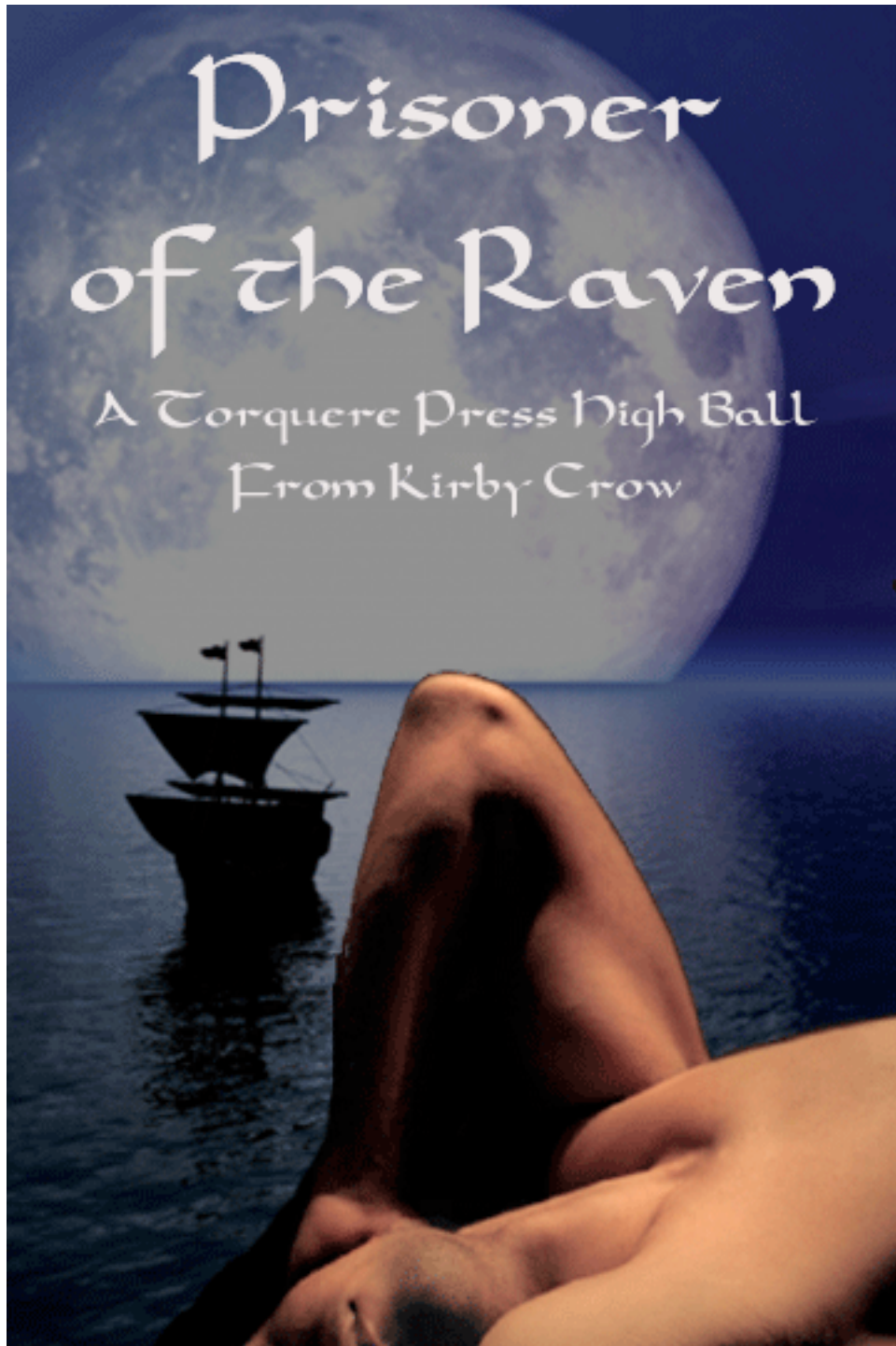


Prisoner of the Raven

A Torquere Press High Ball
From Kirby Crow



High Ball: Prisoner of the Raven

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Chapter One

861 A.D.

The Northern coast of Ireland

The pounding on the hatchway door rose to a final fury before the thick wood cracked and split asunder. The Dubhghall, the dark foreigners that some called Vikings, dropped down and flooded the small compartment below the deck, their bloodied axes gleaming wetly in the red sunset at their backs.

Aleyn crouched against the bulkhead, holding his puny knife outward.

The Vikings crowded in, their shouts dying down when they saw that no one confronted them. No one, that is, except Aleyn, just short of twenty summers and on his first voyage out.

It's likely to be my last, he thought woefully. The rest of the crew was dead, he was certain. He had taken refuge here when it was apparent that the cog would be overrun by the Vikings that had spied them running south with the wind along the coast of Eire. He did not even have a proper knife to defend himself against these axes and swords. The knife he held now was good for little besides cutting cheese and apples at supper. Hiding had seemed the best course.

One dark, bearded warrior raised his axe, and Aleyn took a deep breath and prepared to charge forward into death. Suddenly, the Northman's weapon was pushed aside by a large hand covered in studded leather. Aleyn looked up, startled, as the Viking chieftain shouldered his fellows aside and stood looking down at Aleyn with a flat expression of boredom.

The Dane was bigger than any man Aleyn had ever seen. His face was all hard angles, with burning blue eyes above the sharply-defined shelf of his cheekbones, and he had the long blond beard and hair that all the Fingall, the pale Vikings, seemed to have. All, that is, that Aleyn had ever seen.

This one would be the jarl, then. He had an air of command about him and was more richly dressed than the others, with costly chain mail over his leather jerkin and a round iron helmet which he swept off with a careless gesture. Freed from the helmet, his yellow-gold hair came nearly to his waist. The warrior whose axe he had so rudely seized backed down without a word.

"Put the knife down, Irlander," the jarl said in quiet, but very comprehensible, Gaelic. His voice was equally flat and bored, as if words were something that came to pester him and the only way he could be rid of them was to spit them out.

"You speak my language," Aleyn blurted in shock.

The jarl nodded. "I do. They do not, so put the knife down before they spit you like a boar." His mouth - full and curved beneath the bright gold beard - split in a grin. "A small boar."

Aleyn could say nothing to the accusation of smallness. Put beside these folk, he was sure that was what he looked like. To his own people, though, he was no worse than average. He had straight brown hair that always seemed to stray into his eyes, a slender nose, and a body that spoke of long years of work and effort. He was muscular and lithe as a cat, even if he was yards shorter than these men.

Maybe not yards, Aleyn thought dubiously as he reluctantly dropped the knife. The bearded jarl nodded again and spoke a few guttural sentences to his men, obviously questioning them. He turned back to Aleyn.

"Where is the silver on this ship?" the jarl asked.

Aleyn blinked. "Silver? We carry what you see."

The jarl hawked and spat on the deck. "What, grain and wool? That's all?"

Aleyn nodded. "Easier to carry grain by the coast than by wagon," he said nervously. "And the wool is worth much."

"Fah!" The jarl looked disgusted. He eyed Aleyn appraisingly. "Your people fought well. That is why we had to kill them all."

"They were not my people," Aleyn managed in a shaking voice. "They were from the Black Sea, eastern men. I only took ship with them a few weeks ago."

The jarl's blue eyes raked Aleyn's body, and he felt a stone of dread drop into his belly. He had a sudden urge, which he resisted, to wrap his arms around his body as the jarl continued to inspect him. He suddenly felt naked and defenseless in front of these warriors, and thought longingly of his knife. Not that it would have done him any good.

The jarl stepped closer and took Aleyn's chin in his gloved hand, turning his head this way and that to see the set of his features. "You have all your teeth?" He did not wait for an answer, but prodded Aleyn's mouth open with his thumb to peer inside.

Aleyn had a passing thought to bite him, but thought better of it. Every other man on the cog was already dead. He had not known the crew very well, and he had no immediate wish to join them. Best to be smart, stay alive, watch and wait. If they did not kill him right off, perhaps there would be a chance for escape.

The jarl hummed in approval when he saw that Aleyn's teeth were white and sound. Aleyn pressed his lips together and the Viking took a moment to trace the outline of Aleyn's mouth with his gloved finger. Supple leather glided warmly over his skin. Aleyn

was paralyzed with outrage. He forced himself to attempt to pull away, but was held fast by an iron hand gripping his upper arm.

“This has a sweet shape,” the jarl murmured for his ears alone, his thumb lingering on Aleyn’s lower lip. He ducked his head to look searchingly into Aleyn’s eyes. After another long moment, the Viking nodded to himself as if confirming some inner suspicion, and released him. “How old are you?”

Aleyn rubbed his jaw and scrubbed his hand across his mouth. “Nineteen,” he said through clenched teeth. “I was born under the winter moon.”

It was spring now and the ship was laden with a heavy haul of wool from the spring shearing, bound for their far eastern lands, which had poorer grazing country where folks would pay well for such bounty. Aleyn had been looking forward to the long journey and the sight of new things, which he was now sure he would never see.

The jarl gestured for his men to leave and they smirked and laughed and one of them slapped his companion on the back in some private joke. In a moment they had climbed the short ladder and were gone and Aleyn was alone with the hulking Viking.

Although he fervently hoped he was wrong, Aleyn thought he might know what the jarl wanted. His hope of escaping unscathed vanished like a puff of air when the man stepped even closer to him and put his hands on Aleyn’s shoulders. He dragged a hand through the softness of Aleyn’s chestnut hair, and Aleyn flinched when his strands caught on the studs of the jarl’s gloves and tugged painfully.

“You,” he stammered. “What do you want from me?”

The jarl just looked at him, and Aleyn noticed that he was even more handsome when very near, a thought which he quashed quickly.

“My name is Ranulf.”

“Ranulf,” Aleyn repeated, but did not repeat his question. Ranulf had begun to massage his shoulder with his other hand, almost like a caress.

“You’re not very big,” Ranulf said “but you would fetch a good price on the block.”

Aleyn was puzzled for a second, then horrified. “Slave block?”

Ranulf tilted his head. “There is another kind?”

Aleyn felt like he was in a bad dream. Ambushed on his first sailing out, the ship taken, the crew killed, and now this big oaf of a Viking pawing at him and rating his value as a slave!

He tried to push the man away. "Stop it. Let me go."

"No."

Aleyn glanced at his fallen knife on the deck and longed to have it in his hands. No brigand, no matter how comely, had a right to put hands on him.

Ranulf saw the direction of his gaze. "What will you do, Irlanderman? You think you can reach that knife before I break your back? Death is no bargain, boy. I could make you a better one."

His words made Aleyn pause. Bargain? Aleyn's own not-inconsiderable sense of self-preservation began to kick in. Perhaps it would not be necessary to die today. "What do you mean?"

"You can refuse me, and I will sell you to the Saxons as a slave, or you can try to kill me, in which case I would have to kill you. Either way, you will lose."

"So what does it matter if I die trying? Anything is better than being a slave!"

Ranulf snorted in amusement. "True. Spoken like a Viking. You have hot blood in you, boy. Worthy blood. That is why I make you this offer. It may be two moons before we depart for my home in Ribe. There are still many settlements to raid, many witless tradesman sailing their goods on this witless coast."

Aleyn ignored the insult. "What is it you want?"

"Lay in my bed at night," Ranulf said, his face very near to Aleyn's. Aleyn could see that his eyes were the color of the summer sky, and that his beard was like brushed gold. "Let me use your body when darkness covers us. In the daylight, you will work with the rest of my crew, and I will treat you fairly. On the day I set sail for Denmark, if you have done your part well and been agreeable in all ways, I will set you free on your own shores, and neither take you as my slave nor sell you to another."

Aleyn could barely breathe. Slave or whore, which was worse? He could hardly tell. He was also wary of tricks. "Alive on my own shores?" he specified, then was horrified at himself. Was he even considering this?

Ranulf chuckled again. The air of boredom and detachment was gone from him, and Aleyn began to suspect that this Northman had many faces, and he was seeing one that the jarl rarely showed anyone.

"Alive and unharmed and perhaps not even regretting. I am no green youth with fumbling hands. You will find much pleasure in my touch."

Aleyn stared at Ranulf, aware that his breathing was quick and frightened as a rabbit's.

He often thought longingly on the forbidden beauty of men, but he was vigilant to keep that secret buried inside him. How had this Viking seen it so easily?

“How can I trust you? You murdered my shipmates. They were innocent-”

“Not innocent,” Ranulf growled, his expression going dark. “Your king did not pay this year, so any ship on his coast is fair game. Your people knew of this. Why do you venture onto the water when you know we are out here, if not to challenge the rights of the strong, which Odin has granted us?”

It was insane reasoning, or at least Viking reasoning, and Aleyn could make no sense of it. He knew nothing of policies or kings, other than one had just died and his name had been Maelseachlainn. Of the new monarch, he knew nothing. He was also aware in some primal way that there was no changing Ranulf’s mind of the justness of his convictions. The Viking evidently believed that the victors deserved any spoils they could take and the weaker were born to endure it. How could he argue with logic like that, especially when he could not even defend himself?

Aleyn swallowed hard, not knowing how to answer or proceed, so he merely waited. After a long moment, Ranulf put his hand under Aleyn’s chin and tipped his face up.

“It is yes, is it not?” he said gently. “You will do this?”

Aleyn took a shaky breath and closed his eyes. “Yes,” he said in a faint whisper.

“What is your name?”

“Aleyn,” he answered.

“A-leyn,” Ranulf repeated, but he said it strangely, pronouncing it as a Viking would.

Ranulf released him and Aleyn’s eyes flew open. The Northman stepped back and Aleyn watched him in dread, knowing what was about to happen. To his surprise, Ranulf bent down and picked up Aleyn’s fallen knife and shoved it in his belt.

“Take what things are yours from this place and come with me,” Ranulf commanded, then turned and made for the ladder, leaving Aleyn to stare after his broad, armored back in utter shock. The Viking ascended in three short strides and was gone.

Ranulf strode down the deck of the vanquished cog with a smile on his lips. For all his scorn, the wool was a good find. It would be used to make the vathmal sails that all Vikings used on their longships, and would fetch a dear price. The grain was unspoiled and would feed them as they made their way up the coast. This was only their first raid of the season and more bounty would follow, but today, ah today!

The young man was fine-looking: a full mouth, a firm jaw, dark hair the color of charred oak, green eyes like spring leaves. His body was slender and taut, and already he could feel that smooth skin under his hands. It would feel like rare cloth, rich and secret, and he would have many opportunities to enjoy it before he would be expected to keep his word.

It was a promise he might even keep. If the boy displeased him, he would not harm him, just sell him and forget about it. If he did please him, he would consider going back on his word and keeping the boy for himself when they sailed for home. The winters were cold in Ribe, and he would appreciate such a body lying beside him at night, warming his bones and his prick at the same time. If Aleyn pleased him very well...

Ranulf frowned. Best not to think about that. Best not to involve his heart in such matters. Aleyn was very good to look at, yes, but he knew nothing of his nature. It was one thing to enjoy a man's body, quite another to get to know his spirit. He had only known Aleyn for a few moments, but so far he had seen nothing to convince him that he was any different from any of the other little, stunted clans that peopled this coast. He had given in and meekly agreed to let an enemy use his body like a woman. Had he, Ranulf, been the one captured, he would have killed his captor for even suggesting such a thing.

Ranulf sighed as he came out on deck and surveyed the carnage they had wrought. His men were busy loading the wool and grain onto the longship where the banner of the raven flew, and he stepped around a fallen body to reach his second, a huscarl who had been with him several years. He called to him; "Oskell!"

Oskell lifted his head and came at once like a dog to his master, yet the huscarl carried himself proudly across the deck. Although Vikings were fiercely independent, Ranulf was one jarl who demanded to be obeyed without question. Ranulf had earned his title when he was twenty-one, through his acts of courage and intelligence in battle. Following the Viking tradition, a jarl kept the loyalty of his men only as long as they felt he deserved it, and Ranulf intended to keep his title. He was now thirty-seven, still hale and strong, and any man who challenged his command had better be holding a sword when he did it.

Oskell was ten years younger and almost as tall as Ranulf, but pale-haired as a Frost Giant, with eyes that were lashed in white and almost colorless. He looked at his jarl with respect and nodded. "Já?"

"Get the rest of it aboard. Get the grain. Fire their ship. We sail south by night."

Oskell glanced over Ranulf's shoulder to the hatch that led below deck. "And the little Irlander?"

"He is coming with us." Ranulf saw Oskell's dubious look and his eyes narrowed. "You do not approve."

Oskell shrugged. “What is there to approve? You have taken what is your right.”

“But there is something.”

Oskell shrugged again. “If you just want a bedwarmer, take Gamelin. He would not mind.”

Ranulf saw Gamelin from the corner of his eye, helping Haakon load a tightly-bound bale of wool onto the longship. The young Viking had bright, curling gold hair and a somber smile, when he smiled at all. He was Oskell’s constant companion. “You might.”

Oskell shook his head, waiting for Ranulf to speak.

“Well, this is a thing.” Ranulf put his hands on his hips and spaced his feet a few paces apart. “Are you tired of Gamelin, or do you just not want the Irlander on my ship?”

“The second,” Oskell said shortly. “Bad luck. We killed his shipmates. Their fortune rides with us so long as we have him.”

Ranulf snorted. “Luck! Do you believe in magic now, too? The boy is powerless and his crewmates weaklings.”

“Not that weak,” Oskell pointed out. “We wanted slaves, remember? None of them would be taken. Perhaps this boy has some of their spirit in him.”

“He backed down quick enough when we were alone,” Ranulf said meaningfully.

Oskell’s expression turned droll. “You were not down there long enough for that.”

Ranulf gave him a ghost of a smile. “It has been a long time. Perhaps I have already had him.”

Oskell hung on to his point for a moment longer, and then he laughed. “You have not,” he chuckled. “But you are jarl. Take the boy. Throw him overboard when you are done with him, or sell him to the Britons or the Saxons.”

“I may keep him, and take him back with us on the long crossing” Ranulf stated, holding Oskell’s eye. “As you said, I am jarl. I may do as I wish.”

Oskell paused, his merriment dying. “The crossing is hazardous,” was all he would say.

And bad luck is not welcome, Ranulf finished for him silently. Well, so now he knew his crew’s mind on it. They did not want to see this particular Irlander sail away with them when they left these shores: the Irlander whose entire crew had been so determined to avoid capture, they all had to be killed. Ranulf ground his teeth. Not that he had been seriously thinking of it anyway, but if he wanted to take him, by Odin, he would!

“Get back to work,” he growled, and watched sourly as Oskell went immediately to help Gamelin load the wool, never once looking back or casting him a resentful eye. Raiding was a profession for young men. The older Ranulf got, the less patience he had for the petty arguments and frictions that sprang up between crewmen and the endless discipline he must impose on himself to maintain control of what was basically a pack of barely-tamed wolves on a crowded ship. Lately, he had begun to miss the comforts of his home and the sounds of earth and land rather than sea and shore.

Still, he was a natural leader long accustomed to command, and it irked him whenever anyone opposed his will.

I may not be a Viking forever, but I will always be a jarl, Ranulf thought. My men will submit to me, and so will this pretty-eyed Irlander.

They left the burning cog to sink into the sea. Aleyn watched the charred bow of the trade ship steam and hiss as it slipped under the smoke-roiling surface of the waters. On it were his erstwhile shipmates, killed by the Vikings, and now here he was, on the Viking longship, ignoring the stares and knowing leers of the warriors. Many of the crew were blond and fair, including their leader, but there were equally as many who were reddish haired or dark and black-bearded, thus living up to the name Aleyn’s people had for them. Dubhgall: dark foreigners, invaders. He was suspect of this apparent contradiction, but since he knew little or nothing of what happened in the cold lands and how these people mixed, he kept his confusion to himself. Perhaps the jarl had a Fingall mother.

The longship had a single, square-rigged sail, striped in many colors, and had a soaring, curved prow and stern. On both sides of the ship hung a long row of round wooden shields, elaborately painted and adorned. He walked as close behind Ranulf as he could without looking like he was tagging after him. Just like a lost pup, he thought sourly. He had often hunted rabbits with his cousins in the woods, using dogs to chase the creatures to their warrens and trap them there, and then smoking them out with deadwood and brush. Now he knew how that felt, and vowed never to hunt that way again. If I ever get out of this, was his next thought.

He followed Ranulf with the scant bundle of his possessions in his arms as the Viking wended his way through the warriors and stopped at the very stern of the ship. There was a low, wide compartment there, built like a high shelf under the ship’s railing and kept closed by a sliding wood hatch. Ranulf slid the hatch open and turned back to look at Aleyn. Aleyn peered past him. He could see only darkness beyond.

Aleyn flicked a look to Ranulf. It was nearly night now, and stars were beginning to wink and flash in the darkening sky. The firelight from the burning cog played across Ranulf’s features, giving his attractive face a sinister cast. For a long moment, Aleyn bitterly regretted his decision.

But when Ranulf spoke, he again used that gentle tone that had persuaded him to give his promise before. “Get in,” he said, too low for any other to hear. “Sleep. I will wake you at first light and show you how we sail this beast.”

Aleyn’s jaw dropped. This was not at all what he had expected. Ranulf was behaving as if they had made an honorable business deal between them. How could he reconcile the slaughter and the sordid arrangement aboard the cog with this benign, almost considerate attitude?

Ranulf’s face was gold in the firelight, lined like leather from sun and wind, and there were creases around his eyes that Aleyn was sure were from laughter.

“Are you afraid, boy?” he asked lowly.

Aleyn’s spine stiffened and he clenched his teeth. “No.”

So saying, he stepped into the darkness. Behind him, the hatchway closed and Ranulf rattled off a spate of Viking language, followed by a burst of laughter from his men. Aleyn’s face burned with shame, but he refused to feel afraid, even though he was a prisoner and surrounded by blackness.

He stood in the dark and breathed shallowly as the longship swayed under his boots. Beyond the hatchway, he could hear the crew calling back and forth to one another and the snap of a sail being unfurled. The longship was underway.

To where? Aleyn wondered, feeling his resolve against fear wavering. Where is he taking me?

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could discern the outlines of a bunk and a small table. Groping his way, he found a thick candle on a cold metal plate and groped again along the edge until his fingers touched the back of a chest. The table seemed to be bolted to the floor, but the chest moved easily and he sank down into it, crossing his arms over his bundle. Footfalls echoed hollowly on the deck beyond, sounding like drums, and he sighed deeply, suddenly very tired. He glanced at the bunk and pulled a face. A Viking bed, probably filled with fleas and god knew what else. Yet, Ranulf had seemed clean enough, and his smell was like well-oiled leather and seasoned pine and something sharp like pepper, like his uncle Padraig’s wooden chest where he kept his spices. It was not a very familiar smell, but neither was it terrible. He yawned hugely as the longship turned in the wind and the sighing of the waves seemed to sink into his blood. He could barely keep his eyes open, but he knew he must. To sleep was to let down his guard, and then what would happen to him?

Nothing worse than what has happened already, his mind whispered with practical sense. You’re already a prisoner, already sold your soul to save your skin, and sold your skin to save your life. Go to bed.

Yawning, Aleyn kicked off his boots, tottered to his feet and fell into the deep, soft bunk, his eyes already closing in sleep.

“Come on, Aleyn, show me yours!”

The voice was young, the mouth that spoke full as a peach and framed by dimples and the scant auburn hairs of a youthful beard. Kellan, his old friend, was home from his travels and staying with them for a full turn of the moon during harvest. It was late summer in their settlement, a small village in Cianacht. They were in the hayfield, drowsing after a long day of work, and Kellan had gotten a wicked look in his eyes as they lay beside one another. Kellan’s hand flicked a fly from Aleyn’s shoulder, and then strayed down to brush over his chest, pausing to pinch a nipple until it turned hard beneath his fingers. Aleyn’s breath caught in delight, and before he knew it, Kellan had sat up and unlaced his breeches and was showing him his cock. It was much like his own, pink and rigid and veined, and Aleyn stared at Kellan as he fondled himself.

“Show me yours, Aleyn,” Kellan repeated, all red curls and wicked grin, and Aleyn found his hands fumbling at his own breeches. His fingers shook so hard that he could barely get one lace through its eyelet.

“Here, let me,” Kellan laughed, and reached for him.

Aleyn watched as Kellan’s fingers negotiated the tight knots and jerked his breeches halfway down his hips. His cock bobbed in the warm air, stiff as a board, and Aleyn flushed with mingled shame and pleasure as Kellan’s hand closed over his sex and he began to stroke him.

“Here, you do the same to me,” Kellan said, smiling. He guided Aleyn’s hand to his prick. It was hot and familiar in Aleyn’s hand, and yet strangely foreign at the same time. Aleyn wet his lips and tore his eyes away, watching his friend’s face contort as he began to slide his fingers over the satiny skin. This was sin, it was. The priests said so. Utter, blackest sin.

But how can it be sin when it feels this wonderful? Oh, I’m damned now. Damned to hell and I don’t even care!

Kellan panted. “Like that, yes. Oh, Aleyn...”

Kellan leaned forward and in that moment, Aleyn knew that Kellan was going to kiss him.

It was too much. Aleyn jerked his hand away, only then realizing that his palm was wet with the seed that leaked from Kellan’s shaft. He scrubbed his hand on the cut hay and

jerked his breeches up, stumbling away, running as Kellan called after him.

“Aleyn! Come back, Aleyn!”

He shifted as he ran, back to a younger self, running through the trees with his friend Diarmit into the vivid green woods outside the village. They found a narrow ravine to hide in and sat on a hollow log, whispering and laughing. Diarmit, only a few years older than himself, had pushed his shoulder and laughed at him, and he had pushed back and thrown a few twigs, and then Diarmit, his eyes alight, had leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

It made them both pause and take a breath, and all around them the hushed forest seemed to glitter more brightly. Then Diarmit was kissing him again, his arm winding around his neck to pull him closer.

Aleyn’s shoulder erupted with fire. He shouted and jerked away, scrambling back among the dead leaves, and then he saw his Uncle Padraig standing over them.

Aleyn woke with a start, seeing only flickering candlelight and the completely strange outlines of an unfamiliar room. Someone was standing over him, a dark shape there at the foot of the bed, tall as a bear. He gasped and scooted back, drawing his knees up to his chest, his heart hammering under his ribs.

“Aleyn,” Ranulf said, again giving his name that oddly appealing accent.

A dream, Aleyn thought, massaging his shoulder. Only a dream. The episode in the hay field had been real. It had happened this past summer, only months before Aleyn had left. Kellan had decided to stay on with the family. He became a constant temptation, following Aleyn with his eyes, making excuses to be alone with him, and every time Aleyn saw him, the scar on his shoulder seemed to throb. It had scared Aleyn so much that he left his uncle’s home and signed on with the first foreign trade ship outbound from the coast, not even telling his kin where he was heading, though he was sure they would not care anyway.

Diarmit had stopped being his friend after the episode in the forest, then Aleyn’s parents died and Padraig took him in. The village priest counseled Aleyn to endure Diarmit’s hostility as the price of the charity shown to him. Later, the priest learned from Padraig the source of Diarmit’s anger, and Aleyn learned to keep his secrets to himself.

Now, he was a prisoner. He could have had Kellan, but instead a giant of a Viking now stood over him, slowly unlacing the ties of his leather jerkin.

Ranulf’s face was in shadow. “What?” he asked roughly, pulling the jerkin over his head and tossing it to the deck. His shoulders were so broad that Aleyn had a fleeting thought

that he faced a mountain.

“I was dreaming,” Aleyn whispered.

He felt, rather than heard, the amusement stealing over the Viking. “Of me?” Ranulf clambered heavily into the bed, making the straw mattress in its rope frame dip sharply.

Aleyn scooted away a little more. “No,” he got out. By the yellow light of the candle, Aleyn could make out Ranulf’s face as he rose over him and slid his hands around his waist.

“Did you sleep?”

Aleyn found he could not speak.

“Yes? No?”

Aleyn nodded.

“Ah, good. Then we begin.” Ranulf tugged hard and Aleyn found himself on his back with Ranulf practically on top of him.

“Wait!” Aleyn gasped. His hands scrabbled at Ranulf’s muscled, hairy chest, but he dared not hit him or resist. He knew better than to break a bargain with a Viking, and he had promised to give this one his body.

Ranulf rumbled deep in his barrel chest and lowered his head to nuzzle and suck at Aleyn’s neck. Aleyn shuddered. Ranulf’s beard was scratchy and the skin under his ear was sensitive, yet there was more to it than that. Exactly what, Aleyn did not yet guess, but when he felt the slick warmth of Ranulf’s tongue exploring the curves of his ear, felt the hot breath puffing against his cheek, he began to realize.

Slow, lazy heat began to travel from Aleyn’s shoulders, down his chest, over his belly, to settle between his thighs, where he began to grow hard. His eyes flew open. This was the same feeling as when Kellan touched him, the same sin! Or was it? Would he still be condemned for committing a sin when he had no say in the matter?

Ranulf had begun to pull at Aleyn’s homespun shirt, jerking on it until the button at his throat popped and a seam ripped. He tugged at the hem and rucked the material up around Aleyn’s chest as his big hands began to explore Aleyn’s body.

Aleyn’s mind worked frantically, unsure what to say or do in response.

Whereas Kellan had wanted Aleyn to touch him, Ranulf seemed content to just have him lie there. Aleyn shivered as Ranulf’s lips trailed over his cheek, skirting his nose, and then drew in a shocked breath as Ranulf’s bearded mouth covered his own. He turned his

head quickly.

“Men do not kiss!” he managed to exclaim.

Ranulf laughed and slid down a little, so that his chin was even with Aleyn’s breastbone. He licked Aleyn’s nipple and nipped it with his teeth.

“I suppose they do not do this, either?” He lowered his mouth and sucked on the hard little nub.

Aleyn whimpered. Oh, that feels good. Oh oh oh!

“Viking,” he whispered in a shaking voice, wetting his lips. “Viking, what are you doing?”

“Ranulf,” the Northman said in a voice like a slow roll of thunder.

“Ranulf,” Aleyn panted obligingly. Ranulf’s lips trailed lower, down over the skin of his belly. His thick fingers massaged the curve of Aleyn’s thigh as he coaxed his breeches down to his knees. “What are you doing?”

Ranulf growled, and Aleyn threw his head back and uttered a shocked cry as wet heat surrounded him. Ranulf had taken his prick into his mouth.

Aleyn’s back arched up off the bed. His head seemed to be packed with bits of light, like sparks from a campfire, setting his brain on fire. He gasped as Ranulf began to suck him. His trembling hands found Ranulf’s broad shoulders and he lifted his hips.

Ranulf growled again approvingly, sliding the wet ring of his mouth up and down Aleyn’s shaft, the hairs of his beard ticking Aleyn’s balls pleurably, unbearably.

Aleyn’s head tossed like a skittish colt taking the bridle for the first time. A part of him wanted to throw Ranulf off and find the nearest weapon. Yet another part, the part that was making his toes curl and the muscles in his legs twitch with the need to spend into the Viking’s mouth, that part was making his hands seek the softness of Ranulf’s long hair. That part was making his hands curve to cup the back of Ranulf’s neck, pulling him forward, pulling him to engulf him deeper, faster.

Ranulf moaned around the shaft clasped between his lips and stopped for a moment. He withdrew, causing Aleyn to groan in disappointment, and glanced up at the younger man with a smug expression.

“You learn quickly.”

Aleyn could care less about approval. Or even rape, if that was what this was. All he wanted was Ranulf’s mouth on him again.

“Please,” he whispered, his body writhing like a snake, hips arching up, his wet cock brushing Ranulf’s beard. Ranulf turned his head and gave Aleyn’s shaft a little lick, his blue eyes wicked with amusement.

“Tell me what you want.”

“You,” Aleyn gasped, not knowing the words. “What you were doing... you...”

“Say it.”

Aleyn closed his eyes, surrendering to his traitorous body. “Put your mouth on me,” he begged, his restless hands carding Ranulf’s hair, which was like long, long strands of gold silk between his fingers. “I want it again. Please.”

Ranulf took Aleyn’s cock in his hand and kissed its tip. He placed his lips just over the head and sucked very softly, as if drawing the nectar from honeysuckle. Aleyn shuddered from head to toe, realizing he was being teased.

“Damn you,” he hissed between his teeth. His hands gripped Ranulf’s neck tighter.

“Mmm,” Ranulf hummed, his mouth busy. His tongue flicked rapidly on the underside of Aleyn’s prick, and Aleyn hissed and jerked, suddenly so close he could feel his climax just hovering there, waiting to crash over him.

“Oh,” he moaned as his eyes flew wide open in startled amazement. “Oh, oh...”

Ranulf took pity on him and swallowed him almost to the base of his cock, sucking hard, his busy tongue never still, and for one long moment, Aleyn forgot to breathe.

When he did, he used his breath to utter a wanton cry that was shockingly loud in the cabin. He shot his seed into Ranulf’s mouth and the Viking murmured and hummed and sucked him harder, making Aleyn’s hands loose their grip on his hair and claw the woolen covers like a wild thing, drawing another ecstatic cry from him.

Aleyn did not even wince when there was an answering clatter of laughter from beyond the hatch. The Northmen believed he was being raped, and his cry the sound of Ranulf claiming his body against his will. If only they knew!

Aleyn collapsed back against the covers, breathing hard as if he had swum the whole length of the river back home. His whole body felt like it had been pulled and stretched like dough, and it was several moments before he realized that Ranulf was crouched on his knees over him with his breeches undone.

Aleyn suffered a moment of panic as he saw that Ranulf’s big hand was clasped around his own cock and that he was steadily stroking himself as he gazed down at Aleyn with slitted blue eyes. Aleyn’s gaze was drawn to the hard, turgid shaft caught in Ranulf’s

grasp, and his green eyes widened as he saw how big it was, how wide and flared the crown and how pronounced the thick vein that ran from base to head. It was huge!

Aleyn stared back at him, not knowing what he should do, if he should even make a sound, when Ranulf's eyes closed and he began to fist his cock faster, uttering little gasps under his breath. He grunted and gave one long, shuddering groan, his eyes squeezed tight, and a thick stream of come striped Aleyn's belly and cock with heat as Ranulf spent his lust on top of him.

Aleyn continued to stare. The Viking had brought him here to use him, or so he thought. Why did he restrain himself now, even giving pleasure when he need not even consider Aleyn's feelings? Ranulf satisfied himself as if asking (or commanding) Aleyn to do it had not even occurred to him.

This bizarre consideration mystified Aleyn, and he looked down at his belly as Ranulf finally opened his eyes and began to absently massage his seed into Aleyn's skin.

"You behaved well," he said, and Aleyn's pride was goaded. Did he think he was praising a dog?

Aleyn tried to push him off, and was further astonished when Ranulf went obligingly, rolling off to settle on his back beside Aleyn.

"Mmm," Ranulf hummed happily, folding his hands over his broad chest. "A perfect way to start a nap. Góða nótt." He did not even bother to lace his breeches back up, but left his big cock curled on his belly like a dormant serpent.

Aleyn turned his head to look at him, completely baffled, but he felt that to speak would be to risk disaster. He reached down to pull his own breeches up, grimacing at the sticky mess on his belly and swiping at it, and when he was done he wondered what he should do. Should he leave the narrow bed to the Viking, or should he pretend to ignore him, waiting for him to make the next move?

All his questions were answered when Ranulf sighed deeply and began to snore. Aleyn fixed his gaze on the cracks in the ceiling and the thin rays of starlight peeping through. His poor head was packed so full of thoughts and worry and distress with everything new and terrible and wonderful that had happened in the past day that he simply gave up and fell deeply asleep beside his captor.

Chapter 2

Aleyn slid the narrow hatch aside and squinted in the bright morning light. Above him, a pack of gulls scolded and called, and he ducked under the high shelf and left the compartment. The moment he stepped on the deck, every head turned toward him.

The stares of the Vikings were neither hostile nor particularly friendly. Instead, they regarded him with a kind of amused contempt that made his spine stiffen with offense. He had no illusions that the warriors believed their leader had kept him alive because he was valuable to their campaign, but neither was he sure that they knew exactly what transpired between him and Ranulf in the night. He wondered for a moment if such things were common among Vikings, and then had to admit that he had no way of knowing.

He stood there for a long moment, unsure of himself. He had awoken alone, not having heard Ranulf exit the compartment, and wondered what to do until his pride informed him that would not hide like a mouse in a hole the entire time he was a prisoner, waiting only for Ranulf's next appearance to use his body.

One thing was necessary. He moved to the edge of the starboard side, where a black-haired Viking was relieving himself over the rail, and unlaced his clothing enough to expose himself. The Viking barely glanced at him as he pissed into the slow-churning water below, and he felt the tension around him ease as the warriors went back to their various tasks. Perhaps this one common act that every man must perform shrank the mystery around him, made him less of a riddle and more human, though no less a prisoner.

A deep voice called to him from the bow, and he turned to see the jarl's large form framed by the shadow of his banner; a black raven on a field of yellow and red.

"Over here, Irlander!"

Aleyn was almost relieved. He made his way toward the bow, trying not to look as unsteady on his legs as he felt. Alas, his hope was in vain, for not a dozen paces more and he slipped on a wet patch on the deck and landed on his rump. Laughter cascaded over him and he sat up quickly, his face burning with humiliation.

"Sorðinn," he heard someone say very near him, and looked up to see a rugged young man with red hair and a ruddy complexion staring down at him.

"Soft cat," the man said, followed by a flow of Norse that Aleyn had not a chance of following.

Aleyn got to his feet, dusted the seat of his breeches with dignity, lifted his chin, and strode towards Ranulf.

Unlike the others, Ranulf had not laughed, but his blue eyes were merry when Aleyn

reached him. "It takes time for sea legs," he said when they were close together on the bow. "It matters little." He put his hand on Aleyn's shoulder, right where the white scar there marked him like a brand, and it took every bit of Aleyn's control not to flinch away. His pride had taken enough of a beating. It would be unwise to risk Ranulf reacting to his dislike in public.

"That man," Aleyn turned and nodded towards the red-haired man who had spoken to him. "Who is he?"

Ranulf peered over the top of Aleyn's head. A gust of salt-smelling wind caught his magnificent hair and it trailed behind him like a gold banner. "Haakon. What of him?"

"He called me a soft cat. What did he mean?"

Ranulf's mouth twitched and Aleyn sensed that he was holding back a smile. "Not important."

Aleyn frowned. "Maybe not to you." He set his chin stubbornly. "What did he mean?"

One of Ranulf's golden eyebrows climbed high. "I am the hard cat," he said. He poked Aleyn lightly in the chest with a stiff finger. "That would make you the soft cat, yes?" Then he laughed, as if it were an old joke that an Irlander could not hope to understand.

Aleyn scowled and stared out over the choppy waters, wishing the Northman in his grave. Ranulf shook his head and pointed to a group of men working on the port side near several large coils of rope. "Go to Oskell, he will show you how to work."

Aleyn was grateful for anything to take his mind off the present, so he picked his way carefully over to the men. "Which one of you is Oskell?"

His tone was bold, but inwardly he was quaking, and so he was glad when a Viking with frost-pale hair and eyes like chips of ice looked him up and down and thumbed his chest. "Oskell," he provided.

Aleyn nodded. "You have work for me?"

Oskell looked blank. Obviously, he did not speak his tongue. Aleyn pointed to Ranulf, who was now making his way to the stern of the ship to speak with Haakon. "Work." He pointed at the coils of rope the men were checking for flaws, and saw that some had been set aside for repair. "I can braid."

Oskell seemed to understand. He kicked one of the large coils with his foot and grunted as if to say 'start there', and Aleyn moved to squat on the deck beside the coil. He was aware of many eyes on him, but he concentrated on his work. There was a small cutting knife, tar, and hemp nearby, and he began the laborious task without much enthusiasm.

Work was work, and to Aleyn, one piece of labor was much like another. Whether it was shearing sheep or plowing or repairing lengths of rope, he tended to set his hands in motion and his mind adrift. It was a good habit, usually, because it made long, tedious work bearable. At the moment, it was also helping him to disregard the dull headache beginning behind his eyes. He often had this ailment, which had appeared when he was a youth, but he had never gotten used to the blinding pain and sickness it could bring. In another hour, the pain had sharpened into a red pounding behind his eyes, and he was trying valiantly to ignore it when he slowly realized that a shadow was looming over him. He looked up and saw that it was the red Viking, Haakon, the one who had called him a cat. Haakon snarled a few words at him in a guttural tone, and Aleyn realized several other men were looking at the two of them. Annoyed, he set the rope aside, wiped his tar-sticky hands on his breeches, and stood up.

“What?” he asked, irritably.

Haakon extended his hand and pushed him a little with a hard forefinger planted in the center of his chest. Aleyn rocked on his heels but otherwise did not budge. “What do you want?” he repeated.

Haakon shoved him. Aleyn went stumbling back a pace and caught himself on the railing. He glared at the red giant, his hand tightening on the little cutting knife still in his grip. Haakon shouted at him.

“I don’t know what you’re saying, you shit-faced sheep-fucker!” Aleyn shouted back.

Haakon’s ruddy complexion went nearly purple and he lunged forward, only to find himself shoved back by Oskell.

“Neil!” Oskell snapped. He stood between Haakon and Aleyn and stared Haakon down, speaking sternly. Aleyn only recognized the words Ranulf and Irlander, but nothing else. Apparently, Oskell was reminding Haakon that he belonged to their jarl.

Aleyn felt his tenuous hold on his temper slipping. Too much had happened in too short a time and his head felt like it was about to burst. He wanted to shout Oskell down, tell him he could fight his own battles. He pressed forward a little, the small knife clutched in his fist, and the big Northman swept him aside casually and focused completely on Haakon. Apparently, this was a personal battle between Oskell and Haakon, and Aleyn wondered what the cause could have been.

He opened his mouth to speak and Oskell shot him a warning glance. A younger man came up beside Oskell, a handsome youth with short, curling gold hair and a snubbed nose. The younger man took up position a little behind Oskell, staring at Haakon with an expression of challenge. If Haakon moved to strike Oskell, he might find himself with two adversaries instead of one.

Haakon looked like he was working himself up into a good, slaughtering rage, but before

Aleyn could decide whether to move back or disobey Oskell and intervene, Ranulf appeared. For such a big man, he moved incredibly fast. His muscular arm shot out and Haakon went tumbling back, almost losing his footing on the deck. Ranulf did not shout, only gazed at Haakon with a mild expression on his face, though his hand went to his waist and his fingertips brushed the haft of the long knife he kept there. His chain mail was turned to pale gold armor in the bright light, glittering like the sun on the water.

Haakon glanced from Ranulf to Aleyn, and then his mouth worked as if he would spit, but instead he meekly bowed his head. “Já,” he muttered, and moved off.

Ranulf dropped his hand. He turned to Aleyn and fixed him with a burning look. “Go. Get off the deck.”

“I didn’t do anything to-” Aleyn began.

“Go.” Ranulf said, already turning to confront Oskell and the youth whose name Aleyn did not know.

The unfairness of sharing the blame for the argument stung him, but he supposed it was not as bad as Haakon sticking a sword in him and pitching him over the side. He tried to shoulder past Ranulf, but the jarl grabbed his upper arm with iron fingers.

“Leave the knife,” he commanded.

Aleyn had completely forgotten he was holding it. Now that Ranulf had reminded him, he discovered he did not want to be disarmed again. “Are you afraid?” he challenged.

Ranulf blinked and then laughed. He made a show of taking the knife out of Aleyn’s grasp and examining it, whistling his admiration of the useless little weapon before dropping it back into Aleyn’s hand.

Ranulf ruffled his hair as if he was a silly child. “Keep it,” he chuckled, his blue eyes shining with humor.

Aleyn felt his cheeks burn with humiliation. He pushed past Ranulf and made his way back to the compartment at the stern, avoiding the looks of the warriors.

Once inside with the hatch safely closed, he hurled the knife away from him and stood there fuming. Ranulf was right: he had as much chance of killing Ranulf with a mending knife as he did of killing a bear with a sewing needle. He sank down onto the chest and eyed the rumpled bed sourly. The nights were short this time of year and it was hours before sunset, but he had no doubt what would happen when Ranulf made his appearance.

The bad part, he thought, is that it’s not half as terrible as I thought it would be. He could almost believe that this was a normal voyage, for in truth his work and the way he was

treated were not much different than aboard the trade cog. With one exception, he reminded himself. One very big exception.

He felt a flush come over him as he remembered the size of Ranulf's cock, and how he had not sought to make him touch him or take it into his mouth or body. It was almost as if the Viking was plotting out a seduction and last night was only the first stage.

Then what of tonight? he wondered, and marveled that he felt no fear. He should be afraid, he was sure. Despite Ranulf's lack of brutal treatment, he was certain the Northman could be cruel at a moment's notice. Look how quickly he had cowed Haakon on the deck!

Aleyn sighed and dropped his face into his hands. He began to wait out the long afternoon, listening to the men calling to each other and the scrape of the long oars being rolled out, the cadence as they began to row, the sound of birds and wind, and one time, Ranulf's voice rising above the others. The voice of a captain or a king, sure he would be obeyed, promising danger if he was not.

The motion of the ship was making him sleepy, and he was beginning to get fiercely hungry. At sunset, Aleyn's stomach rumbled and he yawned and stretched and looked again at the bed, wondering if he should take a nap and if Ranulf would take it as an invitation if he came in and saw him there.

As if his very thoughts could beckon, the hatch slid back and Ranulf ducked into the compartment. He held a bundle in his hand.

Aleyn's drowsiness vanished and he watched the man as he approached. Ranulf held out the linen wrapped bundle. Aleyn took it and opened it. It was bread and cheese.

"Thank you."

Ranulf shrugged. "You worked. You have to eat." He sat on the edge of the bunk and motioned to Aleyn to go ahead. Aleyn unwrapped the bundle and tore a chunk of bread off with his teeth. It was coarse and stale but it was bread, and the cheese made it go down a little easier.

"Here." Ranulf motioned for him to stand up, and Aleyn did, moving aside so Ranulf could get into the hide-covered chest he had been using as a chair. Ranulf took a long-necked pottery jug out of the chest and left the lid open. "Sit by me."

It did not sound like an order, and Aleyn was leery of the bed, but he obeyed. Ranulf opened the jug - it was stoppered with wax and a bit of wood - and took a long drink from it. He offered it to Aleyn.

"What is it?"

“Mead,” Ranulf said, pushing the jug at him.

Aleyn took a drink. It was wet and strong but far too sweet. He made a face and Ranulf laughed. “You don’t like honey wine?”

“Is that what it is?” He wiped his mouth. “No wonder it’s so sweet.”

“You do not like sweet things? My wives do.”

“I’m not your wife!” he snapped. He was angry at the comparison, but curious as well. “You have wives? How many?”

Ranulf thought. “Four. No. Three. Gunel divorced me last year.”

“And do your wives know what you like to do with men in bed?”

Ranulf did not answer, but took another long drink and pushed the jug back at Aleyn. “Your turn.”

Aleyn chewed his bread and looked narrowly at Ranulf. “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Are you ... what is the word... an ardent drunk?”

Aleyn saw that Ranulf’s eyes were again sparkling with humor, and he decided he was being teased. “No.”

“But how do you know? You have never had mead before. Maybe it is the bitter Irlander wine that makes you sour.” He smiled. “This will make you sweet and wanting to be touched.” The back of his hand brushed Aleyn’s shoulder as he passed the jug back. Aleyn flinched a little, but continued to chew his food and said nothing, only drank as he was bid, even though this mead seemed to go straight to his toes. It also had the welcome effect of banishing his headache.

Ranulf was still looking at him. Aleyn turned to eye him warily. “What?”

“You stood up to Haakon.”

Aleyn’s brow creased in bewilderment. “Course I did.”

“But you did not stand up to me on the cog.”

Aleyn gulped some more of the mead. “What’s your point?”

“That you are not a coward, yet you chose to submit to me.”

Aleyn shrugged. "It's not cowardice to want to live. It doesn't mean I'm a slave or weakling just because I know I can't defeat forty warriors with one knife."

Ranulf scratched his beard, looking at Aleyn as if trying to puzzle him out. "You are telling me you are not a thraell because you chose your master. That does not make sense."

Aleyn shifted uncomfortably. He wanted to insist that Ranulf was not his master, but feared it would provoke the man into feeling he had to prove something. Tread carefully, his cautious side warned. It was good advice.

"The man on the deck," he said, trying to change the subject. "The younger one with the nose like a cat who stood beside Oskell."

"Gamelin."

"Is that his name? He... he did not seem to like Haakon." Aleyn hiccupped as he took another long swallow of mead. He was beginning to like it.

"No, he would not. Haakon is a free sokeman. You know this word? A farmer who owes service to his jarl. I did not want to take him with us a-raiding but we were short of men. Gamelin was thraell to his family and also his..." he paused to think. "There is no word. Gamelin was in Haakon's bed before he was in Oskell's. He liked Oskell better. This did not please Haakon, and Haakon fought Oskell over it. Oskell won."

"Oh." He was a little shocked that Ranulf spoke of men being lovers with such casual ease. "And that's... I mean... that's right and well among your people? That men bed other men and do with them... well... what we did?" Aleyn's cheeks were pink with embarrassment.

Ranulf slipped the jug of mead from Aleyn's hands and took a last drink, setting the jug on the deck. "What did we do?"

Aleyn finished the bread and cheese and dusted his hands off. To Ranulf's amusement, he reached again for the jug and took another long drink. "You... put your mouth on my prick," Aleyn said lowly.

Ranulf grinned. "I like that word. Do my people object to men fucking each other? Yes and no. They object to a leader being treated as a woman in bed, but to one such as you or Gamelin, who is thraell and does not lead, but only fights where I send him, they do not really care."

"So, you can tup me and no one bats an eye, but if a man tugged you... what would that mean?"

"I could no longer lead." Ranulf said. "My men would not respect me if I let myself be

used like that.”

Aleyn snorted. “That doesn’t seem fair.” But, he thought, he’s the one who put his mouth on me. Doesn’t that mean that he was the one tugged?

Ranulf was silent for a long moment. Aleyn turned and saw that the Viking’s eyes glittered dangerously and that a cruel, calculating look had stolen over his features. It was a look he had not seen there before, and he began to feel nervous. Perhaps he had said too much.

“What are you thinking, little Irlander?” Ranulf asked after another long minute of silence.

Aleyn swallowed in a throat suddenly gone dry. “Nothing.”

Ranulf took the jug from him and set it firmly on the deck. “Why does this ‘nothing’ put the fear back in your eyes?”

Aleyn was suddenly nervous. He did not know enough about these people to go making guesses about them and running his mouth! What if Ranulf felt threatened by him and sold him to the Saxons just to keep him quiet? He would never see his home again!

“I was... it was nothing,” he blurted.

“Perhaps you are not the pretty fool I took you for,” Ranulf said, shaking his head as if at some inner folly.

Aleyn wondered if he was goading him

“Enough talk.” Ranulf placed his hand in the center of Aleyn’s chest and pushed him back. He straddled Aleyn’s chest, his broad legs on either side of his ribs, and began to unlace his own leather jerkin. When he was naked to the waist, he untied the laces of his breeches and brought out his cock, stroking it roughly in his hand before Aleyn’s eyes.

“We have never even kissed,” Ranulf observed, which made Aleyn jerk his gaze up to the Viking’s face. It was a bizarre thing to say, under the circumstances.

“What?” he got out. The mead had made his tongue fuzzy and he was sorry he had drunk so much of it.

“I only got a taste of your mouth before you stopped me. That does not seem fair.” His voice was very gentle as he continued to stroke and rub his stiffening cock before Aleyn’s face.

Aleyn licked his lips. Yes, it was strange and not at all normal to have this Viking on his chest, stroking a bead of come from his big prick and spreading it over his shaft. It was

also terribly exciting, and even though he did not comprehend the source of his excitement, it did not lessen the heat coursing through his blood.

“What do you want me to do?”

Ranulf remained silent, fisting his cock slowly and looking at Aleyn with intense interest.

Aleyn raised a tentative hand. He could feel his own prick beginning to swell and grow hard under his breeches. “Do you want me to...?”

Abruptly, Ranulf slid back and dropped to his knees at the foot of the bunk. He pushed Aleyn’s knees apart until he was crouched between them, and then began to tug at Aleyn’s breeches.

This again, Aleyn thought as he helped him with the laces. He would not object. Nothing that felt as good as the Viking’s mouth on him could he object to, no matter how much of a sin it was. To his surprise, Ranulf did not simply tug his clothing aside, but removed his boots and wool socks and pulled his breeches completely off, throwing them over his shoulder. He pushed Aleyn’s legs very far apart, and Aleyn sat up halfway with a feeling of misgiving.

“What are you doing?” he asked, for Ranulf’s index finger was in his mouth, and Aleyn stared as he watched the jarl wet his finger generously with his own saliva. He jerked back a little when Ranulf took his finger and slid it under Aleyn’s balls, the wet tip probing at the small, hidden entrance there, but Ranulf’s hand was strong on his hip, holding him in place.

Ranulf ran a spit-slicked finger around his hole, and Aleyn stiffened. “No,” he gasped.

Ranulf ignored him and continued to circle and caress that puckered entrance. Aleyn twisted and tried to slip from his grasp, which only made the Northman hold him that much tighter.

“Be still.”

“But you... I don’t like that.”

Ranulf gave Aleyn’s prick, stiff and jutting up proudly between his thighs, a dubious look. “How would you know?”

Aleyn cast about for an answer. How did he? Ranulf took his silence for assent and slipped his finger in to the first knuckle, twisting it experimentally. Aleyn’s hand gripped the Northman’s shoulder, fingers digging into skin.

“That hurts.”

“Only because you squirm about so much. Relax and it will stop.”

Ranulf’s voice was measured and low, his hands steady, and Aleyn shivered and twisted his head so that his cheek scraped the rough wool of the blankets. He struggled to bring his body under control, though every instinct he had was telling him to shrink from that invading finger, to wrench and pull away from the intrusion into his body.

Ranulf kissed his thigh. “Very good.” He pushed his wetted finger in another inch to the second knuckle, and when Aleyn tensed and gasped, he pushed yet more until his hand was flush against the curve of Aleyn’s buttocks. Aleyn trembled, his muscles shuddering with tension, and Ranulf planted another kiss close to his balls and gave the crease of his thigh a long lick.

“Give it a moment,” he soothed. “Be still.”

Aleyn exhaled sharply when Ranulf began to flick his tongue over the sensitive skin of his balls, and very nearly cried out when he felt that slick tongue probe hard at the base of his cock. He did cry out when Ranulf took him fully in his mouth in one sudden movement, surrounding his cock with incredible heat, swallowing him to the base. It felt like his skull was exploding.

“Oh god,” he gasped.

Ranulf hummed around the hard shaft in his mouth and stopped for a moment, looking up at Aleyn, a pleased smile on his wet mouth. “You liked that, I think.”

Ranulf’s finger was still inside him, but it did not bother him so much now that his cock was hard and Ranulf was pleasuring him so well with his mouth.

Aleyn did not reply, but reached down and cupped Ranulf’s face in his hands, guiding it back to his member. Ranulf grinned and complied, taking him back in and sucking him, sliding his mouth up and down, his bearded cheeks hollowing and filling. He slid his hand under Aleyn’s rump, cupping a round buttock as he aided Aleyn’s thrusts into his mouth, bringing him closer to completion.

When Aleyn was on the brink, Ranulf took his opportunity and pushed his finger in the last tiny bit and curled upwards, stroking hard across the hidden gland inside. Aleyn was struck dumb by the wave of pleasure that seemed to course from deep inside him, making a bee-line straight for his cock. For one long, timeless moment, that was all he was: a string of ecstasy caught between his hard, leaking prick and the finger buried inside him, joined together by Ranulf’s eager mouth sucking him with devastating skill, his blond head bobbing as his finger began to thrust in and out.

Aleyn gave a cry so loud he was sure the Northmen would think he was being murdered or Ranulf was splitting him in half. His hips bucked as he shot his seed deep into the Viking’s throat, his hands on Ranulf’s head, pushing down, almost gorging him with it as

his captor, his self-proclaimed master, swallowed and swallowed.

An endless time later, Aleyn's hands went slack and Ranulf pulled away. The Viking carefully eased his finger out of him, eliciting a moan from Aleyn, and he wiped his beard with the back of his hand. Aleyn sprawled on the bed like a dead thing, his legs splayed and his muscles trembling with the aftermath of pleasure. He barely felt Ranulf easing into the bed beside him, but he stirred a little when he felt Ranulf's hand on his chest. The man began to pinch and roll one of his nipples between his fingers.

"That was a fine thing," Ranulf said, as if thinking it over.

Aleyn could not bring himself to argue. At first, Ranulf may have captured him and held him against his will, but there was no denying that his body responded to the big Northman like a dog to his master's voice, as if it were made for one purpose: to serve Ranulf in any way he wished.

When he did not speak, Ranulf reached over and drew Aleyn's unresisting body higher into the bed, turning him so his back was to Ranulf's chest.

Now he will take me, Aleyn thought. His muscles went taut with sudden fear. Even though Ranulf had shown every consideration with his body, Aleyn could not help but dread what was to come. The compartment had grown dark, and Aleyn realized that night had fallen without his notice.

Ranulf must have felt the tension in his muscles, for he stroked Aleyn like a skittish horse and murmured barely-audible words under his breath. The words were foreign, but Aleyn could sense their meaning. Ranulf was reassuring him.

None of that helped when Ranulf's arm went around his waist and he pulled Aleyn's buttocks to his groin, and Aleyn felt the hard, thick shaft probing against the soft cleft of his ass. He inhaled sharply and Ranulf fitted his lips to the soft spot under Aleyn's ear, his beard scraping pleasantly.

Aleyn's fingers knotted in the wool coverlets when he heard Ranulf spit into his hand. From the movements behind him, he could tell Ranulf was spreading the saliva over his cock, wetting it like he had with his finger, preparing to penetrate him. Ranulf reached around and spread Aleyn's legs, but to his surprise, Ranulf slid his damp cock between Aleyn's thighs, not inside him.

"Close your legs tightly," he rumbled into Aleyn's ear, his breath harsh.

Shocked, Aleyn complied, and Ranulf thrust a few times experimentally. Aleyn felt friction and the pleasant sensation of rubbing under his balls, the scratch of coarse pubic hairs against his rump, and he squeezed his thighs together a little. The answering moan from Ranulf was enough to make him do it again, and Ranulf's hand cupped his chin and turned his neck so their mouths were almost touching.

“Sweet prisoner,” Ranulf groaned, and covered his lips with his own in a claiming kiss.

Aleyn was far too dazed to think about what he meant at the moment. Ranulf was thrusting harder, his belly slapping against Aleyn’s ass and his rigid cock jerking between his thighs, and then Ranulf stiffened and grunted loudly and his prick pulsed and jerked before spurting its burden between Aleyn’s legs, painting a thick coat of come there. Ranulf’s thrusts slowed, but he continued to slide his still-hard prick back and forth leisurely, as if savoring every ounce of pleasure he could wring from his captive’s body. His hand was still under Aleyn’s chin and he caressed his throat, leaning over to kiss his ear.

“You make a very pleasing thraell,” he murmured.

Aleyn winced. Thraell was a word that meant little better than slave. As far as he was concerned, these were not love words, but a conqueror gloating over how his prisoner’s body had betrayed him. He had no choice but to submit, true, but he should not have enjoyed it. He should have given in with curses held behind his teeth, loathing every touch on his body, but accepting it as the price of his freedom. This... he did not know what this was. He was sure it was not honorable.

“I am not your slave,” he managed to mutter. “You may take me when you please, but that does not make me your slave.”

“What does, then?” Ranulf’s hand went to Aleyn’s prick and caressed it. To Aleyn’s horror, it began to rise obediently. Ranulf snorted in his ear. “Your body is wiser than you. It knows who its master is.”

Aleyn thrust his hand away from his sex. “I do only what I must,” he hissed. “It’s not as if you gave me a choice.”

Ranulf’s hand went back between Aleyn’s legs, and his arm fitted around his waist and pulled tight in warning when Aleyn would have pushed him off again. “You know nothing of yourself,” Ranulf purred deeply in his ear, like a lion devouring a lamb. “And you are luckier than you know. Another man would have taken you already, and you would have hated it. I like your body, but I like you more. Thus, I am patient.”

The thought that Ranulf might like him was too much for Aleyn. “You’re lying,” he quavered. “You can’t... like me if you hold me prisoner.”

“I can and do,” Ranulf answered, beginning to kiss up and down Aleyn’s neck, rubbing his beard against his skin. A long strand of his flowing hair slipped over Aleyn’s shoulder and rested against his throat. “Indeed, I must guard my heart against liking you too much.”

He pressed a last kiss to Aleyn’s hair and quietly withdrew to the other side of the bed,

leaving Aleyn to stare into the dark with his mind packed full of confusion. He was awake long after Ranulf had begun to snore, and finally he closed his eyes. Though he slept, he found no comfort in it, for all his dreams were of a big, blond Viking who kissed him until he was breathless, then claimed his body on a burning ship full of slaughtered men.

Morning seemed to come more swiftly the further south they went. Aleyn spent an agitated night tossing and turning, and in the morning Ranulf climbed out of bed before him and dressed in his leathers, never once taking his eyes off his captive.

“You’re a restless one. You spent most of the night thrusting your elbows into your poor bedmate’s side,” he joked.

Aleyn scowled and Ranulf laughed and tossed him more bread and cheese and told him to be on deck as soon as he had eaten.

Later, as he worked on the coils of rope, he mused about the night of pleasure before and kept his thoughts turned away from Ranulf’s words. That was easy, for he did not believe him in the least. Sweet prisoner, indeed! It was not so easy to forget his hands or the way his mouth had felt on his skin, the way he had of flicking his tongue wetly over the head of Aleyn’s cock, making him whimper with pleasure.

His head was down as he worked on the rope, when suddenly the longship rounded the bend of the coastline and he spied the village clustered on the hill just beyond the rocky sand. It consisted of a handful of houses, a mill, and a few barns: nothing very prosperous nor especially worth a Viking’s attention. A few hectares of green wheat displayed their short stalks in a field just beyond the village, and several sheep tufted the low-lying meadow. He was surprised when he heard Ranulf’s shout from the stern and the longship turned into the wind, making for the shoreline.

Aleyn’s jaw dropped. Without thinking, he jumped up and strode down the length of the deck to the jarl. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

Ranulf pointed to the shore. “We raid,” he answered, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

“They’re just farmers! They don’t have any silver!”

He shrugged. “We take what we find. It adds up.”

“But you can’t!” He ran up to Ranulf, his fists bunched. He had no thought to his own safety, only that he must stop what was about to happen. “You can’t do this! I won’t let you!”

Ranulf did a double-take, looking at him like he had lost his mind, and then exploded into loud laughter, followed by his men. Aleyn's ears burned in humiliation as the ridicule washed over him. Ranulf put his hands on Aleyn's shoulders, looking down on him with eyes glimmering and teary from mirth.

"And how will you stop me?" he asked, inquiring as if of a puppy.

Aleyn's temper burned like a hot coal inside his breast. He glanced to the railing, and then flicked his eyes to the distance between the ship and the shore, the shore and the village. He tried to dart aside, meaning to throw himself over the railing.

Ranulf was quicker. He caught him painfully by his hair and dragged him back from the edge of the railing, then wrapped his big, brawny arms around Aleyn from behind. "Ho! You would drown yourself?"

Aleyn kicked and struggled to get free, not bothering to answer. He could swim, damn it! He could make it to the shore, he could warn them, if only he could get free of Ranulf! That was the only thing running through his mind at the moment: Get free, get away from him! If you run then his words weren't true, you're not a willing slave, not a whore!

He might as well have tried to break iron chains with his bare hands. The Vikings laughed as Ranulf deftly kicked his legs out from under him and bore him to the deck, using his own weight to pin him face-first against the smooth wooden planks.

"It is good you have made so much rope," Ranulf laughed as the men jeered. He grabbed a length of that same rope and began to bind Aleyn's arms to his chest, looping it around several times before flipping him onto his back.

Aleyn was spitting mad as Ranulf began to lash his hands together in front of him, the knots neat, clever, and impossible to untie with his arms bound to his sides. Aleyn cursed him in words his aunt would have scrubbed his mouth with soap for, and Ranulf laughed and offered suggestions and improvements on his obscenities as he bound his ankles tightly together. Trussed and immobile, Ranulf hauled him to his feet like a sack and slung him over one shoulder, carrying him toward the hatch that led below deck. Aleyn bucked and kicked and nearly succeeded in unbalancing Ranulf, but all it earned him was a sharp slap on his rear.

"You wiggle like a worm!" Ranulf guffawed, and the Vikings laughed uproariously as he was carried into the dim interior of the compartment and thrown on the bunk.

Aleyn laid there and glared at Ranulf, very aware of how foolish and helpless he looked. It loosened his tongue and made him reckless. "Pig!" he snarled. Ranulf made to touch his leg and Aleyn kicked at him with both his bound feet. "Keep your hands off me!"

Predictably, Ranulf ignored Aleyn's anger and held his legs down with a well-placed knee, his other hand pinning Aleyn's shoulder to the bunk.

“You look very good this way.” Ranulf ran his hand up Aleyn’s flank, pausing to cup one buttock in his big hand. “Perhaps I will leave you like this, and perhaps tonight I will take you as a war-captive would be taken, your ankles tied apart as I enter you.”

Aleyn tried to keep his voice steady, though inwardly he had begun to quake. Ranulf was capable of doing what he promised. “We had a bargain.”

“The bargain was that you would please me.”

“It would please you to rape a man who was tied hand and foot, who could not even resist you?” Aleyn spat, again forgetting his caution. He hated this Viking!

“Yes,” Ranulf answered, unperturbed. He continued to knead the firm mound of Aleyn’s rump. “I think penetrating you would bring me great pleasure.”

He leaned over Aleyn and tried to kiss him. Aleyn turned his head, so that Ranulf’s lips landed on his cheek. At once, Aleyn found his chin seized in an iron grip as Ranulf turned his face back to him.

“You denied me your mouth,” Ranulf growled dangerously. “That is a foolish thing to do. If I want your mouth, or your hands, or even your arse” and he gave one of Aleyn’s buttocks a firm pinch “you will give it to me at once, or I will take it.”

Aleyn watched him, his breath coming in quick gasps. He had never been bound before. The sensation of the ropes cutting across his chest, constricting his breathing and holding his arms immobile, was causing him to panic. He struggled wildly.

“Stop...” he panted, but even through the terror of being bound, he was aware of Ranulf’s nearness and smell, of the way his great muscles bunched beneath his leather shirt and the corner of his mouth curved upward in sudden lust. His traitorous cock began to stir as Ranulf’s hand strayed around to slowly caress his inner thigh. In a moment more, he would touch his prick and find out that he was hard.

Aleyn wriggled, trying to writhe his way out of the ropes, and Ranulf’s hand closed over the bulge in his breeches. Aleyn gasped, and Ranulf gave him a knowing smile.

“I know your nature better than you do, Irlander,” Ranulf said, slowly rubbing his hand in a circular motion over the hard outline of Aleyn’s cock.

Aleyn could feel his face burning with humiliation. “You’re wrong,” he got out, feeling like he was strangling. “I don’t enjoy this, it’s just... I don’t... how do you make me feel this...” he broke off as Ranulf opened his breeches and took his leaking shaft into his hand.

Ranulf gave his hard sex a slow, experimental stroke. “You would come very quickly

now, if I did this,” he said, his voice measured and rich, as if he savored every word. “The ropes excite you. I excite you. Being bound and under my will excites you.”

Aleyn denied it, though his body was nearly shaking with pleasure. He arched his hips with the motion of Ranulf’s hand. One more stroke and he would come, spending his hot seed over Ranulf’s fingers, and it would prove the Viking right. He felt tears gathering at the corners of his eyes and he tried again to turn his head, trying to hide from Ranulf’s too-knowing gaze.

Abruptly, Ranulf’s hand left his chin and he felt himself being turned. He struggled, knowing he had pushed the Viking too far. Now he would rape him. He fought harder and suddenly found himself flipped over onto his belly. Ranulf’s hands were at his waist, roughly pulling his breeches down to his knees, and Aleyn gasped as he felt cool air touch his bare skin.

“Please, don’t,” he pleaded, though the words nearly choked him. Being reduced to begging was almost worse than being raped.

“Don’t?” Ranulf repeated. He sat on Aleyn’s calves, holding him down very effectively as his hands began to caress the rounded cheeks of his ass. “Do not do this?”

“No,” Aleyn rasped out. “Don’t do that.”

“Does it hurt?” Ranulf slid his fingers between Aleyn’s buttocks and stroked there very lightly.

Aleyn bit the inside of his cheek so hard that he tasted blood. No, it did not hurt. Ranulf touched his hole with a fingertip, circling it gently, and Aleyn pushed down into the mattress, trying to escape that invading touch. This had the effect of pressing his hard cock against the scratchy wool. The stiff fibers chafed his painfully sensitive flesh, and to his dismay, he suddenly found he was on the very edge of orgasm. He gasped and stilled, shivering. Ranulf, as if sensing the nearness of his climax through his very skin, spread his buttocks with his thumbs and leaned forward.

Aleyn cried out as he felt the first swipe of wet heat against his hole, jerking away, grinding his cock into the covers in his efforts to escape the agile, talented tongue that continued to lick and probe at his entrance. Ranulf’s beard chafed against his balls and buttocks, sending little shocks through his body as Ranulf spread Aleyn as wide as his bound legs would allow and plunged his tongue inside him.

Aleyn shouted in blinding pleasure as his cock jerked and began to spill his seed beneath him, coming helplessly and endlessly to the obscene rapture of being taken by a Viking’s tongue.

After another endless period of time, Ranulf turned him gently over and began to put his clothing to rights. He did not speak, but only tucked Aleyn’s damp and spent cock back

into his breeches and stood over him. Aleyn looked up at him muzzily, aware of little else except the throbbing tension in his body and the ache between his legs and in his heart. He was amazed to feel Ranulf's hand tenderly pushing his hair back from his face, and he blinked in shock and looked up.

Ranulf was watching him with an odd expression on his face. Aleyn might have mistaken it for affection, if he did not already know how ruthless this Viking was.

Ranulf's fingers strayed over his prisoner's cheek and across his lips, lingering there. "Aleyn," he said, in that accent that made his name sound like a song or a blessing. "You have much to learn. I am not the worst teacher you could have."

Aleyn could not speak or answer, and in a moment Ranulf turned his back quickly and left. "I will be back," he called over his shoulder.

Left alone, Aleyn listened to the sounds of the longship making landfall and the sounds that followed: the battle-cries and the voices of men shouting in rage and fear, and later, of fire and burning.

I hate him, he told himself without much conviction, trying not to remember how gently Ranulf had touched his hair. I hate him. I do!

Eventually he heard boots on the deck outside the compartment, and the hatch slid open. Aleyn squinted against the light, seeing only a large shape filling the room. Only when the hatch closed did he see it was Haakon who stood over him.

Chapter 3

Ranulf led the raiding party, his huscarl Oskell on his right, Gamelin in tow, and twenty good men from the ship armed with axes. Haakon, who was a sokeman and thus the next highest in rank, he left in charge of the longship. He doubted the villagers could muster much of a defense, but there were always surprises in battle. The longship beached on the sloping shore when the sun was at her zenith, and within an hour most of the villagers had been rounded up and put inside the mill. There were no people young enough to be taken as thraells, and Ranulf suspected that the young ones had either been taken in previous raids or killed in the endless clan fights that seemed to plague this island. Only one man was able-bodied, the rest passing middle aged or quite elderly, and the able man, quite sensibly, did not argue when Ranulf announced he was taking their stores. A few of the old women wept and asked how they would live throughout the winter.

Oskell pulled a face. "It is barely spring and you worry for the winter! We are not burning your crops, old woman. Leave be."

A search of the mill turned up only a few silver pennies, but there was wool, newly-spun linen, wine, and cheese, all of which Ranulf commanded to be put aboard the longship. None of his own people had been injured, and he grinned at Gamelin as he passed, for the youth's rare smile was infectious.

"Well, now you have been a-raiding for your first time! What do you think?"

Gamelin shook his head, grinning as he carried a box of assorted cups and plates, some pewter, some brass. "Not as exciting as the battle on the cog. I shall be on the raiding party that takes the next ship!"

Ranulf slung his axe up to his shoulder and slapped Gamelin on the back. "In every battle, one of two things will happen: you will either fall or you will not."

"Then I have nothing to lose," Gamelin said proudly, as a Viking should. "Everything is preordained. Nothing can bring a man to his death if his time has not come, and nothing can save one doomed to die. The All-Father wove my life long ago."

Ranulf nodded in satisfaction and sent Gamelin on his way. There was no mention among his warriors of burning the village after it was plundered. Leaving it to replenish its stores and swell its population was far more prudent for future raids than burning it to the ground. A leader must think ahead.

Just as he was about to call for the return to the longship, his sharp eyes spotted three ragged boys emerging from the far forest beyond the wheat field, yelling at full throat. Though they were still far away, Ranulf discerned that the boy in the lead, dark-haired like so many of these island clans, carried a long knife. The others were armed with a hoe and spade. As Ranulf watched them come on, Oskell appeared at his elbow and shot him a look.

“Is it children we are killing today, jarl?”

“They’re armed,” he answered, spitting into the spring grass. His mouth twisted in distaste. Fool boys! Did no one ever tell them not to attack unless they were ready to die?

“Rakes and shovels,” Oskell scoffed.

“Which are as capable of killing a man as a sword. Iron is iron, friend.”

Still, it disturbed him. The boys were brave. Ranulf could respect their wish to protect their families and property, even if he ridiculed the method.

“Stupid, stupid...” he muttered. He turned. “Get one of the women from the mill,” he ordered Oskell. “Quickly.”

“Which one?”

“Whichever one looks like someone’s grandmother.”

Oskell hurried off, but not before muttering back that they all looked like someone’s grandmother. He returned swiftly, dragging a gray-haired woman with the face of a wizened crone.

“You,” he spoke to her in Gaelic, nodding to the straggling line of would-be attackers. “Tell them to stop.”

“Are you afraid, Dubhgall?”

Odin grant him patience! “You should be. We will kill them all if they raise weapons against us. Is this what you want?”

“They are boys!” she protested.

“They carry weapons like men,” he said, biting off the words.

“And if I bring them down without weapons, will you then kill them?”

“I will certainly kill you, if you do not go now!” he barked. “Fear not, old mother, you have my word. No harm will come to them if they lay down their tools.”

She went as swiftly as her feet would take her, setting an awkward, jogging gait up the path that led to the field, where she met the boys. They halted and Ranulf could see her haranguing them and the boys shouting back and waving their arms and pointing, until finally she made a grab at the shirt of the boy who held the knife and delivered several stinging slaps to his head, tearing the knife from his hand and hurling it away. The other

boys dropped their tools.

Oskell laughed and went to help Gamelin while Ranulf waited by the path. The boys came down with the old woman. Two of the sullen boys were cowed, but the third brave one was furious and not hiding it very well. They halted in front of him and the old woman put her hand on the brave one's neck.

"They are just boys," she said, as if she doubted his word not to hurt the children. "They mean no harm."

"Oh, I think they meant harm," Ranulf said, but he was willing to let it go. "Take them back with you and keep them quiet. If they start bawling like kid goats, I may change my mind."

The brave one's head came up. "I'll show you goat!" he screamed at him, and before Ranulf could move or react, the boy whipped out a knife hidden in his sleeve and buried half the point in the jarl's upper leg.

It was not a very big knife at all, but Ranulf bellowed and roared and the boys shrank away. Oskell came running with Gamelin and several others as Ranulf stood cursing horribly. He jerked the knife out of his leg and threw it to the ground, spitting on it.

"Miserable pup!" he raged, drawing his sword from its long sheath. The old woman darted forward as if she would stop him, but was dragged back by his men. He stood over the boy and raised his sword.

The boy looked up at him, his eyes fierce, without a trace of fear, and Ranulf hesitated. The boy was enemy and had attacked him with a weapon. By their laws, punishment was plain and expected, yet still he hesitated. The lad had brown hair and eyes the color of green clover.

Like Aleyn.

Slowly, his sword was lowered, until he saw no reason to keep holding it and sheathed it at his side. He put his hand over the wound on his leg to staunch the bleeding.

"Get these idiot children in the mill and lock it before they cause any more mischief," he growled, limping away. "Doubtless they have more people in the forest. They can let them out when we've gone."

When he was back on the longship and Gamelin was cleaning his wound, Ranulf noticed several of his men sending odd looks his way. He looked down at Gamelin as the youth knelt in a pool of sunshine on the wooden deck, wrapping a bandage around his jarl's thigh.

“Well, and what do they think?” he sighed.

Gamelin lifted an eyebrow. His curls were like shavings of gold in the light. “They wonder at a jarl who shows such mercy.”

“Mercy,” he snorted. “That was no mercy, not to kill a puppy because it bites. Its instinct is to bite.”

“Might be a bit too subtle for some minds to grasp,” Gamelin observed, tying a tidy knot. He stood up when he was finished. “For my part, I would rather fight true warriors than dirt-digging villagers. I will say this to whoever asks me.”

Ranulf nodded, knowing he was being given Gamelin’s assurance of support. He had Oskell’s unshakable loyalty, as well as many others, but there were a few who would see Ranulf’s actions today as weakness, and would try to use it to their advantage. It was not unknown for a jarl to lose his command during a raid, or to meet with an accident, or for his crew to mutiny.

One such mutiny had occurred years ago when Ranulf was young and on his first raiding. Harald had lost his command off the coast of Briton because he foolishly targeted lands that were well-protected, seeking to prove his worth in battle rather than searching for treasure, and getting more and more of his crew killed in the bargain.

At last, with half a crew left, Harald had aimed his ship for a southern Briton port that was known to be well-defended by the British king’s garrison. Ranulf had led the mutiny and he himself had killed Harald and tossed his axe-cleaved body to the sea, and the remainder of the crew went on to raid successfully for the rest of the season under the leadership of Ranulf Eriksen, their new jarl.

Gamelin went to his seat at the oars and Ranulf sighed and stood, making for his sleeping compartment and some well-deserved rest. He winced as he ducked under the low hatch and saw Aleyn lying on the bunk, still trussed and bound. He hoped he had not made the knots too tight.

“Aleyn?” he called as he sat on the chest and pulled off his boots. “Are you awake?”

His only reply was a sniff, and he sighed. Normally, he would have found amusement in soothing such a pretty captive, but his patience was at an end this day. “I will cut you loose,” he said, drawing his knife and moving to Aleyn. “I did not mean to leave you tied up so long. I was delayed.”

That was when he saw the bruise on Aleyn’s cheek. He froze. His hand went to touch the purpling area on Aleyn’s cheekbone. “How did this happen?” His first thought was a fall. Had he tumbled off the bunk in his struggles, hit his face on the deck? Aleyn’s refusal to answer alarmed him.

“How did it happen?” he asked again, slicing through the ropes that held his wrists and bound his chest, then the ones on his legs. “Did you fall?”

Aleyn sat up and pushed the cut bindings from him before wrapping his arms around his knees. “No,” he said shortly. He would not look at Ranulf.

“Then what?” He was rapidly losing patience. “I am in no mood for games,” he grated out. “Tell me what happened.”

Aleyn glanced at his face, then quickly away. He said something too low to hear. Ranulf leaned closer. “What? Speak up!”

Aleyn looked at him, and Ranulf saw that his green eyes were bright with unshed tears and his mouth was trembling. “Haakon,” he said lowly, leaving Ranulf to figure out the rest of it.

Ranulf’s jaw tightened. “Haakon marked you? How?” When Aleyn did not answer, he clapped his hand down hard on his shoulder. “Answer me!”

“Or what? You’ll hit me, too?” Aleyn shot back. He swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, as if ashamed of his weakness, and Ranulf paused. He had never considered that the man had pride. If so, it was a strange one; one that allowed an enemy to use his body while still believing himself free.

Ranulf strove for calm. He loosened his iron grip and moved a little away from Aleyn. “I must ask you this; did Haakon strike you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t say.”

Ranulf blew his breath out and clenched his fists. “Mark me well, Irlander: if men are to die, I prefer to know why I am killing them.”

Aleyn stared at him. “You’d kill your own man?”

“I might. First, I must know why he struck you. What did you do?”

Aleyn threw a piece of the cut rope at him. “Lie flat on my back, mostly!”

Ranulf felt his heartbeat begin to slow with the first beginnings of a deadly rage. “You were never untied, then. Did he touch you?”

Aleyn pointed to his cheek.

“I do not mean that.” Ranulf carefully put his hands on Aleyn’s shoulders. “Did he touch you the way I touch you?” And he slid his hand down the front of Aleyn’s shirt, brushing his palm across his nipple. “Like this.”

Aleyn flushed. “No. He just came in and shouted at me and when I shouted back, he hit me.”

Ranulf put his hand under Aleyn’s chin and forced the younger man to look into his eyes. “That is all? You are sure?”

Aleyn nodded. Ranulf released him and sighed. “Very well. I will handle this in my own way, Aleyn. For the present, stay away from Haakon.”

“Your ship isn’t that big,” Aleyn retorted. “And I didn’t go out of my way to find him when you were ashore.”

Ranulf pulled at his golden beard, thinking. “No, you could not have,” he mused. His brain began to work, remembering old slights Haakon had sent his way, his many arguments with the crew known to be loyal to Ranulf, his bitterness over the loss of Gamelin, who had been as dear to him as any could be to that red pig. “Did he say anything?”

“He said a lot. I just didn’t understand any of it.”

Aleyn was staring at the bulkhead, steadfastly refusing to look at him, and Ranulf felt a twinge of remorse. “I am not blaming you,” he said, striving for a soothing tone.

It did not work. Aleyn shot him a poisonous look. “I should hope not. If you leave me tied hand and foot on a boat full of pirates, you have no one to blame for what happens except yourself.”

“We are not pirates,” Ranulf corrected irrelevantly. He shifted on the bunk and a bolt of pain shot up from his injured leg. He hissed.

Aleyn was looking at his bloodied, bandaged thigh. “You’re hurt.”

“This? This is nothing,” Ranulf scoffed, although it did not feel like nothing. He took a moment to pray to Odin that the boy’s knife had not been poisoned. He did not think so: poison was rare among his people, even rarer on these islands.

Aleyn stretched out his hand hesitantly and then withdrew. Ranulf, who knew much more of human nature than young Aleyn, could see the struggle in him. He wishes me not to come to harm, he realized. Yet, he hates me a little as well. Unexpectedly, he felt a rush of affection for this young man with the odd bravery who seemed to live by

incomprehensible rules.

He probably finds me just as strange, he thought, and a smile touched his face. “You are not so angry with me, then?”

Aleyn had not melted that much, but he had little choice but to comply when Ranulf drew him forward and kissed the bruise on his cheek. “What did you say to Haakon that made him do this?”

“I don’t think he understood it.”

His fingers found the ragged hem of Aleyn’s shirt and he pushed it up as he drew him down to the covers. He ignored the pain from his wounded leg as he caressed the smooth skin of Aleyn’s belly, just above the lacing of his breeches, where there was a dusting of fine hair that arrowed down into the hollow between his thighs.

“Tell me anyway,” he murmured as his lips found Aleyn’s ear. He sucked a soft lobe between his teeth and bit down gently. “Tell me.”

“I said,” Aleyn began, and then hissed as Ranulf’s mouth found the sensitive spot under his ear and nuzzled there, rubbing his rough-soft beard against his skin. “I said that he was the offspring of a horny goat and a diseased mare.”

Ranulf snorted. “You have an imagination.”

“It was wasted on him.”

“You must have been much trouble to your parents.”

“They died before I knew them,” Aleyn answered, making Ranulf pause.

“You have no family?”

“None who would claim me.”

He stroked Aleyn’s arm, the one with the scar. The Irlander was careful to hide the scar from him, but Ranulf had perceptive hands. Aleyn jerked away a little, as if the white mark burned at his touch. Ranulf hummed against Aleyn’s throat, using teeth and tongue to make him arch and squirm. He kissed his way across one fine cheekbone to the other, then moved to his mouth and hovered there, his warm breath gusting over Aleyn’s lips.

“I would claim you,” he said, his voice low and heated. He watched Aleyn swallow and look at his mouth, and Ranulf rolled their bodies on the bed so that he was partially on top of Aleyn. He gave the corner of Aleyn’s mouth an experimental kiss. “You would not give me your mouth earlier. Will you do it now?”

Aleyn was silent, and Ranulf pulled away to look at him. He pushed a lock of Aleyn's dark hair out of his eyes. Despite his vow to keep his feelings out of this matter, he could not help the sudden pull at his heart when Aleyn reached up and traced his finger along the deep curve of his cheekbone.

"I don't know," he answered.

Ranulf's eyebrows went up. "Is the Irlander admitting to fear?"

He had meant it as a joke, for he could not help teasing such an open and pretty face, but Aleyn nodded in all seriousness. "Yes."

He placed another kiss on the other side of his mouth. "I will not hurt you."

"That's not what I'm afraid of."

Ranulf eased Aleyn's shirt up over his head, throwing it to the side. He allowed his hand to roam across soft skin, eliciting a shiver from the slender body under him. "What are you afraid of?"

Aleyn placed his hands on Ranulf's shoulders, pushing him back. He gazed into the Northman's eyes soberly. "I'm afraid if I kiss you, I will make a mistake. I may forget the way things are and mistake you for someone you're not"

"I am your lover."

Aleyn shook his head. "You're my jailer."

His hand caressed the juncture between Aleyn's thighs, and the flesh there began to lengthen and fill. "I can be both."

Aleyn shook his head, an expression of distress crossing his features, but Ranulf could tell that his resolve was crumbling. He pushed Aleyn's thighs apart and settled his body between them, pushing his own hard cock against Aleyn's, the leather barriers between them feeling thin as a breeze.

"Tonight, we will be lovers," he said. "Leave tomorrow for tomorrow. All is preordained. Worry will profit you nothing." He put his hand under Aleyn's chin and tipped his mouth up for a kiss.

"Surrender, Aleyn," he whispered, and kissed him. Aleyn moaned but kept his mouth closed, and Ranulf patiently probed at the shut entrance with the tip of his tongue, gently easing him open. Once Aleyn relented and his lips parted the smallest bit, Ranulf pushed forward like a conqueror, forcing his thick tongue into the soft and heated depths of Aleyn's mouth, reveling in his sharp intake of breath, the way his hands scrabbled at his

shoulders for a moment before going to his neck and pulling him deeper into the kiss.

Ranulf moaned and moved his hips, rubbing their pricks together, and he was gratified when Aleyn's legs sweetly moved wider apart. He broke the kiss and gasped into Aleyn's ear, his hand jerking at the front of Aleyn's breeches, working to free his erect cock.

"I cannot wait to take you," he breathed. "I cannot wait to be inside you."

Aleyn stiffened a little as Ranulf announced his intentions, and his hands fell from Ranulf's neck. "I don't want to do that," he said fearfully.

"Yes, you do," Ranulf said, claiming another possessive kiss, refusing to stop until Aleyn was again clutching at his shoulders and gasping. "Your body is wiser than you, my prisoner. Let your mind rest." He ducked his head to swipe his tongue over a nipple. "Let your body lead you."

Aleyn groaned when Ranulf freed his hard cock and rubbed the length of it on his belly, painting a line of slick between them. He made no protest when Ranulf began to pull at his breeches and boots, undressing him fully. Ranulf took his hand and drew it down between their bodies, until Aleyn's fingers were on the head of his dick.

"Touch me," he said, his blue eyes glittering in the dim light. "Put your hand on me."

Aleyn looked up at the man on top of him, feeling the firm grip on his wrist, the pressure of the heavy body holding him pinned, the hot, slick feel of the cock-head resting under his fingers. His heart thudded against his ribs like a wild thing trapped in a cage, and Ranulf's heated, lustful look only made it worse.

He has caged me, he thought. Without ever locking me up, he has chained me to him. What kind of power or dark magic is this? He's made me his whore and all I want is his touch on me.

Ranulf pulled his hand lower, urging him to wrap his fingers around the thick girth of his big cock.

"Move your hand," Ranulf urged, and then his eyes closed on a spasm of pleasure. "Yes. Up and down, like you do with your own." He moaned and said yes another time or two, and his hips began to thrust into Aleyn's grip. He put his lips to Aleyn's ear and panted and licked, and Aleyn's eyes widened.

I'm doing this to him, he thought. I'm making him feel this.

It was a heady thought, carrying a strange sense of power. Aleyn found his hand closing harder around Ranulf's prick, stroking faster. The Viking arched his neck and bit off a

strangled cry. It was the first time Aleyn had heard him make such a sound. He realized this was power, of a sort: power over his helplessness, power over his present captivity. It was power to make Ranulf drop his guard and cry out in pure pleasure.

Aleyn pushed Ranulf's shoulder experimentally. To his surprise, the man meekly let himself be pushed onto his side. Aleyn scooted down in the bunk a little until his nose was level with Ranulf's waist. He continued to fist the engorged cock in his hand and risked a glance up at Ranulf. The Northman was watching him intently, his tongue held between his teeth, neither offering encouragement nor directing his movements, and Aleyn decided to test his bravery. Moving slowly, he pressed a kiss to Ranulf's stomach. The curling hairs tickled his nose, and he pressed a little harder, his lips moving against Ranulf's navel. Ranulf inhaled shakily, and Aleyn was astonished to feel a hand on the back of his head, caressing very gently, urging him lower.

This must be what it feels like to tame a bear, Aleyn thought. Ranulf seemed different since he returned from the village raid, gentler. After the interlude with Haakon, Aleyn had been dreading Ranulf's return. Before the raid, Ranulf had all but promised to rape him when he came back. Something had happened in the little village, but what?

Aleyn brought the cock to his lips and kissed the tip experimentally. He swiped the moisture on his lower lip away with his tongue, tasting a man for the first time. To his surprise, it was not as he imagined. It was salty and bitter at the same time, slicker than honey. He took the head of Ranulf's cock in his mouth and rubbed his tongue against it, gratified to hear the Northman utter a shaken groan. Ranulf arched his hips, seeking to push his shaft into Aleyn's throat, but Aleyn gripped his prick and held himself back a little, resisting Ranulf's urging hand on the back of his head. He was in control now.

He drew back for a moment and licked Ranulf's prick from head to base, rolling the unique taste around in his mouth. Ranulf hissed, and Aleyn inhaled through his nose, drawing in the male scent. Both of Ranulf's hands were on his head now, and Ranulf was muttering words in his own language, guttural phrases that Aleyn had not a hope of understanding, although he guessed their meaning quick enough. Ranulf wanted him to open his mouth and he wanted to slide his prick in, he wanted Aleyn to close his lips over it and suck.

Ranulf's hoarse, whispered entreaties were so urgent that Aleyn was encouraged enough to open his mouth wider and take half of the thick member. Ranulf's response was inspiring.

Aleyn reached back for the memory of how Ranulf had driven him to ecstasy, how Ranulf had closed his mouth around his shaft and moved the ring of his lips up and down, how Ranulf's hands had rubbed at the base of his prick and fondled his balls. He mimicked what he remembered, and Ranulf began to gasp for breath, his hips following Aleyn's movements with little jolts.

"I will spend if you keep this up," Ranulf panted, his voice strained.

Aleyn sensed it was a warning. Did Ranulf want him to stop, or did he merely think his seed would disgust him? To tell the truth, he thought, it probably would.

His pride had always been contrary. Even though he sensed that the Northman was speaking only for his benefit, he deliberately began to massage Ranulf's cock at the base and sucked harder, his head bobbing eagerly on the wide pole impaling his mouth.

Ranulf hips jerked as he sought to thrust deeper, and he grunted and cried out as he came in thick, hot spurts on Aleyn's tongue. After the initial surprise, Aleyn swallowed reflexively, barely tasting the sperm filling his mouth.

Sweating, Ranulf collapsed back as Aleyn wiped his lips, but that was all the respite Aleyn was given. He felt himself seized by the arms, and then Ranulf was rolling over on top of him, cupping his face in his hands and claiming his mouth in an urgent, possessive kiss, his tongue thrusting deep into Aleyn's throat for the taste of himself.

Aleyn made a panicked little noise - he could barely breathe! - and then Ranulf was off him, jerking at his own clothing and stripping himself fully. Returning, he pulled Aleyn into his arms, skin to skin, and began to caress him with hot, hard hands.

"My prisoner," he moaned, biting Aleyn's ear, throat. His hands found Aleyn's hard dick, and he gave a pleased growl and began to stroke with short, quick movements.

Aleyn gasped. How quickly this Northman could bring him to the brink! Ranulf, sensing his orgasm was near, paused to slip a hand into the cleft of Aleyn's ass.

Aleyn moaned in disappointment. "Don't stop..."

"I could make you feel such pleasure," Ranulf murmured into his ear. His beard rubbed against Aleyn's smooth cheek as his index finger began to shallowly thrust in and out of Aleyn's puckered hole. Aleyn writhed and shuddered at the unfamiliar sensation. The friction and pressure were not entirely unpleasant, but the idea that it was Ranulf doing something so very intimate to him made his head spin.

"Please..." His cock was so hard, he would come if Ranulf so much as touched it. He thrust upwards, trying to rub his aching shaft against Ranulf's hairy belly.

Ranulf laughed and removed his finger to take Aleyn's cock in his hand again. He fondled the firm flesh and smiled down into Aleyn's face, his handsome features alight with lust and pleasure.

"Northman," Aleyn begged.

"Say my name," he rumbled. "Say it."

“Ranulf!” Aleyn cried out as he spent into the Viking’s hand.

He collapsed, trembling, his forehead pressed to Ranulf’s chest. Ranulf wiped his hand carelessly on the covers and began to caress the smooth muscles of Aleyn’s back, holding him.

“I thought about making you beg for all the fuss you put up,” he said conversationally. “But you sucked me very well, for a first time.”

Aleyn was not sure that was a compliment, but he decided not to be offended. Besides, he was too tired.

When he did not answer, Ranulf nipped his shoulder with his teeth, not very hard. “Have you nothing to say?”

“Such as?”

“You could thank me.”

Aleyn was too weary to manage more than a huff of derision.

“You should thank me,” Ranulf went on mildly, his hands learning the shape of Aleyn’s shoulders and arms. “I usually do not take such care to seduce a prisoner.”

“You just rape them and have done with it?” Aleyn murmured, sliding toward sleep.

“Is that what you think this is?” Ranulf’s hand slid lower. “I have not hurt you. And I could, my prisoner.” He cupped Aleyn’s buttock meaningfully. “I could hurt you very badly.”

Aleyn breathed warmly into Ranulf’s neck, more awake now. Why hasn’t he? he wondered. What holds him back? He refused to ask, and Ranulf sighed.

“Is it so difficult to believe that I value you?”

Aleyn shook his head, though he was not answering, and after a moment, Ranulf sighed again and his hands went still.

He fell asleep with Ranulf’s arms around him.

“Did he put the man-rúnar on you?” Oskell asked, smiling his cold smile. “Did he use the love spells these Irlanders talk about?”

Ranulf shot him a waggish look. “Perhaps.” It was near dark and the water was

uncommonly still. The sky was the shade of blood.

Oskell tore off a hunk of bread and handed it to his jarl, moving aside to give Ranulf room to sit. "What was the shape of this spell?"

"The shape of his mouth, which is fine enough for a song."

Oskell laughed and ate his bread, lapsing into silence as they watched the red sky continue to darken into night. "Should we beach by the shore?" Oskell asked. "We need to take on fresh water soon."

Ranulf looked to the shore. It was sloping and sandy, with a low cliff to the west. "We can."

Oskell slapped the crumbs from his hands and stood. "I'll give the word. How's your leg?"

Ranulf flexed the muscle and held back a wince. "It feels hot, but perhaps it will heal on its own. The boy's knife was dirty. Give it a day. Then, I may have to burn it out."

Oskell nodded soberly. Cauterizing was a sound move. "I will help, when the time comes." He moved off to give orders to turn the ship shoreward and beach it.

After a few minutes, Ranulf stood and made for the bow, seeing that he would have to pass Haakon as he did so. The red sokeman kept his head down and barely glanced up, and inwardly Ranulf sneered at him. Dog! Too weak to keep his own bedmates, so he sniffed around at mine! Haakon was a worm.

The man's ill behavior made him cross, so he kicked a wooden bucket filled with tools that was placed near the chest that doubled as Haakon's seat at the oars. The bucket upended and implements spilled everywhere.

Now he looks at me, Ranulf thought in satisfaction, and began to curse Haakon roundly for "leaving his things lying about in the middle of the deck".

"If you cannot keep your place intact, you should stay home and have your mother pick up after you!" he thundered, stomping to the bow, very aware of Haakon's murderous eyes nailed to his back.

Oskell watched Haakon pick up the scattered tools with unease. "That was unwise," he said aside to Ranulf.

Ranulf snorted. "He was in my compartment while we were ashore, pawing at Aleyn."

Oskell looked even more disturbed. "Who knows of this? It is unseemly that a jarl would quarrel with his own man over a slut Irlander. He could whisper that you have been

bewitched.”

Ranulf looked at him for a long moment. A salt-smelling breeze tugged at his long hair as the keel of the ship nosed the sand-bottom. “Would you say the same if it had been Gamelin?”

Oskell’s mouth grew tight. “That is different and you know it.”

Only different because Aleyn is a foreigner, Ranulf thought. A few days ago, he would have thought the same, but he was becoming used to this Irlander and forgetting his differences. Perhaps he was bewitched.

“I have claimed him as thraell, so there is no difference,” Ranulf informed him curtly. “And he will travel with us back to Ribe when we turn for home. He is mine. Now, speak to me no more of this,” he ordered.

“But, jarl...”

“I said cease, damn you!” he barked. Several heads turned and looked, and Oskell bowed his head with cool dignity and moved off to secure the shore.

“Our jarl is bewitched. The Irlander has seized his mind along with his balls.”

Oskell’s deep voice answered the hushed, furtive whisper. “Our jarl is a great warrior, Haakon. You would not dare to say such things to his face.”

The oily voice went on. “Were he in his right mind, I would. But this Irlander, this little sly one... who knows what magic he has wrought? Already, the jarl has let several slaves go free. The boys in the last village would have fetched a good price from the Saxons, but what did we take from there? Wool and fleas!”

“He is our jarl.”

Haakon shrugged. “So long as he leads us well, he is jarl. It has always been thus. But the Irlander may be to blame. Is it not our duty to Ranulf to dispose of this trifling boy?”

Oskell was silent for several moments, considering. Haakon’s grievance was just, for Vikings raided for plunder and riches and so far there had been very little of that, yet he disliked Haakon and had never had any reason to trust him. This sudden concern over Aleyn’s influence smacked of deceit.

“There may be truth to what you say,” Oskell allowed reluctantly “but I would not go behind Ranulf’s back to settle his problems. Let us wait and see, and if matters worsen we will take it before him.”

“Perhaps it is Ranulf who should be removed.”

Oskell took a deep, calming breath and forced himself to keep his hand away from his sword hilt. “I warn you: be very certain you are worthy of any challenge you make. I promise you death, if you are not.”

The waves slapped indolently against the stern of the longship as its keel lay lightly mired in the soft sand of the shore. The night progressed, and in the men’s hearts, a shadow of mutiny began to breed.

The next week was a blur for Aleyn. He spent his days on the deck, working in rain or sun at whatever task Oskell set him to, trying to keep from counting the hours until dusk, when Ranulf would order him into the small compartment. Afterwards, the big Viking would spend hours exploring his body, muttering his strange and guttural language into Aleyn’s ear, his rough hands mapping every inch of him.

Two days after Haakon had hit him, the wound on Ranulf’s thigh had to be cauterized.

Aleyn had been on deck, the gulls calling to one another in the thick mist overhead, the sun a yellow smear behind a blanket of gray, when Oskell approached the jarl. His colorless eyes were grim and he carried a small iron pot full of coals on a long hook. Beside him were Gamelin and a Northman with black hair and a gap-toothed smile. Together, they went into the compartment that Aleyn shared with Ranulf and did what had to be done. In short time they came out, and the gap-toothed man signaled that he should stay out of the compartment for a while. Aleyn shrugged and went back to his work, casting worried looks at the hatchway.

He would have liked to ask if Ranulf was well, but he did not know the dark man’s name or if he spoke his tongue. In truth, he kept as far apart from the other Northmen as he could, except for Gamelin, who had proved to be an unlikely ally. The blond boy was taller than him, but they were roughly the same age. He did not have to ask what the knowing looks cast their way meant, not after what Ranulf had told him about Haakon and Gamelin.

Two of a kind, they’re thinking, he mused sourly. Two pretty whores with their heads together. His mouth drew up into a pinched and resentful expression. He had never thought of himself as pretty, but Ranulf obviously did.

“My pretty thraell,” Ranulf often said, just before he took him into his mouth or rubbed his prick between his hands while Aleyn hid his face in the covers for shame. Ranulf always dragged the covers away and made him kiss him as he slowly brought him to climax.

His warriors rape our coasts, Aleyn thought in turmoil. They kill my countrymen and sack our monasteries, and his touch makes me believe in heaven. My people should burn me.

Gamelin could speak a little Gaelic. Which does not make him any less an animal, Aleyn thought meanly. He immediately regretted it. Gamelin had been decent to him, showing him how to work, how to row without throwing the other men off their rhythm, and how to do his tasks without getting more in the way than helping. In his spare time, Gamelin showed him how to tie knots and how the sails were rigged.

Oskell often walked by them while they were working, and one time his hand had brushed the back of Gamelin's neck in passing. Gamelin looked up and Aleyn caught the secret look that passed between them. Gamelin saw him staring and grinned.

"You not surprised, Irlander," he stated in his broken way.

"No. Ranulf told me."

Gamelin nodded. "That is well. You, me...both we have..." he thought for a moment. "Loyalties," he finally decided.

Aleyn gaped at him. "You think I have loyalty to Ranulf? Why would I?"

Gamelin shrugged. "How not?"

"He is," Aleyn waved his arms "he's a Viking!"

"So too, I," Gamelin pointed out reasonably.

"But he takes from my people!"

Gamelin cocked his head, looking at him, and Aleyn noticed that he had skin like buttermilk and a golden scattering of freckles across his pert nose. "Your people Danes now."

Aleyn shook his head. "No. That's not how it is."

Gamelin shrugged again, clearly not caring if Aleyn could not see what was only plain sense to him. "Your old life," he pointed to the low, white waves slapping against the distant shoreline. "Like that. Gone endless. Always away, now. A-leyn," he poked him in the chest with a finger. "A-leyn is a Northman now. Ranulf has said. Thraell and bonded to him."

Aleyn was disturbed. 'I would claim you', Ranulf had said when he learned that Aleyn was an orphan. Is that what he meant? Why would Ranulf say such a thing to his crewmen when he had promised to let him go at the end of the raiding season? Was he

planning to go back on his word and keep him as a slave anyway, no matter how well he was pleased?

He lapsed into silence and Gamelin let the matter go. Later, when he was summoned to Ranulf's side, the Viking jarl was in pain from his cauterized leg and in no mood to tolerate questions. He had Aleyn rub some kind of fragrant, medicinal oil into his wound and lay down in the bunk, and all he required was Aleyn to disrobe and lay beside him, where he caressed Aleyn's body contemplatively, without heat, while slowly getting drunk on honey mead.

Chapter 4

The longship continued to sail south along the coastline, passing the well-defended native forts of Dal Riata, Dal Fiatach, and the thriving Viking trading bases of Annagassan and Dublin. The native forts were inhabited by clans descended from the fierce Belgae and too large for a single raiding party to take on. The longship - Aleyn found out at last that its name was Lymskr, which Ranulf explained meant wily, or cunning - arrived three weeks later at the Viking trading post of Arklow. It would have been one week, but a black storm sent them scurrying from the coast into the open sea for five days, where the sail was damaged. They put to shore when the weather allowed and repaired it, and thus lost several more days.

The crew muttered during this time, casting dark looks Aleyn's way and making the sign with their fingers against evil fortune. Ranulf invariably ordered him into the compartment whenever tensions became high on the ship. Several fights broke out and the jarl suppressed them with his customary mercilessness, knifing one man who would have struck him. Aleyn questioned Gamelin about it, but the youth was close-mouthed and would say nothing except that Aleyn should keep very quiet and do his work.

During the voyage, there had been only two more raids: one in a prosperous and large town in Oirghialla, and another in a smaller steading further south. Both times, Aleyn had railed and cursed at Ranulf, and the Viking had reluctantly had him restrained aboard the longship. However, he was scrupulous to make sure that Haakon was present on the following raids, and never left aboard while Aleyn was alone and defenseless. When Aleyn thought of this at all, he observed bitterly to himself that Ranulf was only jealous of his property, like a dog with a bone. He was certain the Northman felt nothing for him personally, and it was only his pride of ownership that secured Aleyn's continued health among the Viking warriors.

In bed, Ranulf's hands often found the scar on his shoulder. "What is this?" he invariably asked, tracing the thick white line with his finger.

"Nothing," Aleyn replied, and not all of Ranulf's subtle prodding could get him to tell.

When Arklow was sighted on the horizon, Aleyn counted on his fingers and reckoned then that he had been with Ranulf almost a month. Viking settlements were a hated thing on the island, but Aleyn's people were disorganized and torn by clan raids of their own, unable to band together to repel this ongoing influx of Northmen who came to take and stayed to conquer. It was said that some clan leaders had begun to make pacts with the foreigners and enter into treaties and trade agreements with them, but Aleyn found this too incredible to believe.

The Lymskr rounded the frothy headway and met with five other longships beached ashore. Ranulf ordered his raven banner to be raised. A large encampment of wedge-shaped tents and hide shelters squatted on the hill above the shore, dominated by a huge, circular, blood-red tent that was bordered by a few crude outbuildings and a makeshift

barn for horses. Aleyn was on deck as the Vikings on the shore began calling out welcome to them, and he looked up at Ranulf with apprehension.

“Am I to stay on the ship?” Aleyn asked, eyeing the scarlet tent with misgiving.

Ranulf shook his head as he drew on his studded gloves and pulled a splendid black fur cloak over his shoulders, pinning it with a wide silver brooch. The day was gray and misty but not cold. “You will come ashore. There will be a feast tonight to celebrate our crossing, and you will sit beside me.”

Aleyn frowned. Like a trophy, he thought.

Ranulf saw his expression. “Yes,” he affirmed, as if Aleyn had spoken. “You are a fine prize.”

Aleyn’s indignation warred with his common sense. He knew he should curse Ranulf for the insult, for wanting to show him off like a petted slave. And if I displease this Northman, he thought, I will never be anything else. He clamped his lips shut and stared straight ahead, pasting an expression of indifference on his face.

Ranulf laughed and clapped his shoulder, making Aleyn stagger. “It will not be as bad as you think,” he chuckled. “You will not be the only pretty prisoner in this camp. No one will notice very much.”

Aleyn wondered, but there was not much he could do about it. He resigned himself to an evening of being stared at.

The coarse camp was ill-kempt but not filthy, and Aleyn supposed it was no worse than any encampment full of men used to living rough. There were women also. Aleyn saw dusky-skinned camp followers from far away lands, and dancers with red-painted hands and small bells wound around their ankles that chimed as they walked. Many of them had long hair as black as sheep’s wool, or red as burnished copper. None of the women seemed to be Danes, and he wondered if there was some Viking taboo against bringing their own women on raids.

He followed Ranulf and his men through a throng of loud, merry Vikings. Ranulf was greeted many times by men with voices like trumpets, each one laughing as if he had found a long-lost brother. They came at last to a medium-sized gray tent made of beaten wool fibers set near the center of the camp. Ranulf pushed him towards the entrance.

“They say this is to be my tent,” he told him. “Go and sleep or rest or what you will. I will return later.” Then he turned to his countrymen and said something, and they burst out into boisterous laughter again.

A pox on him, Aleyn fumed, certain that the Northman had made some lewd comment about him being a whore or some such thing. He ducked into the tent without argument

and heard the sounds of the men retreating.

The interior of the gray tent was dim, the muted light and absence of prying eyes soothing after the jolt of seeing so many Vikings gathered in one place. It was not just the camp that bothered him, but the fact that these Vikings appeared to be building more permanent shelters on the hill above the shore. To him, the whole camp gave off an aura of unwanted guests who had come to stay. The knowledge depressed him.

“A pox on Arklow and a pox on Ranulf,” he pronounced to the walls. A scratching sound behind him made him turn sharply. “Who’s there?”

A woman was crouched near the wall of the tent, by the entrance flap. Despite her posture, she gave Aleyn a bold look.

“Who are you?”

“Yasmina,” she answered. She pointed to herself and began to speak in a rapid, throaty language that Aleyn did not comprehend in the slightest. He shook his head.

“Save your breath, girl, I don’t know what you’re on about.”

She seemed to understand that. She pointed to herself again. “For ... for to Ranulf,” she said haltingly. “For him, I. Gift.”

Aleyn wondered at the sudden rush of resentment he felt. He told himself it was against Ranulf for taking yet another powerless bedmate who had no choice in the matter. From the looks of her, she was a slave from the Black Sea or the far Eastern lands. “His welcoming gift, I suppose.”

She shook her head, her long black hair caressing her waist, and pointed toward a low wooden table covered with an embroidered cloth. There was a jug and some cups set out there, along with bread and cheese and a piece of spiced meat, probably beef or venison, wrapped in linen.

Aleyn sighed and dropped onto the rug nearest the table, absently pouring for himself. The jug proved to contain mead, and he was surprised that he was beginning to like the taste. He held it out to the girl. “Want some?”

She shook her head, covering herself with her shawl, and continued to watch him.

“I’m not the one you need to watch around here,” he muttered, and then pondered if he was being fair. Ranulf was much more interested in seducing his will than raping him. He was sure Ranulf would not harm this girl. Ranulf truly had never harmed him, nor given any indication that he was planning on doing so.

No, he’s only threatened to sell me as a slave to the Saxons. How is holding a life of

slavery over my head no harm to me?

His head was beginning to hurt, the old, familiar ache starting to pound in his temples. Ignoring the curious girl, he finished the mead and stretched out on the rug, throwing his arm over his eyes to shut out the light, and was soon asleep.

Yric the Wolf, they called him. A beefy, yellow-haired, yellow-toothed giant of a man who was at least twenty years Ranulf's senior. He was far past the age when most men would have given up raiding and gone home to his farm and his sons, but Yric had never found a life that suited him more than raiding. He was jarl of the camps and trading posts for this part of Irland, and if he had been one ounce less the warrior he was, some younger and more ambitious man would have taken his place already. Some already called him konge, or king of the camps of Eire, but that was precipitous and meant nothing. King was only a word, unless one had the men and coin to make a country with it, and he despaired of ever making a proper Norse country out of Eire.

Yric received Ranulf magnanimously in his vast red tent, which came from Araby lands and for which he had traded several cows. He accepted the jarl's gifts and set out a feast for his crew: roasted beef, boiled grain with mutton and spices, bread, and mead. He had already loaned Ranulf one of his women, a comely, dark-skinned thraell whose name he had forgotten.

"This is fine wool and linen you have gifted me with," Yric said expansively, though the wool was only fair and the linen rough. The wool could be oiled and used to make sails for Viking ships, so it was still of use. However, he was puzzled at the lack of silver or slaves. "There is better raiding further south," he hinted mildly. "Several fat townships cluster on the heel of this island, much bounty and many thraells to be taken and sold."

Before Ranulf could speak, Haakon pounced. "We have taken no slaves, jarl, except one."

Yric raised an eyebrow as Ranulf shot a dark and smoldering look at Haakon. Dissension in the ranks. "Indeed. And where is this slave?"

"In my tent, Yric," Ranulf said. "Haakon speaks where his voice is not needed. He should learn to hold his tongue until it is proper, lest he be sent out of the tent to sit among the children."

Yric flicked his old eyes from Haakon to Ranulf, noting Ranulf's tense posture, Haakon's barely contained spite. "So, you have found a use for her?" He grinned, displaying the sharp yellow teeth that had earned him his name. "That is good."

"Use for him," Haakon put in as a last shot.

Yric shrugged. "All the same. A prisoner's body is not his own. If he pleases our worthy jarl and puts such color in his face and such power in his step, then I will send the pretty thing an anklet of gold with my thanks."

"There would be more power in his step from a good raid than from a dozen bed-boys," Haakon said with venom.

"You have not raided?" he asked Ranulf in surprise,

"We have, jarl, but have found no silver of any mention nor any great treasure to speak of. Yet," Ranulf added. "The season is young and Haakon is hasty and impatient, like all young men."

Yric sensed that this jarl hoped to enlist his aid with the mention of Haakon's youth, for Yric himself was advanced in years. Raiding was considered a natural occupation for young men, but older men were expected to settle down and raise crops at some point. Yric had never had any interest in farming and expected to be raiding until his dying day.

Yric scratched his graying beard, looking at Haakon narrowly. "I sense some disagreement here," he said shrewdly.

Before Ranulf could answer, Haakon broke in again. "Only over the slave, who goes by the name of Aleyn. We took him off a doomed ship, and his bad luck follows us. That is why we have found no silver."

Ranulf the jarl would not dignify a mere sokeman with an answer in words. Though from the look of him, he might answer with his sword soon enough, Yric mused. He looked from Haakon to Ranulf and back. "Why do you tell me these things?" he asked Haakon.

"I thought your wisdom might reach his ears where others have failed, my lord."

Yric wrapped his furs around his barrel chest and stood heavily. He strode to stand toe-to-toe with Haakon, towering over the younger man.

"If you or any have issue with your jarl, be a man and take it up with him. I am not your milk-mother to come bawling to."

With that, he swept past Haakon, leaving him to stare angrily at the departing jarl's back.

Haakon glared at Ranulf for a long moment before storming out of the tent. Several of Ranulf's crew got up and followed him, and Ranulf watched them go with a sinking feeling in his heart. Had he lost that much control over his men? At least ten men had followed Haakon.

Oskell moved closer to him. "That will need to be taken care of at some point, jarl," he remarked to Ranulf.

Ranulf felt like spitting. "Pompous boy. I should pull down his breeches and whip him in front of the crew."

"My jarl," Oskell began.

"I have heard enough for one day." He made to leave the tent. Yric would return later, and he himself would be expected to be present at the feast in his honor, which would last well into the night. He should be rested and have his wits about him, for he knew there was trouble ahead.

"Ranulf," Oskell said, pleading. Ranulf turned. "Please, can you not see that this Irlander is not worth losing your ship over?"

"I will not lose my ship," he said, though he was no longer sure he spoke the truth. "Haakon has never been superstitious. He curses the gods and fate alike, I have heard him. Aleyn is but an excuse." He strode from the crimson tent into the camp.

Oskell followed him. "Exactly. An excuse to take you down, like you took his cousin down in the Briton lands."

Ranulf froze in his tracks, remembering the mutiny that had made him a jarl and the foolish leader who sought to spend every life of the crew to prove his own valor in useless, profitless battle. He had killed that leader.

They were just outside the gray tent. "Harald - that Harald - was his cousin?" Ranulf asked. A shiver of superstitious foreboding tickled the back of his neck, and in that moment he was certain he was going to lose his ship. Learning Haakon's identity had the circular feel of prophecy to it.

"I found out from Gamelin. Haakon has a loose tongue in bed."

"I should have knifed his gut and thrown him to the fish the day we set sail," he snarled, thrusting the flap aside and entering the tent.

Oskell followed him stubbornly. "True, but too late now. Have done with this little nothing Irlander. Put him aside. Give him to Yric as a gift, or even set him free if you cannot stand to see him given to another."

"I am not done with him yet," he evaded. Aleyn was curled up like a cat on the rug, fast asleep. As promised, there was a smoke-colored girl in his tent, also asleep. She was huddled under a mound of furs a watchful distance from Aleyn.

Oskell jerked his head toward the sleeping woman. "You have the girl," he said.

I do not want the girl, he thought, and he finally admitted the truth in the depths of his heart: Though he probably curses me and spits at the sound of my name when I am not there to see, I want only him. But... do I want him more than I want my ship, more than I want to remain a Viking? What madness has come over me?

"Perhaps Haakon is right," he murmured. "Perhaps I am bewitched."

Oskell's head came up sharply in alarm. "My jarl, let me take him with me now." Oskell tried to step around Ranulf. "He has bewitched you. I will get rid of him and you never need ask me how. Just let me-"

"No!" Ranulf placed himself between his huscarl and Aleyn, standing over the sleeping Irlander like a wolf over his fallen mate. "No. He is mine."

Aleyn stirred. Oskell glanced down at him, then back to Ranulf. "I do not know what will happen if he stays."

Ranulf sensed a warning in Oskell's tone. Perhaps it was the only one he could give. Oskell was still a Viking, and Ranulf had proved he had a weakness. He would have done the same. Ranulf nodded sadly. "I understand."

Aleyn sat up. Oskell pointed at him. "Keep your little A-leyn, then. If he does have any magic, tell him he had better use it to protect you, for if anything happens to you, I will kill him as well." There was pain in his voice.

"Leave," Ranulf commanded lowly.

Aleyn woke at dusk to the sound of shouting voices. He opened his eyes and saw Ranulf standing over him with Oskell. They were arguing, and Oskell pointed at Aleyn once and quite clearly said his name.

Aleyn sat up, wondering what he had done. "What's amiss?" he asked Ranulf.

"Silence," Ranulf commanded shortly. He spoke one biting word to Oskell and made a gesture of dismissal, and Oskell departed, but not without a backward glance at Aleyn.

Ranulf was standing, his arms folded, staring after Oskell with a black scowl on his face.

Aleyn knuckled the sleep out of his eyes. The girl, Yasmina, was huddled under a fur near the tent wall. One of her eyes was closed, the other was opened to a slit, and her breathing was deep and even. Aleyn saw that she was awake but pretending to be asleep. She caught him looking and shook her head the tiniest bit, warning him. To do what, he wondered? To be silent, to pretend helplessness like a good slave and be safe from

Ranulf's anger? He ignored her.

"What's wrong?" he asked again.

Ranulf turned to him with a truly ferocious glare. "I told you to be silent."

Aleyn shrank back a little. What in hell is wrong with Ranulf now? he wondered resentfully. Although he could almost feel his tongue itching with the acid retort rising in his throat, he knew better than to speak. Ranulf looked to be on the verge of rage. He cast his eyes down and sat meekly, while above him Ranulf continued to stare at the tent wall. The jarl's breathing was erratic.

Suddenly, Ranulf bent down and seized Aleyn's arms, thrusting his face so near that Aleyn could see the shadings of color in his blue eyes.

"Is it true? Are you witching me, slave?"

Aleyn could only gape at him in shock. "What?"

Ranulf shook him. Aleyn's teeth clicked. "Have you put a spell on me? What charms have you said over me that entice me to keep you by my side, even though I may die for it?"

Aleyn was beginning to know fear. "I don't... I haven't..."

"Are you lying?" Ranulf gripped Aleyn's chin in his sword-callused hand. "If you lie to me now, I will not be responsible for what I do. Tell me."

Ranulf's hands were hurting him. Aleyn blinked and stared at him with wide, startled eyes. "I wouldn't even know how," he said starkly. His voice grew stronger and he stared back at Ranulf fearlessly. "I swear it, Ranulf. I am no sorcerer."

Before he could say anything else, Ranulf had sealed his mouth over Aleyn's and was kissing him passionately. "Tell me you want me," Ranulf breathed and began to strip him out of his shirt, fingers tugging impatiently at the buttons. "Tell me you want to feel my body on you."

Aleyn shivered. He was not ready to give up so much of himself. I'm a prisoner, he thought fiercely. A captured slave. I am not his lover!

When he did not speak, Ranulf kissed him until he was breathless. Ranulf's hand cupped and pressed Aleyn's cock beneath his clothing.

"I will make you tell me," he said urgently. He pushed Aleyn down to the rug and unpinned the magnificent black fur cloak, throwing it aside carelessly. Aleyn made a sound of protest as Ranulf straddled his waist, big knees clasping his hips.

“Wait.” Anxiously, he looked over at Yasmina, who was now wide awake and watching them with interest.

Ranulf barely glanced at her. He gave up trying to unbutton Aleyn’s shirt and began to pull at the material, pushing it up to his shoulders, pinching his nipples and bending down to capture his mouth in a dizzying kiss. “I will take you,” he panted. “I will make you mine completely. We will see how much of a witch you are after I have mastered your body.”

Aleyn did not like the sound of that. Most especially, he did not like Yasmina watching them. Always before, these acts had occurred in privacy, just between the two of them. To suddenly be on display made Aleyn feel naked and exposed. He began to try to push Ranulf off of him.

“I can’t... not in front of... Ranulf, stop.”

Ranulf did not seem to hear him. He tugged at the laces of Aleyn’s breeches, pulling them down. “I want to be inside of you.”

Aleyn began to panic. “You said you would not rape me.”

Ranulf chuckled. He rubbed his leg against Aleyn’s groin. “There will be no need to. You want me, Aleyn. You care for me. Say it.”

“I don’t,” he tried feebly. “I care nothing for you.”

Ranulf paused, suddenly still. “You lie.”

“No.” Aleyn was trembling. “Want you? You’re nothing but a pirate and a rapist. I can barely stand the sight of you!”

Ranulf kissed him hard, silencing him. “Lies,” he gasped, when he would let Aleyn breathe again. “You love me.”

“I said stop!” Aleyn surged up, and when Ranulf simply used the flat of his hand to push him back down, Aleyn lashed out.

“Damn you!” Aleyn’s ill-timed punch landed a glancing blow to Ranulf’s nose.

Ranulf froze, his face clouding over in rage. Aleyn’s aim had been off due to his awkward position and the blow had barely hurt, neither of which was relevant.

“Miserable slut!” he roared. Ranulf’s fist clenched and Aleyn’s eyes widened. If Ranulf punched him with that ham of a fist, it would break his jaw.

Luckily, Ranulf seemed to recall himself at the last moment and dealt Aleyn an open-handed slap to the side of the face. Even though he pulled his strength back at the last instant, Aleyn was still knocked flat. He fell back against the rugs and looked up at the Northman fuzzily as he felt a thin, hot line of blood trickle down past his lips.

Ranulf paused, his hand upraised, and Aleyn flinched. Visibly striving to control himself, Ranulf lowered his hand. "You're bleeding," he said flatly, stating the obvious.

Aleyn wiped his nose against his wrist. "Bastard," he grated out, shoving at Ranulf ineffectually. To his shock, Ranulf let himself be pushed off. Aleyn scrambled to his knees, setting his clothes to rights, as Ranulf rose over him.

Aleyn risked looking up. Ranulf was staring at him. Aleyn swiped at the blood again. Just a nosebleed. He refused to look at Ranulf again, even when he heard the Viking moving away, but when Yasmina gave a smothered laugh, he jerked his eyes up and found that Ranulf was pulling the furs off the woman.

Aleyn was too startled to think of his own safety. "What are you doing?" he blurted.

Ranulf was pulling at Yasmina's thin robe. To Aleyn's surprise, she was not fighting Ranulf, but actively helping him undress her, smiling as she shrugged her shoulders out of the thin shift. Her breasts came into view, full and amber-hued, topped with dark nipples. Aleyn watched as Ranulf, without a look at him, cupped the woman's breast and squeezed it.

"Do you understand me, girl?" Ranulf asked her. His voice was strange. Smiling, Yasmina shook her head and spread her knees.

Aleyn looked at the tent flap, wishing he could just go through it and leave, and wondering if Ranulf would try to stop him if he did. He half rose to his feet, only to have Ranulf turn on him.

"You will stay!" he barked. He jerked at his belt and then began pulling the laces of his breeches apart. "Watch," he commanded grimly, his eyes like burning blue gems, his gold hair hanging in his face. "You think I have mistreated you? You think I have raped you? I will not trouble you for the use of your body again."

Aleyn sank back, knowing that he had no choice but to obey. If he tried to leave, it would go very badly for him. The only protection he had against the other Vikings was Ranulf.

And what protection against Ranulf? he thought despondently. Ranulf said he would not trouble him again, did that mean he had decided to sell him after all? Or would Ranulf actually let him go free?

Ranulf lowered his mouth to the woman's breasts and began to suck on her nipples, laving his tongue over her chest. She giggled and wound her fingers in his flowing hair,

wrapping her shapely legs around his back as he pulled his leather breeches down to his thighs and began to push and rub against her sex.

Aleyn did as he was ordered and watched, and tried to tell himself that he was glad that Ranulf's attentions were focused on someone else at last, which felt confusingly like a lie. Why did I say those things to him? he wondered mournfully. It did not occur to him that his denial stemmed from fear, or that a man could lie even to himself, if the truth were hard enough to confront.

As he watched, Ranulf threw his head back to toss his long mane of hair out of his face, and Yasmina began to claw him out of his leather jerkin, revealing the hard, muscled lines of his back, the curves of his ass. Ranulf's buttocks clenched as he drove against the woman, seeking to enter her, and Aleyn's breath hitched and he looked away, confused by the sudden tightness in his chest. A moment later, Ranulf's hand slapped against the rug. He was glaring at Aleyn.

"Watch," he growled.

Aleyn swallowed. Watch? He could barely stand to look at Ranulf at all. Holding his gaze, Ranulf's hand went between his body and Yasmina's, and Yasmina purred and spread her legs wider, her eyes slitted with pleasure.

What was this odd pain in his chest, the sense of his heart being squeezed until all the blood seemed trying to flee his arteries? Aleyn bit his lip, his mind struggling with the emotions warring within him, until Ranulf grunted and his hips jerked as he plunged his cock into the woman.

Aleyn inhaled a shaking breath, his eyes stinging, but he refused to look away or to let Ranulf see how he was affected. He himself did not understand it, but he knew in some murky way that Ranulf wished to hurt him by taking Yasmina in front of him. His lips clamped together tightly and he lifted his chin. He wouldn't give him that pleasure, not even if he branded him and sold him to the Saxons this very night!

He watched as Ranulf rutted with the girl, his expression blank and set, listening as their flesh met and slapped together wetly, seeing a glimpse of his thick shaft disappearing into her depths. When Ranulf thrust brutally a few times and uttered a hoarse cry, Aleyn knew that he had spent his seed into the woman.

After a few moments, Ranulf lifted his body off Yasmina and wiped himself clean with the edge of her shift. "Go," he said to her, his face obscured by his hair. "Out."

She took his meaning and shrugged as she gathered her clothing up and stepped lightly out of the tent. Aleyn continued to sit with a face like stone.

Ranulf glanced at him once. "What?" he asked as he pulled his jerkin back on. He picked up his black cloak. "You did not like the show? Was it not pleasing to watch me rape

someone else for a change?"

Aleyn stubbornly gritted his teeth. If this Northman expected him to answer, he had best think again!

Ranulf watched Aleyn closely as he dressed, drawing the cloak about his powerful body. "Have you nothing to say?"

When Aleyn made no response at all, the muscle just below Ranulf's left eye began to twitch, and then he was kneeling down and seizing Aleyn's arms, dragging him to his feet.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked. His face was so cold that Aleyn's heart, already aching for some unfathomable reason, began to thud painfully, as if it wished it could just stop.

"What difference does it make?" he heard himself say. "You are a Viking. You take what you are strong enough to hold. What I think, what I feel, doesn't matter. I don't matter."

His words seemed to drain the strength out of Ranulf, and Aleyn was astonished when the Northman released him. Ranulf turned and dug into one of the chests beside the low table, drawing forth a long-sleeved blue garment from it. It was like a long robe with a high collar, spun from very light linen the sapphire color of the deep sea, and shot with many threads of silver at the neck and wrists. Aleyn stared at it as Ranulf held it out to him.

"You will wear this to the feast," Ranulf said in a dead tone.

"No," Aleyn replied without thinking.

He was unprepared for the ferocity of Ranulf's reaction. The Northman grabbed his linen shirt by the neck and tore it down, baring him to the waist. He thrust the robe into his face.

"You will wear this, or you will go in your skin and nothing else!"

Aleyn trembled, but he was not sure if it was from fear or shame or heartache. He took the robe from Ranulf and began to undress without a word. Ranulf watched him as he stripped and put on the odd garment. It was softer than what he was used to feeling next to his skin, and altogether too fair a garment for a man. He realized with some horror that it was probably something that belonged to Yasmina.

Not for the first time, he told himself that he hated Ranulf and wished the Viking dead, and wondered why he felt so hollow inside. He also feared what fate awaited him in the red tent, for he sensed that Ranulf was also brooding on that place.

It doesn't matter what he does to me, he thought. I certainly can't sink any lower than

this; to be miserable that a Viking took a woman when he could have had me instead.

Ranulf waited until Aleyn had tied the last tie at his wrist before gripping his hand and pulling him out of the gray tent. They made their way through the camp, and Aleyn was aware of the stares he garnered and how they must have looked together. Ranulf striding along like he owned the very earth, his lion's-mane of hair trailing after him, his fine cloak furling in the twilight breeze from the water. He with his slight frame, too slender and not enough curves to be a woman, short brown hair, but dressed in garb that one more expected to see on a dancing girl.

The crimson tent was made of thick, tough material that Aleyn was not familiar with, like linen, only much thicker and stronger. The shelter was vast and round, with a towering central pole and many supporting poles, braces, and lines.

Ranulf thrust aside the heavy flap and pushed him inside, shoving him into mayhem. There were perhaps a hundred or more in the tent, and the air was thick with smoke and incense and the smell of food, mead, sweat, and bodies. Strange music played dissonantly, music that was at once sliding, like a snake, and also jarring to his senses. Dancing girls swayed their hips here and there among the crowd, and there was a warm fire in the cleared center of the tent. Smoke exited up through the large hole cut around the material roped to the supporting column, and there were many low tables and benches. Men perched on the benches or sat on rugs or squatted on the sandy ground, and every hand held a mead-horn or a piece of food. There were many voices speaking the rough, alien tongue that grated on Aleyn's ears, and yellow light from tallow and beeswax candles flickered on fierce, bearded, barbarian faces and glowed on the soft features of their dancing women and whores.

Ranulf's hand was on his shoulder, guiding him to a place where an older man with a grim face and greasy yellow hair sat on a carved wooden chair, surrounded by warriors; obviously a person of importance. Ranulf approached and spoke to the man, but did not introduce Aleyn, instead shoving him to sit on the ground next to the second wooden chair placed by the older man. Ranulf sat in the place of secondary honor with Aleyn at his feet.

The ridiculous garment on his shoulders seemed far too heavy and the smoky air and the yellow, flickering light were bringing back his headache with a vengeance. Aleyn closed his eyes and wished he could as easily shut out the sound of crude laughter and the voices speaking in an unknown tongue. He was sure every word spoken was a taunt to him, every laugh an insult.

How not, when I am dressed like a slut and on display, he thought bitterly. He risked a glance to Ranulf's face. The Viking steadfastly ignored him.

Aleyn's heart sank as he realized that Ranulf had probably already decided to get rid of him. What he could not fathom was the Viking's sudden anger and incomprehensible resentment.

What have I done to offend him so? What does he want from me?

He did not have time to dwell on it for long, for Haakon was there almost as soon as he sat at Ranulf's feet. The red-haired sokeman looked down at Aleyn, his ruddy face a mask of loathing, and spoke in his guttural language.

Aleyn did not understand him, which Haakon knew, and his temper began to flare. He had already resigned himself to being the object of stares, but this direct confrontation was more than he could tolerate.

"Get away from me, you pig," he ground out. From the corner of his eye, he could see that Ranulf was deliberately not looking his way, and was instead in conversation with the yellow-haired warrior in the carved chair.

Haakon said something to his companions - there were eight or ten of the crew of the Lymskyr clustered behind him in a knot - and the sokeman kicked Aleyn's thigh lightly with his boot, following it up with some crude insult. Ranulf turned his head and looked steadily at Haakon, though he did not move.

Aleyn glared up at Haakon. The kick had not hurt. It was more the act itself, being spurned like a dog in front of so many witnesses when his wounded pride was already aching.

"Go fuck yourself," he snarled at Haakon, rising to his feet. His hands clenched into fists and he wished desperately for a weapon.

Haakon laughed, but Aleyn saw the flash of rich pleasure in his eyes, and he sensed that Haakon had played him into a trap. Haakon hawked and spat on him, and as the goblet of phlegm landed on his chest - on the ridiculous girl's garment - it seemed to burn there like a live coal, representing all the humiliation and fear and uncertainty he had faced since the cog ship was attacked.

"Filthy, muck-eating dog!" Aleyn aimed a punch at Haakon's jaw. To his shock, Haakon did nothing to defend himself, and the blow landed square on his chin, knocking him back a pace.

Every one of Aleyn's fingers sang in pain. Hitting a Viking's jaw was like striking iron! He hissed and shook his hand, sure he had broken something. Haakon was smiling at him, and from his belt he drew a long, curved knife.

The music stopped. Someone shouted. Aleyn turned and saw that it was Gamelin with Oskell beside him. The pair was struggling toward the center of the tent, thrusting other guests aside to reach Aleyn and Ranulf. The yellow-haired old chief had not moved, but Ranulf surged to his feet, his lips drawn back in a feral snarl.

Haakon's fist lashed out, and that was the last thing Aleyn knew as he fell back and his skull impacted with the wide foot of the carved chair. Everything went dark.

"You are a Viking. You take what you are strong enough to hold. I don't matter."

Aleyn's words played over and over in Ranulf's mind as he sat with Yric. On the outside, it looked as if he was locked in deep conversation with the respected jarl. Internally, Ranulf's mind was a muddle of tangled emotions.

He believes I think him nothing, Ranulf thought sullenly, glancing down to see the alluring profile of Aleyn's face outlined in firelight.

I never meant to care for him. I cautioned myself against it, like a man who takes a third or fourth cup of wine when he knows he should stop, but I was not serious and I only thought of myself and my own feelings. If I chose to indulge in love, I assumed it would be returned.

It was not only unreturned: Aleyn despised him. That Aleyn might think of his very captivity as a brand of contempt never occurred to Ranulf. To be in bondage was the natural state of the weak, and the strong were entitled to any bounty their power brought them. As neither of these facts were in dispute (to his way of thinking), and as Aleyn was weaker than him, keeping a man he had come to care for as a bound thraell was anything but troubling. It was the way things were. Why could Aleyn not see that and open his heart to him? Why could Aleyn not see that he belonged with him, and why did he insist on playing the victim?

Ranulf's mood for the evening had started out foul, and it had grown rapidly worse the moment Haakon entered the scarlet tent and made straight for them.

There were words. Haakon kicked Aleyn - daring once more to touch his property - and then he spat on him. Ranulf had already stopped pretending to be locked in talk with Yric. When Aleyn punched Haakon, Ranulf got to his feet, and then Haakon drew his knife and hit Aleyn with his fist. Aleyn went tumbling back. There was a hollow thunk, and then the Irlander went very still.

Ranulf's vision seemed to narrow down to one man, one focus of attention in the universe, and he went for Haakon's throat. Men scattered. The dancing girls screamed and fled the tent as the two warriors grappled with each other, dangerously close to the fire, their boots kicking and scattering burning coals among the rugs. Ranulf seized Haakon's knife-arm and pinned it. Haakon, younger and quicker, aimed a punch at Ranulf's eye. It landed, and Ranulf growled as his eye began to tear up and close. Haakon would not let loose his knife, and Ranulf thrust his knee into Haakon's belly and relished the gagging sounds that followed. He slammed Haakon's wrist on his knee, knocking the blade from his grasp. It fell almost into the fire, and Ranulf grabbed Haakon by the hair

and delivered an uppercut punch to his jaw, spinning him to the ground.

Ranulf stood over Haakon, breathing hard, and spat on his back as Haakon struggled to rise. The sokeman's jaw was probably broken, judging from the garbled sounds he was making.

"I warned you, you puling, milk-sodden pup; do not touch what is mine." Ranulf kicked him in the belly as he crouched, halfway on his feet, and the red Viking fell again.

"And I warned him," came a voice from behind Ranulf. "I warned him not to challenge where he is not worthy."

Ranulf turned quickly. Oskell stood there, holding Haakon's knife. Gamelin was attending to Aleyn, trying to get him on his feet and out of the tent.

Ranulf looked from the tip of the knife to Oskell's face, wondering what was in the huscarl's mind. For a moment, he wondered if he looked on his own death.

Oskell spun the silvery blade in his fingers as he stepped around Ranulf to Haakon. Haakon was trying to rise. Oskell put his foot in the red Viking's back and shoved him to his belly, then knelt and straddled the Viking's back as if mounting a horse, pulled his head back by the hair, and neatly cut his throat.

Ranulf stared as Oskell got up and calmly tossed the knife into the fire. "Why did you do that?"

Oskell shrugged. "It was my duty to punish disloyalty to my jarl." He looked at Ranulf sadly. "Just as this next thing I do is also my duty." He looked past Ranulf to Yric. "Konge?"

Ranulf turned. Gamelin had gone, and Ranulf knew a brief and joyous sense of relief that Aleyn had gone with him and was out of danger for the moment. However, Yric was regarding him with hard, calculating eyes.

The aging jarl wrapped his cloak more tightly about him and settled back in his carved chair, which was almost a throne. He looked at the men gathered apart from Ranulf: Haakon's pack who had turned against their jarl. Yric's jaw tightened.

"So be it," he said, locking gazes with Ranulf. "Ranulf Eriksen, you have raided long enough. There is a land to tame here, and your wisdom is needed. Oskell is now jarl and master of the Lymskyr."

Though Ranulf knew that Yric had been generous and had not said openly that Ranulf had foolishly lost the loyalty of his men, the words sank into him like a knife wound, cutting deep. For a moment, he wished Oskell had cut his throat instead of Haakon's. Yric was silent, giving him time to accept the verdict with dignity.

Ranulf swallowed. He turned to Oskell, knowing that his fate lay with him now. “And what of me, Jarl Oskell?” he asked, being the first to give his old friend his title. He glanced at Haakon’s corpse and lowered his voice so that only Oskell could hear. “I would appreciate a better death than that. Any death where I am holding a sword would be agreeable.”

Oskell shook his head. “My jarl,” he said reprovingly. He stepped closer to him and put his hand on his shoulder, and then embraced him gruffly. “You fool,” he whispered in his ear for him alone. “The crows have enough to eat.”

Oskell turned them both so they faced Yric. “Konge Yric, I give my lands on this island to jarl Ranulf,” he said loudly, emphasizing Ranulf’s title to bring attention to the fact that Ranulf was diminished only in command, not in stature. “To protect and hold for me as reeve for the day when I leave the Lymskyr, or to be his forever if she sinks or I die in battle.” He looked from one fire-darkened face to the other in the tent, his gaze unsparing. “These are my words. If any man objects, let him come forward” he laid his hand on the hilt of his sword “and we will discuss it in the usual manner.”

There was scattered laughter. The music started up haltingly, and Yric nodded as he accepted a cup of mead from a woman’s hand. He grabbed her wrist when she would have left. “What is your name again, girl?” he asked her.

The woman smiled winningly and slipped into Yric’s lap. “Yasmina.”

“Come, brother.” Oskell’s hand on Ranulf’s shoulder tightened, and the jarl felt himself led away in a daze.

When they were out of the crimson tent and into the clear night air by the shore, Oskell hawked and spat into the sand.

“Fah!” he said, kicking up grains and pebbles with the toe of his boot. He met Ranulf’s look and shrugged. “Nasty business,” he commented. They were in the shadow of the Lymskyr, and the full moon behind her made a sheer mist of her sails, which billowed in the wind like a woman’s veil.

Ranulf barely heard. He raised a hand to touch the curved hull of the longship. “So it is the straw death for me,” he said faintly. “I will die in bed of old age, addled and useless.” He shook his head. “You would have been kinder to kill me with Haakon’s blade.”

“Stop speaking nonsense,” Oskell said harshly. “Battle and glory! Dead is dead. Don’t waste the long life you have ahead for tales we heard as boys. We have both seen enough men die to know there is no glory in it.”

Still, Ranulf was stubborn, holding on to his sorrow. “I am no longer a Viking.”

“You were not born a Viking, either. No man is. What did you do before this?”

Ranulf frowned. “You know what I did. Tilled dirt and grew things, like my father.”

“Who was a Viking in his time until he came home and became a Dane again to sire you.” Oskell sighed. “All things end, my lord.”

Ranulf gazed at him in surprise. “You still call me your master?”

“You will always be my jarl.”

He means it, Ranulf realized, and he felt suddenly ashamed. I have been not been myself since the day we took the trade cog. Oh, Aleyn, you were a sorcerer after all, but it was a very common magic you put upon me, no more mystical than any man whose prick rises at the sight of a pretty rump, then wakes to find he has lost his head over what was attached to it.

“I will make the best use of what you have given me,” he promised. There was only one matter that still worried him. “Aleyn-” he began.

“He will heal. Just a knock on the head, I think. I swear that I will see the Irlander is put ashore near his home. Cianacht, was it? Gamelin said something like that.”

Ranulf nodded, though his heart felt like it was full of molten lead. “Yes. I promised him his freedom if he pleased me.”

Oskell cocked his head. “And did he keep his part of the bargain, your Irlander?”

Ranulf sighed and patted the hull of the longship a last time before he turned away, leaving it, and Aleyn, behind.

“He did.”

Chapter 5

“Aleyn! Come back, Aleyn!”

It was the same dream come to haunt him again. Aleyn shifted as he ran, transforming back to a younger self that raced through the trees with his friend Diarmid, running into the green woods outside the village. They played for a while, throwing dead leaves at one another and hurling taunts and insults, until they found a narrow ravine to hide in and sat on a hollow log, whispering and laughing. Diarmid, only a few years older than himself, had pushed his shoulder and laughed at him, and he had pushed back and thrown a few twigs. Diarmid, eyes alight, had leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

Aleyn’s very heart seemed to stop. He shuddered and took a deep breath, and all around him the hushed forest seemed to glitter more brightly, as if a great secret had opened in his soul. Then Diarmid was kissing him again, arm winding around his neck to pull him closer.

Aleyn’s shoulder erupted with fire. He shouted and jerked away, scrambling back among the dead leaves, and saw his eldest uncle, Padraig, standing over them.

Uncle Padraig carried the short, flat whip he used to hurry the cattle along with, and it was this that had cut Aleyn’s shoulder. He had probably been looking for a stray calf and happened upon them here. Padraig’s face was nearly purple as he lashed out at Diarmid as well.

“Evil boys!” he raged, the whip landing among them. “Back home with you! Out! Out!”

Diarmid grabbed his hand and they ran home, bleeding and bruised. They huddled all day in the barn, terrified of Padraig’s return and the punishment that waited. But later, when they were called to supper, Padraig said nothing at all to Diarmid, only sent the boy home with the news that he had spoken to Diarmid’s father. That alone made Diarmid burst into tears as he left. Aleyn was drawn aside and his uncle silently dressed the wound on his shoulder, his weathered face like iron.

“Will scar,” he informed after he had done washing the laceration. “Your friend has a few to match.” He began to put the medicine and rags away. “It is a good thing,” he said without looking at him. “It will remind you to sin no more. Mark me well, Aleyn, if this happens again in my home, I will call you kin no more. I will see to it that you are not welcome in this village, or any place where my voice can carry. Do you hear?”

His uncle’s familiar face seemed to be that of a stranger. He did not know this man, this cold and unfeeling man who so casually threatened to cast him out of his home.

“Yes, Uncle,” he said meekly, and went to bed. That night, he had a headache so fierce that it left him shaky and sick for days, and Padraig’s fearsome wrath relented. They

never spoke of the incident again, but the bright truth Aleyn had found in the green woods shriveled and curled in torment.

Aleyn woke up. The white scar on his shoulder seemed to throb in time with his head, and outside the gray tent he could hear the sound of shore birds scolding. The air smelled of dawn.

He threatened to disown me, he thought sadly. My own kin, and for nothing more than kissing Diarmit in the woods. Diarmit never looked at me after that, never spoke a civil word to me again. When they saw what I was, they hated me, Diarmit most of all, because he saw the same thing in himself.

He swallowed past the lump in his throat, slowly comprehending that he had never dared face this before. He knew now that, for him, there would never be any true family or home so long as he kept trying to mold himself to what others expected. Aleyn was shocked to realize that the only measure of acceptance he had ever found for his strangeness was among the Vikings, with Ranulf.

I am free with him, he thought in wonderment. He may call me his prisoner, but I have been more myself with him in the past weeks than I ever was growing up at home.

The revelation was unwelcome, but undeniable, and he was not sure he was happy to have the truth. He sat up slowly and felt the back of his skull. There was a lump there the size of a goose egg. He winced as he felt it, and then remembered Haakon striking him, how Ranulf had surged up just before the knife appeared in Haakon's hand.

The tent flap drew aside and Aleyn turned his head quickly, making himself dizzy as Oskell entered. The huscarl knelt down, inspecting Aleyn with his nearly colorless eyes.

"How long have I been asleep?" Aleyn mumbled, forgetting that Oskell could not understand.

"You have been asleep a full night and a day, and it is morning of the second day. How do you feel?" he asked in perfectly understandable Gaelic. When Aleyn only gaped at him, he reached out and felt the lump on his head. "We were getting worried for you. Any sickness or vomiting?" He held up his hand before Aleyn's face and waved it. "Can you see my hand, or do you see more than one?"

Aleyn grabbed his hand and pushed it away. "You speak my language," he accused.

Oskell shook his head, sighing. "Of course I do, fool Irlander."

"Why didn't you say so?"

“I am not in the habit of revealing information to captives who may well use it against me later. You should have asked Ranulf if I could speak your tongue. He would have told you.”

Aleyn sagged. “Where is he?” he asked, knowing the answer. Ranulf must be dead. Why else would Oskell be attending to him? He was amazed at the torrent of grief welling in him.

He’s dead, he thought. He’s dead and I never told him... I never said...

“He is at a farm-steading some ten hills to the west,” Oskell said. “Haakon is dead and Ranulf is still a jarl, but Yric has removed him as commander of the Lymskyr. The stead is mine. I have given it to Ranulf to hold for me.”

Aleyn looked at him in stunned relief. “He’s not dead?”

“Far from it.”

“But...” Aleyn’s mind was whirling. He tried to grasp at a single thought, only to have it dance away from him. “He no longer commands the ship? He will no longer raid? How could he accept that? I thought it was what all Vikings lived for.”

Oskell shook his head. “Not all Danes are Vikings, Aleyn. Vikings are raiders. It is something young men do until they are killed or they stop doing it, and before he was that, Ranulf was just a Dane with a bit of land and a lot of wives. The ship was much to him, but not all. I made him see that, and he has gone.”

“But he’s alive?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you.” Aleyn closed his eyes and sagged, whispering a prayer of thanks, then looked up when he heard Oskell chuckling.

The huscarl’s cold eyes were sparkling. “All this time, I thought you had put a spell on him. Now I see you were spelled, too. You love each other.”

It was on the tip of Aleyn’s tongue to deny it, but he could not deny the vast feeling of relief that had flooded him when he knew Ranulf was not dead.

“I do love him,” he said after a moment. Suddenly, it was as if the admission had toppled a great weight from his shoulders. The priests call this sin, he thought, but it is the answer to what I am. How can it be a sin to be true to myself? That can never be wrong.

Aleyn shook his head. “I can’t imagine why I love him. He took me prisoner...”

“When he could have easily had you killed, or he could have sold you to the Saxons the next day or he could have just left you there to rot on that ghost of a trade ship.” Oskell regarded him with something like interest. “Our laws are not your laws, Irlander. We do not live by the same rules, and by our code what Ranulf did was not only legal, but expected. Ranulf may have done you harm in your eyes, or he may not.” He shrugged. “It all depends on how you want to see it. Do you want to hate him?”

Aleyn looked at him for a long moment, remembering Kellan and how he had run away from his home rather than face his feelings, giving up everything in fear of the truth of himself. He gave a small smile and looked down to hide it.

“No. Hate is the last thing I feel for him.”

Oskell gave his shoulder a push. “Then get dressed in something proper and go to him, fool.” But his eyes were merry. “Are you well enough to travel?”

Aleyn paused. “I am,” he said in surprise. The lump on his head hurt and his jaw was sore where Haakon had struck him, but he was astonished to realize that the blinding pain behind his eyes was gone. He realized he might never feel it again, now that he had cast aside fear. He grinned at Oskell. “Tell me how to find him.”

It was more like twelve hills to the west, but Aleyn finally found the steading. It was a small, rough-planked house, little better than a hut, with a few fences and two cows penned in and several goats wandering about free. A curl of smoke wafted up from the chimney, and the door was closed.

Aleyn cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted a greeting, watching the green, wooded area anxiously. Suppose this was the wrong place, and he was on another man’s land, perhaps even another Northman? Oskell had given him a new shirt, a fine new knife, and some provisions, but he knew if any landowner caught him trespassing, they would assume he was a common poacher and would put an arrow into him.

After a long moment, the door scraped open on its leather hinges and Ranulf’s big, familiar shape filled the doorway. His blond hair was freed from its braids and in disarray, and he wore no mail or warrior’s garb, just his simple leather jerkin and breeches and boots.

Aleyn waved to Ranulf from his perch on the small hill, and after a long, long time spent simply staring at him, Ranulf motioned for him to come closer.

Aleyn trudged down the hill and walked past the cows, up to Ranulf, whose powerful body filled the door so completely.

Once he was there, all his carefully rehearsed words fell away from him. “Hullo,” he said lamely, hitching his pack higher on his shoulder.

Ranulf continued to stare at him mutely, as if he were a dream or a vision that would vanish if he broke the spell by speaking.

“Hello,” he said at last. His fingers found the straps of Aleyn’s pack and he slipped it free, setting it half in and half out of the doorway. “You walked all this way?”

“It wasn’t so far,” Aleyn answered. He fidgeted with his hands a little. “Oskell told me where to find you.”

Ranulf nodded, as if the information was already clear. “But what did you come for?”

Aleyn began to stutter. That he would have to explain his presence never occurred to him. He nodded to the pack he had carried all the way from the camp. “I... I brought your raven banner. Oskell said you would want it. And then...” he trailed off.

Ranulf placed his fingers on Aleyn’s lips. “Be still,” he said. Aleyn looked up at him, noting how very blue his eyes were, how striking the sharp cut of his features were, and wondered how he could have ever imagined he hated this man.

“What are you doing here? You did not come all this way merely to bring me a flag. You would not do that for a jailer.” Ranulf pushed a lock of Aleyn’s brown hair out of the boy’s eyes, his fingertips lingering on warm skin. Then, suddenly, Ranulf’s hand dropped uselessly to his side.

Aleyn recognized that look on Ranulf’s face, the look of denial. He had been wearing it himself since the day the trade cog was overtaken. Ranulf sighed and picked up Aleyn’s pack, tossing it into the house.

“You may as well come in. You can eat, at least. There is mead, too, though I know you are not fond of it.”

“I got used to it, after a bit,” Aleyn said wryly. Oh, there’s a hint.

One that Ranulf did not take. He turned away and Aleyn stepped in after him and eased the door shut. It was warm inside. Ranulf had a small peat fire going in the hearth, and a covered iron pot on it that emitted the savory smell of beef.

“I bought supplies from the farm over the next brook,” Ranulf provided gruffly. “From Oskell’s kin. This, plus the eggs and the goats and the grain I have, will provide for me until I can grow crops of my own. I am a fair hand at blacksmithing, too.”

Aleyn nodded, looking around. There was a straw bed, newly made with wool sacking spread with furs, and one table. The wooden shutters were closed against the morning

chill, and Ranulf fetched a cup from his hide chest, talking as he moved, not looking at Aleyn. His voice was noticeably colder.

“There are no chairs yet. Sit on the floor by the fire,” Ranulf ordered, his back turned.

Aleyn did so, dropping down cross-legged on the worn planks before the hearth and wiping his damp hands nervously on the knees of his breeches. Ranulf moved about the room, fetching the mead, filling the cup with liquor, his posture rigid and stiff, as if he had taken a great wound.

Aleyn watched him, wary but also concerned. Ranulf looked like a bowstring that was about to snap.

As Ranulf turned and saw Aleyn watching him, he suddenly dashed the cup to the floor with shaking hands, spattering the wall. “Damn you!” he shouted. “Why did you come? I was willing to give you what you wanted, willing to let you go. You have no love for me, you said so yourself. Why are you here?”

“I was wrong,” Aleyn burst out impulsively.

Ranulf knelt swiftly, and despite his newfound resolve, Aleyn shrank away. Ranulf was as angry as he had ever seen him.

“Wrong about what?” he demanded.

“I said you raped me. You didn’t.”

All the anger seemed to go out of the man at once. Ranulf sat on the floor across from Aleyn and put his face in his hands. “What would you call it, then?” he asked tiredly. “I gave you no choice.”

“I had many choices,” Aleyn argued. “I could have died, I could have tried to escape, or I could have fought you. I didn’t even do that.”

“Common sense,” Ranulf countered, dropping his hands into his lap. “You said it yourself; it is not cowardice to know you cannot defeat forty men alone. I tried to tell a fool named Harald that, just before I killed him.”

Aleyn sighed with frustration, having no idea what Ranulf was referring to. “I was angry and you did frighten me, but I didn’t fight you because I wanted to know what it was to have a man touch me.” He looked at Ranulf straightly. “Finally, to have a man touch me.”

Ranulf tilted his head, regarding Aleyn like he was a new vista he had a mind to explore. “Well,” he said. The smell of mead was strong in the air, sweet as bee pollen. “Shall we try the mead again?”

“In the cup this time,” Aleyn suggested.

Ranulf snorted and went to get the drink. “So, Aleyn,” he said, after he had refilled the cup and sat down again. “What are you doing here?”

“Question is; what are you doing here?”

Ranulf swept his arm out to encompass the small confines of the house and the fledgling farm outside. “What does it look like? I’m no longer a raider, or even a proper jarl. I shall have to work this land myself. This is what I am now.”

Aleyn peered at him. “You’ve given up the Viking life? Not that I object, mind you. You are raiding my countrymen.”

“Raiding is an occupation for young men. I am getting older and I am expected to farm and grow crops after a certain age, to settle down. Oskell has promised to send sheep and goats and a horse from Arklow. Some of my huscarls and thraells from Ribe will also come, in time.”

Aleyn looked askance at him and sipped the mead. “What about these famous wives, your family?”

Ranulf shrugged. “The women I hardly know and they have done without me for years at a time already. In truth, they are not as fond of me as they are of each other. My sons will come here, eventually, on raids of their own. I will send word to my people that I can be found here.”

“So that’s it, eh?” Aleyn put the drink down and crossed his arms. “You’re going to ground, like a windblown seed that’s taken root.”

Ranulf nodded in silence, though his eyes had acquired that heavy-lidded look that Aleyn had grown to know. It was the look that said Ranulf desired him.

Aleyn rose up on his knees and began to pull his fine new linen shirt over his head. Ranulf reached out and grabbed his wrist. “What are you doing?”

Aleyn gave him a crooked smile. “Well, it’s a new shirt. I thought I’d save it from you.”

Ranulf held onto him for a long moment as the fire smoked and crackled beside them. “What I did to you,” he said with difficulty “it is not a thing a man would forgive.”

Aleyn rolled his eyes as he pulled his arm away and shrugged the rest of the way out of his shirt. “If you’re going to start talking like that, you’re going to wind up saying I’m not a man and insulting me and it will be a very, very long day.” He tossed his shirt aside and began to work on his breeches. Ranulf still had not moved.

“Are you going to help me or are you just going to sit there?” Aleyn said without looking up, pulling the laces out of their eyelets. Ranulf’s hands were suddenly on Aleyn’s wrists.

Ranulf leaned very close, so close that Aleyn could see the flecks of sapphire and indigo in his eyes. “Say you forgive me,” he pleaded.

Aleyn cupped the bearded face between his hands and slowly pressed a brief kiss to Ranulf’s mouth. “I forgive you.”

He was unprepared for the crushing embrace Ranulf caught him up in and the bruising kiss that followed. Ranulf’s tongue slipped past his lips, exploring every part of his mouth. Ranulf’s rough hands were in his hair, tugging his head back to thrust in deeper, marking him, claiming.

When he could breathe, Aleyn began to tear at the laces of Ranulf’s breeches. “I want you,” he said hotly, licking his ear. “I want to feel your body.”

Ranulf obliged him by pushing off his own boots and helping Aleyn to peel his breeches off. Finally, they were nude, grasping each other tightly as they lay on the planked floor before the hearth, their bodies grinding together, mouths locked in a passionate kiss, cock against cock.

Aleyn panted as he felt the slippery dampness between them: the first, clear seed of excitement painting a hot, slick line between their bodies. He pushed into it, against Ranulf, his eyes closed tightly, wanting to get closer.

“Put your hand on me,” he begged, moving his hips to thrust against Ranulf’s belly.

Aleyn cried out as Ranulf’s bear-paw of a hand encircled him, stroking him quickly with no prelude to pleasure. He did not need one. Already, Aleyn’s nerves were so tightly drawn that he felt he could come just like this, just pushing against Ranulf’s skin and nothing else. Then Ranulf was moving that hand up and down, squeezing him, and he shouted as he came, forgetting to warn him, forgetting everything.

Ranulf took his mouth again as Aleyn shot against him. The Viking hummed against Aleyn’s tongue in pleased assent while rubbing Aleyn’s seed-slicked cock, slowing only when his lover began to shiver in over-sensitized delight.

He continued to rub his wet hand unhurriedly over Aleyn’s torso. Ranulf kissed Aleyn as he lay limp and satisfied.

Finally, Aleyn came back to himself a little. Ranulf’s cock was rock-hard against his belly.

“Tell me what you want?” Aleyn asked softly. “I want to do it for you.” He reached for

the engorged head of Ranulf's prick.

"Come," was all Ranulf said, getting to his knees and pulling Aleyn with him.

The bed was straw but very soft when covered in the furs, and it gave in all the right places. Aleyn lay on his stomach with his head pillowed on his arms as Ranulf stroked down his bare back to the curve of his ass, pausing there to knead and pinch the soft flesh.

Aleyn smiled, his eyes closed. "You must like that."

Lying beside him, Ranulf kissed his shoulder. He rubbed his beard against Aleyn's skin. "Do you?"

"Hm," he murmured in contentment. "I don't know yet."

Ranulf's fingers slipped between his thighs.

"That tickles," Aleyn chuckled.

"And this?" His fingers stroked upward, into the cleft there, barely grazing the sensitive inner flesh.

Aleyn inhaled slowly, the muscles of his belly tightening with excitement. He had been nervous when Ranulf had done this before, but it had felt so good. "I think so."

The straw mattress moved as Ranulf got out of the bed and padded, naked, to the chest. He drew out something small and came back to the bed, and Aleyn saw that it was the stoppered vial that contained the medicine for his leg. He sat beside him, removed the small wax cork and held the bottle over Aleyn's back.

"What are you doing?"

Ranulf drizzled the chilly oil onto the small of Aleyn's back, creating a tiny, fragrant pool in the indent of his spine. Ranulf fingers dipped generously into the oil, trailing his touch into the cleft of Aleyn's ass, and then purposefully down between his cheeks. Aleyn inhaled sharply when his fingers found the mark and pressed inward, gliding in smoothly, aided by the oil and Ranulf's deft and gentle touch.

"Now do you like it?" he asked, sinking one finger home, deep into Aleyn.

Aleyn bit his lip, fighting to stay still. "It is... it is very strange."

Ranulf curled his fingers and raked gently across that secret center of pleasure hidden inside, the one Aleyn had not even known existed a month ago, making him arch his back and raise his ass in the air invitingly.

“Oh,” he moaned. “Oh yes, that. Do that again.”

Ranulf obliged him, drawing another long, drawn-out groan of pleasure from his throat. “Where did you learn such things?” he managed to gasp out, as Ranulf’s fingers began to slowly move in and out of him.

Ranulf did not answer, but moved so his knees were astride Aleyn’s hips. Aleyn craned his head and watched Ranulf spill more of the oil over his hard dick, coating it thickly. He set the vial aside and pressed the head of his cock between Aleyn’s soft cheeks, not pushing, just brushing the length of Aleyn’s cleft.

“Relax,” Ranulf said in his deep voice. “You must trust me.”

Aleyn felt the head nudge his hole and shivered. Ranulf took his cock in his hand and aimed it at the tight entrance, pressing the tiniest bit. Aleyn put his forehead on his wrists, striving to be still, not to pull away or tense up.

Ranulf’s hand was under his body, pulling him up by the waist so he was partially on his knees. “It is easier this way,” Ranulf soothed.

Again, Ranulf’s cock pressed against the tight ring, and Aleyn began to feel the muscle give. “Ah!” he exclaimed.

Ranulf was instantly still. His hand was on Aleyn’s back, stroking him like a nervous colt. In a moment, Ranulf was pushing forward again, and Aleyn hissed as the broad head pushed inside him, opening him up. He bit his lip, determined to be silent, as Ranulf waited again and then strained forward, slipping further inside the tight channel of his body.

“There,” Ranulf said with effort. His cock was sheathed fully. He waited as Aleyn panted and became accustomed to the burning intrusion, bending forward to place a kiss on his back. Then, as Aleyn began to relax, Ranulf put his hands on Aleyn’s hips and slowly began to fuck him.

Aleyn’s hands knotted into fists in the soft fur covers. Every thrust burned a little less, but it was still far from pleasurable. Then Ranulf gripped his waist, changed the angle and pushed, and sparks went shooting through Aleyn’s brain.

He uttered a shocked little cry and instinctively spread his legs wider, wanting more of that brilliant sensation. Ranulf was thrusting quicker now, his breathing erratic. He leaned over again to whisper close to Aleyn’s ear.

“You do matter to me.”

Aleyn’s breath hitched. “I love you,” he managed to say, then was lost in overwhelming

sensation as Ranulf changed the rhythm and began to ride him with fast, deep strokes, freeing one hand to slip beneath Aleyn and grip his aching cock. Ranulf fucked his ass harder as he neared climax, giving a shaking cry as Aleyn came in thick, hot spurts over his fingers.

Aleyn felt Ranulf come at almost the same time, sudden heat flooding inside his body, and he whimpered and ground his buttocks back against Ranulf's groin, wanting it to never end.

Ranulf collapsed on Aleyn's back, spent. Aleyn's exhausted protest was muffled in the furs.

"Heavy," he mumbled. He felt boneless, limp, like one who has swum a great distance. Ranulf muttered an apology and rolled off him, only to grip Aleyn's shoulder and pull him into his arms. They lay together, sticky with sweat and semen, as they caught their breath.

Ranulf kissed him, running his tongue over Aleyn's lower lip.

"That was... different," Aleyn said.

"But good?"

Aleyn snorted, snuggling closer to Ranulf's broad chest. His fingers roamed in the mat of fine gold hairs there. "Very good."

Ranulf rumbled something in agreement. After a long minute, he spoke again. "So... you came to tell me you love me?"

Aleyn paused before answering. Ranulf had said he mattered, but he had not said the words Aleyn wanted to hear. Aleyn's heart began to ache dully. He suspected it would hurt for some time.

"I guess I did," he said heavily. He sighed and closed his eyes on a spasm of pain. "So, here you'll stay. Will that make you happy?"

Ranulf shook his head, turning Aleyn so he could look down into his face with an enigmatic expression. "I will be miserable."

"Oh." Aleyn looked away. Ranulf had not been happy at all to see him, though he was happy enough to bed him. What did I expect? he asked himself dismally. After all I said to him and everything he has lost for wanting to be with me. If I were him, I would not want such a reminder around me, either.

What now for him? Back to Cianacht, after having been a Viking's captive lover? Going home had been unappealing even before he discovered the truth about himself. Now, the

thought was hateful to him.

He felt Ranulf's warm hand under his chin, and the man tipped his face up to look at him. Ranulf's eyes were sad. "I will be miserable," he said "because you will not be with me."

Aleyn swallowed and his heart leapt in hope. "Who says I won't be?"

Ranulf's eyes narrowed. "Do not play, my sweet prisoner, my thief. You have already stolen my heart. Do not rob me of my pride as well."

Aleyn ducked his head and pressed a lingering kiss to Ranulf's palm. "I'm not playing," he breathed.

"You would give up your freedom, give up returning to your home?" He smiled and caressed Aleyn's lower lip with his thumb. "Not that I object."

"Oh, I'm keeping my freedom," Aleyn said smartly, but inside him he felt like the sun was filling up his chest. Joy was a new emotion to him. "We'd best settle that right away."

Ranulf drew him slowly into his arms. The fire had died down to embers and the afternoon was growing cool. He reached out and felt around on the floor for Aleyn's pack, drawing forth the raven banner that had fluttered proudly over the Lymskyr. He spread it over Aleyn's bare body.

"There," Ranulf said with satisfaction, his blue eyes bright with happiness. "Now I have claimed you, as I said I would."

Aleyn's fingers caressed the rich fabric. "Prisoner of the raven," he murmured thoughtfully.

"No, Aleyn," Ranulf said gently. "I do not claim you as thraell, but as family. You are free, my love." He pulled Aleyn closer against his body. "We both are."

-end-