danced a sort of ritualized fight. The blows didn't hurt this time, although the effort expended was entirely real. Piaktok lunged at him again and again. He nipped Jerek's ear and shoulder and neck, not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to make his anger and intentions known. Jerek had never experienced this side of the Seal; his Piaktok had been content enough to follow and take care of him. This Piaktok played the dominant male determined to make his wishes known.

Jerek liked it.

Little by little, the moves became not about anger and right but about seduction. Piaktok's bites turned into teasing kisses. The struggle for dominance metamorphosed into the manipulation of bodies, to delight and arouse.

Yet in this dance, Piaktok still dominated. Jerek couldn't escape even if he'd wanted to. The Seal's body undulated against his, teasing him by thrusting his hardened cock between Jerek's legs.

It was power and dance and love and Piaktok's attempt to show Jerek a far better way to solve their disagreements. He pinned Jerek facedown, exactly as Jerek had done

to him two days earlier, but Piaktok held no rage. His cock nudged Jerek from behind, pressing slowly inward.

Jerek considered the irony of being the king, no longer dominant. He relinquished all control to one of the men who knew him best. Piaktok touched every part of him. It was as if his uncanny seal senses carried over into his human form. He knew exactly what felt good and what didn't, what would extend Jerek's pleasure for hours and what would make him come in an instant.

Hands and lips and weight, he was entirely at Piaktok's mercy. Piaktok's gestures made it clear that he meant Jerek to let go of his utter need for control. Here, submission meant survival. Jerek found it incredibly hard. Until now, he hadn't known what true freedom meant. As an orphan, he'd been penned in by his circumstances and the city constables who had allowed him no leeway. On the *Tophet*, he'd had no choice but to constantly follow orders lest he be beaten or starved. In the North, he'd found his way to the Citadel but still worried that he couldn't learn what he needed fast enough, or that he pretended to know things he did not so as not to disappoint the Northerners.

It was a lie, all a lie. No king deserved the title when ruled by fear and doubt. Piaktok wanted him to be himself, a Jerek with no fear, a king who no longer held on to the hatred of his lover...or himself.

"Get Emmanuel. I need him."

Piaktok levered himself up and considered the request. At last, he nodded and went to fetch their other lover. Emmanuel, wearing a frightened, confused expression and a bandage around his eyes, sat on the ground, back resting against the Seal's chest, fingers threaded through Piaktok's. They were in love; Jerek could see that clearly. He wanted to be a part of that so badly that his whole body ached.

Jerek longed to peel the bandage off, to see his lover's full expression, but neither did he want to harm Emmanuel further. The chanting faded, and now there was only a drumming soft enough to allow them to hear each other.

"Why?" Jerek asked him. He knelt before Emmanuel, no longer disgusted by the idea that others had touched him. Piaktok had obviously made love to him, and Jerek had no qualms with the Seal. They had shared love in the past, and now they would share each other. "Why sleep with the captain instead of me? What did I do?"

"You made me love you. You made me believe in your dream." Emmanuel's hands groped at him, then tangled in Jerek's hair. "I didn't choose to go. Not at first." His body tensed.

Piaktok wrapped his arms around Emmanuel's chest and signed, "Ask him what the captain did."

Jerek did. "I know he asked you to do chores, but —"

"Chores." Emmanuel laughed bitterly. "Clean the carpet, he said, but it was Fritz who ended up cleaning me."

Jerek felt sick, remembering the night Emmanuel had smelled so good. His own hurt brought a river of emotions to the surface. "How could you give in so easily? Why did you let the captain *do* that to you?" His heart pounded within his chest. It didn't make sense; none of it did. "You should have told me. I would have made him stop. I would have made *you* stop. My dream — this dream — wasn't worth losing you."

"I couldn't stop him. I wanted to protect you and your dream, more than anything, but I *couldn't*. I tried. Oh, gods, I tried. I tried." His cheeks sparkled with tears. Piaktok kissed them away. "I went every time he sent for me, because he threatened you. I couldn't bear to see you hurt, and I know I hurt you because I had to lie to save you. He fed me, and he made Fritz fuck me, and sometimes I enjoyed it, and I forgot why I hated him, because you'd started to hate me too. And then you left..."

Piaktok's troubled eyes met Jerek's. He chafed Emmanuel's arms, which seemed to soothe him a little.

Jerek took a deep breath before he prodded Emmanuel. "I left. And then what happened?"

"He was furious. You'd cost him support from the queen. He made me his full-time pet in retaliation, as if by being around him constantly I would be able to remember something you'd told me. We went to port after port, searching for more information about the Citadel. Always, he took me with him. Fritz tugged me around on a chain like a dog, just like the pendant you gave me. They tried everything to get me to talk. Took me to doctors who tried drugs and hypnosis, and when none of that worked, they settled for fucking me more."

"Oh, gods." Jerek went numb. They'd tortured Emmanuel, all because of him and the damn Citadel. Guilt racked him, not only for the abuses he'd given Emmanuel, but also for the terrible words he'd just spoken. Jerek saw then how wrong he'd been about his lover, how terribly, horribly wrong. Jerek had betrayed *him*, not the other way around.

Piaktok must have sensed his thoughts, because he signed, "Enough. No more pity for yourself. He needs your love, not your sorrow."

"I dreamed, Jerek. I dreamed for so long that I would find you and that you would welcome me back into your arms and your bed. I never gave up on you. Never."

And it must have hurt him deeply to find that Jerek had rejected him outright. "I'm sorry," he said. "For everything. It's me who should be begging your forgiveness." And from the look in Piaktok's eyes, the Seal wanted Jerek to do just that.

"Jerek." Emmanuel's voice wavered. "I didn't lie to you. They're coming. The captain traded the steamship in for an airship. They couldn't find the Citadel by land or by sea. They'll find it by air instead."

"I know. I believe you. But later..." For the first time since he'd seen Emmanuel, Jerek let his true desires cleave to the surface. Beneath the scars, behind that damp cloth around his eyes, was the man Jerek had loved since childhood. He'd grown up handsome and strong.

Emmanuel's palm rested against Jerek's chest. "I want you, Jerek. I have for so damn long!"

"I'm here. I'm yours. Always." Jerek embraced him, letting Emmanuel know exactly where he was. They tore at each other with all the strength they had. Emmanuel reacted from the pain of his long torment; Jerek from the agony of knowing that none of it could have been helped, that it was all meant to be, for this moment. Emmanuel clasped his face and kissed him, tongue searching his mouth, the sensation odd after so much time with Piaktok.

And then Jerek reached for Piaktok. They needed him, the one who made them both more than they could be either alone or with each other. Their Northern lover, the soul of the land.

Bodies met, and it no longer mattered who touched whom or whose hand grabbed whose cock. They were one being, one writhing body. Lips met Jerek's. A firm cock entered Jerek from behind, and it was bliss, utter bliss to feel the thickness within him, to surrender to a man who loved him.

He gave as good as he got. One needy cock nudged his mouth. Jerek let it in, savoring the slight salty taste. Piaktok, which meant it was Emmanuel rocking him from behind. Jerek licked and sucked Piaktok's shaft, and took a moment to liberally spit on his palm and finger. He worked his slick hand around to Piaktok's buttocks and slid a finger inside. Piaktok jerked. Jerek found that inner sweet spot and worked it. The Seal's hands grasped Jerek's head and tangled painfully in his hair.

Climax came, a fierce ripple that hit each of them at nearly the same time. Emmanuel cried out, his voice rising above the chanters. Piaktok's head tilted back, mouth wide in the scream he couldn't sound. Jerek's love for them both intensified, so much so that he thought the feeling would rend him from the inside out and he would die exquisitely happy.

They collapsed in a heap, exhausted emotionally and physically. The drums and chanting died away until the only sound remaining was the heavy breathing of the three lovers. Arms and legs were hopelessly entwined, and Jerek had never been so blissfully peaceful or whole in his life.

Their easiness shattered with a single sound.

Thump, thump, thump.

“Oh, gods,” Emmanuel whispered. “He’s here.”

Chapter Seventeen

"I can't take you with me. You still can't see; I don't want you to get hurt."

The kiss Jerek placed on Emmanuel's cheek did little to soothe his disappointment. It wasn't fair; he had as much or more reason to hate the *Tophet* and its crew. He should be out there fighting.

"I'm sorry," Jerek said again. "You'll have to stay in my room. It's in the safest part of the Citadel. I'll show you."

Jerek's arm wound around his. Emmanuel plodded glumly along, feeling worse than useless. Even Piaktok had gone to help. "Maybe my eyes have gotten better. If we just—"

Jerek grabbed Emmanuel's hand before it could reach the bandage around his eyes. "Don't. Not until Atka says you can."

A growl erupted from Emmanuel's throat. "I'm sick of this. I'm tired of being helpless."

They stopped. "You're not helpless. If you were, you wouldn't have been able to find me."

"But I can't do anything to help you."

"You *are* helping me by staying safe so I don't have to worry about you!" He started walking again. "Here we are. My room."

Emmanuel ground his teeth together in an attempt to keep from complaining. Jerek didn't need him to fuss. He focused on memorizing where everything was. The bed—a real bed, not a pile of furs—the washroom, the wardrobe, a table with an ample supply of food and drink. "Enough for a siege," he said.

Jerek didn't laugh. "There's one more thing." He took Emmanuel's hand and guided him over to the wall. "Two steps to the left of the bed. There's a button here. Feel it?" Emmanuel did and nodded. "Push it."

There was a *click* and a sudden rush of warm air. Emmanuel stepped back. "What the hell happened?"

"It's a hidden door."

"To where? Hell? It feels hot over there."

This time, Jerek laughed. "Not hell, though it does lead down near the hot springs. It's a way out. If you hear anyone coming, I want you to use it. There's a store of supplies. You'll find them. When you do, you'll be at a crossroads. Go to the right and then take two lefts. Got it?"

"Got it." Fear, at last, coursed through him. Jerek believed that the Citadel would be attacked inside and out. "Don't," Emmanuel said. He pawed the air somewhere near Jerek's voice. There. He found the stubble on Jerek's face. "Believe that we'll succeed. Believe that we'll be safe and survive, and so will Piaktok." He leaned forward for a kiss. "Believe that I love you. Always."

Their lips met, and for one wonderful moment, there was only this kiss and nothing else. Emmanuel gloried in it, in Jerek's taste, in the feel of his hard body.

Only a moment; then terrible reality intruded. From the distance came the faint *thump, thump, thump* of the approaching airships.

"I have to go," Jerek said and left him alone.

* * * * *

The ship was gigantic, far bigger than anything Jerek had imagined. A huge oval balloon kept it aloft. Smokestacks along the top of the ship pumped hot air into the balloon. From down on the ground in the open space before the Citadel, the people aboard looked like ants running around on the deck. One person stood at the prow, the same unmistakable figure who had watched him and Emmanuel in much the same way on the *Tophet*.

"Harper." The name tasted like poison. This was the man who'd tortured Emmanuel and made everyone's lives aboard the *Tophet* unbearable.

He now drove an airship with cannon ready to destroy the Citadel.

Thump, thump, thump. The engines pounded steadily as the airship drew nearer. The sound sent shivers down Jerek's spine, especially when he realized the sound belonged to not one ship but three.

"Gods have mercy," he whispered. Piaktok looked at him, worry evident in every angle of his body. "Aim for the balloons, the rudders, and propellers," he told the Northerners beside him. "If we disable the ships, we might be able to use the mountains to our advantage." Indeed, he could already see small avalanches starting from the sound alone as if the valley itself were angered by the intruders.

Perhaps it was; Jerek still only had a faint idea of the magic up here in the mountains. Men carried two souls; why not the trees and mountains?

"Aim for the cliffs as well. Use nature itself against them. We will succeed," Jerek told the people. "I believe; the invaders shall not take what is not theirs to take!"

Down the line, the Northerners let out their war cries. Yips and growls, bellows and howls. The mountains shook a little more.

Jerek waited. The ships drew nearer and, he was pleased to see, looked to already be having trouble. The altitude and frigid air couldn't be making it easy to maneuver here; indeed, the ships hadn't gone *over* the cliffs. They'd been forced to maneuver at a

low speed through the canyon barely wide enough to accommodate them. The first had partially entered the valley.

Jerek wasn't taking any chances. "Fire!"

Atka had supplied his people with modern weapons: pistols, crossbows with steel-tipped arrows, and larger, thick-barreled guns that had to be set on the ground to be shot. A flurry of ammunition vaulted toward the ship. Much of it fell short or clattered harmlessly off the metal hull, but a few hit their marks.

In answer, the side of the ship flared.

"Down!" Jerek screamed before a cannonball wailed through the air. A huge *boom* echoed in the valley as a volcanic volley of snow erupted into the air. A few Northerners wailed in pain. "Again. Keep firing. Take whatever shots you can get."

The Northerners did what they could. More arrows and harpoons; two, thankfully, struck the rudder. The ship listed to the side, dangerously near an icy wall. Two more cannons launched. Most of the Northerners were able to get away, but the body of one was thrust into the air by the ball's impact.

"Gods. We need to get closer. These aren't much good at this distance," Jerek muttered. Still, he aimed his pistol at the balloon, praying that a few of his shots would hit home. He saw the flare of cannon fire just in time to roll to the side.

Boom!

Shards of ice and snow blew over him. Gods, that was close. Worried, Jerek reached for Piaktok—who wasn't there. "Piaktok!" he cried, but there wasn't time. More gunshots rang out. Arrows and harpoons flew. Northerners spread out, each trying to get a better angle to shoot and also to give the ship more targets to fire at.

"Piaktok!" Jerek shot round after round, all the while hoping, praying that somehow the Seal was still alive and wasn't lying somewhere bloody and covered in snow. Thank the gods that Emmanuel wasn't here; he wouldn't have been able to see the targets coming.

Fire and roll. Fire and roll. He followed the example of the others, and more and more often, the cannon struck empty ground.

Still no sign of Piaktok. But then...

Jerek's gaze was drawn to the cliffs just outside the narrow canyon. A lone figure was working his way up, inch by dangerous inch.

"No." Jerek clasped a mitten over his mouth in disbelief.

Someone grabbed the scruff of his jacket and yanked him back just in time for another explosion of snow. "What were you *doing*?" Nutaaq the Bear asked him.

Still in shock, Jerek pointed at the ice wall.

Nutaaq looked, but only for a moment. "Either he'll make it, or he won't, but we certainly won't if we just sit here. *Move!*"

Fire and roll. Fire and roll. All these little bits of ammunition were like shooting darts at an ice bear; they stung him instead of causing mortal wounds and only served to make the beast madder. "We need a miracle," Jerek muttered. He believed that the Northern spirits would provide; but he also believed they would not do so without the Northerners doing as much as they could to help. Every time he moved from one position to the next, Jerek glanced at the cliff. Piaktok was still there, working his way over near the ship. If anyone aboard saw him, they could easily fire a pistol at him and knock him down.

The first airship was nearly free of the canyon. Black triangular shapes took off into the air. Gliders, each with a man strapped to it. Jerek and a few others looked up, wondering what kinds of terror would come next. The gliders brought rain, glistening greenish droplets. Some of it splattered onto Jerek's mitten. A moment later, it had eaten right through the hide.

Jerek tore the mitten off, preferring the risk of frostbite to the agony of acid eating his skin. "Bring them down. Stay out from under them, but *bring them down!*"

The Northerners changed their targets. Several screamed as the acid hit their skin, but they kept firing. Two gliders spiraled downward. Three. But there were ten, twenty, thirty of them, circling above the valley floor like vultures waiting for the kill. Deadly green rain continued to fall.

"I believe we will survive. I believe," Jerek said fervently. But he had no idea how to attack the swift-moving gliders that kept themselves easily out of range. Birds. If only they had some birds.

And there, above the gliders, came a flock of rescuers. Jerek couldn't tell if they were Northerners or not, but there were white owls, snow geese, and two dozen shrieking terns. They went after the gliders with single-minded intent, landing on the surface and pecking viciously at the joints holding them together. Men screamed as they plunged to the ground. Northerners dashed toward the fallen to ensure their deaths.

Still, the cannon kept firing. Once the Northerners got lucky when a cannonball hit one of the gliders, but only once. They still had to flee for their lives, stopping to take shots whenever they could.

"Please, Piaktok," Jerek said to himself as the tiny figure climbed higher and higher. "We need our miracle now."

More running and shooting. The next time he had a chance to look, the figure on the cliffside had disappeared. "He's safe. I believe he'll be all right," Jerek said to whatever gods were listening. He couldn't lose Piaktok. Not now.

A bright flash of light erupted aboard the first ship. "He's done it!" Jerek cried, grabbing for Nutaaq's arm. "Fire! Everyone, fire at the ship!"

Again, the Northerners followed his orders without question. This time, their gods decided to aid them. The light and noise made the cliffs tremble. Clumps of snow tumbled down. The ship dipped and swerved wildly. Jerek's stomach dropped just watching it. And then it curved back toward the canyon's mouth, head-on into the ship that had been following it.

A deafening *boom* reverberated throughout the valley. Flames and smoke spewed into the air, so bright it blinded him. Jerek had to brace himself as the ground trembled. The tops of the canyon walls crumbled. Chunks of ice bounced as they cascaded down.

"*Piaktok!*" Jerek shouted, but the name was lost amid the deafening roar. The air turned white, drowning the ships in a tidal wave of snow that grew, spreading outward toward the valley floor.

Nutaaq, in bear form this time, grabbed Jerek's jacket in his teeth and ran. Jerek didn't fight him but looked back hopelessly as the canyon wall crumbled and took Piaktok with it.

Only when the roaring stopped did Nutaaq decide they were safe from the avalanche. He set Jerek down and shifted back to human form. Around them, the surviving Northerners had gathered, all staring at the horror their efforts had wrought. Blackened, scarred wreckage poked up through ice and snow. Wisps of black smoke trailed weakly toward the sky.

"I think the canyon just got a little wider," Jerek told Nutaaq, who nodded. "We have to see if anyone's alive in that mess." He prayed silently that Piaktok, somehow, would be among the survivors.

Nutaaq called to the others in their own language. He shifted, as did a number of his kinfolk. Wolves, foxes, caribou, ermine, and a pair of musk oxen dashed forward. Several others stayed in their human form, able to move faster on human limbs. This time, Nutaaq urged Jerek to mount. The Ice King did, finding it difficult to stay on the back of a moving ice bear without a harness.

Paws, hooves, and hands all dug at the snow. Most of the crew was dead. The few survivors were pulled carefully from the wreckage and given what immediate care was possible. Jerek recognized one of the survivors; no one else aboard the *Tophet* had been so large and blond.

Fritz breathed shallowly. Blood soaked through his shirt and pants leg. Blackened skin covered his left arm and side. "Where is the captain?" Jerek asked him.

The big man only smiled. "Gone."

"Dead?"

"Just...gone." He refused to say anything more.

Frustrated, Jerek walked away from the wreckage. The others were better equipped to deal with this anyway; many, in their animal forms, could sniff out the living and figure out how best to reach them. Jerek was of little use here.

He gazed back at the Citadel, still miraculously shining and intact. Two black triangular shapes rested in the snow just outside the door. Gliders.

Jerek took off at a run. "*Emmanuel!*"

Chapter Eighteen

Emmanuel never considered himself a complete coward, but he found the noise echoing even this far inside the Citadel frightening. Cannon fire. Gunshots.

And then one final, deafening roar that shook the Citadel so badly that Emmanuel fell to the floor. Certain that last attack had been on the Citadel itself, Emmanuel fumbled for the catch for the secret door. It swung open. Emmanuel closed it behind him then, with one hand on the wall for guidance, traveled downward.

It was warm but not uncomfortably so. He found the supplies, just as Jerek had said. Several fur outfits and packs that included food and flasks of water.

But now that he was down here, alone, in a place he didn't know and couldn't see, he was terrified. Jerek had said left, and two rights, hadn't he? Or was it the other way around? Oh, gods.

"Don't be stupid," he muttered. "Think. Think." Left and two rights. It was the first direction that had popped into his head. Or maybe he should just stay here for a while. It wasn't likely that any invaders would find him down here.

Still, the thought of keeping still made him uneasy. Being cautious, he grabbed one of the fur jackets and pants along with a pack and set off along the left corridor. He hadn't gone more than a few steps before he heard someone calling his name.

“Emaaaaaanuel.”

The voice echoed against the stone walls. It wasn’t Jerek; it was too smooth. Panicked, Emmanuel fled, groping his way through the hallways.

“Where arrrrre you, my dear Emmanuel?” The voice was higher pitched, almost feminine, and wouldn’t stop.

And then instinct brought him to a dead halt. The air had changed. Cooler, and the place felt more open. Too open. Cautiously, he dropped to his knees and patted the ground, or lack thereof, in front of him.

He knew immediately that he’d gone the wrong way. He should have turned right, and now, instead of finding a way outdoors, he found a dead end at the edge of a precipice. He stifled the rising terror. He couldn’t run forever. Jerek and Piaktok weren’t here to help him; they’d gone out to deal with the airships, and they might both be dead now. It was only Emmanuel. And the captain.

Whatever happened, he wouldn’t let himself be captured. Better to step off the edge than let the captain get ahold of him again. Though if this was his time to go, he was damn well going to take Harper with him.

Time to face his fears. Still on the ground, he turned toward the hallway. He strained to hear Harper’s footsteps.

“Emmaaaaaanuel,” came the voice again.

The footsteps changed direction, shuffled toward him. The closer he got, the more Emmanuel realized the captain must be hurt. The steps weren’t clean, but more of a *step-drag, step-drag*. Emmanuel’s heart pounded in his chest. Maybe he had a chance after all. If he caught the captain just right, he could throw Harper off the precipice.

If he was lucky. Damn lucky.

“There you are, my dear Emmanuel. What happened to your eyes?”

The voice, back to its normal tone, made Emmanuel shudder.

"Your boyfriend is dead, you know. If it weren't for you, I never would have been able to find this place. It's mine now, and you've earned my great respect. The queen will reward us both. All the wealth we could ever want, because we gave her the Citadel she coveted." The captain drew near enough that Emmanuel could feel his breath on his face. "I have a reward for you too, my loyal Emmanuel." He pressed something familiar into Emmanuel's palm. The dog talisman.

Jerek might be dead, or Harper might be lying. Emmanuel didn't want to think about the former. Not yet. Time to show the captain this dog could bite.

Before the captain had time to react, Emmanuel grabbed Harper's wrist and swung him around and over the edge of the cliff. He kept hold of the captain's wrist with the intent of making this torment last as long as possible before he let go.

Harper screamed.

Like a *woman*.

Emmanuel lay flat on his belly, trying to understand what he'd just heard. Harper was lighter than he'd expected. A woman's weight.

"Don't let go. *Please* don't let me go!" Terror made Harper's voice rise even higher to a woman's natural tones.

Oh, gods. *Gods*. This couldn't be, and yet it made a horrible kind of sense. All those years he'd been her pet, he'd never seen her naked because she was a *she*. No wonder Fritz had been the one to actually fuck him. He felt sick to his stomach, and sorely tempted to let go, but he wouldn't, not without a few answers. "Tell me the truth," he said. "*Madam* Captain."

"Fuck you," she said, her tone back to the usual one. "I'm no more female than you are. I can do everything a god-born man can do and more."

"Except fuck someone properly," Emmanuel said mildly. Now that he had her at his mercy, he began to enjoy himself. "That's why you had your little cabin boy do it."

"And you enjoyed it."

He let that slide. "You used me against Jerek. You used me to betray these good people. Tell me why I shouldn't let go."

"The queen will reward you."

"I don't care about any damn reward. I cared about Jerek. I cared about my life and my body, all of which you took from me!" He swung her a little as a threat. "I want to know why."

"All right. *All right.*" She scrabbled against the wall. Bits of rock echoed as they fell into the precipice. "I love you."

He snorted. "I've had enough of your lies whispered in my ear."

"It's the truth! From the moment I saw you, a gawky, half-grown boy, I wanted you. I bided my time and watched you grow into the man you are. The queen's desire to find the Citadel was the excuse I needed. I enjoyed every moment I had with you, even when I hated you more than anything in the world."

That at least sounded like the truth, but Emmanuel was still left with his decision. Let her go? Or let her live? Woman or not, she'd manipulated him in ways that still made him sick to think about. Any lingering desire he'd had for the captain had vanished, partly because the realization of her femininity had destroyed any last illusions and partly because now that he was in control, Harper's power over him no longer remained.

"I'm going to pull you up. And then you're going to stay still while I tie you up." With what, he didn't know yet.

"I always knew you liked it rough."

Emmanuel's stomach turned, but he pulled her up. The moment she was on solid ground, he felt her body shift. A second later, he felt the sting of a blade at his gut.

"This is your last chance, Emmanuel. Come with me back to the queen, and I'll let you live. If not, I'm afraid I'll have to end it right here," she said with genuine sorrow.

"Then end it. I will never go anywhere with you again. I'd rather die a slow and painful death than live forever as your pet."

"Gods, Emmanuel. You are so stubborn." She kissed him, and for a moment, the illusion was back. The soft, sensuous lips met his, then moved down his neck to his shoulder. Exciting as always.

But the prick of a knife blade reminded him that none of this was real.

The air suddenly shifted around him. He heard the soft *whump* of a fist striking flesh. Harper gave a strangled cry. Harper and the newcomer scuffled. Emmanuel held still, unable to see what was going on. Frustrated and desperate, he lifted the bandage from his eyes and saw...

Light. He could see electric lights that lined the cavern, and the blurred image of one lean brown body fighting with Harper. Emmanuel surged forward, thinking only that he had to get Harper away from his rescuer. He wrapped an arm around her neck and jerked her backward, but it was too late. The newcomer stumbled backward, then crumpled silently to the ground with his hands around the knife hilt that protruded from his abdomen.

Emmanuel slammed Harper's head against the ground, dazing her. "No!" He rushed toward the fallen man. He knew who this had to be. Piaktok.

"Oh, gods. Gods! Piaktok!" Emmanuel caressed the face that he could finally see. Blurred, but Piaktok was *there*. "It's all right. Stay still. Everything's going to be all right." Emmanuel knew better than to pull the knife loose. There was very little blood, but Piaktok's hazy expression was tight with pain.

Another voice echoed in the caverns. "Emmanuel! *Emmanuel!*"

* * * * *

Jerek heard his lover cry out. "We're here, by the precipice!"

The — gods, he'd told Emmanuel to turn right. *Right*. How had the fool managed to turn left? Jerek pounded toward him, Nutaaq on his heels, praying that Emmanuel was uninjured.

They rounded the corner and stopped dead, trying to take it all in. Captain Harper lay on the ground, dazed or unconscious. Piaktok—oh, thank the gods, *Piaktok*—lay with his head in Emmanuel's lap, knees in the air, one hand clutching the hilt of a knife protruding from his belly. The wound would be mortal if not treated, but not immediately so. Emmanuel, bandage gone from his eyes, looked straight at him.

"You can see me."

"Yes. Sort of." Emmanuel grinned, then jerked his head at the captain. "Tie her up. Then help me. We have to get him to Atka."

"Go," Jerek told Nutaaq. "Find Atka. Get her here." A moment later, a huge ice bear raced off down the corridor.

Only when Nutaaq had gone did Jerek realize what Emmanuel had said. "Her?"

"The captain. Just do it. Quick, before she comes to!"

Jerek decided not to argue. He grimly tore strips from the captain's shirt and used them to bind her wrists and ankles. She groaned but didn't fight. Now that her shirt was mostly gone, he could see the thick bandage that she'd wrapped around her chest to disguise her breasts. He didn't know what to think; he didn't have time right now anyway. His lovers were more important. Done with his chore, he knelt at Piaktok's side. "I thought you were dead, you crazy fool. I thought you were *dead*! How did you get away from there?"

Piaktok managed a shaky grin. "I flew," he signed.

"You flew. Shifting into a bird now, are we?" Jerek tried to keep his voice light to hide his worry.

He couldn't hide much from Piaktok, though. "Where is Atka?" his hands asked.

"I don't know. She could be anywhere between the Citadel and the canyon where the airships went down. There's a lot of wounded on both sides. It's going to take Nutaaq a while to find her."

Piaktok nodded, black eyes full of pain.

"Is there anything we can do?" Emmanuel asked.

"Keep him comfortable. Maybe..." Jerek rested his hand on Piaktok's forehead. "If we pull this out, and you shift, will that heal the wound?"

Piaktok managed a tiny shake of his head.

"Will you be able to shift at all? Or are you in too much pain?"

He gestured feebly. "It won't work. I need..."

"Atka. I know. She's coming, as fast as Nutaaq can run. Hang in there."

Behind them, Harper groaned. Emmanuel turned to her, his face full of hatred. "What do you think we should do with her?"

"It's your decision. He — she — hurt you the worst."

"Stop saying that," Harper said.

"What?" asked Jerek.

"*She.*" She spat the word as if it were something foul. "That's not what I am."

"I don't care what you call yourself," Emmanuel said. "You're a ruthless, manipulative bastard. I should have dropped you down the crevice when I had the chance!"

"Why didn't you? Too cowardly?"

"No. Because..."

Piaktok started to shiver. Shock, Jerek thought. Or —

"He doesn't understand hatred. It will drive him away." Gods. It was happening again, only this time it was Emmanuel with the grudge instead of Jerek. It had driven Piaktok's human soul away last time; what would it do to him now that he was injured and weak?

But Emmanuel was a better man than Jerek had been. "I'm furious with you. I always will be. But I don't hate you; I pity you, always having to lie and manipulate to get your way."

"I don't lie," Harper said. "I loved you. But I love my queen and country more."

"Love. You threaten my first lover and try to murder the second. You attempt genocide and dare to call it *love*?"

"Call it what you will, *dog*. I regret nothing. I'd do it again, if it meant I could earn my queen's love and respect."

"And what kind of respect will she have when she sees you returned in rags, under an honor guard of Northerners?"

Jerek shot him a look. "Fritz and the rest of her crew too?"

Neither man missed the spark of relief in the captain's eyes at hearing her cabin boy was still alive. "Them too," Emmanuel said. "Enough death. Enough hatred. Let the queen punish *him* however she wishes."

"Thank you," Harper said.

"I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for him," Emmanuel said as he stroked Piaktok's cheek. The Seal had stopped trembling, but he still looked deathly pale. "Now shut up."

The cavern went silent except for Piaktok's harsh, shallow breaths. Emmanuel held one of the Seal's hands, Jerek the other; then they clasped each other's palms. "I believe you'll be all right," Jerek said.

"So do I," Emmanuel said. "I believe I love both of you and that we'll share long, happy lives."

And then, from down the corridor, came the sound of paws pounding against the stone, and they knew it would be so.

Chapter Nineteen

Late the next day, the three of them were in Piaktok's room watching the Seal sleep. Emmanuel rejoiced that he could actually *see* his lover now. His sight had steadily improved, although he still had trouble seeing distances. Up close, though, Piaktok was every bit as handsome as he'd "seen" with his hands. Best of all was the expression Piaktok had worn when he saw the both of them just before he'd fallen asleep, one full of love and gratitude.

Atka had dressed Piaktok's wound at the Citadel, then had him taken by sled to her surgery where she spent several nail-biting hours repairing the injury. He was pale but breathing regularly, and the morphine Atka had given him ensured that he felt no pain.

He would recover fully, Atka said, "As long as the both of you are *gentle* with him!"

"Oh, we'll be gentle," Emmanuel assured her. Jerek grinned. Just seeing that on Jerek's face made Emmanuel's heart leap with joy.

"Good. Behave yourselves. I've got more wounded on the way because of that mess you made, *King* Jerek."

Another smile, this time at the appreciative tone in Atka's voice. "I couldn't have done it without you and the rest of your people."

Atka patted his shoulder. "They're your people too. You proved that yesterday."

"Thank you," Jerek said. "I'm honored."

"You're welcome. You've earned it. Now, keep an eye on him, but leave him alone!"

For two weeks, on Atka's orders, they let Piaktok rest, visiting him by day and being shooed out of his room at night. Jerek and Emmanuel had to satisfy themselves with each other. It was good.

"But something's missing," Jerek said.

"Not *something*. Someone." He felt it too; their Northern lover strengthened and added to the bond they had. Piaktok was a welcome part of them now, and Emmanuel missed him. "What good is a heart and mind without a soul to temper them?"

That night, after Atka had gone to bed, the two of them sneaked into Piaktok's room. "It's dark," Jerek complained. The light provided by a few dying embers in the hearth was hardly enough to see by.

Emmanuel laughed. "So? It's more fun this way. Isn't it, Piaktok?"

In answer, the Seal found both their hands and pulled them down, one on either side of him. "Does it hurt?" Emmanuel asked. He carefully touched the still-healing scar on Piaktok's belly.

"He'll be sure to let us know if it does," Jerek said knowingly.

By unspoken accord, Emmanuel and Jerek both turned their attentions to Piaktok's comfort, neither wanting the Seal to overexert himself on his first postinjury sex. For a long time they were content to simply be with each other, kissing and touching, exploring their bodies anew. In the dark, it was easy to lose track of who was where.

Something long and firm nudged Emmanuel's thigh. "Jerek? Is that you?"

"Is what me?"

"This."

A pause. "No..."

The Seal's snort sounded like laughter.

Both humans groaned. "*Piaktok!*"

"Should we try it?" Jerek asked.

"I'd rather not, but you're welcome to."

"On second thought, no. *Piaktok*, love, why don't you – ah. Ohhh."

Emmanuel felt a sudden stab of jealousy. "Hey. What about – *oh*." A hand found his cock. So did another. He couldn't tell if they belonged to the same man. In the end, it didn't matter. He groped in the darkness, his lips meeting a shoulder to kiss, his hands finding a cock – a *human* cock – to stroke. *Piaktok's*, from the feel of it, and it hadn't lost any of its stiffness when he'd gone from seal to human.

"Maybe we should stoke the fire," Jerek said.

"Mine's already stoked, thank you. Can't you feel it?"

"You twit."

"Do, then. Now that I *can* see both of my lovers, I want to. Besides, it is getting a little chilly in here." At that, *Piaktok* tugged him down again to nestle next to his healing body. Emmanuel set his head on the Seal's shoulder and wrapped one leg around *Piaktok's*. Comfortable, yes, but still a little chilled. *Piaktok's* arm around his shoulders helped.

"You and your thin Southern blood," Jerek teased. He used a poker to stir the embers, then set a few pieces of kindling atop them. He blew gently.

When he looked back at his lovers, *Piaktok* made a few gestures Emmanuel didn't understand. Jerek's expression turned mischievous. "If you think I blow the fire badly, then give me a minute and I'll show you how good I can blow a man."

Emmanuel's head jiggled as *Piaktok* laughed. "You'll do me after, right?"

Jerek snorted and shook his head, then turned his attention back to the fire. One by one, he added bigger pieces of wood until the flames licked contentedly at the logs. He turned, crawling toward them on his hands and knees as if he were a cat stalking prey. "Now you'll pay for that rude remark!"

He pounced – gently – landing right between Piaktok's legs. He spread them apart so his knees were raised for easier access. Jerek spent a fair amount of time stroking Piaktok's calves and thighs, teasing him with touch until he reached the inevitable. Piaktok sighed in contentment when Jerek finally took him into his mouth.

Watching his lover fellate another man, Emmanuel thought he'd never seen anything so sexy in his life. Jerek must have had plenty of practice. That, and he was showing off for his other lover. It was working. Just watching Jerek's tongue lick Piaktok's cock and balls was nearly enough to send Emmanuel over the edge.

So he distracted himself by giving Piaktok's mouth something to do. Emmanuel kissed him, stroking Piaktok's face with his hands. Piaktok returned the favor by using his own supple hands to caress Emmanuel's back, shoulders, and waist.

Emmanuel glanced back down at Jerek. The blond man had a look of satiation in his eyes. He knew what he was doing to both of them and reveled in it.

Piaktok's body shuddered. His hands clawed at Emmanuel's back as climax hit. Emmanuel embraced him, utterly entranced by what pleasure could do to a man. He held Piaktok until the spasms eased, then met Jerek's eyes.

Jerek grinned. "You're next." He found a bowl of greasy stuff and worked his way behind Emmanuel.

"But...you said –"

"Who do you think I learned that from?"

Emmanuel glanced at Piaktok, who grinned. The Seal rearranged the furs and propped himself up. He opened his mouth as if waiting for someone to feed him.

With both of them on their knees, Jerek nudged him forward so Piaktok could reach him. The warm, tongueless mouth sucked his stiffened cock inside. "Oh, gods."

"It'll get better. Just wait."

A chill slickness found its way between his buttocks. Jerek rubbed the tight ring of flesh until the last of Emmanuel's tension eased and he could slide a finger inside. In and out, in and out, as Jerek coated him liberally with the stuff. Then came two fingers to explore him inside and to toy with that tender internal point.

He moaned and tossed his head back. It landed in the crook of Jerek's shoulder. "Ready for more?"

Between Piaktok's mouth and Jerek's fingers, Emmanuel's body was so alight with sensation that he didn't have enough presence of mind to answer.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Out came the fingers, replaced by Jerek's thick cock. Emmanuel groaned as Jerek eased himself in, not from pain, but from the sheer pleasure of such intimacy with a man he'd loved from childhood. Jerek had never topped him; it had always been the other way around, and this was better, far better than anything he could have imagined. Fritz had always been rough and uncaring; Jerek had learned to be slow and sensual, letting their bodies get used to one another before trying too much.

Piaktok's black eyes glittered in the firelight, filled with love and understanding. How he could create such wonderful feelings with his lips and throat alone, Emmanuel didn't know, but it was good. Beyond good. He whimpered when Piaktok mouthed his balls and did the same magical thing.

The heat in the room rose. Between the fire and Jerek's body, it seemed like another blaze grew within him, licking ever higher until it consumed his body and broke outward. He cried out at his climax, blindly groping for Jerek's arms, needing him, needing him badly even though they were already as close as they could possibly be.

The rush of emotion had affected Jerek as well. He used his weight to pull Emmanuel down next to Piaktok so all three were there, close, together. Hands grabbed at each other, groping and pawing in an intense need for contact.

At last, the need ebbed, and they were content to lie piled atop one another. Emmanuel's throat tightened from emotion. "I love you. Both of you. Always."

"Always," Jerek agreed.

Piaktok said it best with a kiss for each.

* * * * *

In the morning, Atka opened the door to Piaktok's room ready to rail at the two Southerners for disobeying her orders. Instead, she saw the three of them, naked, limbs tangled together, wearing such looks of peace and contentment that she couldn't help but feel the same.

Heart, mind, and soul together, just as they should be. She shut the door and let them sleep.

 THE END 

Nica Berry

Nica Berry is a writer of queer science fiction, fantasy, and erotica. She's a graduate of the Clarion Writer's Workshop for Science Fiction and Fantasy, the Taos Toolbox workshop for SF/F novelists, and graduated with an M.A. in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University in January 2008. She lives in San Diego with her two cats, where she enjoys going to the zoo and taking pictures of the animals, especially lizards.

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