



Viking Seduction

By

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Dedication

To the one man who is the inspiration for it all, my best friend as well as life mate and lover. John, this would not be possible if you were not here. You are my perfect hero.

Chapter 1

Morgana stood at the prow of her ship, the Golden Princess, as the strong wooden bow slipped through the semi-calm water as smooth as a ripple through silk. Tendrils of her free hair lifted, riding the same wind swelling the sails of the vessel. Dressed in blue-tinted men's breeches and tunic, she drew in a deep breath and inhaled the salty tang of the sea, letting it fill her nostrils and lungs with its neat, familiar scent. How long had it been since her last trip on the sea? By her calculations, it had been almost too long. Had it not for her father's plans for her, she would not be here at all.

"Are you all right, Princess?" issued a strong male voice behind her. She turned around to see Robert, the captain of her ship, standing before her. Concern and worry stamped his aged features.

Morgana shook her head and brushed the strands of loose hair over her shoulder. "Aye, Robert. I was just thinking about home." She leaned against the railing and stared at Robert. His face, the color of tanned leather, was creased and lined with age. White hair tumbled around his head like a halo, wafting in the gentle wind. He was no taller than three-quarters of a rod were, but he was mighty.

Despite his grizzled appearance, his smile was warm and inviting. "What were you thinking?"

She sighed then turned to gaze out toward the sea with her resting on the element battered railing. "How much I would have liked to stay at home."

Robert stepped up next to her, assuming the same pose. "You could have, you know."

Morgana shook her head. "No, I could not. Facing a life next to a man who would give his horse more regard than his wife was not an enlivening prospect. I refuse to play the part of political pawn, so this was my only choice."

Robert's tanned, freckled hand covered her. "If I were your father, I would have let you have some say in a choice of a husband."

She patted his hand affectionately. "Much thanks, Robert. It pleases me that you think that way. However, my father, being who he is, decided my marriage to King William of England would prove to be a very good alliance with Wales. He was only doing as he was taught."

"Still, I would"

She laid a finger to his lips. "That is enough, Robert. I want to discuss this no further. Now, where will our course take us?"

It was his turn to sigh. "France then onto Spain. From there, we may go wherever our heart desires."

Morgana cast her gaze out onto the crystal blue waters rumbling past the hull. With the dawn of each new day, she pushed away from the familiar Welsh shoreline she had loved so much toward an unknown destiny. At least it was better than facing a life with the horrific King of England.

Just as she turned to her left, something caught her eye. Though it was quite a span away, it possessed the resemblance of a ship. She could not make out the size because of the distance, but something definitely intrigued her. Red and white material glared at her, flapping at the vessel's mast. They must be the sails of traders roaming the sea in search of good trading routes. Morgana let out a sigh of relief. For a moment, she thought it might be a roving band of pirates in search of hapless ships to plunder.

"'Tis the Vikings!" came the shout from the crow's nest.

"Princess, get down below!" Robert bellowed.

Her brow lifted. "What are the Vikings doing this far south this time of year?"

"I know not, but the fact remains they are here. Now get down below where you will be safe."

"No, Robert! Give me a sword! I can defend myself as best as any man!"

Robert gripped her upper arms in an iron clasp and pushed her toward the stairs. "This is one time that I will not obey your orders, Princess."

Rough hands shoved Morgana into her cabin. Once she was in, the door slammed and locked behind her. Damn them! She kicked the door with vicious swipe while cursing Robert with a bitter tongue. She could take care of herself!

Her gaze drifted to the hinges of the door. If she could just push up the pins holding them in place, she could easily slip through the void. Before she could find anything to take out the hinge pins, a large thunk resounded above her. She looked up, her heart hammering in her chest. Overhead, she heard the hard pound of feet moving over the sturdy wood as the men readied for battle.

She moved away from the door, making her way to the large round window. Morgana peered out, holding her breath as she watched the ship approach. Its sails were indeed red and white, only they were in vertical stripes, indicative of the Vikings. Her heart lurched.

Morgana hurried away from the window and knelt next to her bed, her hands frantically searching underneath.

It must be here somewhere!

This seemed to go on for a few tense moments until her hands locked around the thick leather sheath of her sword. Her lips curled into a smile. We shall see what the Vikings withstand, she thought as the full scabbard came into her sight. The hilt, with her initials carved in the sturdy metal, was ornate, made of the best iron Wales produced. Her father had the blade fashioned for her to give to her husband on their wedding day. From the moment she had planned her escape, Morgana knew this would come with her.

With a firm grip on the hilt, Morgana felt the smooth cold points dig into her palm. It felt comfortable, almost like a long lost friend. She pulled the blade out and stood up, hefting it around. It was the right weight and height, perfect for her. Perhaps her father had it made for her all along instead of her husband.

Now came the harder task. She needed to hide her hair.

Morgana opened a coffer at the end of her bed and started plowing through it. Gowns, bodices, and undergarments went flying as she searched for a head covering.

Under one of her darker gowns, buried near the bottom, lay a black velvet cap. Picking it up, she jammed it on her head, cramming all the errant strands underneath.

With her hair tucked neatly under the cap, Morgana pulled the ornate sword from its sheath and wielded it. It made a sharp slice through the air. Any man who got in her way would end up with the tip of it through his gullet.

Once she pulled out the pins of the door with the hardened edge of her sword, Morgana strained against the hard wood until it gave way. She slipped through the small void created between the jamb and the door. Above her, the scuffle of feet and the shouts of anxious voices became more intense. The Vikings must be close or on board.

She wound her way cautiously through the darkened stairwell, her head pounding. Light seeped through the crack under the door as well as the sharp smell of burning wood, making her eyes water slightly. What was going on out there?

Morgana charged out of the door and stormed to the deck, brandishing her sword before her like a flame. To her left was a young lad, about her size. His blade flashed in a blinding arc in her line of vision, but she caught his steel with her own. Metal clashed against metal with sparks flying as they danced around in a circle of death, thrusting back and forth. With quickness on her side, Morgana swiped her sword at his belly. The red-headed lad fell forward, his eyes turning glassy before he fell onto the deck, his hands clutching the wound as if to prevent the bleeding. The hot coppery smell of blood, mingling with that of the burning wood, rose and stung her nostrils, encouraging her belly to retch at all this death. She had never encountered this before.

Morgana turned, her chest heaving in an effort to regain her breathing as well as to calm her erratic heart, to see more of them scrambling over the side. They swung from the mast on thick ropes, descending like hungry insects to feed on dead flesh. Fear threatened to overtake her, but she quelled it for the moment despite the hard pounding against her ribcage. They must defeat these heathens.

She looked to her right. There was another Viking about her size trying to slay one of the cabin boys. She picked up a discarded Viking sword as well as her own and rushed

to the boy's side, burying both blades in the mid-section of the taller man. She pushed the screeching yell echoing from his dying lips out of her mind. Blood spurted from the wounds, bathing her completely. Before she could stop herself, the contents of her stomach spilled through her mouth and mingled with the congealing blood on the deck.

Morgana tossed the Viking blade to the cabin boy, leaping onto the upper deck. The swift descent of the enemy had all but ended now with all of the raiders aboard her ship.

Suddenly, she caught sight of Robert, backed against the side of the ship with a sword at his throat. A large Viking held the hilt, his bulging, naked arms glistening with blood and sweat. Tendrils of long blond hair streamed out from underneath his helmet and flowed over massive shoulders. He was large, but she had the element of surprise on her side. Leaping from the prow, Morgana ran with her sword in front of her, ready to thrust the tall man. Just as she came within reach of his back, a sharp pain rang in her head then her world grew hazy. She felt herself fall and slipped into the bleak world of unconsciousness the moment her head hit the blood-splattered deck.

* * * *

"It looks like we have done well, Erik," Sven commented in a hearty tone as they both wove a path through the piles of dead bodies. Smoke rolled by in thick plumes. Death was everywhere, the smell of lifeless flesh clinging to everything. It had been a long time since he encountered a battle such as this.

Erik removed his helmet and tucked it under his burly arm, surveying the scene before him. Most of the dead were the crew of the captured vessel, hardly any of his own. "Aye, that we have. Have you searched the ship for treasure?"

Sven let out a hearty laughter, his brown eyes crinkling around the edges with delight. "Aye, and you will be most amazed at what we found."

Erik turned to Sven as his blond eyebrow rose in response. "What did you find?" For this degree of excitement to fill Sven, it must be worth seeing.

With the snap of his fingers, Sven gestured to bring the treasure out. Two of the men rose from the smoky depths of the ship carrying an ornate coffer between them. In front of him, they halted, setting the box down. Sven broke the iron lock binding the coffer, lifting the lid carefully. Brilliant colors greeted Erik's vision. Various shades of silk fluttered in the breeze of the sea, emitting the soft scent of wildflowers. Erik inhaled the scent.

Sven rummaged with the clean handle of his axe, moving things around so they could get a better look. "There must be a woman aboard, perhaps the ship's whore. Why else bring all these gowns and jewels?" Sven turned to him for an explanation.

Erik's arms crossed over each other, his hand going to his chin in a pensive move. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, crossing his fur booted feet at the ankles. Sven could be right. If there was a woman aboard, it could prove very interesting indeed. "Sven, do you not think perhaps these are goods to be sold in port?"

Sven shook his red head. "There's a woman about, Erik. I can smell it."

Erik let out a snide smirk as he threw his hands up in a mocking gesture. "I think what you are smelling is yourself, Sven. As for this mystery woman" Sudden calls of one of his men drew his attention, cutting off his words.

“Erik, there is something I think you should see!” Ulrich cried, his arm waving in a frantic motion.

Erik strode to Ulrich’s side, waiting for reason for the summoning. “What is it?” he stated in annoyed tone. All of these interruptions wore on his patience, and he wanted to be on his way back to Darvisson as soon as possible.

“Look at this,” Ulrich stated as he laid a blood grimed hand against the boy’s chest where it rose and fell rhythmically. His brow cocked up. Did Ulrich call him over to confirm the boy was alive?

Erik shook his head, shrugging his massive shoulders. “So? The child breathes. Bring him aboard, and we will make use of him at home.”

Ulrich shook his dark, blood-bathed head. “No, there is something more. Feel his chest.”

Erik cast a hardened look at his cousin then bent down to feel the boy’s chest. Much to his amazement, the chest was not flat but mounded, almost like a woman’s. He drew his hand back as if it had been scorched. “Thor’s teeth, the lad has breasts!”

“That is not all he possesses.” With that, Ulrich pulled the cap from the woman’s head. A plethora of blonde hair tumbled out. Portions of it appeared tinted crimson with blood that oozed from the cut on her head.

Erik stood back, staring wide-eyed at the unconscious female. She was dressed in a tunic with breeches and boots, trying to pass as a man. Why was she doing that?

Underneath that dirt and grime, he suspected her skin was as soft as the finest silk. This woman was no whore. “This changes things then. Why was this woman on the ship?”

Sven threw his hands up in frustration. “I already told you! She is the ship’s whore, and now she can be our whore until we reach home.”

Erik shook his blond head, his mind pondering the fabulous silks contained in the trunk. This was not the wardrobe of whore but more than likely belonged to a noblewoman. “We do not know that, Sven. Do not assume what may not be true.”

“There is one way to find out. If you let me take down her breeches”

Sven made a lunge for the shapely legs outlined in the tight breeches, but Erik’s firm hand on his shoulder halted her injustice. “No, Sven. No one is to touch her until I find out her identity and what she is doing on the sea.”

Sven’s deep laughter filled the air. “Not to mention her skill with a sword. If I had not struck on her on the head with the hilt of my sword, she surely would have run you through.”

“Why did you not kill her?”

Sven’s broad shoulders shrugged. “I know not. Perhaps Loki clouded my vision today.”

He clapped his friend on the back in a friendly gesture. “At least it was not a half a barrel of English ale. You have saved me yet again from disaster.”

“What are friends for?”

Chapter 2

Painful throbs in her head brought Morgana back from the depths of dreamless sleep. How long she was there, she was not sure. The last thing she remembered was getting ready to run a Viking through ... her ship! A roving band of Vikings attacked her ship on the high sea!

Morgana opened her eyes. Where was she? Was she in her own cabin aboard the Golden Princess? On one side, moonlight bathed the rough-hewn tent in gray, outlining the confines slightly. Just beyond the edge, she heard the soft murmur of voices in a language she had never heard before. Where was everyone?

Morgana put her hand down and felt the soft fur pelts underneath her constructing a bed. It was warm but foreign. Fear pounded along her veins as the sudden realization of her situation sank in. She must have been captured to be taken God only knows where.

What was she going to do?

Were they going to ravish her and pass her around like some sort of sport?

Before she could think upon it further, the tent parted with the help of two large hands. Terror pushed Morgana's heart to a new pace as a lump formed in her throat. Who was it that was coming into the dim room? Better still, what did they want with her? She backed up a little on the mound.

A very tall figure emerged from the opening and stood before her with arms crossed. From his silhouette, she could see his heavily muscled arms as well as his strong legs splayed out in a gesture of power. Light colored, wavy hair framed his unseen face.

"I trust you are well," he stated in a strong masculine voice. She was taken aback. He spoke her Welsh tongue with a perfect accent.

"How ... how ... you know my language?" she managed to stammer.

Snorts of annoyance escaped his lips. "You forget that the Vikings have traveled the seas since time began. Most of us know many languages." His arms fell to his sides where his hands went to his burly hips. "I suppose you could use some light." With a quick snap of his fingers, a small pot, filled with oil, passed through. Though the flame was small, the light was generous enough for her to get a good look at him.

Warm golden light highlighted his bronzed skin underneath the strange fur vest covering his wide torso. He possessed a strong brow that hooded his eyes, almost like those of a hawk. His nose, aquiline and sleek, swept down to high cheekbones. Luscious full lips parted to let out a soft breath. Her heart thumped an extra beat as the masculine scent of him filled the dim room.

"Much thanks, milord. What ... what are you going to do with me?"

"That all depends." Sitting beside her, the corner of the bed sunk under his weight, bringing forth the thought that at any moment this giant could spring on her and there was nothing she could do to stop him.

Her eyebrow rose. "On what?"

The stranger picked up a strand of her hair and dangled it between his strong fingers. "On you. First, you are going to tell me who you are and what you are doing on the sea with a band of men." Strange light danced behind the light gray eyes. What was his real intent?

She shook her head defiantly, crossing her arms. "No. That is my concern and my concern alone."

In a swift motion, his strong arm locked around her waist and drew her against his hardened plane. Her trembling increased fourfold as her breath quickened. From her position, Morgana could do nothing but to look into his eyes. "Come, vixen, I can be very cruel indeed." His lips were inches away from hers, his breath warm and inviting. For a moment, she thought his lips would touch hers, but, as the moments passed, it became clear he was not. A bite of uninvited lust nipped at the back of her mind.

Morgana threw her head back. "If I do not?"

His lips turned upwards in a devilish smile. "Are you willing to find out?"

"If you must know, I was traveling as the ship's whore, nothing more," she snarled through gritted teeth. "I was given to the captain, but he unfortunately died en route. So, I dressed as a man to keep the others away from me."

His gaze traveled all over her face as if to memorize every line then returned to stare into her eyes. "You lie."

"Nay, I do not!"

He nodded. "You do. Whores do not have such soft skin," he murmured in a low tone as his free hand captured hers, his fingers tracing patterns on the palm of her hand. "They also do not have hands of a noblewoman, so 'tis best that you tell me your identity, or I will kill one of your men for every moment that you do not tell me." Intense heat from his fingers seared up her arm and flowed around her body, exploding in a delicious meld of sensation.

A mask of smug delight crossed his face. "You would not"

"No? Do you wish to discover that for yourself?"

Morgana drew in a deep breath and let out a reluctant sigh. "I am Morgana from Wales and betrothed to a very powerful man whose riches are vast. He would pay handsomely for my safe return."

Small chuckles escaped his throat. "Then, I assume you sought to free yourself from an arranged marriage? Perhaps find your true love upon the sea?"

She tilted her head in a slight nod. "Aye, I wanted to get away but to find love, nay. I do not believe in such foolishness."

It was the truth. Love did not exist, at least for her. All those times she had heard her mother cry because of one of her father's indiscretions with the chambermaids, her heart shattered. The myth that a man took a woman's heart, disregarding all others was for fools. Aye, the man kept the woman's heart but not to treasure it. He had to hoard it, possess it, then destroy the fragile organ when he no longer desired the love. Her father's actions had proved it was all a lie. After her mother's death from a broken heart, she knew love never really existed.

"Now that you know my name, 'tis my turn to learn yours."

The corners of his full lips turned sensuously upward as the light in his eyes deepened. "I am Erik, son of Ragnar, Jarl of Darvisson." His blond brow rose in question. "Your lord and master."

Morgana's anger bubbled over the kettle containing it. Before she could stop herself, she slapped his cheek soundly. Erik's head recoiled from the strength of her strike.

His face came around to show her the blazing fury on it, his bronze cheek reddened from the strike. Releasing her, Erik's left hand slowly rubbed the area of her slap. "You will pay for that little vixen Morgana, but now is not the time. You have fire in you. I like that. I imagine that a man could be consumed with it if he chose to be."

"That is something you will never find out," she snarled as she tried to move beyond his reach.

Erik was too quick for her. His hand on her wrist prevented her escape. "All in due time, my dear. Now as for these rags," he stated, pinching the tattered material between his fingers, "they do not befit you. I will have one of my men bring in a fresh bucket of water so that you may wash. After that, you can dress in your own gown."

"What if I should refuse?"

"'Tis much to late for refusal, my dear." With those words still hanging in the icy air, Erik laid both hands on her shoulders and ripped the material. "There, that will make sure you will change into your own gown!" he snarled. Before she could issue a retort, Erik stormed out of the tent, leaving her completely alone. Outside of her confines, she heard the murmur of his voice among the others in their tongue. Damn him!

How dare he tear her tunic like that? Was ravishment on his mind? Nay, it could not be. The King would pay nothing for her if she were not intact. Tears moistened her eyes, creating a hazy film she could barely see through. Just where was it they were taking her? Worse yet, what would she be made to do once she got there?

If only Kennuric were here! Sweet, strong, older brother Kennuric who taught her everything she needed to know about defending herself and weaponry. He would find a way out of this.

"Here is your water, Morgana. Now wash," ordered a gruff voice as the bucket landed on the board with a dull thud, drawing her from her thoughts. Droplets of water splashed around in a circular pattern around the pail. Her eyes flew open to see Erik standing before her, a scowl stamped on his aquiline features.

"Leave this tent, or I will not wash."

Erik threw his hands up in frustration. "Thor's teeth! I will turn my back while you wash woman!" He turned around amidst the strong sighs of annoyance escaping his lips. Good. Perhaps he would leave her alone until the King paid her ransom.

Morgana slipped the tunic from her shoulders all the while keeping her eyes on him. With a quick hand, she pulled a gown from the coffer and covered herself with it while she dipped the cloth into the cool water. She wrung it out with one hand and proceeded to wipe away the grime and blood. The water was cool and refreshing, not at all harsh or salty. It must be from their fresh water supply.

Slipping the breeches down her thighs, she stepped out of the bloody garments. Morgana turned her back on him reluctantly and proceeded to cleanse the rest of the blood and gore from her body. Soft skin returned from underneath, glowing with a velvety creaminess. The water in the bucket surely must be the color of rust by now.

Oh, how good it felt to be clean again! If only she could wash her hair, but the best she could do was rinse it out with the already muddled water.

Just as she slipped her emerald hued gown on, Morgana suddenly felt as though intent eyes watched her. She turned around to say she was finished, but what she saw

stopped her. Erik had his dagger out, holding it at an odd angle so it would catch the light better. Anger stormed through her. He was using it like a mirror so he could see her movements and the nakedness of her body. How dare he!

“What do you think you are doing?”

“Watching you. You are truly beautiful,” he commented as he slipped the dagger back into his boot.

Morgana was outraged. “Have you no shame? What I did was private!”

“When you are aboard my ship, nothing is private. That gown suits you.” With two lengthy strides, Erik was in front of her. His large hands went to her shoulders and spun her around, sending ripples of sensation throughout her body. “Let me fasten your laces.” Before she could stop him, Erik’s nimble fingers had them tied better than Bridget, her lady in waiting, could have ever done. Her trembling returned at the close proximity of him.

“Get your heathen hands off of me,” she attempted to snarl through clenched teeth. “Take me back to my homeland and you shall have more riches than you could ever dream of.”

“The more fire I see in you, the more I desire to keep you for myself. The riches of your land pale in comparison of what you have to offer. Tell me, would a night spent in the arms of an English nobleman be better than that of a Viking one?”

Before Morgana could issue a reply, Erik’s lips plowed hers with a heavy passion. His tongue burrowed between her taut line in a hurried fashion, encouraging her tongue to dance with his. She was stunned and afraid. None of her previous suitors had ever kissed her like this before. Her knees weakened. Her heartbeat picked up as her breath quickened with a light sheen of perspiration breaking out on her forehead. What was wrong with her?

Just as she delved into the swirling eddy of new emotion, Erik broke the kiss. “Tell me your answer in a few days.” With that, he turned and left the tent, leaving her senses to reel in the relentless sea of desire.

Erik stepped outside of the tent, greeted by Sven who munched on a succulent red apple in his hand. “How is the vixen, Erik? Does she strike your fancy?” he mumbled in between bites.

Erik leaned against the rail, gripping the sturdy wood in his hands. “Aye, that she does. I have not seen such fire since Kristen.” His thoughts ran together in a chaotic whirl. The girl was a Princess from Wales, not just a noblewoman. That he knew for sure. After Morgana was secure in the tent after the melee, he had Sven and several others open the rest of the trunks to find out what was inside. Among the gowns and under things were the keys to her identity. Jewels of all sizes as well as several magnificent crowns were present. Only royalty wore crowns such as those. Erik frowned. Her betrothed was another story. More than likely, he was already a King, looking for a young wife to give him the necessary heirs.

Sven let out a yelp of laughter. “From what I hear, she possesses more than Kristen.”

Aye, the vixen contained fire by Odin. And yet, something in the back of his mind sent out a dire warning, stay away from this woman. She was dangerous, not only

physically but also emotionally. His heart was one risk he could not afford to take. "That may be true but her virtue must stay intact," he stated as he leaned backwards a little, stretching his arms to their full length. "Her ransom would mean nothing if she were not."

Sven's smile suddenly dropped, as did what remained of the apple into the sea. "You mean we can not sport with her at all before turning her over to her people? That is not fair, Erik!"

He turned and glared at his oldest friend. "I care not, Sven. The woman is not to be touched. If she is, then that man will answer to me. Am I understood?"

"Are you putting your mark on her?"

"Aye, Sven, so tell the rest of the men to stay clear of her unless instructed to be in her presence. Otherwise, the only man she will interact with is me."

Erik pushed away from the railing and left a dumbfounded Sven in his wake. He cared not. All that mattered was that the girl remained clean until her ransom arrived. He would make sure of that.

* * * *

Quite a few of her men lived, Robert being among them. The Vikings had chosen to make them slaves aboard the ship, finding it was much more profitable that way. Deep within her heart she praised God for allowing them to live. But what type of existence would they have once they reached the Nordic shores?

Suddenly, a slim hand thrust through the opening of her tent. Her normal servant strode in with her food in his hand. Dark hair flowed down his shoulders like gossamer, trailing over the light colored fur of his vest. Slender, almost womanish arms peeped out from the rough-cut armholes. Despite his tall form, he could not have been more than twelve seasons.

Morgana sat up and accepted his offering with a simple nod of her head. "Much thanks," she replied and took the items from him. His head was down as usual, almost as if he wanted to avoid looking at her face. "Do you speak my language?"

"A ... little ... ," he stammered, not raising his head to meet her gaze.

"Then why do you not raise your head?" Morgana demanded as she set the bowl aside and put a finger under his chin in an effort to coax his head up.

"The lad was ordered not to even look at you."

Her heart skipped a beat as the sound of the deeply masculine voice drifted to her ears. Her breath caught as she looked up. It was Erik standing in the opening of the tent, leaning against the post with his arms crossed, appearing rakish as well as fearless. A look of annoyance crossed his face. "Urien, leave us." Urien looked to his master, and Erik snapped his head in gesture to the outside of the tent.

Without hesitation, Urien scurried from the room and into the bright sunlight that bathed the ship in its glory.

Morgana set the food and water on the bed with trembling fingers then stared at him. "What fool ordered that the child could not even look at me?"

Erik jerked his thumb in the direction of his chest. "I did. Are you calling me a fool?"

"No. Just what you ordered is foolish." For a moment, she thought he would strike her down for calling him a fool.

“Hmmm, I do not think that was what you meant, but I will forget this for now. Your punishment will come later,” he said in a gruff tone as he pushed away from the support and walked over, sitting down next to her. “Now, do you have an answer to the question posed to you a few days ago?”

Morgana turned away for a moment, biting her lower lip. She had thought about the question, but it was absurd and did not deserve an answer. If the only way to escape this heathen’s clutches was to return to England and marry the King, then so be it. Perhaps it was her fate after all to live in a marriage with a cruel husband. “I will not answer such a question, Milord.”

Erik rose to his full height before her, splaying his mammoth legs out. His hands perched on his brawny hips. As much as she tried, Morgana could not read the emotion in the depths of his eyes. “In time, you will. In the meantime, I have come to tell you that we will be reaching our homeland soon, so you will be moved to my home.”

“What am I to do in your home? I thought I was to be ransomed!”

A slow, seductive smile spread across his full lips. “I have not come to a decision yet as to whether or not to ransom you. Perhaps I will come to a decision in a few days. Until then, you will work among the rest of my servants.”

Anxiety pounded her veins as she leapt from her place, knocking over the meager food and water. “I do not do the work of servants! I demand that you return me to my people!”

His laughter, deep and menacing, rumbled through the makeshift room. “You are far from your home and in no position to demand anything. As for returning to your people, ransoming may not be as pleasurable as keeping you as my slave.”

Morgana backed as far as she could from him, out of the realm of his magnetic aura. “Not even you would be so bold as to force me”

A blond eyebrow rose. “Would I not? I must admit that having you in my home is quite tempting.”

She held her head high. “There will be no tempting of any kind.” The sound of strength in her voice was something she had never heard before and did not know existed.

“Somehow I doubt that,” he murmured, the seductive tone thrumming through her body and spreading to her limbs. She had to steer the conversation elsewhere.

Morgana returned his gaze with a hardened stare. “Where are my men?”

Erik placed a fur booted foot at the edge of the bed and leaned on his bent knee, leering at her. “With the others, rowing the ship.” Outside, she heard the sharp crack of the whip, and she jumped. Had the Viking heathens beaten her men into submission?

“Take me to them.”

“Why?”

“I want to make certain they are well taken care of. After all, they are my men.”

Erik bent from his waist and executed a mocking bow, sweeping his arm toward the tent opening. “As you wish, my dear. But remember, I am no more than two paces behind you should you decide to do something brash.”

She pushed past him and out into the bright sunlight. Her tent was in the middle of the ship, held up by strong poles of wood. Toward the stern of the ship were her men, shackled together like animals. Her gaze quickly scanned the ranks, searching for Robert.

She found him near the back of the row, his weathered face covered in sweat. Without hesitation, she ran to him, the sound of strong boot heels behind her very loud.

Morgana knelt in the muck residing on the boards near his feet. She did not care. The only thing that mattered to her was the welfare of her men. "Robert, are you all right?"

His aged eyes opened. A smile of utter delight crossed his face as his hands released the shaft of the oar into his lap. "Milady, you are all right! I praise God that this is so! All this time I thought you to be dead!"

Morgana took him into the warm circle of her arms. She captured his moist face in her hands, staring into the depths of his eyes. That familiar light still resided in the murky deep.

"What are you doing here? You should not be among the filth in this part of the ship."

"I came to make sure you and the rest of the men are all right," she protested as she ran a hand through his scraggly white locks.

Robert tilted his head in a nod. "Aye, we are fine, but what concerns me is you. What have they done to you"

Without warning, Erik's hand jerked her to her feet, pulling her backwards against his strong chest. "She is none of your concern now. The woman belongs to me." His arm nestled securely around her waist, his thumb caressing her ribs and coming dangerously close to her breast. Her breath quickened with each movement. Tingles of desire burned up her spine, prickling the base of her head.

"You know our tongue?"

Erik nodded. "Aye, I do. So if you plan on helping the vixen return home, I will know of your plan."

"What are you going to do to her?"

"That is up to me," he snarled, sweeping her hair aside and kissing her neck gently. "Get back to your rowing." With that, Erik turned her around and pushed her toward the safety of the tent.

Once inside her prison, Morgana whirled about, letting the fury of her anger loose on him. "Why did you do that? I do not belong to you!"

"Aye, but you do. According to Dane Law, you become mine since I captured your ship. Now change your gown. That one is a mess," he ordered as he pushed away from the pole and stalked over to her.

Morgana shook her head. This man was not going to bully her. "Nay, I will not."

"Then I will force you to change." With that, Erik gripped the waist of her gown and tore it, exposing her white bodice underneath. A grin of pure satisfaction crossed his lips. "There, you have no choice."

"Go ahead, heathen, ravish me and get it over with," she spat out. "No matter what you do with this body, I will keep the one thing you can never have."

"What is that?"

"My heart."

* * * *

He heard the entire conversation outside of the tent, silently laughing to himself. Ah, the vixen was proving to be trouble for Erik. 'Twas no matter. He would take her off Erik's hands at the first given opportunity.

He leaned against the strong post, continuing to listen. There was a definite fire there with the Welsh wench, a cup of passion from which he wished to drink. Since Erik staked his claim on the woman, that would prove nearly impossible. Once they reached home, she more than likely would be kept under his watchful eye.

There must be a way.

His eyes widened. Aye, he had the way! He would convince the woman he was her friend and that he could help her get home. Once she was away from Erik, she would be all his like she was supposed to be. He had known that from the first moment he laid eyes on her. That creamy skin, luscious breasts, and long golden hair was all that occupied his mind. So far, he had not been able to get anywhere near her.

He would have this woman, no matter what he had to do to get her, even if it meant putting an end to Erik's life.

Chapter 3

"Come with me," were the only words Erik uttered. Rays of bright light streamed through the tendrils of golden hair framing his face, turning it to pure white light. A seductive smile of joy covered his full lips. She shivered. She had never seen a man look more ethereal and handsome in her life.

"Why?"

"You will see."

Curiosity got the best of her. Pushing up from the makeshift bed, Morgana walked warily to him then exited the tent. All around her she could see nothing but the mists wafting on the water on either side of the ship as the strong wooden prow broke a path through the haze.

Suddenly, a large mountain loomed dark and mysterious before her. At the base resided cottages surrounding a very large house of stone and wood. People moved in and around the dwellings with a comfortable familiarity, going about their daily life.

Wind swept across the vessel, blowing her hair forward. She shivered. "Are you cold, Morgana?" Erik's voice echoed over her shoulder.

"A ... little ... ," she choked out as her hands came up to rub her upper arms for warmth.

"Mayhap this will help," he murmured as his well-muscled arms went around her and pulled her hard against his strong chest. The heat from his flesh seared through the layers of material, burning her where it touched.

Panic as well as the first stirrings of desire filled her body, coursing throughout her veins like a wildfire. Her breath hitched in her chest. He should not be touching her

like this. She was not his wife let alone his intended. This was not the sort of act strangers did.

Morgana pulled away despite the demand for her body to stay. "I can warm myself, milord." Her words were icy, but she did not care. The longer the Viking stayed away from her, the better.

Erik shrugged, his strong hands spreading out to the sides in defeat. "Suit yourself."

"Where are we?"

"Home," he answered.

Erik moved toward the other men in order to escape the magnetism Morgana exuded. It was bad enough to know she was in the tent, ready for his taking, but he found he could not bring himself to do it. By all rights of Viking law, she belonged to him, and he could do with her what he wished. Yet, there was something different about her, something more pure than any other woman he had ever known, Viking or otherwise. She was meant to be treated like the Queen she was to be someday and not like a common whore. If he were to have any chance to bed her at all, he would have to be gentle and slow, not like a rutting dog.

After the men received their instructions, Erik stood at the very top of the prow, his hand on the dragon's neatly carved head. It was good to be home again.

An inner voice told him to turn. What he saw made his breath catch in his chest while his heart pounded hard against his ribcage. Morgana stood on the deck, dressed in her best velvet with her mesmerizing gaze locked onto the approaching fjord. What crossed her heavenly features was a mixture of awe, delight, and general curiosity, making her skin glow with life. Tendrils of her curly blonde hair lifted on the prevailing wind, streaming out behind her like a golden cloak. His heart skipped a beat. After Kristen, he thought never to be involved with another woman. With this one, he felt himself drawn to her, like a moth to the flame ...

Erik turned back. He must stop this madness because it was getting far too dangerous. She was like Kristen and all the rest. Women only wanted him for his title. That was not what he wanted. He had vowed long ago that if he ever found the right woman, perhaps he would make her his wife. Unfortunately, that type of woman did not exist.

* * * *

The tent edges parted, heralding the entrance of Erik. He stood in silence for a moment, staring at her as if there was something wrong. Finally, he took a deep breath, "Come, Morgana. 'Tis time to go home."

Morgana resisted, "I wish to stay here."

His features deepened with anger. "You will do nothing of the sort. Now come with me."

"No!" she screamed

The well of fury burst inside of him. His skin reddened, turning a bright crimson. "You will not stay here because I cannot watch over you. Any man from the village with the need for a woman can come down and ravish you. There will be no one to stop them. Is that what you want? Then so be it. Stay here and fend for yourself!"

“Finally, you have given into one of my demands!” she retorted, crossing her arms and turning away. She praised God silently. At least she would have some peace.

Without warning, a strong hand clamped onto her upper arm. Unceremoniously, Erik picked her up and hefted her over his shoulder. “What are you doing with me? You said I could stay here!” she demanded as her fists beat on his back.

“I have changed my mind,” he answered gruffly. He pushed through the edges of her prison and out into the sun where cheers from the rest of the Vikings rang up all around her. Her cheeks grew hot as embarrassment flooded her body while hot anger bubbled inside of her. How dare he treat her like an animal?

At the prow, Erik handed her, despite her protests, over to one of the men that waited on the wharf while he swung down. He took her back into his strong arms where the heat flooded through the material of her gown, causing her heart to pound in a whole new rhythm. Why did he have this effect on her?

* * *

“Welcome to my home. And yours.”

“This is not my home and will never be. No matter how much you beat me, I will never stop yearning for Wales.”

His brow rose as his lips turned to a frown. “What makes you think I will beat you?”

“Is that not what the Vikings do to women?”

Erik snorted his reply. “Nay, we do not. Vikings treat women with respect. You will not be any different. As for your status, it will be lower of course.”

“What do you mean?”

Erik’s arms crossed over his thick, fur-covered chest. “You are of noble birth, that much I know. In my land, you will be nothing more than my slave until I decide what to do with you.”

Morgana, with anger surging throughout her body, stepped back away from him. “How long will that be?”

“As long as necessary,” echoed his answer.

Erik calculated the cool blonde beauty before him, his heart pounding heavily against the inside of his chest. She was exciting by Odin’s grace. Silvery gold hair hung in light waves around her face, falling to a pale curtain to her waist. Never in his life had a woman stood up to him so much before. She fanned the flames of desire in him, embers that had gone cold long before.

She was very dangerous to his mind. It was all he could do to get her out of it since her capture. No, this could not happen. Damn Frigga, the goddess of matrimonial love, and her meddling ways!

* * * *

King Eynon paced the entire length of his chamber as if he were a lion freed from a cage. By God’s thumb, why had she left Gadferin Castle?

He had sent ships out to search for her and questioned the crew that stayed behind, imprisoning those who might have helped her to escape. Without Morgana, his alliance with England was shaky at best. If war did break out, he had not the troops to defend Wales.

Soft knocks at the door drew his attention, and he halted his silent tirade. "Enter," he growled then slid into the chair behind the table.

"You sent for me, Father?" Kennuric, his only son and heir to the throne of Wales, questioned as he entered the room. Tall and imposing, Kennuric possessed the deep blue eyes of his late wife, Queen Isabella, as well as her smile. He grinned. Kennuric looked so much like Isabella. Despite all of his indiscretions, he still loved Isabella though she had been gone all these years.

"Sit down, my son." Eynon gestured with the wave of his hand the chair across from him.

With a tilt of his head, Kennuric swept his cloak aside and sat down. His large hand ran through a tangle of dark locks while his left ankle crossed over his right knee. "Why do you wish to speak to me?"

"Have you heard anything from the ships I sent out to find your sister?"

"No, Father, nothing yet. It may be awhile because we did not know what actual course she took when she left."

"This worries me. There are pirates and raiders out on the sea. Anyone of them could have overtaken her ship."

Kennuric shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I commiserate, Father. I cannot sleep at night with all the worry that plagues my head." Worry and concern crossed his son's face, the sight of it completely endearing. Kennuric still loved his sister deeply.

"I know she will be fine with your fine tutoring to aid her."

Kennuric's golden Celtic skin paled, his fingers drumming nervously on the table. "What do you mean?"

Eynon stood up and moved to in front of the table, seating himself on the edge before Kennuric's anxious form. "You taught her about weaponry and tactics. That was why she felt so free to leave. She knew how to defend herself. If it were not for that, we would be planning a wedding now."

Kennuric stood up. "Father, please understand. Morgana was so small and fragile. If she knew not how to defend herself, then how would she keep away any man that wished to take her?"

Fury pummeled his veins. He grabbed the collar of Kennuric's tunic in both fists, shaking his son vigorously. "That is what her husband was for. No man would dare get near her once she was the Queen of England."

Kennuric pulled away and stepped beyond his reach. "That man is a bastard, Father! She would have rather lived in a nunnery than become the King's wife. He is cruel and evil!"

"How do you know?"

"I have witnessed his tirades!" Kennuric shot back, his voice rising high through the room. "He hacked off a cook's finger for accidentally touching the meat on the platter!"

Eynon held his hand up. "That is enough! Since you think your sister would rather live in a nunnery than be married to King William, then that is where she shall find herself once we bring her home!"

"Nay, you do not mean"

“Aye, I do mean that! King William will find himself another bride and form an alliance with another nation, leaving us without protection. That also means,” he waggled his finger in Kennuric’s reddened face, “you will be without a crown. Now tell me, is that what you truly want?”

Kennuric’s face remained filled with fury as his head bowed. “I will find her, your Majesty, without fail.” With that, he spun on his heel and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Eynon sank into the deeply embroidered chair, his elbow resting on the arm while his tired fingers massaged his temple. Why must both of his children be rebellious? It was grave enough Morgana had left without a trace, but now Kennuric was taking her side. Would he lose his kingdom because of the brash act of his only daughter and bargaining pawn?

* * * *

“Get yea that bowl on the table now!” growled Edan who stood over the cauldron that bubbled on the open hearth, stirring the gruesome broth. Morgana jumped at the sound of her voice. When Erik captured her and spoke so eloquently in her own tongue, she naturally assumed not many knew it. Apparently, she was wrong.

“What?” she stammered.

“I said get the bowl on the table now!” Edan screeched. Despite her orders, Edan never looked up from the cauldron she stirred.

Morgana could do nothing but stare. The woman was very short with stringy white hair hanging down on either side of her haggard face, giving her the appearance of the fabled Hag of Wales. She was thin, almost on the emaciated side. What made her look even more strange was the large bulbous nose with the bump on the bridge. Was that a typical Viking trait?

Morgana stood before the table as bewilderment flooded her body. On the table were various sizes and shapes of bowls, all filled different kinds of foods. Which one did Edan want her to take out? “I do not know which bowl you wish me to take.”

With a disgusted shove, Edan threw down the wooden spoon and stormed over, picking up a bowl and thrusting it into her hands. “This one! Are you daft, girl?”

Morgana shook her head. “I am not used to working in a kitchen.” This woman had better not push her too far. She was a princess after all. Morgana let out a resigned sigh. Too bad no one else knew it other than her.

“Get used to it! Lord Erik intends to keep you for a while so ‘tis best you get used to the work. Now get out there!” Edan’s small but strong hand landed on her shoulder, spinning her around and pushing her through the wide doorway.

Morgana entered hall with a fast beating heart. Fear and panic flooded her body as she looked around. Men, in various types and stages of dress, sat at the trestle tables and drank from wooden tankards banded with rings of iron. On platters before them were roasted carcasses, composed mostly of suckling pig and goose. Large holes gaped from where the revelers had ripped flesh from the bones, slightly resembling war wounds. These heathens were certainly uncivilized.

In one corner sat an old woman with funny looking pieces of stone in her hand, surrounded by a few of the drunken revelers. She watched in amazement as the woman waved her hands then dropped the stones on the floor. What was going on?

To her left was one of the barrels she had seen earlier in the day except this time it was full of ale. Girls ladled the frothy brew from it into waiting cups and horns. The vinegar-like smell, mingling with the sweaty stale odor already present, was almost enough to make her vomit.

Suddenly, she felt a hot stare burn through her. She turned to meet Erik's cloudy eyes. He sat next to another man on the raised dais, his fingers interlocked and resting on his flat belly. His hair hung down in damp waves, making him appear somewhat angelic. Her heart leapt in her chest as her pulse screamed along her veins. Why did he have this effect on her?

Her feet seemed rooted to the spot when the sight of his hand raising and his finger wagging in her direction broke the trance. Like a sleepy child, she walked toward him and set his bowl down. "Here is your meal, milord."

Erik looked at her for a long moment then lifted his head a little to speak. "Come to this side of the table, Morgana." His voice was low and seductive, tingling all of her senses. The breath in her lungs seemed to catch at the sound as her blood hummed through her veins.

As much as she wanted to, it was far too dangerous to be close to him. "No, milord. I ... I have other duties to attend to," she stammered then turned to walk away.

Before she could, a strong hand manacled her wrist. Morgana turned, meeting Erik's stormy eyes. Tremors of excitement burned up her arm from his touch. "When I tell you something, I expect it to be obeyed," he growled, his face becoming darker in color.

"Erik, leave the poor girl alone," echoed a sweet, soft voice in her own language over her shoulder. She turned to see a small woman drifting toward her. Her hair was the color of midnight, braided in a thick rope hanging down to her waist. Ivory hued material clung to her tiny frame, cinched at the waist to show off her womanly figure. Her hand extended. "You must excuse my son. He, much like his father, can be overbearing at times."

"You ... you know my language as well?"

The area around the sky blue eyes crinkled warmly as a gentle smile spread across her lips. "Of course. I come from your land. My name is Colean. I must ask your forgiveness in not meeting you this afternoon. I was rather busy." Telltale blushes filled Colean's pale face, filling it with color as she cast her husband a quick glance.

Panic returned fourfold. Was this woman a captive as well? "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to fall in love and bear my husband eight children," Colean confessed as her hand swept toward the silvery blond man next to Erik. "That is my husband and Erik's father, Ragnar." Morgana looked at him. Erik had inherited many of his features, including eye color. Though Ragnar was older, he and Erik could have been mistaken for brothers. She turned to Colean. "You will get used to Erik in time, Morgana."

"How do you know my name?"

Colean's smile deepened as a reassuring hand landed on her arm. "There is not much that happens in this hall I do not know about. I am glad you are here. It will give us

a chance to get to know one another and converse in our native tongue. It has been far too long. Now I have excuse to use our language.”

Morgana drew back from Colean’s touch. She was not going to be here in a few days if she could help it. “I must return to the kitchen,” she stated in a stone-laced tone then walked away. Her temples throbbed with confusion mixed with anger. How was she going to escape this place?

Erik watched Morgana walk away, deeply appreciating the way her backside sashayed beneath the folds of the coarse woolen gown. He felt himself harden a little. It was the first time in months that it took something so little to arouse his desire.

“I see that little vixen has gotten to you,” his father slurred next to him. Ragnar tipped the horn up and drained its contents, wiping the remainder from his chin with the edge of his woolen sleeve.

Erik shook his head. “Nay, Father. I find her interesting, but that is as far as it goes.”

“Come, Erik, you are not blind! Do not tell me that you do not desire to bed her in the slightest.”

A slow grin crossed his lips. “I did not say that, Father. As much as I would like to take her into my bed, I can not.”

Ragnar’s eyebrow rose. “Why not? I heard that you captured her at sea, but I did not hear why she was sailing her own ship.”

“For the simple fact that she is a noblewoman who left Wales to escape an arranged marriage. If we have any hope of ransoming her, then she must remain intact.”

Ragnar’s thick fingers gestured for more ale. “That does change things a bit. Are you set on ransoming her?” He gulped the new contents down just as quickly.

Erik shrugged. “I have not decided yet. She does make a most beautiful addition to the household, though.” He lifted the horn to his lips and took a deep swallow. Even through the haze that filled his mind, Morgana remained a present figure. Why would she not burn out of his head?

Ragnar’s laughter was deep, rumbling from the depths of his soul. “That is true, my son. Since you returned home safely and without any incident, I give you the woman as a gift. We do not need the ransom anyway, and you need your bed warm. I noticed none of the village girls vying for your attention lately.”

His anger deepened. “I can take care of my needs, Father. I need no wench warming my bed on a constant basis.”

“Ah, but there is a need for an heir, my dear son. You are well past your twentieth year, and the time is coming. Most of your brothers have children, including your younger brother Einar. You are the only one who has not,” Ragnar stated flatly, holding up the crest of Darvisson, pointing to the intricately crafted dragon on the beaten metal. “You will inherit this one day and become the next Jarl. I want to go to Valhalla knowing that you have produced a son to carry on the family line.”

Erik sank deeper into his chair, hiding the brewing fury. Since the twentieth anniversary of his birth seven years prior, the conversation always steered toward having an heir. Once he had dreamed of having a beautiful wife with many children at their feet. It was only after the disastrous affair with Kristen that his dreams died. “Enough, Father. I

wish to discuss this no more.” Erik’s gaze locked onto the open doorway of the kitchen, his heart pounding in anticipation at seeing Morgana walk back and forth. Each time he saw her, it was almost like a relief. She was all right.

His father noticed what he watched and turned his eyes toward the door as well. “Erik, take the woman and have a child with her. It matters not if you marry her. That way, you will have a son, and I can stop harassing you about it.”

“Why do you not stop now?”

Ragnar pointed to the crest. “Erik, I want you to have this, but if you fail to comply with my wishes, I will simply have to designate Einar as my heir. Is that what you wish?”

Erik whirled around. Nay, his father would not remove him from succession! “Father, why would you do that? Just because I do not do what you ask?”

Ragnar nodded. “I do this for our people, Erik. Since I am a compassionate man, I will give you a chance to redeem yourself. I will give you half a year to make up your mind and find a wife. She must be with child within a few months of your marriage. If not, I will simply pass it to Einar who will be most happy to have it.”

His eyebrow rose. “What if she proves to be barren?”

Ragnar cast a long look at her form as it filled the doorway. “She looks bountiful and healthy. Welsh women are resilient and fertile. Your mother is proof of that. However, if she is barren, there are plenty of other women about too willing to bear you a child.”

Despite the storm of anger building within him, Erik mulled over his father’s ultimatum. He certainly did not want Einar to be next Jarl. Ever since Kristen left him for Einar, he hated his brother and wanted nothing to do with him. To him, it was as if Einar was already dead. “All right, Father. I will choose a wife in the next few months and have a child with her,” he murmured, keeping his eyes firmly locked onto the doorway.

Ragnar chuckled a little and drained the rest of his horn. “Aye, I knew you would see things my way. Ah, I see your mother over there. If you will pardon me, I suddenly remembered there is something I need to speak to her about in our chamber.” With that, his father leapt over the table and strode over to where his mother was in deep conversation with a group of young girls. With one sweep of his large arm, his father scooped his mother up and threw her over his shoulder before escaping up the steps. The smile on his mother’s face told it would be a most enjoyable conversation. He let out a slight chuckle. It was no wonder that he had so many brothers and sisters.

Erik’s attention turned back to his task at hand. There was no woman worthy enough to be his wife let alone bear his children. None of them exuded the sort of fire he desired, except for one.

A flash of light blonde hair caught his attention. He looked up. Morgana stood in his line of vision. He started at her feet and worked his way up. The dark woolen gown fell short of her ankles, exposing her creamy legs at mid calf. One slender limb crooked forward toward the hearth, lengthening the line. The leg went upwards toward a thin waist and so did his gaze. Her arm moved quickly to slice the bread, a movement he found more seductive than a touch on his body. His groin stiffened a little more. Perhaps this might not be a bad situation after all.

He watched Erik's predatory gaze on the woman as the fury in his heart mounted to a new height. His breath quickened, his hands curling into tight fists. Ever since Erik put his mark on her, he had not been able to get close enough to talk to her. Damn Erik!

His opponent's strong jaw was set and determined in a manner he always hated. Erik was not going to stop until he had the wench in his bed. If only he were not Ragnar's son! Otherwise, his body would be floating in the fjord for the crabs to feed on.

Sudden flashes of gold caught his attention. He turned. In the doorway stood Morgana, her left leg crooked, her toes bent slightly. Her stare diverted to the bread she sliced. Blood rushed to his groin, and he imagined running his hand up that creamy leg All too unfortunately, he remembered that Erik stared at the same vision. He must work quickly or else Erik would have her before he ever had the chance.

The soft swish of a gown next to him drew his attention. He turned to see a young girl leaving the hall, a basket in her hands. She headed toward the fjord. Her hair was almost the same shade of Morgana's, her height and build similar. He rose quickly and followed her. If he could not have Morgana this night, a comparable substitute would do, at least for now.

Chapter 4

"Get ye up! 'Tis time for work!" Edan cackled and gestured for Morgana to rise with the lift of her gnarled hand.

"Try and make me," she hissed through clenched teeth. This woman was no threat.

Before Edan could issue a reply, a strong hand landed on the withered shoulder and urged her to the side. Morgana's heart banged a new rhythm when Erik's wide form filled the doorway. "Get up, Morgana," he growled. Muscles clenched tersely in his jaw.

Morgana shook her head. "I would like to see you make me, bastard."

"With pleasure." With two of his long strides, Erik was at her side. His hand gripped her upper arm in a painful hold, yanking her to her feet. Morgana bit her lip in order to keep a yelp of pain from escaping. "When I tell you to do something, I expect it to be obeyed. Am I understood?" Erik leaned close to her face, mere inches away. The heat from his hand seared up her arm and warmed her whole body, causing steady throbs of sensation to pound her temples.

She lifted her chin in defiance as the brewing anger mingled with the present emotions. "No matter what you do, heathen, I will never submit to you."

His blond brow lifted mischievously. "We will see about that. For now," he stated in a menacing voice as he thrust her toward Edan, "you will do as you are commanded. Edan, I want her and only her to wash my clothing. Take her to the tubs and show her how."

"Wash them yourself."

The fury on his face deepened as the grip on her arm tightened. Morgana winced at the pain. “You will clean my clothes, little vixen, and put an end to all this nonsense. If you do not, I will punish you in a most unpleasant manner. Is that what you wish?”

Morgana felt herself pale. If he beat her, she could take the pain. It was the fact that he could kill her men that worried her most. Would Erik sink to that level for her insolence? “What would you do to me?”

“Do you wish to find out?”

Morgana turned to Edan. “Show me the way to the tubs,” she growled, pulling her arm out of his grip. If Erik wanted war, that was what he was certainly going to get.

* * * *

“Get in there!” ordered the old voice behind her. Edan shoved Morgana with a rough hand into a large chamber filled with boiling vats of water.

In response, her stomach growled its malcontent. “I can not work, Edan. My fast is not broken.”

Edan pushed her to a lone kettle in the corner, nearly knocking her to the floor. She looked to the pot filled with boiling water. Next to the vat was a large pile of clothes, their smell strongly masculine and familiar. Were these Erik’s clothes? “You will get your food when all these clothes are done and hung to dry,” Edan barked then hobbled away in that slow gait of hers.

Morgana felt a cold nose press into her leg. It was a robust dog that had come to see what was going on. “Where did you come from, boy?” she murmured as she stroked the his head. The dog, composed of mostly silver and gray, nuzzled her hand and leaned against her leg.

Ouch! The sharp sting on her arm drew her attention, and she slapped at the offensive site. She looked down at the tiny black speck on her arm. The insect was only one of the mites that clung to the animal’s hide.

Morgana was about to swipe it away when an idea struck. “You like me, do you not, sweet dog? Stay with me, and I will give you a few scraps from my breakfast,” she murmured into the animal’s ear. She smiled. This just might be well worth the punishment.

* * * *

“’Tis best ye get back to work, woman. Milord Erik might not take too kindly to you staring out da window,” Edan’s voice grated on her immensely.

She turned around, facing off with the hag despite the stares from other women. “You will open your mouth one time too many, old woman. I am no slave, and I will not be treated as one! I” The banging of the door against the wall cut off her words.

She turned to look, her heart hammering in her chest as Erik’s huge form filled the doorway. A linen shirt clung to his upper body, narrowing down into the waist of his braes. Leather wristbands, studded with metal, enclosed his strong wrists. His long golden mane draped over his shoulders like a pale curtain, his eyes intense. She felt a tingle start at the top of her toes and work its way up her body. He looked more handsome tonight than he had ever before.

In order to calm her erratic heart, Morgana sought something to focus on. She looked down. At Erik’s side was the dog she had befriended earlier. Was that Erik’s

animal? “What is going on here?” he bellowed, his hand coming up to scratch his shoulder.

“Nothing. ‘Tis just a womanly squabble.” A smile spread across her lips. The mites were working well.

“See that it does not get out of hand,” he growled, continuing to scratch his upper body. “Edan, there is something wrong with this shirt. It is annoying my skin.” Suddenly, his hands frantically scratched at the cloth covering his arms.

“Let me see, Milord,” Edan muttered as she made her way over to him. With careful, aged eyes, she searched the linen. Wise fingers plucked a tiny object from it. “This is the culprit, milord. This mite lives on the hides of animals and feeds on blood. Somehow, the creatures infested your shirt.”

Erik ripped it from his shoulders, doubling the material in his hand and shaking it in her direction. “Did you do this, Morgana?” he growled low. She could see the reddened spots where his fingernails had dug into his flesh. Good. That mayhap would teach him a lesson.

Her laughter escaped her lips before she could stop it. “It only proves that when you lie with dogs, you arise with fleas. I did nothing to you.”

Erik strode over to her, dropping the shirt to the floor and gripping her upper arms in a tight hold. “I believe you did this, little Morgana, and you will have to pay handsomely.” His hand came up and cupped her chin painfully. “Perhaps you will come to enjoy it.”

Morgana wrested her chin from his grasp. “Nay, I will not. I would much rather enjoy a blade through my gullet than your touch.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” His full lips curled into a frown. “This little incident has put an end to your washing duties. I think I will keep you in the kitchen under Edan’s watchful eye. In the meantime, you will put salve where the little creatures bit me.”

Tremors of anticipation burned up her spine at the thought of touching him, her knees to near meltdown. Nay, she could not touch him in that manner! That was a duty for his wife or mistress to perform not her. She was neither. “No, milord. One of the other girls will do it for you.”

Erik shook his head slowly as he released her from his grip. “You will do it. Get the salve from Edan and come with me.”

“What if I refuse?”

“Do you wish to find out?”

Erik sat with his golden skinned back to her on the stool in his chamber. The pot with the salve, concocted out of fat, boiled cow’s urine, and other unsavory items, sat on the table next to the chair. The smell emanating from it was horrible, almost like the putrid stench of a rotted carcass. She grimaced. Why did she have to do this?

“You can start anytime, Morgana. I do not have all day,” he snarled.

Morgana took a deep breath, dipping her hand into the smelly pot and smearing the concoction all over his back. Through the thick layer, she felt how smooth his back was, bulging with life and muscle. Her breath quickened as her knees weakened again. Each muscle twitched under her hand, alive with energy. The pace of her hand slowed. Shivers of delight crept up her legs and culminated at the apex of her womanhood,

making it throb with the demand of satisfaction. Her hand drew back as if scorched. What just happened to her?

“Is there something amiss, Morgana?”

“N ... No ... there is not,” she quivered then placed her hand on his back again. Though the smell was strong, she pushed it from her mind as the delight of his body took over. Her tiny hands traveled over the mountains of his shoulders, around the thick cords of his neck, and down his arms.

Soft sighs emitted from his lips, heightening her senses. She did not want to stop, but her mind demanded that she must. Just as she was about to draw back, Erik’s hands grabbed her wrists and brought her around to half lay in his lap.

Morgana stared up into his aristocratic face, surprised by the emotion on it. “You are so beautiful, Morgana. Come, give me a kiss.”

“No ... milord. I think I am finished here, and I must return to the kitchen,” she murmured. Her body was alive now, drinking in his sensual essence and enjoying every drop no matter how much her mind denied it.

The corners of his lips turned upward in a devilish smile. “One kiss, and I will let you return.” He kissed her softly at first, his lips tracing the edges of her lips. Slowly, he moved toward the center as his tongue darted out in feathery strokes and teased her immensely. He let his tongue dance on the closed line of her mouth, begging for entry. Unable to withstand the barrage on her senses, Morgana let him in reluctantly. No man had ever kissed her in this fashion.

She danced with him in a gentle, instinctive rhythm as he explored her mouth, touching every part of her. Instinctively, her hand trailed up his chest and came to rest in his hair where she tangled her fingers in it’s silky softness. She pulled him closer, arching against him, wanting more, much more.

His hands clasped onto her waist, slowly moving up to cup her breast, kneading with a slow and gentle pressure. She drifted higher, almost above her own body, on the growing ecstasy. His golden fingers trailed down her leg to her calf for a moment before moving upwards under her gown. Over her knee, they drifted, squeezing then caressing with the softest of touches. She became lost in the sea of newfound emotion, swirling around her like a whirling eddy of water she would be almost happy to drown in.

The moment his hand neared her womanhood, her senses returned in a flurry. Morgana, laying a hand over his in order to halt his search, broke the kiss. “No, milord. I am no wench that falls into bed with the first man to awaken my senses.”

His cheeks were flushed a bright crimson mixed with gold, his massive mountain of a chest heaving as well. “I will get you into my bed, Morgana, never fear.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

Long fingers swept the side of her cheek, trailing down the side of throat, burning a tingling trail of sensation in its wake. She shivered. The smile widened. “I know how I effect you, Morgana. No other woman quivers under my touch the way you do.” His tone was soft and seductive. She was falling under his spell fast.

Morgana pushed up from his lap and moved out of his arm’s length. “I will not bed you or any man for that matter. My innocence belongs to me and always will.”

Erik rose from the stool, placing his hands on his hips. His face was a mix of unrequited lust and confusion. "There will be a day when you give me your innocence most readily, and it will be one gift I will treasure."

"You think too highly of yourself, milord! There is nothing you can do to coerce me into your bed!" Bursts of nervous laughter escaped her throat. If only he knew the truth. She would have fallen into bed with him just moments before had her mind not saved her and stopped his hand.

"You can not deny the feelings growing within you. The desire to find out what lovemaking is all about is growing stronger by the moment. I can feel it."

"I am denying it."

Erik closed the distance and gripped her again, forcing her chin up so that she had to look at him. "I effect you more deeply than you know, just as you effect me. Let us end all this nonsense and give each other what we so desire."

Morgana stood her ground. "No, Milord. I know that you could ravish me to get what you want, but that is not your way. You are more of a hunter. Slowly stalk the prey then chase it until it is tired before taking it. After a while, you tire of it then move onto another selection of prey. You are no different than any other man."

Erik released her then stepped back, staring at her through intense gray eyes. "It seems that you have me figured out. Perhaps I was wrong in trying to bring you into the warmth of my bed. There are others here that are more willing than you."

She crossed her arms in defiance. "By all means invite them then."

* * *

Erik sat down hard on the log next to Sven. "Where have you been, Erik?" he questioned as his nose wrinkled up. "Ewww, what is that smell?"

"Edan's salve," he growled and stretched his long legs out, leaning against the bark of another tree. His irritated skin was feeling better, but it had more to do with Morgana's touch than it did anything else.

Sven scooted down further on the log. "Please sit downwind, Erik. I can not enjoy my ale or meat with that smell."

"To hell with you and your mead!" Erik shouted and shot up from the log. Why did she have to be so cold all the time? He felt her under his hands and her heart pounding in her chest. Why was she denying her feelings? He stalked toward the fjord and stood before it, arms crossed. He sighed. What was it with this one woman? He swore, by the blood of Odin, never to want another woman and here he was, aching for one that did not want him.

"I see the Welsh woman still vexes you, Erik." He spun around to see Sven standing before him, chewing on the bits of meat ripped from the bone in his hands.

"Aye, that she does!" Erik threw his hands up in frustration. "I kiss her, and she responds, yet she denies that she wants me! Ugh! Why must she be so difficult?"

Light laughter erupted between Sven's greasy lips. "If I were you, Erik, I would just take her. My first wife fought me every time I took her until the last time before she died. Women will not admit that they enjoy lovemaking."

Erik shook his head. "Nay, I will not ravish her, Sven. She must come to me willingly or not at all. 'Tis as simple as that."

Sven shrugged his black clad shoulders. "'Tis your decision, but I say take the girl and end this misery. Afterward, she will submit to you whenever you desire her."

His blond brow rose. "Why do you say that?"

"Just a guess. From what I can tell from her, the first man to take her innocence will be the one she falls in love with. Think about it my friend." Sven clapped him on the shoulder with a swift move then left to rejoin the others at the fire.

Erik turned back toward the fjord and leaned against the tree, watching the moon dappled ripples dance on the lake. Nay, he would not ravish her. She would come to bed with a free heart and a willingness to share her gift.

He let out a long sigh. Why did this woman intrigue him so? Was it the fire of her disposition or the gleam of her gold hair? Perhaps it was the turn of her head or the creaminess of her limbs. He was not sure. All he knew was the desire to possess her completely was growing stronger, a beast that was getting hard to control. He must do something about it soon, or else it would become wild. After that, he was not sure if he would be responsible for his actions.

He watched Erik standing by the grove of trees near the fjord, fighting the urge to just push his friend in and end the torment. No, it was not time, at least not yet. He leaned back against the log. Erik's mind was in a whirl about this woman, and he knew why. The Welsh wench wanted nothing to do with him, and that drove Erik mad. All the time growing up, women never resisted Erik, including many of the older ones. He smiled. It was one of the older women that had inducted Erik into the rite of manhood, shortly after his thirteenth season. He remembered it well. After Erik, it was his turn for induction. He remembered how it felt to take a woman soiled by Erik first. She had felt used and filthy. He had grimaced as they culminated the act.

The time had come for him to have a woman that was pure and untouched by any man. He smiled. Before he was through, his touch would be the only mark on her body.

Chapter 5

Morgana reached across the myriad of bowls filled with odd bits of food, grabbing a handful of some strange red spice. Where did it come from? Edan had instructed her to add it to the dish sitting before her, but the old woman did not tell her how much. Shrugging her shoulders, she grabbed a handful. If it was not enough, she could certainly add more.

Her hand was poised to add it when the swift handed Edan stopped her. "Watch what ye is doing! That 'tis very strong! You must only use a little!"

Her curiosity arose as well as an eyebrow. "What is the spice?"

"It makes the dish very hot when consumed. I dare say it will burn the lips."

Another idea formed in her mind. Perhaps Erik would like his dish a little warmer than usual. "Forgive me, Edan. I am not used to cooking so I would be ignorant of

amounts,” she chimed in and dumped the red powder back into the bowl. Taking her thumb and index finger, she pinched a little and put it in the mixture. She looked at Edan through wide innocent eyes. With any amount of hope, the old woman would be lulled into a false sense of security and turn her back. “Is this correct? I would not want to make Milord sick.” Her voice was so incredibly sweet that she nearly choked on her words.

Edan nodded her grizzled head. “Aye, that is right,” she said, turning away.

Morgana’s smile nearly cracked her face in half. All the other girls were in the room pouring the ale and putting down the rest of the food so she could do what she wanted without anyone seeing her. Taking a large handful of the spice, she dumped into the meal and stirred quickly. The liquid, tinted yellow, turned a dark orange. Her nostrils burned with the aroma, her eyes watering. It was perfect.

Morgana stepped out into the hall with Erik’s meal in her hands. His eyes were diverted to the action in the corner. His fingers supported his chin petulantly. What disturbed him so?

Morgana turned to see what interested him. At the end of the room was a giant wooden wheel with one large hole cut in the center with two smaller ones on each side. It hinged on the left-hand side so that the offender could be placed into it easily. Why was that here?

As if to answer her question, a young girl stumbled out to the floor. Her hair was in a mass of honey-colored braids while a white shapeless gown encased the girl’s youthful body, cinched at the waist by a thick rope. Pain and sorrow stamped their marks on the girl’s face. The child could not have been more than sixteen seasons. Morgana gasped. What were they going to do to her?

The man leading her by the rope-belt seemed old enough to be her father, his gray head and beard braided with strips of leather. A dark sheepskin vest covered his chest while matching breeches covered his thick legs. His voice was hoarse as he spoke in the native language of the land. During her tenure, she picked up words here and there but did not know enough to understand completely.

“Do not worry. She will not be harmed.” She turned around to see a tall man with hair as black as night streaming down his shoulders in gentle waves. He was tall and broad shouldered, almost the exact same build as Erik. The same type of shirt and vest covered his upper torso while dark braes and boots covered his muscled lower half. His face had a familiar look yet she could not place it. What bothered her more than anything was the way his startling blue eyes tried to pierce her soul.

“What are they going to do to her?” she whispered, keeping her eyes locked on the barbarity. Her heart pounded in anxiety for the girl’s fate. She watched helplessly as the girl did not resist her imprisonment within the wicked looking device. Once she was secure, her captors pinned her braids to the wood like a halo around her head.

The man chuckled. “This is Odin’s test for an unfaithful wife. If her husband cuts the braids, then he was wrong. If she is harmed, then that is Odin’s way of saying that she was guilty.” The tones of his voice were warm and mellow, almost as though she had heard his voice before.

Morgana turned to face him. “I have not seen you around the hall before. Are you a visiting guest?” She shivered. His presence was certainly overwhelming.

The man let out a bellow of laughter. “Nay, I am not. If you must know, I am the son of Ragnar and Colean,” he stated with a mirth-filled tone as he pointed to his parents. “My name is Einar, and that sour man over there is my brother, Erik,” he mused, pointing to Erik’s solemn form.

Morgana stepped back. That was why he looked so familiar! “I see you have taken your mother’s dark features,” was all she could choke through her stiff lips. Einar had the same magnetic presence as Erik, but it did not hold the exact magic of Erik. Perhaps it was the leer of his eyes or the curve of his mouth telling her to stay away from this man. He was dangerous.

Erik looked up, lifting a full horn to his lips. Uta, safely pinned to the wheel, shivered in terror. Her husband, Hagen, swayed before it, full of mead. In his hand was the axe for the ceremony. Hagen licked his thumb, sliding it along the blade. He would have cut himself if he could actually touch it. Erik frowned. Uta would surely die at his drunken hand.

Ragnar leaned over and uttered a command in his ear, “Save this girl, Erik.”

“It is done,” he murmured, driving the tip of the horn into the table. He jumped up on the table, garnering everyone’s attention. “Friends, I will take her husband’s place and perform Odin’s test. May she see Odin’s justice!” Amidst the jeers and cheers, he jumped down and ripped the axe out of Hagen’s hand, shoving the man to the floor.

Erik set his sights on the braids, closing one eye to put the target in sight. Now was the decisive moment. With all the ale he consumed, doubts about his ability rose in his mind. He pushed them away. He had done it before with a lot more ale in him.

Erik threw it. The blade separated the left braid. Cheers went up all around him, resounding through the stone and wood hall. He basked in the glory for a moment and targeted the next axe handed to him. The right braid went. The applause became a lot louder this time. Erik mock-bowed then grabbed the last axe. He pointed it at her, lining up the edge with the remaining braid. His left eye closed. It was perfect.

With one strong swing, the blade left his hand. A loud thunk resounded through the room. The last braid parted as Uta’s head fell in thanksgiving.

Erik spread his arms out and drank in the praise. He turned to every corner of the room, drinking it all in. Just as he came around toward his chair, his eyes fell on the figure of a man talking to Morgana, his thick hand on her shoulder. Suddenly, his world turned black.

“What are you doing here, Einar?”

Morgana sensed the tower of heat and anger behind her. No one needed to tell her that Erik hovered over her shoulder.

Einar leaned against the stone pillar. “Mother insisted that I come. Besides, ‘tis been a while since I have visited Darvisson.” His stance was casual, as if Erik’s anger did not faze him.

Erik’s hand gripped her upper arm and drew her hard against his chest. Tremors of excitement as well as the heat from his body burned through her. Worried sighs exited her lips. Would there be bloodshed among the brothers?

“The girl belongs to me, and anyone speaking to her will have to answer to me, brother or no brother.” He and Einar locked into a deadly stare as if they sized each other’s strengths before moving in for the kill. The wall of animosity was building quickly, becoming very tense.

“I meant nothing by it, Erik. I was merely talking to her.”

“I care not,” Erik snarled. “If you so much as touch a single hair on her head ...”

“Boys,” echoed the gentle female voice from their tall sides. They looked down. Colean stood there, her hands on their arms. She seemed like a miniature among giants. It was hard to believe both of these large men had emerged from her womb. “I want you to be civil to each other despite what transpired in the past. Erik, your brother will be here for at least a week before he rides north to Hagalund,” she ordered then turned to his brother. “Einar, do not test Erik’s patience when it comes to the woman. Do as he commands. Now, if you both do not do as I ask, I will send you both to the woodshed with your father. Am I understood?” Despite her tiny size, Colean still commanded respect from the giant men. Morgana fought the urge to laugh. The thought of Ragnar taking both large men to the woodshed was almost more than her mind could bear.

“Aye,” Erik grumbled, properly chastised.

Einar nodded. “Aye, Mother.” Their eyes remained locked on each other in a predatory stare before breaking completely, the wall of animosity building to a heated pitch. Einar scowled then stormed off, exiting through the open door at the end of the hall.

Colean drifted away, leaving her alone with Erik. “Bring my meal,” he growled then returned to his seat at the table.

Morgana was furious. How dare he treat her like a piece of property instead of a woman! Just as he promised, she would pay heavily for her crimes, so would he.

“Here is your meal, milord,” she snarled through clenched teeth. She slammed it down on the table. Hot droplets of the meal spilled all around the bowl in scattered patterns. She looked to Erik’s left to see what Ragnar would say for her insolence. What greeted her were two empty chairs. They must have retired for the night.

Erik slumped in his seat, staring at the watery contents of the bowl. “Leave me, Morgana,” he growled.

With that command uttered, Morgana turned on her heel and strode to the open doorway of the kitchen as her heart pounded in anger mixed with frustration. Erik was going to love his food.

She slipped around the corner, her hands gripping the strong, splinter-filled wood tightly. Erik pulled a loaf of bread from the platter with a vicious jerk and ripped it in half. Taking one half, he dipped it into the contents of the bowl and slipped it to his mouth. His jaw only moved twice before his eyes started to water and his hands grabbed frantically at the pitcher before him. Ale spilled down his vest and shirt, staining both completely. She smiled. Revenge was certainly sweet, but it would be short lived.

Erik slammed the pitcher down and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. He looked down into the bowl then swiped off the table with a quick sweep of his arm. The food went flying, hitting several of the revelers who seemed not to mind. “Morgana!” he shouted as he leapt to his feet. His golden cheeks changed to a deep red hue, indicating

the measure of his anger as well as the heat of his food. She stepped back in the shadows. Had she gone too far this time? Morgana shook her head. Nay, she did not. Erik got only what he deserved. "Morgana, I will not shout your name again! I order you before me!"

Morgana drew a deep breath as she emerged from the shadowy recess. Now it was time to face up to her actions. With a gentle glide, she walked toward the dais and stood before Erik. "You bellowed for me?"

"What did you do to my food?"

She shrugged. "Nothing, Milord," she said as a coy smile crept across her lips. It amused her to no end to see him so frustrated with her. Perhaps he would think twice about not ransoming her.

His hands gripped on the edge of the table hard, turning his knuckles white. "I think you did, vixen. Do you remember how I told you that you would be punished for all that you have done?"

Inside she trembled as the remembrance of his threats arose in her mind like a haunting memory. What was he going to do? Morgana held her chin high. "You do not scare me, milord."

Erik grabbed her wrist, pulling her halfway across the table toward him. The edge dug into her hip, making her wince. "But you will be scared by the time I am through with you, Morgana. Ready yourself for punishment."

* * * *

The night was long and arduous. Morgana lay awake through most of it. Sleep evaded her completely though her body yearned for it. Pungent aromas of dampness and sweat rose around her. A few of the servant woman huddled in sleep on a larger pallet in the corner, just beyond the end of hers. Their soft snores filled the chamber with a slight echo that was almost comforting.

Morgana turned on the hard pallet, wincing at the pain shooting up from the tender flesh of her backside. Why had Erik chosen punishment such as this?

Erik had taken her from the hall and dragged her the woodshed, the same one that Colean had promised that Erik would end up if he and Einar were not civil. All along the walk there, her heart pounded in an entirely new rhythm, threatening to burst out of her chest as tingles of anxiety seared up her wrists from his touch. What did he have planned?

She had begged to know, but all he had offered were a few well-placed grunts as he pulled up a stool and sat down. His hand, still holding on tightly to her wrist, jerked her down so that she was prostrate in his lap. How dare he treat her like this!

Despite all the protests falling from her lips, Erik had simply ignored them. One swift hand had drawn up her gown, exposing her backside to his searing gaze. Her body started to tremble. No man had ever seen any part of her body like this, so vulnerable and at his disposal.

Erik must have known this because his fingers traced slow patterns over her flesh, exciting the skin beneath his fingertips. Words of the Viking language fell from his lips in a hushed whisper, almost if he was saying a prayer. Rashes of gooseflesh had broken out as those traitorous feelings raced up her spine. She had closed her eyes to revel in those emotions when the sudden slap of his hand against her flesh had brought her back to a hard reality. With each strike, the pain increased, but she had refused to cry out. She would not feed in his desire to inflict pain.

When he was finished, Erik had let her up only to force her to her knees in front of him. He had cupped her face gently, tilting it upwards. He had remained silent, the depths of his gray eyes swimming with an emotion she could not identify. Before she could speak, Erik bent his head, tenderly kissing her lips, his tongue dancing around the edges as if asking permission to explore her mouth. Out of surprise, her lips parted. Erik explored the cavern, encouraging her tongue to dance in tandem.

Erik had risen from the stool slowly, his lips leaving hers reluctantly. With a gentle nudge, he had pushed her to the floor, lowering his musk-laden body on top of hers. His lips captured hers again in the heated passion of his kiss, his hands roaming all over her body. Her nipples hardened under the hot touch of his fingers, turning to soft nubs of marbles, full of sensitive nerve endings. She had arched into his palms all the while her mind tried frantically for her to stop.

Before she could drown completely in the whirling sea of emotion inside of her, Erik broke the kiss, staring deeply into her eyes. He withdrew from her, leaving her in breathless chaos.

Erik had said nothing, his own breath ragged. In the dim light of the woodshed, she could see the obvious bulge of his manhood as it strained against the leather of his braes. Why did he stop when he could have ravished her? From her childhood, she had always heard stories of how the Vikings always ravished women when they were caught. On that basis, she fully expected it from the moment of her capture. So far, it had not happened. Were the Vikings, especially Erik, different from the bloody tales that circulated around their people?

He had bent down and taken her hands, pulling her to her feet. Without another word, he pulled her along and returned her to the hall, escorting her to her chamber. He placed a swift kiss on her forehead then walked away, muttering Viking words resembling curses under his own breath.

Morgana threw her arm over her eyes. Why could she not keep those traitorous feelings under her firm control? What happened to the sensible part of herself that she could always count on? Apparently, that girl was growing up to be a woman with a woman's desires.

The moon rose high on the midnight hued sky as the stars twinkled, as though they were gems sewn into the navy fabric. Sooty clouds dotted the night, floating aimlessly toward the pale orb. Trees, many of which were there from before Odin's birth, stretched toward the sky and surrounded the inlet, tipped in silver. Sounds of the night, from the owl searching for food to the howl of the wolf, drifted through the air and relaxed him a little. Soft breezes swept in from the ocean and rustled the leaves, bringing with it the sharp sting of the salty water.

Erik let the cool silvery water of the fjord ripple over his hot skin. After that little escapade with Morgana, he needed something to cool his body. His mind went back to the heated memory of her kiss as it lingered on his lips, and the flesh around his groin tightened again. Nay, he would not think about it anymore. Morgana was a woman far beyond his reach. Despite the fact she trembled at his slightest touch or nearly melted with his penetrating gaze, her exterior was still as hard as stone.

Erik skimmed the water on his back, the cool night air a most welcome refreshment. Prickles of gooseflesh broke out where the wind caressed the flesh. The gentleness of the touch reminded him of Morgana and her dainty fingertips.

He splashed his arms hard in the water as his feet came down to rest on the rocks beneath the surface. Damn her! Why did she make him punish her like that? He did not want to, but she tested his patience much farther than she should have, and he lost control. That was something that should never have happened.

In order to make up for his cruelty, he had kissed her. but suddenly it went far beyond that. The rising need within took over, and he had urged her to the straw-laden floor. He was so close to satisfying the growing need within him when he looked down into the swirling blue depths of her eyes. Twisted myriads of emotion roiled beneath the cool surface, a combination of desire, fear, and mutual attraction. It was her fear affecting him the most. He had never taken a woman against her will, and he was not about to start now. She would have to come to him when she was ready, of her own free will or not at all.

Erik pushed away from his spot and started to swim out toward the middle of the white cap laden fjord. It was going to be one long night.

He watched Erik swimming in the fjord with a predatory gaze, his heart hammering in his chest. Now was not the time. He must be patient. The time was coming, and it was coming soon.

He leaned against the tree, crossing his arms. The bark of the wood felt rough and dug against his flesh, but he ignored the pain. There were more important things to do now.

His mind traveled back to the tenuous moments when Erik dragged Morgana to the woodshed. He expected to hear screams of pleading and begging, but he heard nothing from her. The only audible sound was flesh against flesh as well as the soft intake of breath by Morgana. His hand went to his sword, his fingers tightening around the hilt. No, that time was not right either. Erik was unarmed, and it was against Odin's law to fight an unarmed man.

Once the striking stopped, he leaned an ear against wood. He heard the soft rustle of straw against the stone of the floor as well as moans of ecstasy from the woman and heavy breathing on Erik's part. He should have rushed in at that moment, but restraint held him. Soon, very soon, the woman would be moaning from his touch.

Chapter 6

Morgana brushed a stray lock of hair away from her eyes with the back of her hand, sighing deeply. The heat in the kitchen was almost unbearable though the sun had barely risen. Edan had awoken her long before dawn and put her to work. She was utterly exhausted.

Hot air rolled from the blazing hearths as the pigs roasted on their spits, turned by the servants' hand. Loaves of dark bread lay on the long platters of wood, ready for

baking. The smell from the risen loaves was wonderful, but, when mingled with the sour body odor emitted from the other women huddled in the room, it was almost intolerable.

Morgana turned to lay another loaf on the platter when a large golden hand captured her wrist, halting her movements. She looked up. The man who stood before her was not at all like the rest of them. His build was slighter than Erik's was, but he was just as tall. Chestnut hued hair fell down, framing his aquiline, beard covered face. Leather covered his upper body while leather braes molded against his thin yet strong legs. Mild warmth glowed in his eyes. "I need to speak to you," he said in a Welsh cadence filled with urgency.

She wrested herself from his grip. "I have nothing to say to you, nor do I wish to hear anything you say." Morgana laid the bread on the platter then shoved the entire board into the oven where it would stay for almost a full hour.

Morgana attempted to move over to the other side of the kitchen to free herself from the tangle of bodies near the fire when she found her way barred. She looked up. "Please remove yourself from my path."

He shook his head. "Not until you hear what I have to say."

It was apparent this man was not going to leave her alone until she heard his words. Wiping her hands on her coarse apron, she stepped to the other side of the room, out of the earshot of the others. She folded her arms over her bosom and glared at him. "All right, out with it. What have you to say?"

The man appeared anxious. His eyes flicked nervously from her to the others then back to her. "My name is Ulrich, and I have come to help you return to your home."

Morgana's heart beat at a double pace as her breath quickened. Home! She never thought to hear that word again! With a quick waggle of her fingers, she gestured for him to follow her outside. He did so without question.

Once they were alone, she turned to him. "What do you mean?"

Ulrich looked around warily then concentrated his stare on her. "I want to help you return to Wales where you belong. I know you yearn for your homeland as I would if I were captive in your country. You do not belong to our land and never will."

Morgana wanted to trust this man, but there was something in his eyes warning her to beware. Why was he doing this? More than likely, it was not out of the kindness his heart. "What sort of reward do you seek in payment for doing this?"

Ulrich looked down and kicked at a tiny rock with a booted foot. "I overheard you tell Erik on the night of your capture that your betrothed would pay handsomely to get you back. If we guarantee your safe return, surely he would be willing to pay us. I want to be free of Darvisson as well as Erik. I have lived in his shadow far too long. The ransom your betrothed would be willing to offer would enable me to do that."

Her breath escaped in a slight murmur of relief. She knew it was too good to be true. All that he desired out of this was a few gold coins and not the satisfaction of seeing her home. What did she expect? They were Vikings after all. "Aye, he would be willing to pay you well, but that is only if my virtue is intact, so it must stay that way."

He nodded. "Of course."

Morgana's blood raced in her veins as the rampant thoughts of home rose in her mind like a long dead dream. Ah, the thought of seeing Wales again was almost more than she had ever hoped! "What sort of plan do you have?"

Ulrich's arms crossed over his chest as he leaned his body against the doorframe. "I am still working on a few minor details, but, within a day or so, they will be final. Once that is done, I will tell you how and when."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

Ulrich shrugged. "If you want to leave, I guess you will have to."

* * * *

Einar strolled into the kitchen breathing in the wonderful smells of meat roasting over the open flame. So far, he had seen nothing of his sour brother Erik all morning or for the last few days. It was just as well. He was in no mood for another fight.

He moved through the throng of bodies, tasting this and that, pecking the pretty girls on the cheek and patting them on their backsides. They all giggled as he passed, and he drank in every drop. There was nothing in the morning that helped shape his mood like the attention of women.

He moved around the table and bent his head to kiss Inga's slim neck when movement outside the door drew his attention. He jerked his head up. Inga, noticing the lack of attention, spun around. "What 'tis wrong, Einar?"

He pointed to Morgana. "Is that not Erik's woman out there talking to Ulrich?"

Inga shrugged, her hand scratching the back of her head in irritation as her face contorted into an annoyed snarl. "Aye, it is. She is to be in here helping us instead of holding Ulrich's attention."

"What are they speaking about?"

Inga's voice rose in anger. "I know not, and I care not! They speak in her language, of which I do not know. If you wish to know so badly, then stand at the door!" She spun around and continued cutting the ripe fruit for the evening.

Einar was annoyed with her display of anger, but he would teach her a lesson later. It was more important for him to find out what Ulrich was up to. Sometimes, the boy got into things way over his head.

He stepped into the shadow and listened. Erik had set someone to watch her continuously when he could not do it, but that man was nowhere in the vicinity. He frowned. That man's boots is somewhere he would not want to be when Erik found out.

Murmurs of her plan of escape wafted over to him, his mind imprinting each word and syllable. Erik must know of her plan and soon, or his woman would be gone forever. Perhaps now was the time to heal the wound between him and his brother.

* * * *

The slant of the sun indicated it was almost midday, a welcome relief. It was almost time for the meal. She could retire for a short while before having to return to the kitchen for the evening meal. Perhaps, if she could get a bucket of water, she could wash herself before then.

Morgana cut the delicate golden skin from the pear, laying the bits of rind aside for steeping. Just as she took the last cut, bronze fingers encircled her arm. "Ulrich, I told you that I would speak to you later!" she hissed. When would the boy leave her alone?

Morgana spun around quickly, meeting the dark depths of Erik's eyes swirling with vicious anger. What had she done?

"Was Ulrich in here touching you?" he demanded furiously. She could see the tiny blue vein in his temple pulse with his fury. Erik was getting to a dangerous point.

She must protect her only means of escape. "Please do not be angry with him, milord. He merely asked me if I could teach him my language more fully, 'tis all." Morgana let a soft smile cross her lips. Perhaps that small act would put the rising beast to sleep.

Erik remained undaunted. "If he means to learn the tongue, he will come to me. Is that understood?"

She nodded. "Aye, milord. I will tell him that he is to come to you for instruction and avoid me all together."

Though the fury remained, an element of surprise crossed his face as his hands gripped her upper arms strongly. "What did you say?"

"I merely stated that I would go along with your wish."

His anger abated slightly. "Good. 'Tis time you came to your senses. After this, if any man approaches you, tell me, and I will deal with them. Am I understood?"

Morgana tilted her head in a nod.

Erik released her but not before brushing a kiss across her forehead. The heat from his lips seared the flesh on her forehead, imprinting there forever. "It pleases me to see that you possess the good sense to behave. Now I want you to follow me."

Her eyebrow rose. "Why?"

Without another word, Erik grabbed her wrist and urged her along. Terror gripped her body. What was he going to do to her now?

* * * *

The horse lumbered along the beaten path with a quiet pace with both Morgana and Erik on its back. Before them lay the beauty of the twilight that was evening. Birds sang the mellow tones of their goodbye to the light. Winds, full of wildflower perfume, swept across the soft valley.

"Where are we going, milord?" she asked quietly, drinking in the magnificence around her. The waters of the fjord darkened to a deep blue while the rolling whitecaps captured the last reddish orange vestiges of the dying sun.

"When we are alone together, you may use my formal name," he murmured behind her. His strong body curved into hers, burning through the thick, coarse material of her gown. Spears of excitement coursed through her veins like wildfire.

"Where are we going, Erik?"

"I am taking you out to show you the beauty of my land that belongs to you as well now that you are here."

"It is not my land, Erik, and never will be. Perhaps the sooner you get that notion out of your head, the better off you will be."

He said nothing to her proclamation as the horse followed the natural dip of the green valley until Erik halted it at the edge of the restless fjord. He stopped the horse, led it over to a tall, sturdy tree, then dismounted. With a quick hand, he tied the reins to the trunk and held his arms out to her. Morgana was afraid to touch those arms, to wrap herself in them for even a moment. It meant a new danger to her chastity as well as her soul.

With no other recourse left to her, she slipped into his arms and let him set her to her feet. "Much thanks, Erik."

A sensual smile curled his lips as she slid down the length of his body and out of his arms. "My pleasure, Morgana," he whispered as his finger tilted her chin up. "You truly are beautiful, vixen. You would make a most beautiful Viking Queen."

Morgana pulled her chin from his finger. "I belong to no man, most of all you." Inwardly, she trembled because of his closeness. Her heart pounded in her chest while her breath caught. His magnetism was almost too much for her resolve.

His smile broadened as he took a step toward her, backing her up against the tree. His hand slammed against the bark near her ear while his other lay on her waist, his thumb caressing her ribs and coming dangerously close to her breast. "Ah, but you do. How long are you going to go on playing these games, Morgana? You hunger for me as much as I hunger for you."

She broke from the circle of his touch and stalked away. "I am a chaste woman, Milord, and not about to bed the first man who strikes my fancy."

The sound of his boots moving through the tall grass came toward her then stopped the minute they reached her. Erik's hand went on her shoulder, spinning her around. His eyes glowed with a low sensual fire, a flame that would consume her if she let it. "I told you that you could call me Erik when we were alone."

Morgana shook her head. "No, milord."

His mouth curved into a frown. "I do not understand, Morgana. I am showering attention on you."

Her hands clenched at her sides as the heat of her anger crept into her cheeks. "Attention that is unwarranted! I will not allow you to take liberties only afforded to my husband!"

"What does that have to do with my desire for you?"

Morgana let out a harried breath. "I am Christian, and 'tis forbidden to couple before marriage. My soul will be damned otherwise."

Erik's hands slipped to her waist, drawing her close to his hard line, curving into her. Her heartbeat picked up in speed, nearly bursting out of her chest at his touch. "According to Odin, a man should taste a woman before he takes her as his wife so that he will know if she is barren."

"How heathen," she muttered.

Erik let out a soft laugh. "Aye, I knew you would think that way. The fjord between our religions is wide, but I think we may be able to bridge that gap before is all done. Come and kiss me."

"Nay," she hissed, fighting with all she had to keep from melting in the safety of his arms.

His hand rode up her back and tilted her head back, twining his free hand through her hair. Erik's head bent and blessed her lips with a feathery kiss, seeking entry. Pulses of desire raced through her veins, lighting every one of her senses on fire. Unable to fight his magic, she gave in, allowing him into her mouth. Their tongues danced in tandem, sending those pangs of desire surging through her.

Finally, Erik broke the kiss, parting reluctantly. "That was worth waiting for," he murmured as his mouth found the curve of her neck, nibbling gently. The power of his touch melting her defenses and making her more vulnerable to his charm. Her knees weakened as the pounding of her heart became more ferocious by the moment.

Morgana pulled away in an effort to keep from submitting completely. "What is it you wish to show me?" Her chest heaved in unabated desire as she moved away, strolling through the deep grass of the valley. Tall blades tickled the insides of her ankles, adding to the already heady brew of passion stirring within her.

Erik chuckled softly and drew behind her, pulling her hard against him. She felt the power of his ardor when the bulge between his legs pressed into her buttocks. "I guess that kiss will have to suffice until you are willing to offer more," he whispered huskily as his arm extended over her shoulder and pointed to a jagged piece of rock jutting out from beyond the stony crag. "That rock over there is where I used to dive into the fjord when I was a young boy." It was high above the sharp collection of stone below.

Her heart slammed in her chest. Heights were the one thing she could never stand. "How did you keep from killing yourself?"

His free arm slipped around her waist. "Is that a note of concern for me that I detect in your voice, Morgana?"

The heat of embarrassment flooded her cheeks. She sounded more like a wife or a betrothed than a servant did. "No, milord, 'tis just that I could not have done that," she quickly recovered. The less he knew how he affected her, the better.

"Perhaps in time I will teach you how to do it. Now, do you see that small cottage over there next to the larger one?" She nodded. "That's where I was born. Many women of the household go there to give birth. My mother did with all eight of us. Perhaps you will make use of the room one day."

Morgana ignored his insinuation and looked to the other building. It was tall, almost as large as one wing of the main house, and built of the same type of stone. Its roof, constructed out of thatch, rose high against the deepening sky. The windows remained closed tight. Soft sighs, as well as light, came from it. "What building is that?"

"That is where we house our captives."

Her breath caught. The men who fought so valiantly at her side were in there! Through the days, she thought of them often, trying to find a way to go see them. Perhaps now was her chance. She turned to Erik. "If I ask something of you, would you grant it to me?"

A blond eyebrow rose. "What is it that you wish?"

"Let me see my men. I need to know they are taken care of."

"Why?"

She turned away so he could not see the shame she felt. If it had not had been for her, this never would have happened. They would be at home, cuddled warm against their wives and playing with their children. She had taken all that away from them by her foolishness. If only she had married William instead of running away! "I have failed them, milord."

"Why do you think so?"

"I should have stayed in Wales where I belong and married my intended. That way they could have been happy with their families."

Erik stared at the glorious creature before him and heard the surreptitious creak around the chamber of his heart as the door opened a little. This girl cared more about the well being of others than she did for herself. He had never seen that quality in a woman before.

His emotions swelled within, forming a hard lump in his chest. It was an overpowering need to keep her close and protect her at all times. His original intention was to bring her out here and seduce her, but, with her being this vulnerable, he found he could not. She was fragile despite the times that she stood up to him and tried to kill him. That part of Morgana touched him like no other woman. Could it be he was developing a deep caring for her?

A smile crept across his lips. "I assure you that they are well taken care of."

He could see the tears misting Morgana's eyes as she shook her head. "I am their mistress, and I need to know for myself. Please, milord, will you take me to them?" The pleading in her voice was more than enough to sooth his ardor laden mood.

Without a second thought, he took Morgana into his arms and stroked those glorious golden strands. She trembled against his body. He tightened his hold. "Aye, I will, though I will not leave you alone with them. I would advise against you trying to formulate a plan with them in Latin or any other language. I am well versed in many tongues."

Morgana lifted her head and looked at him through those clear blue eyes. His heart skipped a beat as the intensity of her stare burned through him. "I promise. May I see them now?"

He nodded. "As you wish."

The room was dank, smelling of stale body odor and excrement. No air moved inside, so the stench was very strong. Morgana's belly retched in response, but she pushed the feeling away. Her men were most important to her right now.

Her nervous gaze scanned all the men lined up along the walls of the room. The first few she did not recognize. They were captives from another land. She moved down the line with Erik not more than a few steps behind her.

Finally, she came upon Robert who lay on a straw pile, snoring loudly. His straggly white hair was matted and stiff, the stray tendrils falling into his eyes. Morgana knelt and brushed them away with a loving hand.

Robert awoke with a start. "I have just laid down, heathen! I do not wish to work" His words trailed off the moment he opened his eyes and saw her. "Milady!" he cried and sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, "Can it truly be you?"

She nodded. "It is I, Robert," Morgana announced, throwing her arms around his burly body, "I am so glad to see you!" Her gaze went to the others beside him. "Are all of you all right?"

Murmurs of 'Aye!' rumbled through the thicket. Chains rattled from where the men shifted, piercing the thick air.

"Good," she said in a strong voice. "I have been so worried about you all. Do you have enough to eat and drink?"

"Aye, for heathens, we are treated well except for these dratted chains at night," Robert commented as he bent down to scratch under the strong iron manacle. "How are you treated?"

"She is treated very well," Erik answered in a gruff voice.

Robert gripped her hands in his. All emotion slipped from his ruddy features as his thumbs caressed the naked flesh of her palms. He turned them over and stared in

horrified surprise. "They have got you working as a scullery maid, do they not? I have half a mind to tell them"

Morgana laid her finger on his lips. "That a noblewoman is not used to kitchen work. They know that but do not care. I do not mind, Robert. It could be much worse."

Robert's face darkened. "If they harm you in any way"

"Then they will have to answer to me," Erik growled from over her shoulder.

Robert looked up. "How do we know that you have not harmed her?"

"Does she look as though she has been harmed?"

"That is not the way that I mean, heathen. She is a beautiful woman, and you are a man, albeit a heathen one. Must I spell it out for you?"

She turned to see the deadly flash of anger cross Erik's face. Before she could say anymore, Erik reached down and gripped her upper arm, bringing her to her feet. "This visit is over. You will not see her again until I decide otherwise. Come along, Morgana."

She turned to Erik. "One more moment, milord?" A moment passed before he tilted his blonde head in a slight nod.

"Much thanks," Morgana said then knelt next to Robert, giving him a kiss on his cheek. Leaning forward slightly, she was inches from his ear. "Fear not, Robert. I am working on a plan to get us out of here."

Erik jerked her back to her feet, and she did not resist at all. He pushed her from the odiferous room.

Once they were outside, Erik pinned her against the wall, one hand against the stone while the other cradled her waist. "What did you say to him?"

She crossed her arms. "I told him to be strong and that I would visit as often as I could."

Expressions of distrust flooded his face. "Somehow, I think you said something different, but I will believe you for now. As for your visits, you should not make promises you cannot keep."

"But they are my people. I must see to their welfare," she pleaded.

Erik's face softened a little as a smile crossed the lips that had so tenderly kissed her before. "Your compassion for those men is most intriguing. I would have thought a woman of your stature would have nothing to do with them."

Now it was her turn to be confused. "My stature?"

His hand slid from the wall and cupped her chin, sending shivers of pure delight through her. "I meant as a noblewoman. Come, it is getting late, and the evening fires need to be banked."

"May I still visit them from time to time?"

"If you wish, but that is only when I have the time to accompany you. Now, let us mount and return to the hall."

With that, Erik's hands went around her waist, lifting her effortlessly onto the brown and white mare. He climbed up behind her, putting an arm around her waist while the other gripped the reins in a tight fist. Erik curved into her back, the heat from him very intense as it burned through the material of her gown. She let out a reluctant sigh. Keeping her virginity intact was going to be hard with Erik at her side.

He watched as Erik and Morgana left the small area around the captive house, pressing his body against the dark side so that his form remained embedded in shadow. The last thing he wanted Erik to know was that he watched every move all the while coveting the tasty morsel on the horse.

Morgana's hair flew loose from her golden braid, spraying out around her head as though it was a pale halo highlighted by moonlight. Through the silver light, he could see the well-rounded shape of her calves, exposed by the hem of her gown. His manhood hardened instantly at the sight, his mind wondering what it would be like slipping his hands up those delicious legs, to the fleece covered womanhood.

He shook his head. This must stop. The images of her must remain in the back of his mind or else he would not be able to concentrate on the task at hand. Thankfully, he urged Ulrich to speak to her about escaping, putting his plan in motion. Morgana would take the bait. He could see the desire in her eyes for Erik, but, with a little time, he could turn that desire to himself.

The plan he put together was flawless. Instead of taking her to the waiting ship in Ungven, he would whisk her away to a secret location of his choosing before Erik even knew she was gone. It was all going to be all so perfect.

Pushing himself away from the wall, he scurried away in the night. There was much to do and barely any time to do it.

Chapter 7

Erik rode through the familiar hills of the valley, drinking in the beauty around him all the while his thoughts remained on Morgana. From the delicate turn of her neck to the soft whisper from her lips was more than enough to send his blood boiling. Just being near her did him well. When Morgana was not in his sight, he found himself becoming quickly irritated until he caught a glimpse and knew how she fared.

Erik halted his horse on the edge of the ridge overlooking the fjord, staring at the water. Whitecaps rolled through the inlet, beating against the rocky shoreline before returning to the sea. Sprays rose high in the air, filling the day with its dampness. The salty tang hung in the breeze, and he inhaled the scent deeply. No matter where he went from now on, the smell would always remind him of her.

He frowned. What was it about Morgana that attracted him so? Before his mind could conjecture, a sound behind him broke the silence.

"It must be Loki's luck to meet you here, Erik," echoed a deeply familiar voice behind him. He turned. Einar sat on his favorite black stallion with a devilish grin on his face.

His ire rose. "You," he stated in a low growling tone. The last person he wanted to see now was Einar.

Einar nodded his blue-black head. "Aye, 'tis I, my brother."

Erik's left hand gripped the handle of his sword tightly. It might be time to rid himself of this stone around his neck forever. "What are you doing here? You know I do not like to be followed when I ride," he hissed.

Einar directed his horse forward a little and halted a distance away. "I know that, but I have come here because I am concerned."

Erik's eyebrow rose as a deep laughter echoed from this throat. "Ha! You are concerned for me. If you feel that way, why did you take Kristen away from me?" His grip on his sword grew stronger as his gaze searched for Einar's sword. His side was free of the ornate blade.

"I come unarmed, Erik. You would not dispatch me and keep me from dining at Odin's table in Valhalla, would you?"

Erik released his sword, letting the blade fall back into its sheath. "I suppose not. Now say what you need to and leave. The sight of you sickens me."

Einar dismounted and walked over, laying a hand on the white and brown hide. "I deserve that and more. What I did to you those seasons ago was intolerable. If you must know, revenge has been yours. Not long after I took Kristen to my home in the North, she left me for a neighboring Jarl, taking our daughter with her."

Erik relaxed a little in his saddle. Kristen showed her true form to both of them. Part of him knew what she was like, but, at the time, he did not care. He had loved her like no other woman, but all she was interested in was being 'Queen' of Darvisson.

Not long after their betrothal, he had caught her in bed with Einar. He was outraged and nearly killed both of them. Einar had ridden for the North that night, taking Kristen with him. That had left Erik with a sour taste in his mouth where women were concerned.

Was this some sort of ruse by Einar? How did he know Kristen did not have few mewling brats sired by Einar in the North? The truth was, he did not. Knowing how Kristen had been, Einar was probably telling the truth.

"Does Father know?"

"He does now. Come, we both knew how she was so 'tis no surprise, at least to me."

Einar let a light chuckle escape his bearded lips. "It was not to me, either. I only took her to get back at you."

"Why?"

"Because you were the perfect golden Viking while I was the dark one. Women seemed to swoon over you, even when you were young. You needed to do nothing and they would fall at your feet. I, on the other hand, would have to do all sorts of things to get them to notice me."

Irritation crept into his voice. Where was this story going? "Are you calling a truce between us?"

"Aye, that I am, brother. It has been way too long, and we are way too old to be feuding this way over a woman." The sincerity in Einar's voice was genuine, not the usual false tone it normally took.

He dismounted and stood before Einar, crossing his arms. "Then I have no choice but to forgive you for your indiscretion, though I am still angry over it."

Einar clamped a hand on his shoulder. "The bit of news I have for you may just bate down that anger yet."

"What news?"

"It involves this new woman in the hall you seem to fancy. Come with me and I will tell you all about it. When I'm through, you will not even remember we have not spoken in a few years."

* * * *

The fortnight since her initial meeting with Ulrich moved very slowly. Every few days she received instructions on where to meet Ulrich and the band of Vikings that were to take her to a waiting ship bound for Wales. It was a city called Ungven, about half a day's ride from Darvisson. Her heart beat with persistent abandon while filled with pangs of regret. Since her time here, Erik had turned into a gentle blond giant, bellowing at her less and less. She would miss the way her skin trembled at his touch, the way her heart fluttered when he entered a room, and the way the chamber lit up with his smile. Morgana shook her head to drive away those feelings. She must put them aside or else she would never have the courage to leave.

As her excitement built, so did her disappointment. It would be too risky for her to try to take her men back with her. She would have to leave them behind with the hope she could return one day and get them back.

Morgana's mind wavered on this each day as pangs of guilt tore at her soul. She was a Princess, and, as such, she was supposed to take care of her people no matter what the circumstances. Now here she was, planning her own escape and not thinking about those who had sacrifice their very lives for her. How could she leave them behind?

"Morgana, I need you to come with me," commanded the strong female voice behind her. She turned to see Colean, dressed in a dark blue gown, standing there with a basin of steamy water in her hand. Her braid, dark in color, matched the scowl on her face.

Morgana's brow rose. "Why?"

"One of the girls is birthing, and I need another pair of hands. Come with me." Colean's voice was strong and forceful despite her small size. She could not help but obey.

Morgana followed Colean to one of the servant's rooms where mournful wails echoed through the narrow, chilly hallway. She cringed as they came closer, the sounds almost ear splitting.

Colean opened the door, allowing the sound to escape. Morgana followed Erik's mother inside. Kneeling on the floor with a towel between her legs was the young girl known as Elfrida. The girl's red head whipped back and forth as cries of pain escaped her lips. Two of the other women supported Elfrida on either side, holding her steady.

"Sponge off her head while I help the midwife," Colean ordered then set the basin of water on the table. Morgana dipped a piece of cloth into it and went over to the poor girl. She wiped away the perspiration gently all the while watching what Colean and the midwife did.

They slipped back to the Viking tongue, speaking to the girl who cried out in agony every few moments. Morgana looked down at the cloth between the girl's legs. It was now a dark crimson, stained with blood and clear fluid. Morgana gasped. The birth of

a child was something she had never seen before. Was there supposed to be this much blood and agony?

Elfrida bore down, grunting and gasping as she did so. The midwife peered between the girl's legs and made some sort of announcement. All the other women cheered as Elfrida continued her endeavor.

Morgana looked down in time to see the infant's head slip from Elfrida's body. Then the rest of the infant emerged. It was a son. The midwife had caught the tiny babe within her capable hands. Colean rushed to tie off the cord and cut between the two pieces of rope. The midwife then held the infant up by the heels and slapped it soundly on the backside. No sound escaped from the babe's lips.

The elderly midwife cradled the infant in her arms, and she tried to clear its mouth. There was still no sound. Morgana put a hand to her lips while her heart beat in anxiety. She hoped the baby would take its first breath.

With its mouth and nose clear, the infant did not breathe. The midwife laid her ear on the tiny chest. Slowly, the grizzled head rose and shook back in forth. A mournful wail rose from Elfrida's lips as the midwife handed her the baby. Elfrida rocked back and forth on her heels, lamenting the infant's death in her Viking tongue.

Morgana could take no more. Her eyes misted over to a filmy haze she could barely see through, but she could see well enough to make it through the door. She ran through the hallway, to where she did not know or care.

Through the open door of the great hall she ran, past the circle of men seated around the fire. Elfrida's husband sat among them, their laughter rising through the air.

Morgana ran until her lungs felt like they would burst. She stopped on the short ridge just beyond the men where she collapsed. Hot tears of grief rolled down her face while her arms crossed over each other. She knelt in the long grass, letting the dewy blades envelop her. Why must life be so harsh? That child still had an entire life ahead of it.

Warm hands on her shoulder brought her back to the present. She spun around. It was Erik standing behind her with a confused look on his face. "What is it, Morgana?" he questioned lightly as he sank to his knees in the grass beside her.

"It is too awful!" she cried, pulling out from under his touch.

Erik's strong arm went around her shoulders, and he pulled her close. She relaxed against the hard wall of his chest. "Tell me what happened."

Morgana swiped at the tears that refused to stop flowing. "Elfrida had her baby today."

"And it did not breathe life. Am I correct?" She nodded as the moisture disappeared through the material of his tunic. "Oh, Morgana, you poor thing. More than likely you have never seen anything of that sort, have you?"

Morgana pushed away and stared at him. "How do you know?"

Erik pulled her closer, stroking her wild hair. "If you had been born here, you would have accepted that fact more readily than you do now. This is a sad fact of our climate. Babies that are too small do not survive."

The soft masculine smell of his leather vest was warm and comforting. Morgana buried her face into the open vee of the tunic, feeling the skin alive under her cheek.

"Please, Milord, leave me. I wish to be alone," she sniffed. Though she felt safe in his arms, she could not share herself with anyone. She pulled away.

He drew her back and held her tightly. "No, I am not going to leave you alone. You are upset, and I will not leave you that way," he murmured as he picked her up in his arms. She wound her arms around his neck for safety, feeling the silky tendrils of his golden hair spilling over her naked arms.

Erik stood up and proceeded with her to the great hall. "Shh, Morgana. You will be all right," he whispered as he walked past the semi-circle of men. They seemed a little quieter now with Elfrida's husband nowhere to be found.

Morgana looked around. The moon was rising in the twilight sky, bathing the land in a silvery dream. Tops of trees rustled in the slight wind slipping through the valley. Her hair danced on the same breeze, tickling her nose. Her tears started to abate a little until she saw a horrific sight. Near the base of one tree stood Elfrida's husband, Jorgen, with a few of the other men and a skald. At their feet was an open hole with a little mound of dirt next to it. In Jorgen's hands lay the tiny bundle, wrapped in rags.

Morgana buried her face into the curve of Erik's corded neck, blocking out the sight. The tears started to flow again as her body racked with sobs. Life seemed so cruel as to take away that infant's life before it even began.

His hand patted her on the back in a gesture of comfort. "Do not look at it, Morgana. It will only upset you more."

"I cannot help it! That poor innocent"

"That is part of life, Morgana. Sometimes, babies in our harsh environment were not meant to survive," Erik offered as he stepped through the door of the great hall.

Colean rushed over to greet them, her hands wringing. "Are you all right, Morgana? When you left so suddenly, I grew worried."

Erik pushed past his mother and started up the stairs. "She is fine, Mother. I will take care of her."

"If you need me, do not hesitate to knock on my chamber door," Colean called after them.

Erik strode down the seemingly endless narrow hallway, dimly lit by the torches on the wall. Morgana pulled her head from the crook of his neck. Darkly shining stones glared at her from the wall, cold and sterile. She looked around. This part of the house led to his chamber.

At the door at the end of the hallway, Erik halted. He set her to her feet, opened the door, then picked her back up. Morgana did not resist. Her will to fight was gone for the moment.

Erik strode through the room, closing the door behind him with one booted foot. The heavy wood slammed against the stone jamb, ricocheting around the room. He walked to the bed and laid her down gently.

Fear slammed through her, making her heart pound out of control. "What are you going to do to me?"

His lips curled up into a deliciously tempting smile. "Why do you always think I am going to do something to you?"

"Because you are heathen."

“Heathen has nothing to do with it. Tell me, is it because I am a Viking that you are frightened of me?”

Morgana looked to the other side of the room rather than to answer him. It was not him she was afraid of, it was herself. If she submitted to his desires, then her soul would be lost forever, not to mention the fact that he could put a baby in her belly. The experience Elfrida went through was something she could never survive if it happened to her. She turned back. “No.”

Erik sat down on the bed next to her, taking her hand in his. “We are in private so you may use my given name. Now, why are you frightened of me?”

“I ... I ... do not know.”

“Am I that terrible to look at? Do I beat you or threaten to kill you?”

Morgana blinked hard several times and swallowed the lump in her throat. His magnetism was working on her senses, melting the inner resolve. “You do threaten me, Erik. That makes me fear you all the more.”

Hearty laughter erupted from his throat. “You are quite a woman, Morgana. You over spice my food, put mites in my clothing, not to mention attempt to kill me when I capture your ship, and you are afraid of me. It should be the other way around!”

His mirth filled the room but did nothing to erase her tenseness. “That still does not change the fact I fear you.” She trembled lightly but kept it under control. The less he knew her emotions, the better.

Erik arose and walked to the end of the bed. He bent down and opened an ornate trunk. With deft fingers, he extracted a blanket and returned to her side, laying the blanket over her.

“What is this for, Erik?” she asked in stunned surprise.

Erik said nothing as he strode to the other side of the bed. He drew his shirt over his head, slinging it across the chair next to the bed. Once he completed that task, Erik sat down in the chair and removed his fur-covered boots, stacking them side by side.

Morgana’s heartbeat quickened as her breathing increased. Was Erik going to shed the rest of his clothing and strip away any self-control she had left?

Silently, Erik lay down next to her, prudently keeping his braes on. He drew her into the circle of his arms, encouraging her to lay her head on his shoulder. His arm went around her, holding her tightly. Erik softly kissed the top of her head, drawing her closer. “Is that not better?”

Morgana yawned, realizing that for the first time all day, she was truly tired. “Why are you doing this, Erik?”

His fingers danced against the skin of her neck while his other hand captured her hand in his. “Because you need someone to hold you now, to protect you from the cruelty of life.”

The flow of her tears ebbed as the sincerity in his voice penetrated the stony ground of her heart. “I am confused. I am nothing more to you than a servant, yet you treat me as more. Why?”

Erik’s shoulders jerked upwards in a shrug. “Perhaps there is a spark in your eyes that I have never seen before or the way your skin feels when I touch it. All I know is that I need you to be close to me, Morgana,” he murmured, tilting up her chin. “I hold you dear to me.”

His lips brushed against hers while his fingers traced the underside of her jaw toward the hollow of her neck. Erik's touch burned a trail down toward her breast where his palm rested on the swell, kneading gently. Morgana felt her body arch into his hand as if to beg for more of what he had to offer.

He took this as an invitation, letting his hand travel down further. His fingers tugged at the hem of her gown, pulling it past her knees. She felt his touch searing the skin of her calves, moving toward her thighs. Instant heat rushed toward the moist apex as the anticipation of his ministrations filled her senses.

Morgana tried to fight the demands of her body, but it was no use. Her flesh was beyond her control.

Erik's hand slipped up her thighs, gently kneading the inner skin. His fingers sought out her womanhood, spreading her resisting thighs apart. Dipping into the veritable forest of her private hair, Erik found the secret core. His thumb stroked the tiny button, bringing it to ripe fruition while his fingers dove in and out of her slick crevice, heightening her senses. Her hips rose uncontrollably from the bed as if begging for each plunge.

Morgana's body heated to a new temperature as solid gasps of ecstasy escaped her throat. With each stroke, she slipped a little further beneath the water of damnation. No, she must stop this! Then, out of the fog of desire, her better sense clawed its way to the surface. With as much will as she could muster, Morgana pushed Erik's hand out from under her gown. "No, Erik, we can ... not ... do ... this," she gasped, her body crying out for more of his touch. No, her flesh demanded it. The sleeping dragon of desire awoke to feed on the passion exuded between them. She must somehow put it back to sleep.

Erik's own chest heaved as his lips descended on her neck. "You do not mean that, Morgana. Do you not feel how much I want you?" With that, he took her hand and brought it down on his manhood. It was large and throbbed with unrequited passion, the leather across it extraordinarily tight.

Morgana snatched her hand away as if scorched. She must not be tempted anymore. "Please, Erik, do not make me do this," she whispered softly as the visions of Erik on top of her and inside flooded her mind.

He kissed her cheek sensuously and drew her close. "All right, vixen. Your innocence remains intact tonight, but I do not know how much longer I can go on without making love to you."

Erik pulled the cover up over her shoulders then held her tightly. Morgana snuggled into his chest, choosing not to reply to his last comment. She wanted to give herself over to him, but it was more than religion that stopped her. It was herself.

Erik lay in the quiet darkness, listening to the sound of Morgana's breathing as she slipped to the land of dreams. Her soft body conformed to his, inflaming his ardor more than it already was.

He kissed the top of her head and drew her in closer. His body cried out for hers, the need to be inside of her rising like the tide at night. She filled his entire being, firing his senses like never before. It was like a breath of fresh air in an otherwise stale room. Erik let out a sigh. This is what he waited for. A woman so full of passion that it would consume him if he drank from her cup.

Sweet aromas from his ministrations filled the air, adding to the tension. He inhaled deeply, imprinting that fragrance on his mind. It would always remind him of her.

He looked down. Morgana's light lashes lay against her cheeks while her plump lips parted as soft breaths escaped. Her tiny fingers curled around a tendril of his hair, almost as though she was afraid to let go of him.

As he looked at her, Erik felt an emotion swelling in his chest, a feeling he could not identify. What was it? It ran past fondness and caring, but it was not as deep as love. He smirked. Love. That emotion he thought he knew once, but it turned out to be wrong. Kristen was a bad choice for a wife.

Morgana, on the other hand, was a perfect choice. She was strong like the Nordic women, with a mind as well as a will of her own. Her inner beauty as well as her exterior intrigued him no end. How could two perfect halves balance as one?

Erik yawned, stifling it with the back of his hand. Sleep was coming for him fast tonight. Perhaps it was because Morgana was at his side and he did not have to wonder as to her well-being.

Just as he closed his eyes, Morgana drew her knee up over his semi-flaccid manhood. Instantly, he reacted. Erik let out a resigned sigh. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 8

Kennuric's ship, constructed of the finest English oak wood, passed silently through the waves. The water slapped soundly against the hull as he stood at the prow, letting the wind drift through his black tendrils. Before him lay the wide expanse of the azure sea, matched against the hard line of the light blue sky. Somewhere out there was Morgana.

Why was his sister so impulsive? If she had only given him a little bit of time, he might have been able to persuade Father to arrange another marriage for her or at least delay the wedding until the King had tired of waiting.

Kennuric laid his hands on the railing and gripped the strong wood tightly. What was Morgana going through at this moment? Was she even still alive?

"Where do you wish to set the course for, my prince?" questioned the voice behind him.

He turned to find old Cynan, dressed in a dirty shirt and matching breeches, standing there. "Set a course for the Viking lands. I have a feeling that Morgana is among them."

Cynan shook his ragged head. "No, my prince! You can not mean to sail for the heathen land!"

Anger boiled beneath his surface. "Yes, we are. Set the course without further argument. If there is the slimmest chance Morgana is among them, I will find her."

"How do you know they have her?"

Kennuric returned his restless gaze to the sea as his heart beat in double time. Cynan was right. He did not know if they had her. The only thing he had to go on was intuition.

Ever since their childhood, he and Morgana had always shared a special bond though they were a few years apart. He had known when she was in pain or needed him for whatever reason. The knowledge always tugged at his gut, much as it did right now. She was out there, somewhere, begging for him to save her. Kennuric drew a deep breath. He would not let her down, not when she needed him the most.

* * * *

Morgana awoke to the sound of the birds chirping their welcome to the new sun. Warm rays of light flooded the chamber, bathing it in a soft gold. Her head turned up toward the morning song. From the slant of the light, she could that it was almost mid morning. Why had they not awoken her for her duties?

She looked around and noticed she was not in her usual chamber. Morgana's breath halted in her chest but not before a gasp escaped. She was in Erik's chamber. How did she get here? Morgana looked to her left and let out a sigh of relief. Erik was not there. She cast her gaze down. Her gown was thankfully still intact.

Memories of the previous night flooded her mind. Elfrida giving birth to a dead child, Erik carrying her up here and holding her, his hand seeking ...

Out of embarrassment and shame, Morgana pulled the coverlet over her eyes. How could she have let him take that liberty! Only her husband should have done that to her, not some heathen who desired her body for a night to satisfy his own lust.

With a ferociously beating heart, Morgana threw the cover aside and leapt from the bed. She paced around the room, her hands wringing. What was wrong with her? She was a good Christian woman not given to flights of fancy, yet she subjected herself to his touch.

The apex of her thighs trembled as the memory of his hand stroking her secret core, bringing about wanton feelings of lust she was never supposed to encounter, came back to her. Why must she suffer like this? Perhaps this was God's test of her faith. The sharp knock at the door drew her attention.

The oak door opened to reveal the grizzled Edan with a scowl on her face. "Tis time for work," she growled then turned away.

"Why did you not wake me sooner?"

Edan stopped in her tracks and spun on her leather-clad heel, the hem of her coarse gown spinning around her thin ankles. "Because Lord Erik said you were not to be bothered until sometime later this morning," came the tart reply.

Morgana crossed her arms. "Where is he?"

"Hunting. Now, get to work."

Edan left the doorway and headed toward the stairs, the soft swish of the leather against the stones rising through the air.

She must leave here soon and not give into the demands of her body. The longer she stayed, the worse it was going to get. Attraction to Erik grew every day, as did the hunger to know what it would be like to dissolve in ecstasy beneath him. Oh, what it would be like to have him inside of her, filling her physically and emotionally!

She stood up and walked to the door with slow, careful steps. At the jamb, she turned and cast a look to the bed. The memory of his touch would haunt her always and would perhaps carry her through the nights she warmed the King's bed. She had been as close to sheer bliss as she would be in her life. With any amount of hope, she would never forget it.

* * * *

The ride was long but enjoyable. Erik loved riding in the morning with a few select friends, hunting for stag or stoat, whichever they found. This particular morning was special, however. The previous night he had come close to satisfying the overwhelming need to taste Morgana's passion. Just when she was ready to surrender to him completely, she had pulled away, claiming that her religion would damn her if she submitted to him.

He understood her reason completely and put the ravenous beast of desire back to sleep. When it was time for Morgana to give herself to him, he wanted her to do so willingly or not at all. A smile spread across his lips. Not that he would refrain from using a little persuasion now and then to help his cause.

Erik led the party through a thicket of tall trees that never seemed to end. Long grasses rustled against the stout legs of the horses. Swift winds brought the aroma of wildflowers through the dense grove, and he inhaled deeply. It reminded him of the sensual scent Morgana exuded last night, light and fragrant. Instantly, he felt himself harden. A frown covered his lips. He must satisfy his thirst soon or it would drive him to madness.

Low growls echoed from dense shrubs nearby one of the tall trees. Erik halted his horse in front of the vegetation, his eyes narrowing as he watched the leaves rustle. Their prey was behind the foliage. With a silent waggle of fingers, Erik gestured for the rest of them to dismount along with him. They obeyed without question.

Erik drew his bow from his shoulder and pulled an arrow slowly, creeping up on the prey with the stealth learned from years of practice. This beast would not escape him just as Morgana never would. She was his forever.

* * * *

Morgana left the hot kitchen with the bucket of slops meant for the hogs. She was relieved to do this as the stench inside was almost overpowering.

Just as she rounded the corner of the stable, a hand reached out and pulled her to the side of the building, nearly knocking the bucket out of her hand. Another one slipped around her mouth to prevent her from screaming. "'Tis Ulrich, milady. I have come to bring you news."

Ulrich's hand fell away, and she turned on him. "Why did you accost me like that? You could have asked to see me."

He shook his head. "No, milady. It is much too risky since Erik wants no one to speak to you. I did not want to incur his wrath."

"What would he do to you?"

Ulrich shrugged his lambskin-clad shoulders. "I do not know, but I have no desire to find out."

The bucket slid from her hands and landed on the ground, allowing Morgana to cross her arms, her brows knitting in anxiety. "What is the news?"

“The ship is leaving a little sooner than expected so we must move tonight.”

Morgana’s brows furrowed in question. “Why?”

“I do not know. I received word a little while ago from one of the men sailing on the ship. I think they were worried about the tide carrying them out to sea.”

Morgana turned around as her face contorted into a mask of welcome surprise. This was unexpected. She thought she would be able to wait a little longer and perhaps leave in the morning when Erik was away hunting. At night, it was more likely that Erik would be in the hall with his fellow Vikings. When that occurred, Erik forced her to sit next to him while his hand rested on her leg, his thumb caressing her knee while he drank his ale and listened to the skald. “How are we to do this?”

Ulrich dipped inside of his vest and pulled out a tiny beaker filled with liquid. “At the feast tonight, put two drops into his ale. He will fall asleep within a half an hour and remain so until morning. That should be enough time to get to the ship since Ungven is only three quarter’s of a night’s ride from Darvisson.”

Morgana took the vial from him and examined the liquid. It glowed green, sticking to the sides of the beaker. She uncorked it. The vile smell assailed her nostrils, and she grimaced. The cap went on immediately. “What is this?”

“’Tis boiled mandrake root. Its powers for aiding in sleep are legendary.”

Morgana slipped it into her pocket and picked up the bucket meant for the hogs. “All right, then. Tonight will be the night. Is there anything else I need to know?”

He shook his head. “No, there is not. If there are any changes, I will tell you.” With that, Ulrich looked around the other side of the stable. There was no else around. He left with the swiftness of a deer, disappearing in the dense thicket of the forest.

Morgana strolled to the hog pen, her mind awash with excitement. She was going home, and there was no one there to stop her! Morgana would miss Erik’s caresses and kisses. Nay, she could not lie to herself. She would always hunger for them. Suddenly, the knowledge that she would never have lips such as those arose and stabbed her in the heart. Was she making the right choice?

She emptied the bucket into the trough. The very sound of the entrails and meal hitting the wood arose in the air, encouraging the hogs to feast.

Morgana watched them for a moment then tossed the bucket aside in a rage. It slammed against the post of the pen and splintered. Why did Erik have to touch her in the first place? If he had not, she would have been able to leave him without any regrets. Now she found it harder and harder to leave.

Einar heard the splitting crash of the bucket against the post and snickered slightly to himself. It was a good thing he followed Morgana out here or else he would not have known about the mandrake potion.

He leaned against the stone wall and listened to her berate herself in her own tongue while she slammed her fists against the weathered wood. She desired his brother just as much as Erik desired her. Anyone who looked at them knew they belonged together. Perhaps that was why he chose to help Erik instead of letting jealousy get the best of him. Ever since Kristen had left him, he felt the pangs of guilt about what he did to Erik, especially since his act had come back to haunt him. He deserved it. Kristen had not been his to bed, but, at the time, he had cared not.

Einar pushed a lock of black hair out of his eyes and continued to listen. Morgana had grown silent except for her soft footfalls as she left the yard, heading toward the main hall. Good. Erik should be back within a few hours so that would give him enough time to find out more about this plan.

* * * *

Twilight landed in Darvisson, finding Morgana sitting next to Erik at the banquet hall. Ragnar sat to her left with Colean to his left. They did not say much except to each other, holding hands while Colean smiled almost continuously. What made Erik's mother so eternally happy? Was it because of the fact Ragnar swept her off her feet several times a day, dragging her back to their chamber for a 'conversation'? Nay, it had to be more than that. Was it possible that Colean had grown to love the burly blond man who fathered her eight children and the land that fostered him?

Erik's hand descended on her knee where his thumb caressed the ridge of bone beneath her gown. "Are you all right, my dear?"

She nodded, laying her trembling hands in her lap. His very touch sent her senses reeling. "Aye, that I am."

"Good," he murmured then handed her an empty horn. "Get me some more ale."

Part of her wanted to throw the horn back at him, but her better sense prevailed. She did not want to arouse his suspicion that she planned to escape. "Of course," she replied then rose to fetch his ale.

The small beaker bounced in her pocket, brushing against her thigh. Her salvation lay in the tiny vial. She had to protect it, no matter what.

At the ale barrel, she dipped the horn in and filled it to the rim. She nodded to the other girls filling the pitchers with large wooden ladles then made her way over to Erik. Morgana noticed his head turned to the merriment in the corner. She looked into that direction. A skald, dressed in strange clothing, stood in the middle and entertained the merry crowd. Erik was entranced.

Morgana slipped into the shadow behind the fireplace and pulled the vial from her pocket. Putting the cork in her teeth, she pulled out the cap. The noxious fumes assailed her nostrils. How did she know that poison was not in this vial? Ulrich would not do such a thing, she told herself. Ulrich respected Erik too much. However, if that was the case, why was he happy to help one of Erik's slaves escape? With a firm resolve, she pushed the smell from her mind as she carefully put in two drops of the sleeping potion.

Morgana swirled it then firmly capped the beaker before putting it back in her pocket. This should do the trick.

She poured out of the shadows and strode over to Erik, tapping him lightly on his exposed shoulder. "Here is your ale." She handed him the potion-laden cup as a smile threatened to erupt from her lips. Erik would be asleep in no time.

Erik nodded, his gaze still locked on the skald. "Much thanks," he said, taking the cup from her hand and sticking the end of the horn in the table. "Sit down, my dear." He patted the empty chair next to him.

Morgana sat down, all the while keeping her eyes on the full horn. Why did he not drink it! "I thought you were thirsty, Milord."

Erik's attention turned to her. "I am, Morgana, but not for ale." Erik's head bent and touched her lips in a feathery kiss, his thumb stroking the side of her face. Sparks of

desire exploded in her body, sending waves of flames spreading throughout her flesh. He tantalized her lips by kissing the corners at first, his tongue darting out now and then as if to tempt her into letting him in. Morgana could do nothing but comply.

Erik explored her mouth with infinite expertise, melting her resolve completely. She trembled under his touch, her body wanting more of it than he could give at that moment.

He pulled away and grabbed the horn. "You have quenched my thirst for you. Now I must quench my thirst for ale."

Morgana held her breath as Erik drank the contents, spilling some down his leather tunic. With any amount of hope, he got as much of the potion as possible.

Erik speared the table with his horn, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "That tastes very good tonight. This must be a new batch of ale. Signal for more," he ordered then slumped back into his seat. Good, the potion was working.

With a slight smile on her face, Morgana signaled for more. The more he drank, the faster the potion would slip into his system.

By the time the skald finished his songs, Erik's eyes closed half way as he slid further down in his seat. She could hear the dull scrape of his boots against the floor each time he moved down. Morgana cast a look to him. He was more than ready for bed.

"Milord, do you not wish to retire? You seem so tired," she murmured, brushing a golden lock from his face.

Erik straightened up and laid his arms on the table. "I am not tired, Morgana. I do not wish to retire." With that, his head fell forward, right into his meal.

Fighting the urge to show her amusement, she tugged on Ragnar's sleeve. "Milord, your son seems to have fallen asleep. Is there someone who can help him up to his chamber?"

Ragnar, as well as Colean, looked at Erik with scrutinizing gazes. "It seems that he has," Ragnar mumbled then wagged his fingers in the direction of two other Vikings. They lumbered forward. "Take Erik to his room and put him to bed but clean his face first."

They nodded and pulled Erik from his chair. His muscled body was limp, and, from the strain on the boys' faces, he was not easy to carry.

She fought back the smile threatening to emerge on her lips when she saw Erik's face. Bits of carrot and corn as well as meat juice covered his handsome features. He snored loudly as the others dragged him to his chamber. He was going to be asleep all night.

Morgana, struggling to hide her glee, rose and excused herself. "Since Erik has no more need of me, I will return to the kitchen." She tilted her head and scurried out to the kitchen. Her freedom lay just beyond the open door.

Morgana hurried along the beaten path with the bucket in her hands. The ground was rough under her bare feet, with sharp rocks digging into the soft soles. She kicked her leather shoes off as she made her way down to the hog pen in the fear they would only slow her.

The moon rose high in the sky, casting a pale light on the earth. Trees shimmered with the light, swaying to the beat of the breeze. Silky grass whipped against her ankles as she moved, tickling the insides. Somewhere overhead an owl screamed, searching for a meal. Sweet perfume clung to the air, tantalizing her senses. That was perhaps what she would miss most about this land. What she would miss more would be the glory of Erik's touch.

She was about to upend the weighty bucket in the trough when a strong hand descended on her shoulder. The bucket fell at her feet where it spilled its slimy contents. Her heart stopped. Did one of Erik's men catch her? Morgana whirled around to see Ulrich standing there with a dark cloak in his hands.

Ulrich draped the cloth around her shoulders. "Put this on quickly," he ordered then signaled with a quick wave of his hand. Several other Vikings appeared from the trees with two horses.

Morgana clasped the heavy cloak around her shoulders. "Much thanks, Ulrich, for doing this."

A quick flash of a smile crossed his lips. "'Tis my pleasure, milady. Come, let us move before someone realizes something is amiss."

With that, he urged Morgana toward the waiting horses. Ulrich helped her mount then followed on his own.

Morgana felt the pulses of excitement tear through her body with reckless abandon. Her time of servitude was over! She was free to return home or go wherever she wished. Morgana let out a sigh of relief. Her most fervent wish was finally coming true.

* * * *

Several hours passed by slowly as they rode at a moderate gallop through the forest. Ulrich took great pains to stay away from the beaten path, preferring to stay in the shadows to avoid detection. Morgana hated the route he took. Briars and thorns ripped at her face and hands as they pushed through, leaving her with tiny cuts. She let out a weary breath. It was a small price to pay for her freedom.

Ulrich directed them to a small clearing and dismounted, directing the others to do the same.

Morgana halted her small mare. "Why are we stopping?"

Ulrich walked to the side of her horse and held his arms out. She took them and dismounted as well. A warm smile crossed his lips. "The horses need a short rest before we continue on as well as we all do. Does your back not hurt from riding this long distance?"

Morgana nodded. "Aye, that it does. Perhaps a short rest would do me well." She moved in a little circle, feeling the damp blades of the grass under her feet. The leather of the stirrups bit into her soles, leaving them feeling chafed and cramped. Perhaps it had not been a good idea to leave her shoes behind.

Ulrich walked a short distance away from her and the rest of the men, cocking his ear toward the dense thicket of the forest. Her brow rose. What was he doing?

Morgana walked over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "What is the matter, Ulrich?" He held up his hand in gesture of silence.

Ulrich said nothing then turned to her with a grim expression on his bearded face. "We are not alone."

Morgana let a slight chuckle escape her lips. "Of course we are not alone, Ulrich! We are in a forest full of animals."

He shook his head. "No. There is a shift in the woods telling me that we have been followed."

"That is nonsense! Erik is asleep at the moment, and no one else knows we are gone or cares!"

Morgana patted him on the shoulder and started to walk away. "Ulrich, you presume too much. We have not been followed"

Before she could finish her words, black figures melted out of the forest glen and moved in on them, cutting Ulrich down first. His body fell with a dull thump into the clump of grass at his feet. His sword fell a small distance away from his lifeless hand.

All of the mystery riders were clad entirely in midnight hue, down to their horses. Silver light flashed as swords drew, slashing at the men around them. Bodies as well as limbs fell into the grass. Sickening crunches of steel hitting bone rose in the air as blood flew from wounds, splattering the nearest objects. The rush of hoof beats drifted in the air, adding to the horror that was taking place. She wanted to scream, but the terror in her throat kept her from doing so.

Morgana stood rooted in her spot out of fright and watched the entire melee unfold. Who were these men and what did they want?

Finally, Morgana's feet freed themselves from the entanglement of fear, and she was able to run. Before she could get very far, a black horse, complete with equally clad rider, stood in her path. Her heart beat wildly, pounding against the inner wall of her chest. The breath hitched in her chest.

She turned to run the other direction only to find the same thing. Trying another way, she found that barred as well. Suddenly, the riders circled her, moving their horses in a loop, keeping her locked in.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

The mysterious men remained silent as they pulled their horses to a stop. One of them pushed forward. He extended his black clad arm and gestured with a waggle of his finger for her to come closer.

She shook her head as terror screamed along her veins. More than likely, he would cut her down like the rest if she complied.

The rider shifted in his saddle as if irritated then dismounted. With firm steps, he came close then walked around her shivering form as if he were a butcher sizing up a piece of meat. She could not see his face because of the cowl pulled low over his eyes. From what she could tell, he was tall and broad shouldered. His walk was slow and purposeful, almost calculated to the point to frighten her. It worked very well.

He stopped in front of her and pulled her into his hard chest. His gloved thumb stroked her cheek, sending chills of terror down her spine. Did this man plan to ravish her then hand her over to his men when he was finished?

She heard a slight snicker in his intake of breath. His hand slipped inside of his cloak and returned with a bit of cloth. Pushing away from her slightly, the man's hand clamped on her shoulder and spun her around, tying the cloth tightly around her eyes.

"Where are you taking me, bastard? My master will kill you for doing this!"

Ripples of laughter erupted through the crowd, but no sound came from the man. He spun her around and tied a cloth in her mouth as well.

Morgana heard the telltale bristle of rope behind her, and it all became too much. Breaking free from his grip, she lunged forward in an effort to run but only found herself laying face down in the grass after tripping over a fallen log in her path. Before she could get up, the weight of the man nearly crushed her, his legs on either side, straddling her. He muttered what she assumed to be curses in a guttural language, tying her hands firmly behind her back. She struggled against the constraints, but it was no use. They were too tight.

He pulled her to her feet then picked her up in one swing of his arms. Strangely, this action felt familiar, but she had yet to place it.

The man placed her on his horse then mounted behind her. She could feel the heat from his body slip through the coarse material of her gown, terrifying her tremendously. His hands rested on her thighs for a moment, squeezing gently before they moved toward her breasts. Her breath quickened as her fear heightened. Who was the man who touched her so intimately?

She felt the pressure of his hands on her waist for a moment then it left. After a moment, his gloved hands returned, but, this time, they contained a rope. He tied the rope around her waist and pulled it tight. Morgana gasped out of surprise. He loosened it slightly. She felt the tug on the rope as he tied it around his own waist, presumably to keep her from getting down from his horse on her own.

Morgana felt his arms slip past hers, strong and thick, picking up the reins. With a quick flick of booted heels, the animal lunged forward through the brush. Underneath the blindfold, Morgana felt the hot tears of remorse flood her eyes. This should not have happened. Again, because of her foolishness, more men died. When would she learn?

Her thoughts turned to Ulrich. Poor, sweet, innocent Ulrich, who wanted nothing more than to have the reward to buy his own land. She took that all away from him. Ulrich's death was her fault. Had she been more careful, he would right now be thinking of the land he was going to buy and build a family of his own. Now that would never happen.

Morgana stiffened as the fear tore through her. She would never see Wales, or worse yet, Erik, ever again. She was at this stranger's mercy, and he had only God knows what in mind for her.

Erik, where are you? Please save me!

Chapter 9

Morgana's body grew stiff with her hands tied behind her back, her wrists aching for release. They had been behind her back far too long. She twisted inside of the rope. It was tight but not tight enough to cut off her circulation. The only thing she succeeded in doing was to encourage the coarse fibers to dig a little deeper into her wrists.

During this exhaustive ride, the stranger behind her said nothing except to let out a few grunts in the strange language and issue what she assumed to be orders to the others.

She shivered as the terror spanned her limbs. Where was Erik when she needed him?

Finally, the horse stopped. Behind her, she heard the soft rustle of the horses' hooves against the tall grass. Where they moving in closer?

Before she could question it, the warm gloved hands released her from the bonds. Bringing her hands forward, she rubbed her wrists and was about to remove the blindfold and cloth from her mouth when his gloved hands trailed slowly and sensuously up her arms, stopping her. She felt the warm leather against her skin, sending chills of fear through her.

The man put his hands around her waist and picked her up effortlessly, turning her around on the horse so she faced him. Her heart banged in her throat, and she swallowed hard as her fear started to take over. Part of her wanted to cry out, but she refused to give them the satisfaction.

His hands traveled up and down her body, coming to rest on her breast where his thumbs toyed with her nipples. Instinctively, they hardened under his touch as the coarse material of her gown rubbed against the exposed flesh. Tiny gasps escaped her throat as she fought the natural feelings this intimate touch brought.

Slowly, his hands moved down and came to rest on her exposed calves, moving toward her thighs. Morgana trembled as the sleeping beast of desire awoke to consume her. No, she told herself, I must not feel this way! I am no wanton woman!

Suddenly, his hands wrapped around her waist, drawing her to him. His finger tilted her head up. The mysterious lips brushed against hers in a familiar fashion, teasing the corners at first then moving toward the center where his tongue probed for entry. Morgana twisted her head to the left and right in order to prevent this stranger's kiss.

He held both of her hands behind her back with one of his while his free one cupped her chin. His lips found hers, demanding that she comply. Morgana kept her lips pulled firm and taut. There was no way she would ever allow this stranger entry.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the mysterious man let go of her wrists. Morgana put her hands on his firm chest, pushing away. She ripped the blindfold off and tore the cloth from her mouth. "Who are you?" she demanded, her mind already knowing the answer.

She looked for the others over his shoulder. There was nothing there except the empty woods. They must have retreated elsewhere.

The man pushed back his cowl, revealing a thick mass of blond hair and a seductive smile. "Did you honestly think you could run away from me?" Erik smirked.

"You ... you ... were sleeping," she murmured.

His laughter was deep. "I only pretended to be asleep. When I found out that you were going to aid me in going to 'sleep', I came up with a plan of my own."

"How did you find out about my escape?"

Erik laid a pensive leather clad-finger to his chin. "Let me see. Ah, yes, it was my brother, Einar. It seems he overheard you talking to Ulrich about your plan. Also my curiosity raised the day you told me that Ulrich asked you to instruct him in your language. I knew that to be false because I taught the boy the language long ago."

“Why did you let me get this far?”

“Because I wanted the pleasure of hunting you down and bringing you back.”

“You really are a bastard, Erik. You only let me get so far before you reined in my leash.”

Erik nodded. “Aye, that I did. I will have to say it was clever of you to put the potion in my ale. By Odin’s luck, I was more clever.”

Her eyebrow raised as her heart increased in intensity. “How did you avoid it?”

Erik pulled her closer, tilting her face up with a gentle nudge. “When I kissed you, Einar switched the horns and dumped out the ale you gave me.”

Morgana turned away. She knew that Einar would mean trouble for her, and she was right. With Ulrich gone, there went her chance for escape. She looked back to Erik. “I may have failed this time, but I will not fail again, never fear.”

A sensual smile crossed his lips. “Oh, yes, this will be your last time, Morgana. I will make sure that this never happens again.” His hand came dangerously close to her breast, his thumb threatening her nipple again.

She drew in a deep breath. “I take it you are not angry with me?”

Erik’s hand slipped behind her neck and held it in a firm grip, forcing her to look into the dark depths of his eyes. “Aye, I am very angry with you, but I know how to control my temper. I do not like having to chase my woman all over the countryside.”

“I am not your woman,” she hissed through clenched teeth.

“You became my woman the moment I laid eyes on you. Before I left tonight, I made it known that any man who speaks to you or touches you will suffer punishment by my hand. As an added precaution, you will be watched over by me or someone I trust.”

“Nay, you can not do this!”

His lips descended onto the hollow of her neck, nibbling at the delicate skin, inciting a riot of gooseflesh to break out. “I can, little vixen. By the time I am through, you will be begging for my touch.”

Morgana felt her self-control slip a little, but she managed to bring it back. “No matter what you do, I will never submit to you.”

Erik lifted his head, his eyes glistening with emotion. “You will, my dear. ‘Tis only a matter of time, and I am a patient man.”

His head bent again, teasing the area that affected her most. Morgana felt the waves of wanton desire wash over her as he continued his ministrations. Erik was right. It was only a matter of time before she submitted to him. Unfortunately, time was the one luxury she could not afford.

Erik, still dressed in his black attire, entered the hall with her in his arms. Morgana shivered as she looked about the voluminous hall, expecting shouts and cheers. The only thing greeting her was silence. Tables and chairs were devoid of bodies, the chamber utterly empty. Horns lay on their sides, discarded like pieces of rotten meat, while the fires crackled as the embers died.

She looked to Erik as a slight tremor rode through her. “Where is everyone?”

“‘Tis late, and they are more than likely asleep,” he grumbled then moved toward the stairs leading to his chamber.

“Where are you going?”

“To bed. I am exhausted.”

Erik put one foot on the stair. He was about to mount the treads when Morgana yanked on a large lock of his hair. “Put me down,” she ordered.

Ripples of fury crossed his face. “Do not test my patience more, Morgana. I am in no mood for games,” he growled as he started up the steps.

“I said put me down!”

Erik halted in mid stair and cast her a murderous gaze. “I see you wish me to put that cloth back in your mouth to keep you quiet.”

“You would not dare.”

“Aye, that I would, vixen, if it will keep your vicious tongue quiet. As I said before, I am in no mood for games or a tongue lashing for that matter. Now, you will keep silent. Am I understood?” His eyes glimmered with a dangerous light. That signal meant she must cooperate, at least for now.

Morgana nodded as the terror climbed higher inside. Deep in her heart, she would never bend to his will. “Aye.”

His lips spread in a most delicious smile. “Good. ‘Tis time for bed. Since you exhausted us both tonight, I will tell Edan to let you sleep a little later this morning.”

“Is that my punishment?”

Erik shook his blond head. “Nay, vixen, I have something better in mind for that.” His words sent chills up her spine.

Erik kicked open the door of his chamber with one booted foot, stepped inside, and slammed it with the other. He set her to her feet. “Take off that gown, Morgana.”

Morgana clutched the open edges at her throat. “No, Erik. I will not submit to you.”

Erik whipped off his cloak and threw it into the nearby chair. “Thor’s teeth, woman, I am not asking to bed you! Surely you do not wish to sleep in that gown!”

Morgana stepped away. He seemed unleashed tonight, as though he could do anything to her. “I do not wish to undress in front of you or any man. Now let me return to the servants’ quarters where I belong.”

Erik stepped forward, shaking his head slowly. His hands rose and clamped on her upper arms, gripping tightly. “Since I cannot trust you not to escape, you are going to stay here with me tonight. Tomorrow, I will make other sleeping arrangements for you.”

Morgana felt her resolve break down as hot tears threatened to spill out of her eyes. “Why are you doing this to me? I do not belong to you or any other man! You care nothing for me!”

That familiar seductive smile slipped across his lips. “If you must know the truth, Morgana, I care for you a great deal, far more than Kristen.”

Her eyebrow rose in surprise. “Kristen?”

Erik drew a deep breath, pulling her close. “She was my betrothed before she fell under Einar’s charms. She was everything I thought a woman should be. That is, until I caught her in bed with Einar. After that, Einar and I never saw eye to eye, always quarreling much to our mother’s disdain,” he confessed in a low, solemn voice.

There was much pain in his voice as he mentioned his previous betrothed. Morgana felt the pang of sorrow stab her own soul. Perhaps he did speak the truth about his feelings for her, but she could not be sure that it was not some ruse to take her to bed.

Morgana looked up to see pain and hurt swimming behind the cloudy gray of his eyes, the emotion a mixture of feelings that her mind could not identify but her heart could. Instantly, Morgana's resolve began to melt. "You said Einar told you about my plan. If you were feuding so much, why did he tell you?"

He shrugged a little. "Because he saw what I felt for you and did not want me to suffer again because of a woman. Einar confessed to me that he did what he did to me out of jealousy and that I have my retribution that I sought long ago."

"What retribution?"

"Kristen left him for a neighboring Jarl just a few months after their flight to the north, taking Einar's daughter with her. Kristen proved her worthlessness to both of us."

Erik's head lowered as his lips sought the delicate flesh of her neck, tantalizing the skin. She quivered under his touch, almost at complete meltdown. "Am I worthless to you?"

Erik lifted his head, tilting hers up with a soft nudge. "Nay, my dear, you are far from it. You are the most precious thing I possess."

"But I am not yours."

His eyes moistened slightly as he gripped her hands, his thumbs lightly caressing the pink flesh of her palms. "Be mine tonight, Morgana," he whispered huskily, "and I will be yours. Nothing else will exist but us."

The ferocious pounding of her heart increased in intensity, threatening to burst out of her chest. His touch sent spears of excitement coursing through her veins. "But I cannot, Erik. I am not your wife or even your betrothed."

Without missing a beat, Erik went to the floor, kneeling on his left knee. He gripped her hand, gazing up at her intently. "Come to my bed as my bride, Morgana. I swear, by the blood of Odin, to take care of you and protect you and any children from all harm."

Her bottom lip quivered as her heart pounded ferociously. "But that is not a formal marriage, Erik."

"Only until I make it known to all of Darvisson."

The storm of emotion roiled within, churning endlessly as her mind tried to sort out all of the feelings. She wanted desperately to join him, but, for the sake of her soul, she could not. A shudder rumbled through her as the sensations came together in one crashing wave. "No, I cannot do this, Erik." Each moment she spent in his presence was one step closer to her damnation.

Erik rose and pulled her close to him, his breath labored. "Come to my bed as my wife, Morgana."

"There is no priest to wed us."

"We do not need a priest when we have each other," he murmured, lowering his head to nibble on her neck.

Morgana felt that wall of emotion crash over her, and she slipped beneath the waves. She was lost, and she cared not.

His hands went to her shoulders and pushed the top of her gown down, exposing her shoulders. His lips kissed the freed skin, turning it to molten fire.

Her arms wound around his neck, twining in the soft strands of his hair. Her body was an out of control blaze threatening to consume her very soul. "Erik, promise me one thing," she whispered in the dim light of the chamber.

Erik lifted his head, his gray eyes shining. His hands cupped her chin gently, his fingers brushing against the ridge of her jaw. "What is that my dear?"

"That you will not hurt me or get me with child."

His eyes widened. "Why do you say that?"

Morgana stepped away with her hands over her shoulders, her soft footfalls the only sound in the room. "After what I saw with Elfrida, I am not sure I would be able to survive the pain."

Erik's warm hands gripped her resisting form, bringing her back against the hardened plane of his chest. "Oh, Morgana, why would you think that way?"

"Because it can happen."

Erik shook his head as he took a deep breath. His fingers brushed her cheek in a feathery touch. She quivered with anticipation. "No, not to you. I would never let it happen. As for hurting you, I would rather cut off my own limb."

"I ... I ... have heard that the first time is extremely painful," she whispered, those words falling from her lips before she could stop them.

His arm swept across her as his hand gripped her opposite shoulder, turning her around gently. "I will not lie, Morgana. It is a little painful at first, but, after a few times, you will get used to me, and it will be nothing but bliss," Erik promised in a soft tone, kneeling at her feet again, holding her hand. "I swear by Odin's blood, I will not hurt you."

Morgana felt some of her fear and apprehension slip away like a thief in the night but not all of it. Part of her screamed to be satisfied while the other ordered her to wait for marriage. "I ... do ... not know," she stammered as her breathing became more labored with each pound of her heart.

A smile crossed his lips. "Then let me make your mind up for you."

With that, Erik's lips brushed hers in an enticingly light kiss, leaving her hungry for more. Burying her hands in his hair, she pulled him to her, deepening the kiss to a hard urgency. His hands wrapped around her waist, holding her close to his form. Dangerous sexual heat seeped through his clothes and warmed her up, slowly burning through the material of her gown. Spears of anticipation coursed throughout her body, searing a hot path to her limbs. She trembled. The long thirst was about to be satiated.

Erik bent low and picked her up in one swift swing of his large arm. Striding to the fur covered bed, he laid her down gently, all the while keeping his lips locked with hers. The warmth from his hands was deliciously welcome as they moved around her body, awakening every inch of her flesh.

His lips slipped to her neck where he burned a trail of hot kisses down to the hollow of her throat. Morgana was so caught up in the emotion he evoked that she barely noticed the fact his fingers untied the lacing at the front of her gown.

With a swift flick, her breasts were free to his touch. Cool breezes, tinted with the salty sea air, wafted in, caressing her skin. Erik pulled away and stared at her for a moment, the emotions crossing his face setting her soul on fire.

Out of panic, her hands went to pull the errant edges together when his hands gripped her wrists. "There is no need to hide your beauty from me, Morgana," he murmured.

"Please, Erik, this is not right." Part of her wanted to stop while the other yearned to be brought into the full blossom of womanhood.

Releasing her wrists, Erik laid his finger against her lips. "No more protests, Morgana. Tonight, your body belongs to me."

His lips descended on her right breast. His tongue toyed with one ripe and ready nipple, bringing it to a marble hardness. His free hand played with the other mound, kneading gently, urging rampant feelings of wanton desire to surge through her. Morgana arched into his hands, wanting more of his touch. He was entirely too intoxicating.

Erik tugged at her gown again, pulling it down past her waist. Morgana looked down. She was naked and vulnerable, like the wanton woman she feared.

The dreaded trembling increased as her hands went to cover her private parts.

Erik frowned. "What is the matter, Morgana?"

"I am just frightened, Erik," she replied. It was the truth. Aside from the pain she would feel from his first entry, she worried about something much deeper. I must not lose my heart to him.

His sensuous lips curled up in a knowing smile. "I will be most gentle with you, Morgana, I promise." His voice was deep and husky, extending the invitation for her to be beneath him, swimming in the ecstasy that only he could provide.

Erik laid his lips against her hot skin, searing a trail of kisses between the valley of her breasts and plunging toward her navel. Despite the flames of desire soaring along her veins, her fear heightened as he continued his descent.

At her navel, his tongue darted in and out, licking slowly around the outer rim. Morgana shuddered as a tangle of emotion washed over her.

His fingers traced lazy patterns on her calves, working up to her thighs, all the while his lips kissed her abdomen. Higher and higher, they climbed, stoking the flames of the fire burning beneath her surface.

Suddenly, he pulled away then stood up. Morgana shivered in silent terror. Was this a ruse to tease her to the brink of madness then leave her alone? Instinctively, she tried to pull her gown up.

"What are you doing?" Erik questioned with a slight chuckle in his voice.

Morgana stopped. "I thought perhaps you had changed your mind."

Erik shook his head as he slipped his black shirt over his head, tossing it to the floor casually. "Nay. You are the one thing I could never change my mind about." With that, he sat down in the chair and unlaced his boots, throwing them in the general direction of his shirt. His braes followed. "I thought perhaps you would like to touch me." She nodded. Every fiber and morsel of her being cried out to be satisfied, to know what it was like to have Erik inside of her, filling every inch.

He stepped into the shaft of moonlight, taking her breath away. Muscles, built up from years of training, quivered beneath his golden skin. Yards of flaxen hair, filled with

gentle waves, draped over his shoulders like a curtain. His shaft was rigid, ready for her. Erik looked at her with an unequaled intensity.

He closed the distance in three strides, returning to her side. He lay down next her, drawing her into his arms, his hands roaming the nether regions of her body, setting her flesh on fire.

"I ... I ... can not," she stammered, though her body demanded to touch him, to feel life humming through his veins and revel in the power of his body.

"Let me show you," he murmured softly as he grasped her hand and laid it on his firm chest.

With his encouragement, Morgana hungrily let her hands trail over his skin, her lips touching the silken flesh, reveling in the feel. Taking her fingers, she touched his nipples and found they turned to quivering mounds just as hers did. A little sigh of delight escaped her lips.

She wasted no time. Moving over him, she let her lips trail to his chest, finding a ripe brown nipple. Her tongue toyed with the nub, encouraging it to become hard. Erik shifted under her as a sigh escaped his lips.

Morgana took this as an invitation and let her hand slide down his rippled belly, stroking around his navel toward the forest of blond curls surrounding his manhood. She was tempted to touch the organ, but her better sense prevailed. She had never seen a naked man before this moment. Would he like his privates touched just as she enjoyed hers to be?

As if he sensed her indecision, Erik grasped her hand and laid it on the hardened flesh. Morgana felt the throbbing pulse, her mind reeling as she began to explore. Lightly she touched the taut skin, feeling the power residing within. The power to make a child as well as give pleasure to a woman. How perfect he was crafted, down to his manhood. She could not resist stroking it.

Erik bucked under her with slight moans escaping from his lips. Before she could go further, Erik nudged her back on the bed. Her eyes widened in surprise. "Do you not like what I am doing, Erik?"

His breathing became more ragged as each moment passed. "Nay, Morgana. It is just that you are driving me to the brink of madness, and I am not ready to finish before we have even started."

"Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, my dear. Let me get these things off so that we enjoy ourselves." He picked up her gown from under her. "This can go with the rest."

That was it. She was naked before him, ready to accept him completely.

Morgana remembered the 'instructions' one of her governesses had given her about coupling and turned around, getting up on her knees, steeling her body for pain. "Whenever you wish, Erik."

Erik urged her down on the bed. She turned over and noticed the storm of confusion in his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"I thought that is how you preferred coupling," she replied innocently.

His smile returned. "There is so much I have to teach you, Morgana! Aye, that is one way, but there are many others. For now, there is one that will cause you less pain."

"What way is that?"

“Let me show you.”

Erik lowered himself on her, holding his weight up slightly as not to crush her. His lips nibbled at her neck, dipping into the hollow before moving around to the front. The deliciously warm tongue darted out to tease her flesh, raising it to new levels of sensation.

Around her legs, she felt his hand stroke her navel then work its way down to the clean line of her fleecy private hair. She strained to hold her legs together, but it was no use. Erik nudged them apart with clever strokes, dipping his fingers into the apex of her thighs, searching for the tiny button to the door of the inferno of her desire.

Her breathing quickened, as did the pace of her heart. Each dip of his fingers drove her to a higher plane, a place she never knew existed.

Erik’s lips left her as his ministrations stopped as she continued to ride the wild waves of passion.

Her eyes flew open to find him gazing down at her intently. “Why did you halt?”

“Because, Morgana, I want you now,” he murmured, stroking the sides of her face with his hands. “If it starts to hurt too much, I will stop if you ask.”

“But what if you are not satisfied.”

Erik brushed a lock of errant hair out of her eyes. “Just being here with you will satisfy me enough for now. There is time for pure satisfaction later. Are you ready?”

Morgana nodded, readying herself for the pain. Erik shifted over her. She felt his manhood, large, erect, and ready, pushing eagerly against the swollen folds of her core.

Erik stroked her legs for a moment until she relaxed. They fell open of their own accord. Taking this invitation, Erik brushed his lips with hers then gently plunged into her. Pain seared up from between her legs, exploding in her brain. Tears flowed from her eyes as Erik held her in a tight embrace. “Do not move or else it will make it more painful,” he whispered in her ear.

The first few thrusts felt as though the act ripped her body in half. Erik was gentle and slow, taking great pains not to tear her delicate flesh.

Before she could stop what happened, Morgana’s hips instinctively rose, despite the discomfort, to accept his strokes.

True to his word, Erik kept his motions to a minimum, taking her to a height she never experienced. Morgana’s heart nearly burst out of her chest as the ecstasy rose and swirled around her like a warm cloud. Her skin felt as though fire burned through it.

Gasps of desire escaped her lips as Erik’s hands descended on her hips, holding on tightly as he drove himself into her.

For a moment, Erik halted his motions and looked down at her, keeping himself firmly inside. His chest heaved as perspiration beaded his brow. “Are you all right?” She nodded and brought his mouth down to hers.

Together they rode the carriage of desire to the heavens only to return as two utterly satisfied people.

Erik shuddered violently then rolled away, drawing her into his arms. “Did I hurt you?” he gasped as the breath threatened to leave his chest.

Morgana nodded, drawing her knees up to her chest. The pain remained as the ecstasy burned away. “Nay, you did not.”

Erik propped himself up on one elbow and gazed at her through intense eyes.
“Then why are you drawing your knees up?”

Tears flowed out of her eyes as the burning increased. “Aye, it does hurt a little, but it will go away in time.”

His hand touched her cheek, stroking in a loving motion. “Why did you not tell me? I would have stopped.”

“I know not.”

Erik lay back down and drew her back into his arms, his thumb drawing lazy circles on the naked flesh of her back. “Did you fear my wrath?” She nodded. He merely drew her closer. “Oh, Morgana, you have so much to learn! I would have stopped if it meant you were not hurt. As for my satisfaction, let me worry about that.”

She stroked his damp chest, enjoying the deep smell of the musky scent that left his pores. “Do you wish to take me again?”

Erik kissed the top of her head. “Aye but not tonight.”

“Why not?”

“Because you need time to rest and heal from the injury I have inflicted.”

Morgana felt his heart beating against the funnel of her ear, hard and strong as though it beat just for her. Erik was as kind to her as he could be, including worrying about her after lovemaking instead of himself. Most men did nothing of the sort. From what she had always heard, men only worried about their own pleasure.

Deep within the recesses of her soul, she reflected on everything up until this moment. Erik had been nothing but kind and caring, even during their lovemaking. I am falling in love with him, and there is nothing I can do about it.

Erik lay in the quiet darkness, listening to Morgana’s even breathing. It was magic that she was here, in his bed after sharing her body with him. That was a true gift in itself.

He kissed the top of her head. Morgana shifted, snuggling deeper into his chest. Her skin was warm and inviting, begging to be touched and explored. Aye, he did want her again, as many times as he could have her, but that would come in time. She needed to heal from his urgent strokes. He tried not to hurt her, but the feel of being inside of her virgin body was like potion to him, driving him to drink in much more than he should. Too much was never enough, especially with her.

Erik stroked Morgana’s arm slung over his waist. It was smooth like the finest silk from the East and soft as velvet. Nay, he would never let her go. Perhaps it was time to wed and produce an heir. He looked down. If Odin’s luck were on his side, he would have placed a child in her belly by their first coupling.

Drawing back the covers, Erik stared at the beautiful woman next to him, her face a composed mask of satisfaction. Even in sleep, she was still beautiful. His gaze trailed over her body, drinking in the perfection of her form, halting at her private area. Did he hurt her terribly by his urgent strokes? Pushing her onto her back, Erik nudged her legs apart and searched for signs of blood. His fingers brought back what he dreaded. Crimson liquid. Silently, he cursed himself for being too aggressive, too urgent with her. He must have torn the delicate tissues with his impatience.

Erik rose from the bed and treaded to the basin filled with cool water. He rinsed the blood from his hand and wet a cloth. The least he could do was tend to her and make sure that she was not in any pain.

The stone was cold against the naked flesh of his feet. He ignored it as he went back to the bed. Sitting next to Morgana, he opened her legs a little more and cleaned the area.

“Wh ... what ... are you doing Erik?” she mumbled sleepily, trying to pull her legs together.

His hand stopped their motion. “You were bleeding, and I wanted to clean it so that it would not pain you anymore,” he replied softly. “I should have been more patient, Morgana. I did not mean to inflict that sort of pain on you.”

“I am all right, Erik,” she yawned, her hands pushing away the stray locks of hair from her face.

Erik let the corner of his mouth curl up in to a half grin as he threw the cloth to the floor. “You are now. I can sleep knowing that I have taken care of you.” He slipped into bed beside her, drawing her sleepy form to his.

“Much thanks,” was all she said as she rolled onto her side, snuggling closer to him.

There was no turning back now. He was a lost man with this woman, and he knew it. Marriage was the only thing he wanted with her now. Unfortunately, she would not marry him so readily. Perhaps it was better not give her a choice.

Chapter 10

Sunlight streamed through the open windows in ribbons, lightening the icy gray stones. Morgana felt the new heat and opened her eyes to find herself within the taut circle of Erik’s arms. She stretched then settled back down, snuggling into Erik’s smooth, warm chest. Pulling a soft fur blanket up to her chin, Morgana’s mind pondered the events of the previous night. Did she really make love with Erik or did she dream the entire sensuous episode?

The dull throb between her legs assured her that she it was no dream. She let out a soft sigh and trailed her fingers across Erik’s smooth mountain of muscle. The golden skin, covered in a damp sheen, quivered underneath her touch, almost as though she brought him to life. Gentle shivers ran through her at the thought.

Morgana’s fingers danced around in lazy patterns from his neck to his navel, delighting in the delicious feel of him. Erik shifted the moment her hand reached the line of his privates. She pulled back.

“Why did you stop?” he murmured sleepily.

"I thought you would not like me touching you," she answered in a soft tone. Part of her teaching from that same governess had been that men do not like to be touched, especially after coupling.

His arm swept across her shoulders, warm and alive, drawing her in close. "I will never tire of you touching me, Morgana." Despite the intense guilt roaming through her body, Morgana felt the sense of desire and satisfaction that only came through lovemaking.

She nuzzled her cheek against his chest and trailed her arm over his body, gripping onto his side. "I never imagined that you would say something of this nature," she whispered against his damp skin.

Erik tilted her head up. She gazed longingly into those deep pools of gray storming with emotion. "Why not? Just because my people have a reputation for raiding and pillaging does not mean that we do not love the touch of our women."

"I am not your woman," she reiterated. Just because she coupled with him last night, it did not solidify ownership. She wanted it as bad, if not more than he did despite the protests of her mind.

"You are, Morgana. You came to my bed as a virgin and gave yourself to me as a bride. That makes you my woman."

Morgana bolted up, clutching the thick pile blanket demurely over her breasts. She glared at him with ire-laden eyes. "I did no such thing! I answered the call of my body as well as yours, nothing more! I am not your bride or your wife!"

Erik laid a rough hand on her shoulder, jerking her back down on the bed. He turned over, laying himself on top of her, his legs pinning her body solidly. "You are, Morgana, whether you realize it or not. You are still my wife even though it has not been made known to the rest of the clan," Erik stated calmly as his gaze traveled over her face. "Now, since I have to punish you for your little flight to freedom last night, I am going to give you a choice. You will either wed me or else you will wear shackles until you learn that this is your home now. Which is your choice to be?"

"That is no choice! I will not do either!"

A light, sensual smile curved one side of his lips. "Aye, vixen, you will. If you cannot decide, I will make the decision for you. I think you know what my choice is to be."

Morgana tried to pull away from him, but he was too heavy. His manhood, rigid and alive, nudged against her inner thigh and tempted her beyond all reality. She must resist the ecstasy and release that only Erik could provide. "How could you do this to me, Erik? Take my only possession then treat me as though you care nothing for me?"

"I care a great deal about you, Morgana, more than you know at the moment. I have always received what I craved in life. You are no different. I want you, and I will have you by my side for all eternity as well as our children."

"You really are beastly, Erik. I will not have your children or anyone else's for that matter. I will return to Wales and marry the King."

Erik's brow furrowed in question. "Why would the King want you? He wanted to marry a virgin, and you are no longer one. So, you see, the only choice for you is to stay here and marry me."

Morgana turned away, biting her lip. Erik was right. She could never return and marry the King. That thought should have occurred to her last night, but it escaped her mind as she reveled in the magic of Erik's body, exploring every bronzed inch. Morgana let out a resigned sigh. The King was not for her. If she had been able to return, she would have longed for Erik the rest of her life. She knew that now. "You will do what ever is necessary to get what you want, no matter what the cost?"

Erik's lips descended onto her neck as he maneuvered himself between her legs. His hands roamed her body, tantalizing every pore. Shocks of desire and passion exploded through her system, lighting the fire she was unable to resist. "Aye, Morgana. I will do what is necessary to keep you with me."

"Then I have made my choice," Morgana gasped, as waves of wantonness washed over her and flooded her veins with heaving emotion.

Erik lifted his head, peering into her eyes. His hands softly stroked either cheek, causing shards of excitement to burn up her neck and increasing the temperature of the room. The corner of his lips turned up seductively as he awaited her answer. "What is it to be?"

* * * *

The wide expanse of water lay before him, trapped within the confines of the stone arms with only a little bit allowed to escape. Back and forth, the sea rumbled through the tiny inlet, whitecaps rolling along in a semi calm fashion. Columns of white clouds, as soft as the finest wool, crept across the azure sky, blotting out the sun now and then. Occasionally, a dark shadow passed overhead as a hawk swooped down in search of a meal. Gentle breezes swept across the high ridge above the long house, lifting stray tendrils of his hair from his partially clad shoulders as he sat on his stallion overlooking the fjord. That caress reminded him of Morgana, just as everything did lately. Dainty fingertips that traced languorous patterns over his skin, setting his soul on fire.

"I thought I would find you here, Erik," boomed the familiar voice behind him. He turned. Ragnar and Einar, dressed in daily attire consisting of leather tunics and braes, sitting behind him on their multi-colored horses with Fenfir, Erik's pet wolf, in tow. Pale light of the morning rained down on them, enhancing the blue-black hue of Einar's hair while turning their father's to gold.

Erik turned back. "I came here to be alone, Father," he snarled. If he wanted to drown his soul in thoughts of Morgana, he wished to do it alone.

From behind, Erik heard the soft clomp of hooves push through the plush pile of grass. He turned to see Ragnar pull the brown and white stallion to a halt on his right side. "What ails you so, boy? Is it that Welsh vixen that infected your blood?"

"How do you know?"

A light, fatherly laughter erupted from Ragnar's throat. "You are my son, and I know when something ails you," Ragnar quipped and patted him on the back. "Besides, Einar told me all about it."

Erik cast his brother a hardened look. "I told you to keep this to yourself," he growled. This was his concern, no one else's. He fell for the woman fast, perhaps a little too fast, but that was his mistake. He would deal with it alone.

Einar merely shrugged his broad shoulders as he urged his horse up into line with the others. "Mother was a little concerned about all the black clothing we needed the

other night when we set out to capture your Welsh vixen. She wanted to know, but I refused to tell her, at first.”

“How did she make you tell her?”

The hot blush of embarrassment crept over Einar’s bronze cheeks. “That is my secret, Erik. In any case, she made me go and tell Father.”

Erik’s spine stiffened. He did not like interference from anyone, including his family. “So you know,” he retorted, “I suppose you think I should send her back.”

Ragnar’s hands released the reins and went to his hips. “Did you take her?”

Erik nodded. His mind filled with images of their sweet lovemaking, the air filled with her sweet scent. Every pore of his being cried out for her no matter how much he tried to keep it from being that way. “Aye, that I did.”

His father’s face darkened. “We could have ransomed her, Erik, if she were still intact.”

Erik whirled around on his horse, the saddle creaking under his weight. “I care not! You have bothered me far too long to settle down and take a wife! So now I will, and you are chastising my choice! Besides, you told me to take the girl anyway because we do not need the ransom.”

Ragnar was taken aback. “Aye, that I did, my son. Are you in love with the girl?”

“Nay ... aye, I do not know!” he snarled as his fists clenched at his sides. No woman had ever affected him this way, including Kristen. The thought of losing control of his emotions and iron will were almost more than he could bear.

“So, you have decided to take her as your bride,” Ragnar chimed then cast a look to Einar. “It seems to me that your brother is going to get married. Praise Odin!”

Einar clapped him heartily on the back. “May you have many sons to carry on our family name!”

Erik buried his face in his hands for a moment then straightened up. Morgana would never agree to marry him, especially after her decision this morning. Her will was almost as strong as his own. “There is only one hindrance, Father.”

Ragnar’s face became a mask of confusion. “What is that? Do not tell me she was not a virgin!”

Erik shook his head slowly. “No, she was. The only problem is that she refuses to marry me.”

“Why?”

“After her escapade last night, I had to punish her somehow, so I offered that she either marry me or wear the shackles until she could learn to keep from running away.” The leg irons were against his better judgement, but he had to force her some way to return to the fold of his arms on a more permanent basis. He hoped she would take the easy way out and choose him, but her stubbornness was going to get the best of both of them.

Now it was Einar’s turn for confusion. “What did she choose?”

* * * *

The dull clanks of the iron against the smooth floor of the kitchen grated on her raw nerves. Even with the throng of bodies in the mid size chamber, the sound still managed to echo through the room.

She had reluctantly put them on after Erik made love to her one last time. Her body had dipped in the swirling eddy of pleasure and passion, savoring every precious moment. Now, the memory of it was all she possessed. By her own choice, Morgana would never again dissolve in those blessed waves of ecstasy.

She felt her heart sink. She could marry Erik, but that would be admitting she was in love with him. That was one emotion she was unsure of at the moment.

The chafing around her ankles made her yearn for his arms, taking the easy way out of her situation. Somehow, she could not bring herself to admit she was utterly wrong.

Rough brushes against her shoulder and a shove nearly pushed her into the hard gray hearth, bringing her back to reality. She turned to see a sour-faced Inga moving past her with swift speed. "Watch where you step," she muttered. The girl cast her a foul smirk then moved around to finish the assigned duties.

Morgana slammed the bowl filled with fresh meat down on the table. Her fingers trembled as she ran them through her hair. Desire still pulsed in her veins, warm and inviting, eating at her like a hungry lion at a fresh kill. It wanted to overpower her and drive her straight into Erik's arms. That was something she would not do no matter how much her body demanded that she should.

Eerie feelings pricked at the back of her neck, making her hair stand on end. It felt as if someone watched her with great interest. Morgana spun around to find one of the men sitting on a stool watching her. Her eyes narrowed. His red hair framed his bearded face, braided in tiny rows on either side. Dark brown eyes peered out from beneath his hooded brow. From the way he sat, Morgana knew that he must be as tall as Erik but not as stocky. Dark leather covered his upper torso as well as lower, framing his thick form. Slowly, a lecherous grin spread across his lips, sending a shudder through her.

Morgana turned to Edan for an identification. "Who is that sitting on the stool?"

Edan cast a hard look to the man then went back to stirring the brew in the pot. "That be Sven. Lord Erik said Sven is to watch you at all times until he returns from his hunting. Now get to work and worry not about who is watching you!" Edan's callused hand shoved her back toward the worktable.

Morgana turned her back on Sven and set about chopping the vegetables for the midday meal. As much as she tried, Morgana felt the unmistakable burn of his intense gaze bore through her.

Let him look. As far as she was concerned, no man would ever do anything to her other than stare.

* * * *

Erik returned to the great hall just before sundown, exhausted and hungry. Morgana felt his stare come through the open doorway, signaling that he wanted her, perhaps in more than one way. Her spine stiffened. The only thing he was going to get from her was his meal.

With a resigned sigh, Morgana picked up the bowl of millet and a loaf of bread along with a slab of meat, making her way to the table. "Here is your meal, Milord," she stated as she set the items before him.

He sat in his usual chair, propping the edges of his boots on the lip of the table. Setting his elbow on the armrest, Erik supported his chin with his fingers. His gaze

flicked to the food then back to her as a sensuous smile crossed his lips. "You are most attractive, Morgana, even when you have smears of flour on your cheeks."

Her hands instinctively went to her cheeks, wiping away the dusty remains. "If you need something else, one of the other girls will get it for you," she answered in a stiff tone. She read his signals loud and clear, the innuendo unmistakable. Without warning, her body flooded with pangs of desire, the magic of his grin melting her defenses.

Erik lowered his feet and leaned forward. "Is something amiss, Morgana?"

"I am fine! You have your meal now so leave me alone!" she hissed through clenched teeth. Morgana spun on her heel, causing the iron of the shackles to rub unmercifully against her skin. She retreated to the kitchen despite the clatter behind her as Erik followed closely behind, his footsteps unmistakable.

How long could she keep this up? Every time she was around him since they coupled, she yearned for the feel of his hands on her body, waking it up from a long slumber. The feel of him inside of her was a treasured memory as well as the moment of culmination. She shuddered then felt the hand on her shoulder.

Erik spun her around to meet his angry eyes. "What is wrong, Morgana? All I did was ask you a simple question, and you growled at me!" His gaze rose to survey the full kitchen. In his own language, he uttered a simple command that sent the others scattering. He looked back to her once they were alone. "Are the chains hurting your ankles that badly?"

Morgana wrested herself out of his grip and walked away from his reach. She could not tell him what she really felt. That part she would never share with any other living being except Kennuric. Her mind spun quickly to fabricate a ruse.

She shook her head. "No, milord. 'Tis just that I miss my men quite a bit," she replied in a quivering tone. The truth wanted to burst from her chest, causing her breath to stick in her lungs. "You promised that I could see them as much as I wanted, but I have not seen them since the first time. Why is that?"

Erik closed the distance, pulling her tight to his chest. "If that was all that bothered you, why did you not tell me? I thought perhaps you were still in pain from our lovemaking as well as the chains binding you."

Morgana looked up. "Can I see my men?"

Erik shook his head. "Not for awhile, Morgana. That is part of your punishment. When you learn that this will be your home then I will relent with the chains and the visits with your men."

Morgana blinked hard as her heart sank. "Then I shall never see them again."

His mind worked on its own power as images of Morgana danced in his head. It was by the luck of Odin that Erik had picked him as one of the men to watch over Morgana when he was not around. That left plenty of opportunity for him to get close to her and gain her trust. When she was ready, he would whisk her away to his own hall where she would live as his Queen and bear his children.

The conversation between his friend and Morgana drifted out, and he listened intently. She was certainly full of fire as well as ice, a delicious combination that would consume any man who dared to taste it. A snide smirk crossed his bearded lips. He would taste it all right and then some.

Inga, tall and slender with dark auburn hair, crossed his path. In her hands was a bucket of refuse for the hogs. She walked with a careless ease, giving him a sidelong glance before moving past.

He felt his manhood harden at the sight of her. She was no Morgana, but a compliant body was better than nothing.

* * * *

Kennuric pushed through the thick crowd that pervaded the city of Borka, just inside of the border of Jutland. Raw smells filled the air, a noxious mixture of sweat, manure, and animal. Though it was close to the sea, the salt-filled air did nothing for the stench.

The main thoroughfare through the trading town was a narrow dirt path, beaten smooth by many feet crossing over. To the left were the animal stalls where the butchers did a roaring trade. Rabbits, lambs, and suckling pigs hung on the stout pegs for all to see and purchase. Mingling in the fetid air was the aroma of roasting meat. Suddenly, he found himself quite hungry.

Kennuric stepped to the first stall where a turkey roasted and obtained a large drumstick. He munched on it as he walked through the thick crowd, his mind mulling over the situation. So far, he had a few possible sightings of her but nothing conclusive. He had asked around this town, but, unfortunately, not many spoke his language. Those who did could not speak it well.

“Who are you looking for, my good man?”

Kennuric lowered the meat from his lips and turned around to face the stranger before him. Standing perhaps over a rod, the man was dressed in a fur-covered vest and dark leather braes, tucked into black skin crafted boots. Dark hair framed his clean-shaven face. “Who are you?”

The man stepped forward. “My name is Baldr. I overheard that you are looking for a particular young woman possibly captured by my people. Is this woman your wife?”

Kennuric shook his black head as his heart picked up in speed. “No, she is my sister. Do you know of her?” His excitement started to build. Morgana was very close!

“Is she rather small with long blond curls and a beautiful face that men would sell their souls for?”

“Most of your Nordic women have that appearance,” he replied sourly as he lifted the turkey leg to his lips. Did the man think him to be daft?

Small rips of laughter erupted from the thin lips. “Aye, except our women are exceptionally tall and do not sail ships called The Golden Princess.”

“Aye, that is her! Where is she? I must know of her care!” he shouted.

Baldr plucked the turkey out of his hand, tearing off bits with his worn teeth. Kennuric was ready to protest but thought better of it in case this man could lead him to Morgana. “I think I may know where she is, but that could be quite costly to you,” Baldr stated through the food swirling in his mouth.

“I do not care man! Whatever it costs, I will pay it!”

“Why do you want her back?”

His ire rose at Baldr’s question, but he quelled that anger, channeling it into the excitement at finding her again. “She is my sister and belongs in Wales!”

Baldr's dark brows knitted together in a frown as the hardened gaze traveled up and down Kennuric's form. "From the way you are dressed, I dare say you are a nobleman and your sister is very valuable as a marriage pawn."

He shook his head. "Nay, man! I want her back because she does not belong with you heathens!"

"You think us heathens yet you seek my help? Is that not contradictory?"

"You sought me out, 'twas not the other way round!"

Baldr shrugged his broad shoulders in annoyance. "So be it then. Find her yourself."

He turned and started to walk away before Kennuric's better sense got hold of him. With quick steps, he caught up to Baldr. "Forgive me, Baldr. You are my only hope of finding her. Name your price and tell me what I must do."

A slow grin crossed Baldr's face. "That is more like it. Come with me. I think I have a plan to help you get your sister back."

Baldr's grimy arm crossed his shoulders and propelled him toward a longhouse constructed out of stone where smoke rolled out of the chimney in tall, white columns. His heart soared. Morgana was just within his grasp!

Chapter 11

Gray clouds rolled across the sky in dark marching bands, stretching as far as the eye could see. Morgana felt a wet drop fall on her nose then roll to the side, dribbling down her cheek. Standing to her full height and stretching her back that ached from picking too many herbs, she watched as the sky drew dark. The other girls that worked alongside of her failed to notice the weather.

Beyond the mountains, fingers of bright white light flicked behind the snow capped juts of rock. Thunder rumbled in the distance, settling across the unquiet sky.

Morgana drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes as the wind swept through the lush green valley. It smelled of purity and cleanliness as well as the salty tang of the sea. Like Erik's caress, soft grasses brushed her ankles just above the chains binding her.

From the right side of her body, she heard the unmistakable sounds of hoof beats. She opened her eyes to see Erik and some of his men riding at full gallop toward her.

Erik pulled his horse to a halt in front of her and dismounted quickly. Without a word, he picked her up and sat her on his horse, getting on the animal behind her.

"What is the matter, Milord?"

"There is a terrible storm coming, and I want to get you under cover as quickly as possible," he mumbled then turned to the others, "The rest of you get under cover as quickly as you can!" Erik kicked the horse and pointed it in the direction of the great hall. The animal tore off across the valley with incredible speed.

Just as they reached the door, the rain fell from the sky as if the heavens opened up and let loose its fury. Water rolled from the roof onto the dry earth where it quickly formed puddles of mud.

Erik dismounted and took her from the horse, shoving her rather roughly inside. He mounted his horse and rode it toward the stable.

Morgana shivered in her wet gown, standing in the middle of the empty hall. The other girls had obviously found refuge elsewhere. She looked around the silent room. The barrels stood empty, scrubbed to perfection. Tables, constructed of the finest Viking wood, remained clear of debris and clutter. She waited for a sound, any sound that broke the uneasy silence. Why did she feel as though someone watched her on a constant basis other than Erik?

Her hands gripped her arms and rubbed for warmth. The cold of the floor seeped up her ankles, chilling the iron around her flesh. Icy dampness bled through her coarse gown and chilled her completely.

"Take this, my dear, it should warm you," echoed a soft, familiar female voice behind her.

Morgana turned to see Colean standing there with a warm, woolen blanket in her hands. "Much thanks," Morgana stated then took the cloth from Colean's outstretched hands and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"You should get out of the wet things immediately before you catch your death of cold." The lilt of Colean's voice was warm and comforting, a sweet echo that reminded her of home.

"But I have nothing else to wear," she protested as a sneeze fought its way to her nose.

Colean patted her arm reassuringly. "There is no one here, Morgana, with the exception of you and I."

Heat rolled out in abundance from the roaring hearth, warming her completely as the wet gown slipped from her shoulder under the blanket, landing in a damp heat on the floor with a dull plop.

Colean reached down and grasped the hem of the dress. "Now step out of it, Morgana, and I will have one of the girls fetch you a dry one. In the mean time," Colean stated softly, propelling her to a nearby chair, "we must talk."

"About what?"

"About my son."

Morgana looked away, staring blindly into the flames. She definitely felt something for Erik, but she could not call it love. In his arms, the world felt right and wonderful, yet something inside of her kept her from enjoying it. "Is he displeased with me?"

Colean settled her small frame in the ornately carved chair opposite, crossing one leg over the other in a casual fashion. "No," she said softly, shaking her head, "he is not. As a matter of fact, I have not seen him happier since you have come here."

"How is that when he grunts at me all the time or raises his voice to me?"

Colean's slim fingers laced together, laying against her slim belly that had once housed all eight of the children she bore Ragnar. "If you must know the truth, Morgana, Erik fancies you."

“He has an odd way of showing it.”

Colean leaned forward, laying her hands against her knee. “He was half mad when he found you had disappeared. When Einar came looking for black cloaks, I knew something was wrong so I cornered him and made him tell me what angered his brother so.”

The mental image of little Colean cornering a gigantic Einar was almost too comical. Morgana managed to stifle the slight smile behind her hand. “What did you do to make him confess?”

A grin of motherly satisfaction crossed Colean’s lips. “That is my little secret. Besides, my sons know that no matter how big they get, I am still their mother and deserve respect. If they do not, their father will take them to the woodshed most assuredly.”

This time both women broke out into riotous laughter because the thought of Ragnar taking either Erik or Einar to the woodshed was too much to bear. Mirth rose high in the room, mingling with the crackling of the wood in the fire as the knots exploded.

Colean’s laughter died down in the nearly empty room. “Oh, I have not laughed like that in a while!” she quipped, rocking a little in her chair as the rest of the laughter left her body. “Anyway, back to what I wanted to speak to you about. How do you feel about Erik?”

Morgana turned her stare back to the flames, blinking slowly. She felt attraction to Erik, actually yearning for his touch. Strangely, she found her days to be a lot lonelier while he was out hunting or checking on the work of the captives.

She turned back to face Colean. “I do not know how I feel, Colean. My religion says I must save myself for a good Christian husband yet” Tears formed and burst through the dam she constructed holding them back. Morgana buried her face in her hands, hiding her shame. She failed miserably as a Christian and as a woman.

Colean’s warm hand on her shoulder drew her back to reality. “There, there, my dear. There is no shame in giving ourselves to the ones we love, whether or not we are wed to them.”

Morgana looked up, her heart pounding in her chest in anxiety. Somehow, Colean knew she was no longer a virgin. “How do you know?”

Colean’s lips curled into a smile of certainty. “A woman who has known love carries herself differently when she comes into full blossom. I noticed that the morning afterwards.”

“I am so ashamed!” she cried, burrowing her face into her hands. Everyone must have noticed she was a fallen woman.

“There is nothing to be ashamed of, Morgana. I gave myself to Ragnar before we wed. Erik was in my belly when we finally married. Tell me, is Erik that displeasing to you?”

Morgana pulled her head up and looked deep into the dark fathoms of Colean’s eyes, shaking her head. “Nay, he is most attractive.”

“Did he hurt you the first time?”

Morgana, shocked by Colean’s directness, answered the question without hesitation. “Nay, he was most gentle with me.”

Colean drew her into a tight embrace. "I raised Erik to treat women with the utmost care and gentleness. He has always been that way, even when Kristen tore his heart out."

"Ah, the elusive Kristen."

Colean's midnight colored eyebrow arched upwards in surprise. "Erik told you?"

"Why does that surprise you?"

Colean clapped her dainty hands together and placed them in her lap, tucking them between her knees. "My son rarely shares his feelings with anyone, including me. I know that he fancies you, but I did not know how deeply."

Morgana stared into the red-gold flames, letting Colean's words sink in. Erik seemed as though he would keep himself private, yet he shared so much with her. Was he in love with her? "I sense that too, Colean, but I am afraid to give my heart to him," she confessed before she could stop herself.

Colean's warm, gentle smile returned, highlighting the shine of love in her eyes when she spoke of her eldest son. "I suspect he is afraid to do the same thing. You see Kristen had crushed his spirit. For nearly a week" Colean suddenly stopped, her hand flying to her mouth.

Morgana was puzzled. "What is it, Colean?"

"Erik would be most upset if I told you, but I think I am willing to risk his wrath this one time."

"I think he has already retired for the night," Morgana offered, her mind spinning.

Colean's dark head searched left and right for any sign of him then faced forward, staring at Morgana through cobalt blue eyes. "I want you to always remember this story Morgana because if something happened to you, Erik would cease to exist. You see, for nearly a week after Kristen's betrayal, Erik stayed in his chamber, refusing to eat or bathe. He slept mostly, drinking more than any man I had ever seen. At the end of a full week, I marched up into his chamber and demanded that he get up. He refused. At first, I thought I had the wrong chamber. Erik's clothes lay around in stinking heaps. The room reeked of ale and sweat, almost to the point I could barely stand in the chamber. Erik's beard was long and matted. Since he did not heed my call, I called for my husband and Erik's brothers. They dragged him down to the stream and cleaned him up. After that, Ragnar and the rest of my sons took Erik on a hunting trip. I had the chamber cleaned completely and aired out. Erik's mood seemed to change upon his return but not entirely. Erik was restless. So then, he decided a trading journey would benefit him greatly. The sea always did wonders for his mood. Then he found you."

Morgana's heart swelled with pain for Erik and the ache he still must be feeling for his former love. Betrayal was not in her blood so he was safe from harm in that regard but was she? "I do not plan to hurt him."

Colean's brows knitted into a frown. "Good. I do not want my eldest son hurt again. I am not trying to frighten you with what I have told you, but I want you to understand I will do everything in my power to keep my son from being hurt, no matter how much I treasure you."

Morgana nodded. "I understand, Colean. If I had a son like Erik, I would protect him to the ends of the earth."

The moment Erik heard those words fall from Morgana's lips, his pride swelled to new heights. Morgana had all but admitted that she loved him. She would never hurt him. He knew that from the moment he met her, the truth shining in the depths of her emerald green eyes. She was no Kristen.

As far as being angry, Erik was a little but for not the reason his mother thought. He should have been the one tell Morgana, not his mother. He shrugged absently. Now Morgana knew a little more of his past. A smile crept across his lips. Even for as old as he was, his mother still tried to protect him from all the hazardous aspects of life. That was the part he loved best about his little Welsh mother.

Erik leaned against the solid stone wall, listening to the soft murmurs of his mother and Morgana. They exchanged stories in the Welsh tongue, laughing delightfully at stories from Wales of the King or the Duchess of Conoch who happened to be the most notorious courtesan in all of Wales.

He let out a long sigh. Frigga definitely moved the heavens to bring Morgana to him so perhaps it was best to set the wedding plans in motion before anything else befell Morgana.

Erik pushed away from the wall and mounted the secret stairs on the other side of the room, one foot grudgingly going in front of the other. He wanted nothing more than to rush down and scoop up Morgana, taking her back to his chamber to make mad passionate love. The way her body dissolved under him was a potion far too addicting.

His dark leather braes tightened uncomfortably around his groin as he continued his ascent. Slight growls escaped his throat as his teeth ground together. It was certainly going to be a long night.

* * * *

Her days were long and lonely, the chains a constant reminder she had made the wrong choice. She knew Erik a little better now, or at least understood the reason behind his actions toward her. Colean was a relief in that way. Still, that did not make what he was doing right.

Warm trickles running down her heel drew her attention. She looked down. Dark red drops fell on the gray stone, turning to a murky crimson. Her fingers sailed underneath the shackle and felt the band of worn skin slick with blood.

"What are you doing?" Edan cackled from the far corner of the kitchen.

"I am bleeding, woman. Leave me."

Edan hustled from her spot as fast as she could, peering down at Morgana's ankle. "'Tis nothing, girl! Get back to work!"

Morgana whirled around. "Leave me alone," she hissed then tore a strip of her gown, placing it between the injured flesh and the iron.

"Why I should beat you."

"There will be none of that, Edan. Anyone, and I mean anyone, who hurts her in any way will answer to me. Is that clear?"

Morgana looked in the direction of the booming voice. Erik had returned from hunting with his brothers early.

He knelt down next to her feet and slipped his fingers under the hardened metal. "You are bleeding, Morgana. Why did you not tell me?"

"It is none of your concern, Milord. I can tend to my own wounds." Her heart pounded a little faster while her pulse screamed along her veins from the fire of his touch. Morgana's body awakened from its forced sleep, demanding more of him than she could possibly allow.

Desire mixed with genuine concern danced in tandem flames behind the fathomless depths of his gray eyes. "Everything about you is my concern. I can see this little game has gone far enough. After today, you will wear the chains no more."

Morgana breathed a sigh of relief. "Much thanks, Milord. I was growing weary of them."

"I have decided to shackle you with a more permanent chain."

Her eyes widened. "What sort of chain?"

The corner of Erik's lips turned up into a sensual smile, igniting the flame within her. "I have decided that you will marry me in three days."

She jerked her injured ankle out of his grasp. "Nay, I will not marry you!"

Erik stood, grasping her hands in his and forcing her to stand as well. She winced from the pain firing up her legs. "Aye, you will. 'Tis all arranged. Now let me tend to your ankles."

Morgana stepped out of his reach. "No, milord. I will not be bullied into marriage by you or anyone else." Her voice harbored an icy tinge, but she cared not. When she was ready to wed, she would but not until then.

Erik pulled her to the hardened plane of his chest, forcing her to look into his eyes. "You will marry me, Morgana. You have no choice in the matter."

"I have choices."

The corner of his mouth turned up into a sensuously gorgeous half smile. "Come, Morgana, how long are you going to continue playing games? I know how I affect you. If you must know, I can almost hear the sigh of relief in your voice when you speak."

She felt her cheeks heat from the flood of embarrassment. Erik was right. She did want to marry him. "You must be daft, Milord. I am only relieved. Ouch!" she cried, shifting her ankle slightly. Fresh trickles of blood streamed out of the injured flesh, falling to the floor where they sat in a congealed puddle.

Erik's gaze flicked down to her injuries, his lips curving into a frown. "This is madness, Morgana. I will hear no more protest. I intend to take care of your wounds as well as the rest of you."

Before she could protest further, Erik scooped her up in his powerful arms and headed toward the stairs. Her temples pounded, becoming ferocious as the magic of his touch pervaded her senses. Would she never be free from these emotions? More importantly, did she want to be?

He heard the sounds of their voices just as he entered the hall. He stopped and listened, not believing what he heard. Erik was going to wed Morgana in three days! Damn the bastard!

Erik's obsession with the woman was fast becoming an obstacle he did not anticipate. He thought Erik would have tired of her by now, just as he had all the others.

He looked heavenward, his mind thinking of Valhalla. Damn you Loki for meddling in this!

Deep sighs escaped his lips. It was time to put his plan into motion.

* * * *

Morgana's mind swirled on Erik's words as his tender fingers applied bandages to her ankles as well as a salve to help heal the wounds. Once he was finished, Erik looked up, his lips curving into a generous and warm smile. "Is that better?"

She nodded, biting her lip. "Aye, Milord."

Tingles of desire raced through her body, from her ankles to the top of her head, her belly curled into a tight knot of excitement. Clearly, he did not know how he affected her.

Erik stood up from his kneeling position at her feet, helping her to stand. He cupped her chin softly and drew her face near his. "You will make a most beautiful Viking Queen, Morgana. You will never regret our marriage for one day," he murmured, his lips just inches from hers.

His breath was warm and inviting, causing her heart to beat a little faster. "Please, Erik, do not make me do this."

"You have no choice. You belong to me and always have since the moment I captured you. No woman has aroused me the way you have, your fire and passion," he whispered, lowering his lips to the sensitive spot on her neck where he nibbled playfully.

Morgana, trying to keep herself afloat in the sea of desire, could only utter a hoarse whisper, "Aye, Erik, I want to be with you, by your side forever," she heard herself murmur, her true feelings escaping her before she could stop them.

His thick arms went around her waist, pulling her to the hard line of his body. His arousal was hard not to miss. "That is what I thought. Come, let us finish what we have started." With that, Erik swept her into his arms again.

He laid her down on the soft bed, the tiny furs of the blankets tickling the bare skin of her arms. Looking into the deep pools of his eyes, Morgana allowed herself another flight on the wings of passion.

* * * *

She awoke to see night had fallen, flooding the chamber with an eerie gray light. She sat up and looked next to her. Erik was asleep on his side, the flaxen hair falling gently over the mountain of muscle of his shoulder. A smile of contentment was on his lips.

What was she doing? She should not be in this bed let alone allow herself to marry this heathen! She sighed. There was no turning back now. Feelings for him were growing faster, her body craving his touch at every opportunity.

Morgana lay back down and snuggled into his broad back, putting her arm around his taut waist. Instinctively, Erik's hand sought out hers, intertwining his long fingers with her dainty one. Perhaps this was her destiny all along, to be here, by Erik's side. She had grown used to the surroundings and quite enjoyed watching the ships pull into the fjord after a successful trading journey. The climate was more to her liking, with more sun and less clouds.

She kissed the divot between his shoulder blades, letting her lips linger on the soft but masculine flesh. Erik murmured a little then fell silent. Morgana smiled. She affected him, even in his sleep.

* * * *

“Morgana, wake up, my dear.”

Erik’s voice pierced the hazy cloud of her dreams, and she opened her eyes, blinking hard. He stood next the bed, adjusting his leather tunic and sheathing his sword to his side.

“What is wrong?” she questioned while rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Nothing, my dear,” he replied, kneeling next to the bed. Erik brushed the stray golden strands from her shoulder and kissed the exposed flesh. “I wanted to tell you farewell.”

Stark terror ran through her veins, but she managed to hide her emotions. “Where are you going?”

Short bursts of amused laughter left his lips. “I see you fear me leaving forever,” he stated then took her hand in his. “The fact is that I am going on a hunting trip with my father and all of my brothers who have come here for the wedding. We will be gone until the day of the wedding, but, rest assured, we will be back well before the ceremony.”

“Why are you going?”

“’Tis tradition. When any male member of my father’s family chooses a wife, all the male members take him on a hunting trip for a few days so preparations can be made. Also, it ensures the bridegroom will not suffer anxiety and desert his new bride before the ceremony.”

Morgana leaned up on her elbows, breathing a sigh of relief. “I thought perhaps I had displeased you in some way.”

“Nay, you did not. This hunting trip will help keep my mind on the one thing that means the most to me.”

“What is that?”

“You.”

* * * *

Morgana stood next to Erik’s horse, gazing up at him. He sat proud and strong in the saddle, his golden hair blowing softly in the breeze sweeping through the valley. Dark leather molded to his sculptured body, outlining every muscle and curve. His long sword, strapped to his side, lay against the horse’s naked flank. Her breath caught. Erik was purely magnificent.

He stared at her, his gray eyes blazed with a tenderness and life she had never seen before. “Will you miss me, Morgana?”

She nodded. “Aye, I will miss you.”

“Then let me give you something to remember me by.” With a swift movement, Erik brought her up on his horse, settling her on his saddle, his arms embracing her tightly. His lips sought hers, exuding the most passionate of kisses. It was light and feathery at first then quickly became filled with ardor. Morgana reached up and put her hand on Erik’s corded neck, pulling him to her.

Back and forth, their tongues danced in the ancient inborn rhythm. Morgana's heart pounded as the flames of desire licked up the wall of her inner being, threatening to consume her completely.

He broke the kiss, pulling away reluctantly. "If I keep that up, Morgana, I will never leave on this trip." He wrapped both hands around her waist, lifting her up and setting her gently on the ground.

Ragnar and the rest of Erik's brothers, including Einar, broke out into riotous laughter. "Aye, that is the spirit, Erik! Come, my sons, the sun will not stay the sky long if the Valkyries have anything to say about it. Let us leave!" he bellowed.

He straightened up then cast his father a hard look, turning back to her. "I will be back in three days hence. Fear not, I have someone who will protect you until I return."

"It will not be the same without you."

"I know that as well, but you will see the days will course by, and you will hardly notice them. As for your work duties, they are over. You will sleep in my chamber. The servants have orders to wait on you. Nothing will be denied."

Morgana felt tears prick at her eyes, but she pushed them back. "Take great care and may God be with you."

"Rest assured, Odin will be," Erik replied then cast a look to Ragnar. "I am ready, Father."

Ragnar raised his arm. "Let us proceed!" With that, Ragnar shoved his booted heels into his horse's flank, and the beast burst into a full gallop. Erik and the others followed their father, a sea of blonde and black heads behind him.

She watched them descend the valley toward the ridge leading out into the wooded thicket surrounding the hall. Once they were out of sight, she cast her gaze toward the sea. The sun rose a little higher on the horizon, deepening the color of the sea to a sapphire with white highlights dancing on restless liquid.

Water poured in and out of the fjord, crashing against the rocks and creating high sprays, the sound of it almost like a lullaby. She had grown so used to the noise that it always lulled her to sleep.

Wafts of wildflowers spilled through the valley, permeating the air. She drew in a deep breath. Without warning, bile rose in her throat and forced her to retch in the grass beneath her feet. All the contents of her belly came up in a torrent, splashing into the tall reeds.

Morgana sank to her knees until the storm passed. She sat back on her haunches as the nausea continued to rise. What was wrong with her?

She stayed quiet for a moment as her belly settled down, her mind whirling on the strange sickness. Her belly tightened into a knot as the fear of what could be behind it crept into her mind. She had a course about a month after she came to Darvisson but had not one since she had first made love to Erik two month's prior.

Morgana paled as the answer was unmistakable. She carried Erik's child. There was no other reason for her sickness other than that. Worried sighs fell from her lips. Thankfully, all of the servants had retreated into the hall to prepare the evening meal or else she would have had to explain her retching.

Hot tears formed in her eyes, slowly falling down her cheeks as she stared at the beauty before her. Part of her wanted to return to Wales, but with a child it was impossible. Especially when the father was a Viking heathen.

She could not go back and explain to her father that she had conceived it out of desire and attraction, not ravishment. He would not see the difference. She would still be a fallen woman to him and a disappointment.

So be it then. She would bear this child and raise the baby with Erik. If he chose to toss her aside later, she would raise her son or daughter here, with Erik, holding her head high no matter how many other women shared his bed. She was a princess, after all, and still possessed her dignity.

Morgana laid her hands on her belly and closed her eyes. The child must not be very big, yet, in her mind's eye, she could already see it. Their son would grow to be tall like his father with her blue eyes and full lips. She smiled. Erik will be greatly pleased when she gave him the news on their wedding night.

He watched Morgana retch in the grass, the fury creeping into his belly like a snake, forming a tight knot. That could only mean one thing. Erik's child existed in her belly. Damn him! This was not supposed to happen!

His plan was already in place to get her away from Erik, but she was too well protected for him to do that. With Erik gone, she would be easy prey, but, with all the people Erik had assigned to protect her, it would sign his death warrant. The only solution was to wait. Though she was with child, there was an old woman that mixed herbs to rid women of children they did not want. He smiled. He would use her services most readily so the obstacle of the child was of no importance.

He pushed away from the wall as his ardor swelled inside. Selig would be coming soon to watch over Morgana so it was best if he was not around.

The sweet melody of a voice flooded his ears, and he turned to see Brianna returning from the fields with a basket of vegetables in her arms, her red braid swinging against her back. He took a deep breath. Brianna was one dish he had not tried yet.

Chapter 12

Stars twinkled like tiny diamonds sewn into ink hued fabric of the clear midnight sky, glittering for all to see. The bright half moon hung high in the sky, bathing the world.

"Why are you still awake, Erik?" mumbled Einar from his left.

"How do you know I am still awake, Einar? I am not making any noise to keep you up," he retorted half-heartedly.

Einar rose from his blanket near the dying embers, propping himself up on one elbow. "Because your breathing changes, and you sigh quite often when you cannot sleep," Einar stated sleepily as he rubbed his eyes. "Did you forget we shared a chamber until you entered manhood?"

Erik snickered slightly. Those times were among the best in his life. He and Einar had a game where one would see if they could get to sleep before the other and hog as much of the bed as possible. It would get to the point that they both were going to sleep before the sun sank. "Aye, I remember, my brother. Do you remember the time I put the crickets in your boots?"

"And I got revenge by putting the flour paste in your sword sheath."

Erik and Einar chuckled for a few minutes then Einar shifted his position so that he sat up. "Something is troubling your mind, Erik. I can sense it. Is it that Welsh vixen?"

"That is none of your concern, Einar. Go to sleep." He was not in the mood for discussion of Morgana. She haunted his every waking moment and dream, consuming every breath. He needed to stop thinking of her for a least a moment, but he found he could not.

"Aye, she is what troubles you! I knew it! Fear not, Erik. After your wedding, she will be yours forever."

"I know that, Einar," Erik replied stiffly.

"Erik, that woman is as much a part of you as you are of her. I think you knew it from the moment you set eyes on her but are too stubborn to confess it."

Erik shot up from his place, glaring at his brother. "What do you know of it, Einar? You have never felt anything for a woman beyond lust. Why else would you have so readily taken Kristen from me!"

Einar hung his head low in shame then looked up. "I know I deserve that, Erik. However, I see something when you are with Morgana, something that was not present with Kristen. It is almost like you complete each other."

He lay back down, threading his hands behind his head as the power of Einar's words sank in. How odd it seemed that before Morgana, he swore no woman would ever possess his heart. Without knowing it, Morgana took it from him slowly. Only until she possessed it completely did he realize what had happened. By that time, Erik did not care. He craved her touch and caresses like a drunken man craved wine.

"Go to sleep, Einar," he growled. The fact that he was in love haunted him no end as well as the fear that this could all be over in a fraction of a moment. Morgana is no Kristen, he told himself silently. Remember that.

* * * *

King Eynon of Wales paced restlessly around his spacious chamber, his mind unable to rest. There had been no news of Kennuric in some time now. Damn! Both of his children and heirs were out in the world, and he had no idea where they could be.

His boots beat a hard rhythm on the stones while a hand nervously combed through his blond locks. What should he do? Take his armada and comb the sea?

Eynon moved behind his desk and sat down hard, staring at the portrait on the wall opposite of him. It showed a young woman with flowing fire-tinted hair against the backdrop of the castle. Her figure was lithe, her white gown accentuating all of her womanly curves. Eynon's lips curled into a smile. It was of his late wife, Isabella. She was headstrong and willful, just like their daughter. That was what had captured his heart when they had first met. Her spirit still hung strong in both children.

A knock at the door split the still air. "Enter."

The heavy English oak swung forward to reveal his older brother, Cadugan, on the other side. "You wished to see me, Eynon?"

Eynon nodded. "Come in, Cadugan."

Cadugan shuffled with a painful gait, his leg lame as the result from an accident from a fall when he was a young man. Despite his tall stature, Cadugan slumped slightly, his light brown hair hanging in tendrils on either side of his war weary face. Stiffly, he sat down. "What is it you wish to see me about, Eynon?" Cadugan's eyes held contempt as well as annoyance. He grew irritated. Did Cadugan not know what was at stake?

He leaned back into his chair. "I am going to be going away, Cadugan. I am leaving you as Regent until I return."

Cadugan's crinkled eyes widened in surprise, his fingers twining together absentmindedly. "Where are you going?"

"To find Kennuric and Morgana. Both of them must come back here and take their rightful places."

Cadugan leapt from his seat, his fist pounding on the table. "You do not even know which direction Kennuric went in!"

Eynon's hand fell and joined with his free one, the fingers lacing together over his flat belly. "That may be so, Cadugan, but I will find him. There are only two places in France that he could have stopped to re-supply his ship before going any further. I will go to each one and find out where he went from there. In the meantime, you will rule in my stead."

Cadugan's eyes softened for a moment. "Eynon, this is a great honor, but are you sure you wish to undertake this? Kennuric will return with Morgana most assuredly."

Eynon shook his head. "No, I cannot take that chance. I need them both here and quickly. The King will not wait long for Morgana's hand. 'Tis rumored that his eye falls on the King of France's daughter for a possible alliance."

Cadugan's face contorted to a mix of concern and sorrow, his voice nearly cracking. "As much as it pains me to say this, Eynon, but have you thought of the possibility that she is no longer alive?"

His anger brewed at his brother's hard accusation, his eyes narrowing. "No!" he shouted, pounding his hand on the carved wooden table. The hollow sound echoed through the room, bouncing off the high stone walls. "She is alive! I can feel it. So is Kennuric. I want them where they belong." The fact that they could not be alive never entered his mind. When he wished for something to happen, it always did. He hungered for them to both come home, and that was what they would do even if he had to move heaven and earth to make it happen.

Cadugan's expression hardened as the flesh of his face reddened. He sank back into his chair. "Is the reason you want them back because they are your children or the fact that Morgana could be a useful pawn in your political game?"

With one angry sweep of his arm, he knocked several ornately carved glass objects from his table to the floor where they shattered into tiny fragments. "Damn you, Cadugan! I love my daughter, but I want her married well! Aye, I do want an alliance with the King of England! Only Morgana can provide that."

Cadugan rose slowly from his chair, adjusting the embroidered edges of his tunic and sleeves. His eyes filled with hate and contempt with each passing moment. "Still the same old Eynon. You only want people around you that can provide you with something."

He stormed over to his brother, grabbing the man by the upper arms. "What do you mean?" How dare Cadugan think him to be selfish! He was doing it not just for Morgana's sake but the sovereignty of Wales.

Cadugan wrested himself from Eynon's grip and clamped onto his brother's wrist. "If you had not forced Morgana into this marriage, she would not have decided to take to the sea. If you let her choose her own husband"

He pulled himself away from Cadugan, stalking about the room with his cloak flying out behind him. "Cadugan! I am her father, and I know what is best for her and for Wales! Marriage to the King of England would provide us with a formidable ally in times of war," Eynon's gaze traveled up and down Cadugan's form, sizing up strength. His brother was no match. "We can see why Father chose to bestow me with the crown instead of you." Eynon stormed over to his chair and sat down, rubbing his tired temples with a frustrated hand.

Cadugan winced as though a blade slipped through his gullet. "I suppose I deserve that, Eynon. At least I can go to sleep at night knowing all of my children are still on the Welsh shores and happy, not wandering around the sea having God knows what done to them," Cadugan's finger wagged in his direction. "Think about that when you go to sleep tonight."

With that, Cadugan shuffled from the room and headed toward his own chamber. Eynon sank deeper into his deeply plush chair. No matter what Cadugan thought, he still did what was right, at least in his eyes.

The crackling of the fire pierced the thin veil of quiet surrounding him. Eynon's eyes drew back to the portrait of his dear Isabella. She stared back with fiery, passionate eyes that he had grown to love and a warm smile. Perhaps all along he did not expect Morgana to go quietly to England to wed the King. She had the fire of Isabella in her as well as the passion for life. If she had gone without a word, he would have been shocked.

Eynon sighed. It was time to gather his armada and find his children.

* * * *

The three days seemed to speed by with a heady swiftness all the while the hall was being prepared for an entire week of festivities planned for the wedding. Morgana, still reeling from the retching, did nothing for that time except lie in bed and eat little.

Colean, with her ever-watchful eye, stepped into the chamber early the morning of the ceremony. Concern wrote itself over her delicate features. "What ails you, Morgana? All the food I send up here returns to the kitchen barely touched."

Morgana turned on her side, pushing her hand under her head. "Nothing, Colean. 'Tis I am not hungry is all."

Colean's dark brows knitted in puzzlement. "'Tis more than that, Morgana. You are pale and without vigor. Something ails you."

Morgana let a silent tear track its way out of her eye, letting it fall on the bare skin of her arm. "It is just that I am anxious for the wedding to begin," she lied through stiff lips.

Colean sat at the side of the bed, stroking her wild hair gently. "Morgana, do not lie to me. I know what a woman looks like when she has conceived a child."

Morgana whirled around, her eyes blinking wildly. "How do you know?" Her breath caught in her chest, refusing to move. If Colean knew about this, how many others did too?

Colean's mouth curved into a warm, generous smile. "Many things have told me so. I noticed that you do not each much and weep when you think no one is around. Your skin is paler than usual, and your cheeks have lost their color. Have you been retching much?" Morgana nodded. "Does Erik know that is he going to be a father?"

She shook her head. "I did not realize it until after he left so the answer is nay."

Colean patted her hand affectionately. "Then it will be up to you to tell him. Perhaps tonight at the banquet."

More tears rolled down her cheeks as the fear and panic began to take its toll. "Please, Colean, I do not think I can do this! As much as I care for your son, I do not know if I can be a wife and mother."

"How can you deny him? He is in love with you."

Morgana's eyes widened in disbelief. "What did you say?"

Colean folded her hands together as her face took on a serene expression. "I said he is in love with you, Morgana. I have never seen him happier with a woman than he has been with you. Are you in love with him?"

Morgana turned away as the hot tears continued to fall down her cheeks. She wished she could say she was in love with Erik as well, but she was not entirely sure how she felt. She did care for him deeply, but she could not justly call it love. "I do not know!" Her hands flew to her face as confusion hit her like a shower of stones. Her emotions vacillated from one to the other in a raging torment. How would she know the true ones?

Colean pulled them away from her face. "You need not answer, Morgana, for this is a trying time. I can tell that you care for Erik, and that is enough for now. There is time enough later for love," Colean murmured as she dried Morgana's tears. "Come now, this should be a happy day for 'tis a double blessing from God."

Morgana pushed away the errant moisture with the heels of her hands, sniffing back the moisture in her nose. "I suppose so."

"That's a good girl. Now, you are to come with me."

"Is it time yet?"

Colean shook her head. "Erik and the others have yet to return though they will be back soon. I need to instruct you on the Viking marriage ceremony before they return."

The gentle nudge of Colean's hand at her soft wool covered elbow urged her from the bed. Morgana followed the tiny woman out of the room, towards another chamber, all the while her heart pounded ferociously in her chest. Could she trust Erik to remain true to her for the rest of his life?

* * * *

Bright beams of sun burned through the grove of tall, majestic trees surrounding the meadow near the hall, bathing the world in white light. Tables from the hall sat in the long emerald reeds, decorated with brilliantly colored wildflowers. Sounds of music and merriment rose through the air as well as joyous laughter.

Perfumed wind swept through the meadow, smelling of roses and honeysuckle while the sound of the fjord serenaded them.

Morgana's heart was beyond her control now. She stood next to Erik, dressed in a white gown with a crown of silver decorated with flowers. Her hair wound around her head, held in place with a special pin. According to Viking tradition, she would remove it after the ceremony then put away for her future daughter to wear on her wedding day.

Morgana stole a sidelong glance at Erik, letting a tremor rumble through her as she drew a deep breath. He was magnificent. A black and white fur vest covered his upper body while leather braes molded his strong thighs, disappearing into tall leather boots. His blond hair hung like a pale curtain past his shoulders, still damp from his bath. Strapped at his side was a different sword, not like the one he normally carried. In keeping with Viking tradition, the sword would be put away after the ceremony for any future sons.

Erik secured gazes with her. "Are you all right, Morgana? You look rather pale this morning."

Morgana locked her knees together. "I am all right, Erik," she muttered through clenched lips. The nausea rose high into her throat, threatening to spill out if she opened her mouth. Hopefully, the ceremony would not last long.

His hand clamped onto her elbow, drawing her closer. "If you feel as though you are about to faint, tell me and I will catch you. You seem so pale and wan today. Are you sure that you are all right?"

She nodded. "I am fine. Much thanks, Milord."

Ragnar and Colean stood before Morgana and Erik, holding each other's hands. Colean's face beamed with joy while Ragnar's smile nearly cracked his face in half. "I ask for Frigga's blessing on this marriage and that, within the year, they have a son," Ragnar bellowed then turned to Erik. "My son, I give you this woman for your wife. You must respect her in all things and give her all that she desires."

Erik nodded. "I will, Father."

Ragnar turned to her. "Morgana, I give you my eldest son as your husband. You must respect him in all things and obey his commands as well as provide him many sons."

Morgana could say nothing for a moment then tilted her head in a nod.

"'Tis time for the rings," Ragnar ordered.

Selig, who stood on Morgana's right, produced two silver bands from his dark leather girdle pouch and handed them to Ragnar. Without missing a beat, Erik withdrew his sword and held it by the blade, pushing it toward Ragnar. The older man laid the smaller of the rings on it.

Erik drew it back and grasped the metal circle in his fingers. His lips pulled out into a sensuously dangerous smile as he held it out for her. Methodically, her hand rose and pushed her finger through the ring, her body trembling. "I take you as my wife and charge, to take care of you in illness and health. I will protect you and the children you provide me with until the point of my own death. All that I ask is that you obey me in all things and never question me."

Morgana remained quiet for a moment then gave her answer. "I will," she murmured, the desire for the welcome warmth of Erik's hard body rising like a raging fire in her veins.

Erik let go of the ring and held the hilt of the sword to his father. Ragnar laid the other ring on it. He retracted it, holding the ornate handle to Morgana. Her shaky fingers picked it up and held it out for Erik.

His finger slipped through easily. "I take you as husband and charge, to take care of you in illness and health. I will protect you and the children you provide me with until the point of my own death. All that I ask is that you obey me in all things and never question me."

Riotous laughter broke out among the crowd as confusion swept across Erik's face. It was so endearing that it forced Morgana to smile. "Was I not supposed to repeat the vows exactly as you did?"

"That is the way to control your woman, Erik!" echoed a call from among the crowd. He turned around and cast a murderous glance before returning to face her.

His warm and generous smile returned. "It matters not. You are my wife now, and no man can ever touch you, except for me of course." Erik's fingers stroked the underside of her jaw, his thumb riding the hard ridge of bone.

The fire was building inside of her, threatening to burn out of control. "Shall we join the others for the festivities?" Her voice quivered.

"Not before I kiss you," he murmured, handing the sword to his father. Then he bent his head, teasing her lips in a feathery soft embrace while cheers went up around the crowd. She vaguely heard Ragnar pronounce them man and wife as she drowned on the welcome waters of passion.

Erik's tongue burrowed between her lips, inviting hers out to dance. His thick arms went around her waist, drawing her close and holding her tightly. Back and forth, their tongues danced until she had to break the kiss because of the nausea rising in the back of her throat. "Please. Everyone is watching."

"Let them look," he murmured as he bent his head again.

Morgana pushed him away. "Perhaps we should join the festivities in the hall."

Erik stood up with his brows knitted in a concern while his hands went to his taut leather clad hips. "Morgana, there is something different about you, but I am at a loss as to what it is."

"Look, they fight already, and they have scarcely been wed!" echoed another jeer from the crowd.

"I am just glad the ceremony is over. I am looking forward to the banquet," she lied. Right now was not the right time to tell Erik that he was going to be a father.

Erik let out a hearty laughter. "Then let us proceed!"

* * * *

Morgana and her party ran as fast as possible, but they were no match for Erik and his party on horseback. The name of the game was to see who would win the race back to the hall. Tradition held that the groom was to win, but today she was determined to give it her best try.

It was to no avail. Just as she and the other women broke through the thicket of trees surrounding the hall, Morgana witnessed Erik and his men dismounting their horses

at the door. Echoes of their laughter drifted over to them, high above the strong sound of the water in the fjord crashing against the rocks.

"Are you all right, Morgana?" gasped Colean as she hung onto a tree for support.

Morgana nodded. "Aye, I am fine except for the rolling of my belly," she grumbled as her chest heaved. Suddenly, her head felt light, and the world began to spin. Morgana leaned into a small sapling for support.

"Let me get Erik so he can carry you back to the hall," Colean offered as the other girls ran ahead of them.

"Nay, I will walk down from here," she gasped as her breath returned in a slow rhythm. Taking a deep breath, Morgana stood up and took a few precarious steps down to the hall.

Erik lounged against the doorjamb, arms crossed, conversing with the others until she approached. His mouth stopped in mid sentence, and he stood up, a warm smile on his features. "What kept you, Morgana?" he inquired as she pushed through the throng of men.

His face was so sweet and gentle that she smiled as well. "I would have been here by now had I ridden a horse."

Laughter broke out among the others. "That is the way to take your bride in hand, Erik," jeered someone from the back.

Erik shot a threatening look into the crowd. "I would take care of how you speak about my wife next time," he warned in a low tone. Soft murmurs rumbled through the crowd, and all fell silent. He turned to her. "Well, next time that could be arranged. Shall we go in?" Morgana nodded, and he swept her into his arms, carrying her over the threshold amid the cheers of the others.

Inside, the transformation of the hall was magnificent. Brilliantly colored fabrics covered the tables, topped with small clay pots of flowers. Servants had arranged the tables in a horseshoe shape with the back table on a raised dais. White linen draped over the scarred wood of that table, nearly touching the floor. Two horns lay there like fallen soldiers, waiting for the summer honey mead.

Erik set her on her feet. "Would you like to sit for a few minutes before the serving of the mead?"

Morgana shook her head slightly, trying to keep the nausea down to a minimum. "No, Erik," she murmured, gazing up at his face. His eyes, the color of slate, were clear and filled with emotion. Erik was never more handsome than he was at this moment.

His brows furrowed against his forehead, his eyes surveying her face while his hands cupped her chin gently. "Morgana, is there something you are not telling me? You do not seem well."

"No, Erik. 'Tis just the excitement of the wedding, 'tis all," she whispered then kissed his hand nearest to her lips. "I promise."

Erik released her reluctantly. "All right. If you do not feel well, tell me and I will carry you up to the chamber. The feasting will go on for a week so if you miss a day or two, it will not present a problem."

Her eyebrow rose. "A week?"

Erik nodded. "Aye, that is how long Viking celebrations last. We ask for the intervention of Frigga to bless the marriage."

"The Viking goddess of fertility?"

A tiny chuckle of laughter escaped his lips as his eyebrows rose in surprise. "I see you are learning Viking ways, Morgana. I will tell you more about her later, but right now my mother needs you in the kitchen." His lips brushed her forehead, sending shivers of delight down her spine.

Morgana turned to see Colean standing behind her with arms folded. "Just for a while, my son, then I shall return her to you."

Erik graced his mother's cheek with a kiss. "I know, Mother, though I will wait anxiously until I see her again."

He gave her a swift kiss on the forehead then joined the group of men behind him. Colean grasped her by the elbow and led her to the kitchen filled with working bodies. She let out a soft sigh. With any amount of hope, she would not retch at all today and give away her secret.

Erik could not help but steal a glance at Morgana as she walked away. His heart pounded fiercely in his chest. She was so beautiful, and now she was his bride. Never had he thought it possible to have a woman such as her. Without realizing it, she exuded more passion than any other woman he had ever known. Whenever he was around her, he felt the need to touch her constantly, as if to reassure himself that she was real. Kristen never made him feel that way. Thankfully, he never had any children with Kristen. It would have been harder to let her go if that had been the case.

Erik turned back to the others and listened intently as to the discussion, but he did not join in. His mind was on Morgana. Her pale pallor as well as lack of vigor concerned him. Was she growing ill from this climate or could there be something more sinister wrong with her? Nay, she was too strong for that. The only other thing it could be ... his mind whirled. Could she be with child already? The pound of his heart quickened in pace as a slow smile curled his lips. Perhaps Odin's luck was on his side after all.

Erik leaned against the stone wall and stared into the kitchen doorway, watching Morgana prepare the honey mead with the other girls. Even her movements seemed different. He smiled at the prospect of a child. Fatherhood was something he did not think he would achieve, but now it seemed he had. After tonight, Morgana would not do anything but lie in bed and enjoy her time.

"Are you with us, Erik?" Sven inquired.

"Nay, his mind is on his new bride," Selig chimed in, slapping Sven heartily on the shoulder.

"I do not blame him. If I had that vixen in my chamber every night, I would think of nothing else except what lay under her kirtle," Thorson commented, scratching his scraggly beard.

Those words penetrated Erik's cloud of thought, stoking his anger. No man talked about his wife like that. Slowly, he stood up. "What did you say, Thorson?" His limbs thrummed while his fists clenched in rage.

"I said ... ," was all Thorson could get out of his filthy mouth before Erik's fist connected with it. Thorson went flying across the room, landing flat on his back.

Erik stalked over to the huddled figure and stood over him. "I would take care of how you talk about my wife, Thorson! If I ever hear you say something of this nature again, I will kill you slowly!"

Thorson rose from the floor and held his bleeding lip, standing before him with equal fury. "How dare you hit me, you impudent boy! I have a mind to"

Thorson's hand went to the hilt of his sword and attempted to withdraw the blade when Erik's hand clamped onto his wrist, stopping his action. "I would not do that if I were you, Thorson. Your family would not appreciate finding your body in the fjord after the crabs have fed on your bones."

The blade slipped back into his sheath. "You have not heard the last of me, Erik." "I am counting on it."

With that, Thorson stalked out of the hall and into the bright sunlight, mounting his horse and riding toward his home in the west.

Erik turned to the others with his anger still pummeling his veins. "Does anyone else having something to say about my wife?"

"He was just saying that in jest, Erik. It was not an attack," Selig offered.

"Do you wish to be next?" he growled, his hands curling back up again.

Selig shook his black head, apparently having no mind to fight. "Nay, Erik."

"Then take your places. It is almost time for the mead to be served," he snarled.

The men resumed their jesting conversation in a more wary mode and went to their places with Erik following closely behind. Nay, no man who ever talked about or touched Morgana would ever live to see a new tomorrow.

Chapter 13

Morgana's body filled with the excitement of the wedding as she emerged from the kitchen with the wooden pitcher in her hands. It was full to the top with sweet honey mead. The aroma was luscious, making her belly turn over even more and the evil spinning in her head worse.

While she filled Ragnar and Colean's horns, the other girls were busy filling the rest. She was grateful. Any moment, Morgana felt as though she would drop from the mixture of emotion tumbling inside.

She stopped in front of Erik. He smiled widely, holding up his horn. "Much thanks, my dear."

"You are most welcome, husband," she murmured with a smile on her lips. For some reason, it felt good calling him that, as though that was the way it were meant to be.

Morgana tipped the lip of the pitcher when all of a sudden the world began to sway. Her legs felt as though they no longer supported her. The vision before her became hazy and went darker before the world turned black.

Morgana awoke to find herself in her new chamber, undressed and slipped underneath the soft fur blanket. Long, silky hairs tickled her cheek, urging her to wake even more.

What had happened?

Darkness had invaded the chamber, indicating that night had fallen. Shafts of silvery light from the moon filtered through the windows, bathing the room in a ghostly pale light. The sounds of merriment echoed through the door. How long had she been asleep?

Startling noises next to her pierced her veil of calm. "Are you awake, Morgana?" Erik murmured in the dark, his arm slipping under her and drawing her close to him. She felt the warm fur of his vest against her cheek, soft and silky.

She yawned, stifling it with her hand, snuggling deeper into his body. "Aye, that I am, Erik. What happened to me?"

His hand stroked the back of her head in a slow, loving way, intertwining with her hair. "You fainted. Is there something you wish to tell me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come, my dear. I am no fool. You are pale and tired looking. Then you fainted. I suspect there is something you wish to share with me." She could almost hear the glee in his voice through the quiet echoes of the dark.

Morgana swallowed hard. "I ... ," she trailed off. For some reason, she could not get the words out.

"Yes?"

"I am with child, Erik"

His grip tightened. "You do not know how happy you have made me, Morgana," he exclaimed in a proud tone. "I suspected that was the cause for your ailment, but I decided to keep it to myself lest I were wrong. When is the child to be born?" Erik's joy-filled voice echoed through the room, making her heart soar. For some reason, his response made her feel wanted and needed, not just a wife to beget heirs. So this may be love, she told herself. If it was, she would never be without it again.

She buried her head into the thick hollow of his neck. His skin contained that deep manly smell she could only associate with him. She inhaled deeply. "Perhaps the spring or early summer. I am not sure which."

Erik pulled away and gazed longingly into her eyes, his hands cupping her face. "You are the most beautiful woman, Morgana, and I am a truly lucky man to have you. I swear to you now, just as I did earlier, that I will defend you," he whispered as his hand trailed down to her still flat belly where his fingers danced in a slow circle. "As well as this babe who grows in your womb, to the death if necessary. There is nothing I would not do for you."

Hot tremors of desire pulsed up from under the heat of his hands, spreading through her limbs like an out of control fire. "I need you, Erik, now more than ever," she murmured and pulled him to her, "I am grateful to give you this child. Perhaps I was foolish in the past about my presence here, but, for the first time, it is all making sense to me. This is where I belong, with you and our child. Perhaps, this was the way it was meant to be all along." That startling confession escaped her lips, and she did nothing to stop it. She was glad. This prayed on her heart, and she wanted to confess it, but

something always stopped her. Perhaps it was the way Erik looked at her that prompted her to risk her heart.

His grin widened. "You do not know how long I have waited to hear you say that."

She returned his smile. "You do not know how long I have waited to say it."

Erik's lips descended onto hers, inviting her to join in the ancient ritual. Slowly, the passion burned hotter, stoked by the fire quickening in them.

* * * *

The feast continued for a week with everyone enjoying themselves fully. Mead flowed as if it were a river while meat and fruit as well as bread was in abundance. Morgana enjoyed as much as she could before having to retire to the chamber because of nausea or tiredness. Erik had carried her up each time, tucking her into bed before returning to the feast. There was such tenderness in Erik's touch that Morgana felt her heart open a little more. Was this what love was all about?

Nearly a week after the end of the feast, Morgana was gently awoken by Erik. "Wake up my dear wife," he murmured, stroking her hand.

Morgana opened her eyes to see Erik, dressed in his normal attire, kneeling by her bedside. His eyes contained warmth as well as distress. "What is it, Erik?"

His hand tightened around hers as his lips brushed a delicate kiss on the back of her hand. "I am afraid I must leave you for a short time, Morgana."

Her heart pounded hard against her chest as a lump formed in her throat. "Why are you leaving?" Her voice quivered as she uttered those words.

"There is a pack of wolves that have been worrying the cattle and sheep. We found another ewe dead this morning. Father wants to track the beasts down and insists that all of his sons go with him."

Morgana let out a sigh of relief. It was not what she imagined. "How long will you be gone?"

Erik bent his head, laying his lips against the bare skin of her arm, sending tremors of desire to sear along her veins. "Not long, I hope. If Father is right, the pack is only a day's ride from Darvisson. Once we find them and destroy the pack, we will return."

She reached her hand out, trailing her fingers up his arm. Stopping at his neck, she sensuously kneaded the muscles. Perhaps he will share something before he left. "Before you go, there is one more thing."

Erik's blonde eyebrows arched. "What is that?"

Morgana pulled him close so that he was only inches from her face. "Let me give you something to remember me by."

He stood outside the hall, chewing on a reed, his mind spinning. With Erik leaving Morgana for a few days, that left him plenty of opportunity to seize her. A smile curved his lips. That little trick with the ewe proved just the thing. With a little luck and a few hungry dogs, he had slit the animal's throat then let the dogs tear at the carcass so it looked as though wolves had been in the area. It was fool proof.

"You sent for me?" inquired the young lad at his side.

He turned, scowling at the poor boy. "Aye. Is everything ready?"

"Aye, it is."

"Here are a few pieces of silver for your trouble."

He reached into his pouch and produced several pieces, throwing them in the boy's direction. The child's hand snatched them up from where they fell on the ground then ran in the direction of his home. His grin grew wider. Once Morgana was at the proper location, he would send for the old medicine woman by means of the boy.

His hands clapped together. The plan was coming along nicely. All he needed to do was bide a little more time, and Morgana would be his forever.

* * * *

Morgana felt her heart sink as she stood next to Erik as he readied himself to ride with his father and brothers. She gazed up into his eyes, noting the loving stare. He leaned down to whisper into her ear, his breath warm and inviting. "If you keep that up, Morgana, I will end up having you again and disappointing my father."

Her arms twined around his neck while his hands encircled her waist. "Somehow, I do not think your father would mind," she quipped.

Erik's sensual lips curled into a smile. "Nay, he would not begrudge me the pleasure of your arms unless it costs us another sheep."

"Nay, I would not, Erik, but we must ride before sundown, and I do not want Fenfir to lose those tracks," Ragnar commanded from the other side of Erik's horse.

Morgana looked down at the silver and black dog sitting patiently next to Erik's feet, appearing as though he were as anxious as the rest to get going. She smiled. The fleas she had used to infest Erik's clothing came from his own pet. It was her and Fenfir's little secret.

She turned her attention back to Erik who was ready to mount his horse. "Please be careful, Erik."

Einar let out a yelp of laughter. "He has Odin on his side so you need not worry dear sister!"

"Aye, that I do. Come kiss me then I must be on my way."

"With pleasure."

Morgana pulled Erik's head towards hers, taking full possession of his lips with a hungry fury as the passion poured from her. From his reaction, Erik seemed surprised. That only lasted for a moment until he fell into her rhythm.

"Enough of this!" Ragnar bellowed in a good-natured way. "Erik, we must go or else the pack will move on before we can track it down!"

He pulled reluctantly away. "I will be back, my love," he murmured as the back of his hand softly caressed her belly. "Take care of my child while I am gone." Tremors of desire pulsed up from his hand toward her heart.

Morgana clamped her hand over his thick wrist, holding tightly. "Of course, my dear husband."

Erik brushed a gentle kiss on her forehead then mounted his horse. "A day away from you is much too long," he stated then turned to the rest of the party. "Let us ride!"

With that, he kicked his horse in the flanks and urged the beast at a low gallop over the ridge. Their tall figures blotted out the edges of the fjord as the blue green water rolled in gentle waves. Further out was a hazy mist, as thick as the wool from the sheep,

threatening to move inward. It was so thick that the juts of stone forming the inlet remained hidden within the white shroud.

She looked down to Erik and his party. He turned around and gave her a wave before disappearing completely into the thicket. Tears threatened her eyes, but she held them back. Erik was only going to be gone for a day, and then things would return to normal.

A warm hand on her soft wool clad shoulder brought her back to the moment. "Erik will be fine. He is with his father, perhaps the finest Viking warrior who ever lived," commented Colean.

Without thinking about it, Morgana turned around and embraced Colean hard. "I know, Colean," she replied calmly as the hot moisture pricked at her eyelids. "I do not understand why I feel so apprehensive about his leaving."

Colean pulled away and cupped her chin in gentle, warm hands. "I can see through your eyes that you have come to treasure Erik greatly."

"Aye, that I have, Colean. When I first came here, I fought against remaining, but, with time, Erik has shown me a side of himself that I did not know existed."

A warm smile curved Colean's lips. "There is one more thing you do not know about Erik."

"What is that?"

"Erik was raised with my Christian beliefs as well as the Viking beliefs of his father."

Her heart nearly fell to her feet. "What?"

Colean tilted her head slightly. "I raised him that way as well as the rest of his brothers and sisters. Some have returned to the old ways, but some have stayed with the Christian means. Erik has the best of both worlds"

"But I thought ... "

"Erik only clings to the pagan faith in front of his father who does not like the new faith but indulged me in my wishes. Sometimes, he does forget when he is in front of you. If you wish to know the truth, he is more Christian than any of the others."

This revelation raised new questions in her mind. "Then why were we wed in the old ways?"

Colean's slim arm went around her shoulders and drew her tight. "Ragnar insisted that all of his children be wed in the old ways though they were raised in the Christian faith. Though it tears at my heart, I agreed to it."

Morgana laid her head on Colean's shoulder. "Then are we still wed within the confines of the Church?"

"Aye, that you are because your hearts are bound no matter what the ceremony, Morgana," Colean murmured, sweeping stray strands of blond hair slipping from its braid out of her face. "You must be tired. Perhaps you should retire to your chamber for the rest of the day."

The tone of Colean's voice was calm and reassuring as well as motherly. Even with Erik gone, she still felt safe with his mother near her. "Aye, I think I shall. Though the babe is not very large, I seem to tire easily."

Slight tones of laughter escaped Colean's lips. "If you think you are tired now, wait until you get a little larger. You will know the true meaning of exhaustion then."

Morgana took Colean's hand and walked up with her toward the hall door. Not only did love grow in her heart for Erik but for his mother as well. Since her own mother had died so long ago, Morgana had felt lost and alone with no female guidance around her. With Colean at her side, she had all the companionship she could ever want or need. A smile curved her lips. This was where her destiny lay all along. For the first time in her life, Morgana felt as though she truly belonged.

* * * *

The deepest of the night gave way to the bright pink fingers trailing over the sky, indicating morning had come. Morgana had barely slept. The large bed was cold and lonely without Erik to help keep it warm.

She snuggled deep into his side of the bed, burrowing her face into the fur covers. His scent still clung to the skins, strong and manly. Morgana inhaled deeply. A sense of warmth and comfort washed over her like a strong wave. Tears moistened her eyes as thoughts of her new husband floated through her mind.

Soft knocks at the door drew her attention away. Pulling the covers up to her chin, Morgana burrowed deeper in the bed. "Come in," she called out sleepily.

The door swung open to reveal Colean, dressed in a simple blue shift, accompanied by three other women. Morgana's gaze flicked from one woman to the other. Who were they? They were tall with varying shades of color. One was jet haired, like Colean, while the other had bright blonde hair, like Erik's, braided and wound around her head like a golden rope. The third one was a shade in between those two.

"I see you are up," Colean chirped as she swept into the room, followed by the new women. "I want you to meet Erik's sisters. This one," she pointed to the woman with black hair and large belly, "is Bestla. Next to her is Freya." Colean pointed to the woman with the golden brown hair and large fawn eyes. "Last but not least is Lin. I am sorry you did not meet them at the wedding, but the messengers I sent to their homes did not arrive in time for them to return to Darvisson for the feast."

Lin acknowledged her introduction with a small tilt of her head. Freya and Bestla did the same. In each of their faces, she could read traces of Ragnar and Colean as well as Erik. She smiled. Other than Kennuric, she had no other siblings so the thought of sisters thrilled her to no end. Finally, there was someone to share things with and tell secrets to.

Bestla stepped forward in a dainty gait for a woman so tall. She stretched out her hand as her full lips curled into a warm smile. "Welcome to Darvisson, Morgana. Mother tells us that you make Erik very happy."

Freya, slightly shorter with stronger gait, moved toward the bed and sat at her side, pushing aside the fur blankets a little. Her hair was long and the color of chestnut, falling down her back in gentle waves. She did not seem as slim as the others yet the scarlet gown she wore accentuated her womanly curves. Lights of generosity and warmth echoed in the pools of her fox colored eyes. "We are glad you are here to mend our brother's heart. After Kristen"

"That is enough about that harlot, Freya," Colean scolded gently.

"Forgive me, Mother. 'Tis just that I love my brother so much that I only wish to see him happy again. After she left Darvisson for good, I never thought Erik's heart would ever recover."

Lin, the fairest and tallest of the group, walked to the end of the bed and sat down. "You must forgive us, Morgana. We can be a little overwhelming at first, but, after a

while, you will get used to us! Oh, my new sister, how wonderful it is to have you here!" Lin's slender hands clapped together in delight.

The warmth of love and wonder filled the room, bathing her in its haunting glow. She craved this kind of love and comfort in Wales, but it always eluded her. Now it was hers forever. "I do not know what to say. I would have expected that all of you would be a little apprehensive."

"Nay, how could we be? Mother has kept us informed of all that has happened and how happy you have made Erik. We could do nothing but love you for that," Lin stated softly, laying a hand on her covered foot in a sisterly way.

She looked to Colean who merely smiled. Clearly, Colean had not informed Erik's sisters that he was going to be a father. She turned back to the girls who crowded around her bed. "I suppose your mother has not told you about one other surprise, has she?"

Freya, Lin, and Bestla shook their heads while confusion slipped onto their features. Morgana smiled. "Your brother will be a father sometime in the late spring or early summer."

Cheers from Erik's sisters, who she now started thinking of as her own, rang around her bed, showering from the high-beamed rafters.

"That is wonderful, Morgana!" Bestla cried, patting her own large belly. "Our children will grow up together!"

With a smile on her face, Colean clapped her hands together. "Aye, they will and become the best of friends. I would dare say this is cause for another celebration."

Morgana's heart pounded in her chest as the sense of inclusion surrounded her like a warm sunny day. "But we just had our wedding celebration, Colean. Surely, all the food stores have been depleted?"

"Nay, they have not, but this will be just a family celebration," she stated as she wound her arm lovingly around Bestla's shoulders. "Not only will I have another grandchild to dote on, but I will have all of my children under one roof again. That in itself is cause for merriment."

"Aye, that it is!" cried Lin.

"May God shower us with his blessings!" Freya joined in.

Morgana's lips pulled into a tight smile as the nausea returned fourfold. "I suppose 'tis all settled then."

Colean urged her daughters away from Morgana's bedside with a gentle hand. "Come with me, children. There is much to be done before your father, brothers, and husbands return from the hunt."

"You do not have to leave," Morgana begged. The tender air was like a heady drug, strong and intoxicating, making her want more of it.

"Aye, we do," Colean reminded her with a gentle grin as she led her children to the door. "You need your rest for now. In the coming months, you will not have as much as you would like."

Morgana sat up, piling the fur blanket around her waist, the corners of her mouth turning downward. Why did it have to end when she had begun to enjoy the banter between all of them? "May I help with the planning of the feast?"

Colean nodded. "I would not have it any other way."

* * * *

The dense woods were thick with patches of undergrowth. Trees, some so tall it seemed they had been there since the creation of the earth, pushing toward the sun. Shards of sunlight streamed through the leaves, leaving the earth with a soft blanket of light. Crisp cackles of birds, perched high on the dark brown limbs, ricocheted above them. Ripe emerald leaves showered down each moment from the trees.

Erik looked up as his horse pushed on through the forest before the others, branches and twigs snapping under the animal's hooves. The sun was not quite high enough yet to indicate midday. When would they find those damned wolves and head back to Darvisson? One minute away from Morgana was like an eternity.

"Look!" Ragnar shouted as he pulled his horse to a halt, pointing to a pile of dung near a fallen log.

Erik's heart pounded as he halted his horse then dismounted with the others. With any amount of luck, the dung would belong to the pack they were hunting.

He followed Ragnar and the others to where the manure sat. The darkened log, infested with moss and insects, partially hid the pile from the sun, keeping it from getting hard. Erik pushed aside some of the rough undergrowth and knelt beside the pile, his hand on the slimy log for support. "It looks as though we are on the right track, Father."

Ragnar stood before it, his hand to his bearded chin while he regarded the sign. "All of you, fan out and look for claw marks on any of the surrounding trees."

Without question, the rest of the party scoured every tree and sapling, searching for the elusive claw marks. If present, they marked the pack's territory and warded off any other unpretentious wolves.

Erik hacked away at some of the brush in his path with a vicious swing of his blade, his mind completely on Morgana. Was she all right? Was their child all right? A slight growl emanated from his lips. Each moment away from her was like torture, unending and painful. How long had he waited to find a woman of her caliber? As long as he could remember, of that he was sure.

When his father had proposed a marriage between him and Kristen, he had not been opposed to it. He had been a little younger than he was now, naive and impressionable. Kristen took his breath when they had first met. She had been tall, unlike Morgana, with waist length tawny colored hair. Amber eyes had captured his, and he knew then that he was a lost man.

Just before he and Kristen were set to wed, he had discovered the awful truth about Kristen then sent her away. It was as if part of his heart and soul died as he had vowed never to love another. Then, as if by the hand of Frigga and God, Morgana drifted into his life, to heal the wounds inflicted by Kristen.

"There are none of those infernal claw marks around here," Erik muttered to himself as he continued to search for those dratted marks of the wolves, his heart pounding hard in his chest. Why was this hunt so different from the others? Something clearly was not right.

"Did any of you find anything?" boomed Ragnar's voice over the densely wooded thicket.

Calls of nay surrounded him, and he gave his answer. "Nay, Father!" he shouted.

Erik rose from his stop and slowly made his way up the small incline, back toward the log, all the while his intuition nagged at him. Wolves had not been a threat for some

time. They followed the herds of elk and deer normally more north this time of year. He frowned as the pounding in his chest increased, his breath catching in his throat. Something told him that this was just a ruse to get him away from Morgana.

He picked up his pace and stalked over to his father. "Father, there are no wolves. This was just a way of leaving our women unprotected while we are chasing these elusive animals."

His gaze darted around the scene, looking for any other sign of the wolves, his heart nearly bursting out of his chest. It was a trap.

Ragnar's eyes narrowed as he stared at all the evidence, his hand scratching his beard. "My eyes are old, my son, but I think you are right. There is nothing that signals that pack came through here."

Erik stepped over to his steed and mounted it quickly. "I think we should ride for Darvisson now! There is a threat to our women, I can feel it!"

"Boys, mount your horses now! Erik is right! We need to return!"

Without further hesitation, the hunting party forgot their 'prey' and headed back to the hall through the thick brush as fast as possible. Fear ruled Erik's heart throughout the ride, his mind reeling. He should never have left Morgana alone, ready for anyone to pounce on her at a given moment. If something happened, he had no one else to blame but himself.

Chapter 14

Morgana, dressed in the crimson gossamer-like gown, wandered down to the hall to find Colean, along with Brestla, Lin, and Freya, sitting around the table. Their heads bent over the fabric in their hands with needles shining brightly. Morgana's gaze swept over to the table between them. Brilliant colored heaps of material lay on the scarred wood. A fire roared in the open hearth and licked up the sides of the blackened stone as heat cascaded out.

Empty tables surrounded them as well as vacant barrels. It was after morning, and there was no meat roasting over the banked coals. The bleats of the chosen lambs outside the kitchen door echoed through the room, cutting through the thick air like a hot knife.

"What is everyone working on?" Morgana inquired softly.

All heads turned up at the sound of her voice. "We are just putting together some new baby clothes for Brestla's baby as well as yours," Colean commented, her full lips pulling into a smile. "You will need all the clothing you can get."

Morgana was puzzled. "Why?"

Colean let out a soft laugh. "If memory serves, your baby's father outgrew everything within the first week, forcing me to constantly make new clothes for him."

"Aye, our brother grew quickly, as did his appetite!" Lin chimed in.

All of the women, including Morgana, joined in this gentle mirth. With the warm glow of the fire, she felt at home in this circle of women. Her smile widened. She could think of no better place to raise her child.

"Would you care to join us?" Brestla suggested, pulling out the chair next to her. "You can sit next to me."

Morgana took a step toward the chair then stopped. It had been so long since she had sewed anything, much less clothing. She could not appear ignorant or foolish in front of her new mother and sisters. "I think I will go down and visit my fellow captives today. It has been so long since I have seen them."

Colean's expression dropped. "No, Morgana. Erik does not want you going down there by yourself."

She walked over to Colean's chair and laid her hand on the older woman's shoulder with a reassuring pressure. "I have no intention of leaving here, Colean. Even if I did not have the babe within the confines of my womb, I would not leave."

"What would stop you?"

"The feelings I bear for your son," Morgana confessed. Her breath escaped in a soft sigh. The feelings she harbored for so long were finally out in the open. "That is what holds me here," her eyes swept over the gathering, "as well as the rest of you. I have come to find a peace here that I cannot find elsewhere. I will not be so hasty to give that up."

Colean's face brightened as her words hung in the air, patting her hand with a motherly touch. "I can see the truth in your eyes. All right, if you wish to visit them, then go ahead, but make it quick. Erik would be most displeased if he came home and found that you had been down there by yourself."

Morgana embraced Colean then stared into the deep blue pool of her eyes. "It will be our secret."

With that, Morgana stood up and gave each woman a brief kiss on the cheek. Each one smiled then waved to her as she exited the door.

Bright sunshine showered the earth with its golden radiance. Morgana looked over the ridge into the deep, sapphire blue waters of the fjord. It was slightly calm today with barely any whitecaps. The two strong arms of stone protecting the inlet from harm were clearly visibly without a trace of clouds around their whitish gray tops.

She listened intently to the sound of the sea as it rushed to crash against the rocks at the bottom of the fjord while salty sea air stung her nostrils. She inhaled deeply. It was a most glorious day.

Unable to resist herself, Morgana kicked off her shoes and sank her feet into the soft dewy grass. Tall blades tickled her ankles despite the slight traces of pain in them from the shackles. The reeds were as deep an emerald as some of the jewels she left behind in Wales, while others were light, making a colorful blend that swayed in the gentle breeze.

Morgana turned to her right and stared at the little cottage where Erik housed her men. The thatched roof looked as though it was in dire need of repair while some of the stone walls crumbled from age. She must speak to Erik about that.

With a smile on her face, she started her journey through the clear meadow with her hands sweeping the long grass, letting it caress the insides of her wrists. It reminded

her so much of Erik. She laughed softly to herself. Her wrists were not the only places he liked to kiss.

* * * *

He watched her walk down to the stone cottage, her shapely backside swaying beneath the soft material. Instantly, his organ began to stiffen. She was alone and unprotected. Apparently, Selig was not doing his duty as Erik had appointed him to do. He shook his head. He did not want to be around when Erik found out Selig let Morgana wander about by herself. That was too bad. To the victor went the spoils.

Morgana placed her hand on the knob and was about to unlatch the door when the distant sound of horses galloping thundered overhead. Was Erik returning from the hunt?

She turned to find a large, red-haired man riding toward her with the reins of another young mare in his hand.

The strangely familiar man halted in front of her then dismounted, causing her heart to pound in double time. "Who are you?"

The man halted and bowed in front of her. Long crimson braids and free hair floated around his face while amber hued eyes glared at her. "My name is Sven, Milady. I was sent here to fetch you."

Morgana backed away, her hands clutching the top of her gown together while her other hand gripped her shoes tightly. "Who sent you?"

"Lord Erik has been injured by one of the wolves, and it is feared that he lays dying in the woods. You are to come with me and accompany him back here," Sven announced, his broad chest heaving.

Morgana wasted no time. "Take me to him," she ordered then hurried to the side of the mare.

"My pleasure."

Sven put his hands around her waist and lifted her to the young mare. Morgana settled herself in the saddle, placing the shoes loosely on her feet. She could put them on more securely once she got to Erik.

Sven was barely on his horse before she pointed her horse in the direction of the woods. "This way?" He nodded.

With that, Morgana dug her heels into the beast's flanks and urged the animal into a full run into the woods with Sven following closely behind.

* * * *

The sun was high in the sky, beating down on the densely wooded thicket, adding to the already oppressive heat. No air moved, nor did the birds sing. The only sound was the crunch of the twigs as the branches broke under the horses' hooves.

Fallen logs, thick with dark green moss, decorated their path, but they managed to skirt each one with Sven carefully navigating the path. Uneasiness crept into her belly, forming a tight knot. Something did not seem right about this, but she pushed the nagging thoughts away.

Without warning, Sven halting in the path, his gaze straight ahead. He said nothing as the soft whinnies of his horse drifted over his shoulders. She could almost see his body tense.

She pulled her horse up behind Sven. "Why are you stopping?"

“’Tis time to stop, Milady,” he remarked, slowly turning around. On his face was the most malicious leer she had ever seen on a man.

“How long until we reach Lord Erik’s side?” she questioned nervously. Morgana hoped the nervousness would not bleed through her voice, but, unfortunately, it did.

“We are not going to Erik, my little vixen. You are coming with me.”

Her instincts had been correct. “No, I am not!” she screamed.

Morgana attempted to turn the horse around and push the beast to a full gallop, but Sven grasped her by the waist, pulling her onto his horse. Her backside thumped painfully against the strong hide of the horse as the breath escaped from her chest.

Sven’s breath, warm and odiferous, lingered around her ear. “You belong to me now, Morgana. I knew the moment I saw you lying on the deck,” he snarled, “I knew you were mine.” His grip tightened. “When Erik declared you off limits to the rest of us, I grew angry then and vowed that no matter what I had to do, I would have you.”

Morgana stiffened under his painful grasp, as the pounding of her heart became more ferocious. “Let me go, Sven, and I swear that I will ask Erik for mercy on you.”

Sven let out a raucous laughter that rumbled through the dense thicket. “I think not! If anything, you will be begging me for mercy on your husband. As for Erik’s brat in your belly, that will soon be a distant memory.”

“No!” she screamed into the air around her, trying to wrest herself from his grip. “I do not care what you do to me, but I will not let you harm our child!”

His arm jerked, driving the metal spikes on his black leather wristband painfully into her ribs. “It matters not. The old medicine woman is in route to the secret location and will clean out your womb most readily.”

Her anger boiled over. She drew her elbow forward then thrust it backwards as hard as she could, connecting with Sven’s solid belly. Sharp thrusts of air as well as a few curses emitted from Sven’s lips. His hard fingers released, and Morgana saw her opportunity.

She plunged forward and managed to make it off the horse, landing in the soft grass on her hip. The roughened bark of a tree dug into her thigh, but she ignored the pain. She had to get away from him.

Morgana scrambled to her feet, losing one of her shoes in the process. The grass felt slippery as she moved over it, the reeds rushing past her in one green whirl. Behind her, she heard the heavy sounds of the horse’s hooves clashing against the thick carpet of brush on the forest floor.

Her mind concentrated on nothing else except the child within her womb. No matter what Sven did to her, this child would see the light of day.

* * * *

Morgana was pulled into the darkness of the cave, the smell of dankness filling the air all around her. She stumbled slightly. A thick substance grew on the walls as well as the floor, her naked feet attesting to the fact. Her other shoe had fallen during the ride there. She did that on purpose as well as tearing bits of her gown along the way, leaving a trail for Erik to follow.

There was no sound except for the blood pounding her ears, as fear pummeled her body as never before. Golden light emitted from the torch Sven carried in his free hand while his other clamped onto her wrist, dragging her along behind him. Shadows danced

on the gray stone walls of the narrow passageway as he moved through the void, darkness to light.

Morgana's fear grew with each step. Would Erik know that she did not leave voluntarily and find the clues she had left him?

Sven exited through a tight opening leading to a large stone chamber. Above them, she could hear the faint squeals of the night creatures sailing the sky in search of food. Water trickled in from somewhere, the hollow sound ricocheting around the room. Large stone formations sprang from the floor as well as the ceiling, as tall as a young sapling.

Shafts of moonlight filtered into the room from a hole at the top, bathing the room in a ghostly light. Near the cleared center sat a group of men around a fire. Smoke wafted through the hole and into the night sky.

Sven thundered orders in the Viking language, his deep, growling voice ringing from the walls. Morgana cringed inwardly as her breathing quickened in terror. What was to become of her now?

The thump of the wooden plank on stone startled her, causing her to jump. Morgana turned around to see a board laid across a deep ravine leading to a small island sort of formation away from the rest of the cave.

Sven's thick hand gripped onto her shoulder, his grasp biting into her bones. She winced but refused to utter a single cry. "Get over there, wench," He snarled as he pushed her roughly to the plank.

Morgana stumbled and nearly fell but managed to maintain her balance. "Why are you doing this, Sven?"

An evil sneer curled Sven's bearded mouth, revealing a row of dark teeth. "Because of that damned husband of yours. If he had only minded his own affairs when he captured your ship, I would not have to do this. Now get over there!"

The second shove nearly knocked her down, but Morgana held steady. She wanted to fight him, just as she had Erik, but something inside told her to cooperate for the moment. Her child's life depended on it.

Morgana picked up the delicate folds of her gown and stepped onto the board gingerly, testing its stability. It held true, wobbling a little as she stepped. Taking a deep breath, she began her journey across the makeshift drawbridge. The cavernous void beneath her sounded as though there was no end to it, the echoes of her footsteps seemingly going on forever.

"Would you like to see how deep it is?" Sven snickered.

She turned around. Sven grabbed a torch from one of the other men and threw it into the hungry blackness. The light descended, highlighting the jagged rock on either side. Morgana watched its descent until the golden flames disappeared completely from view. There was no sound of the wood torch hitting anything.

Morgana looked to Sven. "You do not frighten me, Milord, if that is what you think to do."

Sven's evil sneer drooped as his large arms crossed over his fur-covered chest. "I may not now, but, rest assured, dear vixen, when I am through with you, fear will be all you know."

* * * *

Night slipped over Darvisson, turning the countryside to pale shades of blue and gray. Silvery rays of the moon pounded the earth in their ghostly light, paving the way for him. Erik's horse was exhausted, bathed in foam. He cared not. Morgana's life was at stake, and he knew it.

He slowed the horse to a lope and urged the tired beast through the brush where a young lad waited to take care of it. Erik jumped down from his horse with his blood pounding in his head, his belly turned to lead. Where was she?

Just as he rounded the trees, he saw the band of torches criss-crossing the grounds of the hall, soft voices murmuring curses as well as laments. Erik's heart thumped uneasily in his chest. Morgana was gone.

Erik stalked over to the crowd, pushing through the throng of people. "What is the meaning of this?"

Colean, flanked by his sisters, stepped forward with her eyes full of tears. "Forgive me, my son, but Morgana is gone," she murmured softly, laying a motherly hand on his arm.

"What happened?" His head throbbed with all the possibilities from kidnapping to Morgana having a plan to escape all long, taking his child with her.

Colean held her head up high. "She asked if she may go and visit her fellow captives, and I let her go. She never came back."

He masked the emotions on his face. "How long has she been gone, Mother?"

Colean's dainty hands wrung in frustration, her eyes filling with tears. "'Tis my fault, Erik. I should not have let her go to visit the captives."

Erik laid a strong, reassuring hand on her slim shoulder. "It is not your fault, Mother. I should have stayed behind to protect her. I was one who chose to go with Father and my brothers, not you."

"I know Erik, but I still feel guilty."

He embraced his mother's tiny form, holding her tightly. "I will find her, Mother, but do not blame yourself. This may have happened even if I had been here." Erik turned to the rest of the men. "Fan out and see if Morgana left any clues as to which direction she may gone in."

Erik released his mother's sobbing form into his father's strong arms. He took her aside and comforted her for few minutes before allowing the girls to take her inside the hall. His heart ripped in half. Morgana was gone, and he had no idea where she went. One thing he did know was that she did not go of her own free will. She had confessed that she no longer had the desire to leave so that thought did not trouble him. Besides that, the child in her belly kept her anchored firmly here. Erik frowned. He would find Morgana and exact revenge on who took her away from him.

* * * *

Erik hacked away at the thick underbrush with the firm steel of his blade. A wide path cut in front of him, his fresh horse munching on the remains behind him. Some of the other men searched the surrounding glen, the swish of their blades cutting through the undergrowth rising through the air.

All around him lay fallen logs covered in moss and insects, having been there more than a few years. Soft shafts of moonlight filtered through the canopy of leaves held by the tall trees, falling on the forest floor. Thankfully, there were no clouds in the sky to hamper his task.

Erik shined the light of the torch this way and that, searching for any sign of her. The only thing he could see were the young saplings rising from the leaf encrusted earth toward the life giving sky as well as some thick shrubs. His anger mounted.

“Erik, I have found something!” echoed Urien’s shout from the other side of the hill. His heart froze in his chest. Without a second thought, Erik sheathed his sword and ran toward his friend.

“What have you found, Urien?”

“This,” Urien stated then pointed toward the ground. Erik followed his friend’s finger. A small shoe, constructed of leather and decorated with tiny pearls, lay on its side like a forgotten toy.

Erik bent and picked it up with trembling fingers, looking at it carefully. It belonged Morgana. His heart fell to his feet. He had instructed the shoe smith to make these for her. “Look around. Morgana must have dropped this as to alert me to her whereabouts,” he instructed with a deep growl.

“I have found something over here!” shouted another of his men.

He rushed over, his breathing quickened. “What is it, man?”

“Look.”

His gaze swept toward the young sapling barely yielding any leaves. Hanging on one of its bare branches flapped a piece of dark material, perhaps as long as his finger. He picked up it and held it to his nose. It was Morgana. “This is it! Dear Odin in Valhalla, my wife has left a trail for me to follow! Mount your horses, men. Tonight we ride!”

Erik mounted his horse then tucked the tiny bit of material into the toughened leather of his wristband, tying it securely. Whoever had kidnapped Morgana was going to pay dearly, of that, he was sure.

* * * *

The cave was cold and damp with a cold mist in the air. Morgana huddled against one of the large formations, drawing her knees up to her chest, putting her arms around them protectively. The plank over the shadowy abyss was gone, thus preventing her escape. She let out a weary sigh. With all the clues she had left Erik, he would be here in no time.

“Are you awake over there, sweet vixen?” Sven mocked as he munched on the bit of roasted meat in his hand.

Morgana turned her head toward him. The fire blazed nicely, throwing off a little heat in her direction but not enough to warm her. Embers flew upwards, lifted by the mild wind sweeping through now and then, and out the hole in the rock above. She shivered under the thin material of her gown. No matter what happened to her, she must survive for the sake of Erik and her child.

“I am speaking to you, wench. Are you awake?”

Morgana still refused to answer. This man did not deserve her breath.

Sven rose slowly and menacingly from his place and stalked over to the edge of the precipice, putting his hands on his burly hips. "Must I come over there and loosen your tongue, woman?"

"Leave me be," she snarled and turned her head away from him. The sight of him sickened her to no end.

"Ah, then I trust you are awake. You must be hungry then ... ," he growled, but his words were cut off the cackle of an elderly woman's voice.

"Ye leave her be, Sven. The potion works better on an empty belly."

Morgana whirled her head around to see a very old woman standing next to Sven. A weathered stick perched in her knarled hand while the other clutched a dark brown skin bag topped with a bit of wax. Long white hair hung around her head in a scraggly halo. Coarse dark wool covered her body, cinched at the waist with a leather girdle. Her bosom hung well over that bit of leather indicating her age as well the fact that she had given birth to many children.

"Get started, Boreal," Sven snarled, gesturing for the board to be put in place, "The sooner that brat is out of her belly, the sooner I can put mine there."

The woman swept her arm in a bow. "As you wish. However, I must have someone help me across because I can no longer see that well."

Sven let out a frustrated sigh. "Very well, but make it quick. Erik is no doubt on his way home, and I want his child gone before the sunrises."

"Then let me get started."

Morgana watched as the woman made her way across the treacherous wood, her heart pounding in fear. What was she going to do when this woman forced her to drink the poison meant to kill her unborn child?

Boreal moved with a kind of graceless ease, helped at the elbow by one of the other men, across the board, her feet tapping in front of her as if to make sure the board was still there.

Morgana's breath quickened as her knees drew up tighter to her chest as Boreal walked toward her. Even from the short distance, she noticed an odd fragrance that pervaded the air around the old woman. It was a combination of wildflowers and roses, almost as if the woman made the perfume herself. She had expected Boreal to smell to high heaven, but, thankfully, the old woman did not. Her belly could not have taken it. What also struck her as odd was the feeling she had seen this woman before. She frowned. Where had she seen this elderly woman before?

"Where are you dear?" Boreal cackled as her feet tapped at the stone.

Morgana did not answer but drew farther and farther away from the wicked woman.

"I can smell you dear so 'tis no use hiding from me," Boreal hissed, stretching out her hands. Morgana tried to retreat further, but the formation at her back prevented it.

"There you are, my dear," Boreal announced as her hand connected with Morgana's knee.

With a grunt and a groan, Boreal sank to her aged knees and leaned forward as if to kiss her cheek. Instead, Boreal's mouth went to her ear. "Say nothing and listen to me. I will not harm your child. The only thing in this bag is water so nothing will happen. The reason I do this is because I am very fond of Erik and helped to bring him into this world.

I would never harm any child of his no matter who begged me to do it. In case you do not remember, I was the one who delivered Elfrida's dead babe."

She pulled back and stared at Boreal. That was how she knew the old woman!

Her mind drifted back to that hideous night when the lifeless infant arrived.

Boreal had been tender to the grieving Elfrida, even to the point of washing the babe and handing it the distraught woman. Even with this proof of identity, Morgana did not want to trust her blindly. She reserved some of her faith.

Morgana nodded as fragile trust built within her. Boreal coughed hard, spat to the side, then leaned forward to continue. "What I want you to do is to put up a struggle when I try to force you to drink the liquid. When I tell you to, act as though your belly is in pain. That way, I can tell Sven that it will take time to expel the babe within your womb. He will accept that because he is a man and has no idea of how long it takes a babe to be born. You must trust me on this, milady, if we both want to survive."

Boreal leaned back as a slight smile curled her lips. There was truth in her fox brown eyes, set in the deep lines surrounding them. Morgana was unsure at first whether to trust this woman, but, from what she could read from Boreal's body language, she could trust the old woman, at least for now.

The old crone pulled the skin from her shoulder and cut the wax off with the tip of a dagger sheathed in her belt. "Take a drink, milady," she murmured then looked to Sven then turned back. "This will cure what ails you."

"You drink it, old woman," Morgana snarled, hoping to put as much vigor into her voice as possible to convince Sven this was not a ruse.

"I said drink it, girl!" Boreal gripped her chin and slammed the neck of the bladder between her lips. Water, as promised, poured out of it. It slid deliciously down her throat while the rest spilled down her gown, chilling her through.

Morgana whipped her head from side to side in an effort to avoid the 'poison'. "Nay, do not do this!" She knew tears would be more effective to make it all the more real so she drummed up certain, unpleasant memories to bring them forth. It worked.

"Dry your tears, girl! You did not wish to have that child anyway!"

"Aye, that I did! Now I will surely lose it because of your wicked ways!"

Morgana pushed Boreal onto her backside and rushed over to the furthest formation away from the old woman, clutching it tightly. She pushed her tears to a new height, shaking her body in pretend sobs.

"It is done, Sven. I want someone to bring over blankets and a little bit of food for the girl. It is going to be a long night."

"How long is this going to take?" Sven questioned gruffly.

"I have no way of knowing these things, Sven. I do not read runes. Her womb will expel the baby when the poison reaches its body. Until then, you must wait."

Sven said nothing as he stalked over toward the others. Morgana turned her face away as a smile of triumph crossed her lips. Her baby was going to have a chance at life.

A knarled hand drifted over her shoulder, gripping it tightly. "A very good performance, milady. This will give your child's father enough time to take you both back to Darvisson."

She patted the elderly hand. "Much thanks to you, Boreal. I will make sure my husband rewards you handsomely."

“The only reward that I seek is to see that your child is born healthy and strong,” Boreal whispered then laid a finger to Morgana’s lips. “Be more upset. They are coming with your blankets.”

Morgana resumed her position of utter despair and torment as she clung to the rock. Inside, her heart danced with glee. Erik was coming for her.

Chapter 15

Night shadows deepened as the moon began to slip from the sky. As if on perfect cadence, tatters of material marked the path, each one a precious lifeline to Morgana and their child. With each discovery of the torn fabric, Erik’s heart pounded much harder in his chest, stoking the fire of his anger. Whom ever did this was going to pay with his life.

“Halt!” Ragnar called from the head of the party, holding his hand up in gesture.

Though his body filled with rage and fear for Morgana, Erik kept those emotions from showing as he pulled up next to his father. “What is the matter, Father?” he questioned through clenched teeth. The sooner they kept going, the sooner Morgana was going to be safe and warm in his arms again.

“Be quiet, boy! I am listening to the sound of the forest.”

Erik sealed his lips, though he wanted to protest their lack of motion. It was important to make sure that no one hid themselves within the tall reeds. The telltale sounds of their breathing would give them away to a seasoned warrior. His fingers clenched the reins of his horse. He should have remembered the most important battle tactic of all. It was the element of surprise.

Ragnar tilted his head slightly and listened then sat straight in his saddle. “Move ahead,” he ordered in his strong voice.

Erik’s breathing quickened as his booted heels dug into the meaty flanks of his horse, urging the beast forward. Each step brought him closer to Morgana.

* * * *

Morgana lay with her knees drawn up to her chest, uttering mock cries of pain now and then as Boreal had instructed. The old woman sat next her, rubbing her belly softly, as if to help expel the child resting inside of her. A few hours had passed, bringing on the dawn of the night. From the slant of the moonlight through the hole in the ceiling, dawn was approaching quickly.

“Is the wench still with child?” Sven thundered from his seat near the fire.

Morgana cast a look to him as her belly turned. His beard was full of grease and bits of gristle from the meaty leg in his hand. The greedy mouth turned into a frown with ripples of fat dripping from the corners. Please, Erik, save me before it is too late.

“Aye, Sven. I warned you this takes time so you must be patient,” Boreal replied.

“I grow tired, old woman! I want that child out of her belly, and I want it out now!”

With that, Sven threw his meat to the man next to him and rose to his feet. He stalked over to the makeshift bridge, crossing it in an angry stride. His approach was terrifying, causing Morgana's heart to beat in fear. What was he going to do to her?

Sven grabbed her upper arms, yanking upward so that she was on her feet, forcing her to look into his eyes. "By the morning, that brat had better be out of your belly or so help me, I will help the situation along myself," he growled, his eyes traveling up and down her body. Morgana felt a great unease and terror when his gaze stopped at the ripped hem of her gown. "What happened to your gown?"

"It was torn when you captured me," she stammered then stopped as a lump formed in her throat.

Sven's eyes lit up with a hellish glow with the revelation of what the tattered fabric really meant. "You left a trail for your beloved husband, did you not?"

Morgana shook her head. "No, Milord. It was torn along the way, I swear."

Sven's swift blow caught her across the cheek, sending her spinning to the stone floor. Morgana caught herself in time as the pain seared through her face and exploded in her head. She turned and gazed at him, her hand protecting her injured cheek.

"You lie, Morgana. When Erik arrives here, I will have something in mind for him. As for me, I have other plans."

Sven stalked across the board, his heavy footsteps echoing through the canyon the wood covered. In his Viking language, he issued last minute orders then disappeared down the narrow passageway with a burning torch clenched in his meaty fist.

Morgana watched the golden flames dance on the slick wall, slowly fading until it departed from her sight.

Boreal knelt next to her and patted her shoulder in a loving fashion. "Thanks be to Odin that Sven is gone."

Terror seared through her veins as hot tears moistened her eyes. "He is going out to kill Erik."

"Nay, he will not. Erik is a seasoned warrior with much more skill than Sven."

Morgana clutched the old woman readily and held on tight. "I know he is, Boreal," she sniffed as the hot, wet tears tracked their way down her sore cheek. Erik must survive this for the benefit of both of them and their love.

Boreal's motherly hand smoothed down the wild tendrils of her hair. "Erik will be fine," Boreal reassured her, rocking gently back and forth. "I promise."

* * * *

Their trail ended at a rocky inlet jutting out from the lush green countryside. Moonlight whitened the area, aiding in their task. Low-lying shrubs sprang up around the area, pushing through the cracks between the rocks, thirsting for life.

The opening was perhaps two men tall and three men wide. Sharp jags of stone encased the opening, digging deep into the earth. Beds of hard quartz lay in a scattered, shimmering pool before it, disappearing into the edges of the silvery green grass. The faint trickle of water in the distance indicated they were near a small creek that emptied into another fjord.

Erik's gaze swept around the area, searching for more clues. Then, out of his side vision, came a slight movement. He turned. It was a little more of the brilliant crimson

fabric that had graced Morgana's sumptuous body, clinging to a low branch of a nearby sapling.

He pushed his horse over to the bush and snapped up the material as excitement bounded through his system. "We are close. The rest of you fan out and see if you can find any more material," Erik whispered.

"Why not push ahead, Erik? It is obvious Morgana is in the cave," Einar suggested.

Ragnar's blond head whipped around, glaring with a murderous look to Einar. "What if there is a trap, Einar? Your brother is making sure before the rest of us proceed. Have I taught you nothing?" his mouth worded silently.

Normally, this would have invited Erik's laughter, but, at this point, only the corners of his mouth turned up slightly. Things would have been different had Morgana been at Darvisson under his watchful eye but since ...

The signal in the form of a call of a bird echoed from the other side of the damp cave, telling Erik there was nothing on that side.

Another signal came from the south. Nothing there either.

Erik turned to his father. "Then that settles it. Morgana is in the cave," Erik whispered in a low tone, turning to the rest of the party, "Pull out the torches and your swords. We will need them for battle."

* * * *

Morgana sat with her back against one of the formations, shivering from the slight chill in the air as well as the fear for Erik's life. Please, God let him survive.

Boreal rubbed her shoulder with a firm assurance. "He will be here, Morgana, and then all will be well."

She leaned her head back and stared at fading moonlight drifting through the opening in the top. Embers from the dying fire wafted through the soft wind sweeping through dank void. "I know, Boreal. I just cannot help but fear for Erik's safety."

Out of the corner of her eye, Morgana caught the faint glimmer of gold that started out as a pale yellow and deepened with each passing moment. Her heart slammed in her chest. Sven had returned!

She turned her full attention to the glow, watching the other's reaction. They knew it was Sven, too.

Suddenly, a golden blonde head, attached to a tall, heavily muscled body appeared. Erik! She leapt to her feet, her spirit lifted in joy as he entered the room, followed by Ragnar and his brothers. She was about to be saved!

The rest of Sven's garrison rose to their feet, drawing their blades and readying for battle. Viking curses rebounded through the hearty stone walls, drifting over to where she stood. Before she could decipher what each one meant, swords started to clash.

Back and forth, the blades collided, sending sparks into the air as well as the clang of metal against metal.

Morgana clutched Boreal as she watched Erik battle another large Viking. Erik's arms moved like smooth silk, his motion fluid and calculated. Around and around, Erik danced the ritual of death, his sword slicing in the man's direction. He pushed the offender backwards, toward the fire. His opponent fell into the flames, screaming in

agony. Before the man could rise, Erik sank his sword through the man's chest amidst a sickening crunch.

Erik wiped his blade clean then hurried across the board to her. Before he could even open his arms, Morgana was burying her face into his exposed chest. "You came for me," she murmured silently as her heart pounded in joy.

His arms wrapped around her, strong and protective. "How could I not come for you, Morgana? You and my child are the most precious gifts I could ever have. There is nothing in this world I would not do for you."

Morgana lifted her head and looked into the pure slate gray of his eyes, knowing that real love existed behind those eyes. "I love you, Erik," she confessed.

His eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"I said I love you."

Erik's hold tightened on her. "You do not know how happy you have made me, Morgana, to hear you say that."

"It makes me happy to say it, Erik," she murmured.

Morgana stood on her tiptoes in an effort to kiss him, but she still needed a little help. With a slight smirk on his lips, Erik bent his head and took gentle possession of her lips, urging them to part. Morgana started to enjoy the kiss, but the moment her mouth opened, searing pain through her jaw forced her to pull away. "Ouch!" she muttered then tried to return to Erik's tantalizing kiss when he withdrew.

"What is the matter, Morgana?"

She shook her head, pulling away a little. "'Tis nothing."

Erik wagged his fingers in the direction of the others busy throwing the bodies into the blackness of the ravine. "Bring me a torch," he ordered in a stern tone.

Within moments, someone thrust one into his hand. Erik held it close enough to her face to inspect her delicate features. "Look at me."

"Please, Milord, 'tis nothing."

Erik gently gripped her chin and guided her face towards his. Morgana saw the storm clouds of fury build behind those eyes as he surveyed the damage inflicted by Sven. "Who did this?"

"Sven," she answered without hesitation.

Erik's face contorted into a mask of unabashed anger as his free arm brought her toward him. "I will kill him for this. He will end up like his cohorts over here," he promised then looked past her. "Why are you here, Boreal?"

The old woman stepped out from the shadows. "Sven brought me here to rid your wife of the child she carried."

Morgana felt Erik's arm slip from her waist to the hilt of his sword. Nay, he could not mean to kill Boreal. She withdrew. "Please do not be angry with her! I am still with child. She tricked Sven into thinking she brought poison with her to kill our child. She merely brought water, and I pretended that I was losing the child so that Sven would think he had bested you."

Erik's gaze flicked to Boreal, his eyes narrowing. "Is this true?"

Boreal nodded. "Aye, 'tis true, milord. I brought you from your mother's womb and have watched you grow into the man you are today. I would have done nothing to harm your wife or child."

Erik's hand released its hold on his sword. "Then Odin be praised! When we reach Darvisson, I shall see to it that you are rewarded well!" Erik turned to her. "Are you ready to return to Darvisson?"

Morgana's lips curled into a smile. "There is no other place I would rather be."

With a slight chuckle, Erik bent down and scooped her up into his arms, crossing over the makeshift bridge with Boreal in tow.

She wound her arms around his thick neck, burying her face in the hollow. She was back where she belonged.

Sven watched from the small thicket of brush growing just above the opening as Erik departed with his dear and still pregnant wife. Damn Boreal.

He crouched lower, practically burying himself within the soft dewy earth. Flames of anger licked higher inside of his soul, encouraging his jealousy to a new height. His men were all dead. That much he knew. Erik handled a sword better than any man. Those who followed him really had no chance.

Erik put a tired Morgana on his horse and mounted behind her. Boreal, with the help of one of Erik's brothers, mounted Einar's horse. Her old arms wrapped around Einar's waist, holding on tightly.

An evil smile curled his lips. He had something very special in mind for Boreal.

* * *

Gentle nudges under her chin awakened her from her dreams. "Wake up, Morgana. We are home." The deep masculine timbre of Erik's voice was more than enough to bring her from the depths of sleep.

Morgana opened her eyes, blinking quickly in order to drive the tiredness from her eyes. Dawn broke over the horizon in sweeps of pink feathering out into the expanse of light blue. Trees wavered in the wind as if to welcome her back.

The hall stood as a gray shadow against the morning light, the ribbons of white smoke billowing from the chimney. Several of the girls moved soundlessly around the door, gathering different things for the morning.

Suddenly, one of the girls turned to their direction and yelled out in the coarse Viking language. Within moments, more people appeared, including Colean.

Erik's mother ran toward the party with the rest of the servants, her arms outstretched. "May God be praised! You have returned safely with Morgana!" she exclaimed with delight.

Ragnar was the first to dismount, sweeping his tiny wife into his arms. "Come here, woman. I have missed those sweet lips of yours," he stated before taking possession of Colean's lips.

Colean pushed her husband away. "Ragnar, please! Not in front of the children!"

"Do not be silly wife," he chuckled as he tightened his grip. "How do they think they came into being? Do you wish them to think a Valkeryie left them on the hall doorstep?"

"Nay, I do not, Ragnar," Colean protested, "I just do not want our children to think you to be a beast, 'tis all." Erik's mother turned to Morgana, walking over to the horse with a quiet grace. "Are you all right, Morgana?" Tears filled Colean's eyes then drifted down her face in wet streams.

Morgana nodded. "I am fine, Colean. Why are you crying?"

"Because I let you go down."

Morgana laid her hand on Colean's shoulder. "Do not cry about it. You had no way of knowing what Sven was going to do to me."

"Which reminds me," Ragnar interjected, "Erik, you need to beg for your mother's forgiveness."

Erik took a deep, sorrowful breath. "Forgive me, Mother."

Ragnar cut him off with an upraised hand. "Ask for it on your knees."

He dismounted his horse without hesitation, leaving her to hold onto the cantle for support. She did not mind. The tenderness Erik shared with his mother was most endearing.

He knelt before her, bowing his blond head. "Mother, I beg your forgiveness. I was wrong in my accusations and assumptions."

Colean's slim hands cupped her son's strong jaw and pulled his face upwards. "There is no need for forgiveness, Erik. Your heart was wounded when you said those things. I expect your father would have done the same had he been in the same situation," Colean stated strongly as she cast a look to Ragnar then turned her attention back to Erik. "I would have expected nothing less since you have your father's blood in you." Her lips brushed Erik's in a motherly fashion.

"Much thanks, Mother," he remarked quietly as he rose to his feet, towering over the woman who bore him so many years ago.

With a swift hand, Colean directed Erik back to his horse. "Now, I want you to get Morgana out of this chilly air and into a warm bed."

Erik climbed behind her on the horse, wrapping his strong arm around her waist. "That I will, Mother, with the utmost care."

"When you get her into your chamber, I want you to" The rest of her instructions did not escape her lips. Ragnar merely stepped forward and scooped her up in a wide swing then ambled off toward the hall before she could issue further instructions.

"Where is he taking her, Erik?"

"The same place I am taking you."

"Where is that?"

"To bed."

* * * *

Morgana felt the soft heat of the sun as it drifted through the open windows. Light sighs escaped her lips as she turned over and laid her head against Erik's bare chest. His breathing was deep and even, his strong arm curled around her in his sleep, pulling her close.

She snuggled deeper, feeling the smooth skin under her cheek. It felt so good and so right that she was here, with him, carrying his child. Why did she fight it for so long?

Morgana did not know, and it did not matter. All that was important was what was in front of her right now.

Her fingertips traced lazy patterns over Erik's chest, moving around his nipples carefully as not to wake him. He seemed so tired after her rescue, but he had insisted that he bathe her first then himself before retiring. It had been nearly mid morning before he slid his magnificent body next to hers.

Her lips spread into a smile. This was happiness that she could enjoy forever ... Suddenly, a maddening thought entered her head. Where was Sven?

Morgana quickly sat up, holding the soft down of the blanket close to her exposed chest. Panic rose in her throat to form a hard lump as her heart picked up in pace. Sven had left the cave just before Erik had arrived, almost as if he had always anticipated Erik's arrival. Though most of his men were dead, Sven could easily gather another army and invade Darvisson, ripping her from the only happiness she had ever known. That thought utterly terrified her. She began to tremble.

The bed shifted behind her, and she felt Erik awaken then sit up. "What 'tis wrong, my dear?" His hand slid over her naked shoulder, calming her fears.

"I am afraid," she managed to choke out as the hot moist tears formed in her eyes.

"There is no need to be afraid, Morgana, not while you are with me. I would kill any man who attempted to harm you," Erik stated confidently as he drew her frightened form into the wide circle of his arms.

"I cannot help it, Erik," she stammered as the sobs filled her throat. "You do not even know where Sven is. That means he is loose, ready to pounce."

Erik cupped her chin, tilting her face and forcing her to stare into the depths of his storm colored eyes. "You will never be anywhere I am not, Morgana, because I am not going to let out of my sight. As for Sven, he will be hunted down like the animal he is."

Morgana grew terrified. "I thought you said you were not going to leave me!"

Erik drew her closer, urging her face into the hollow of his thick-corded neck. "I am not, my dear. My father and brothers as well as a few men of Darvisson are going to find him and bring him back here for me to deal with. In your fragile state, I would not leave you."

"Why did he do this to you? I thought he was your friend?"

Erik rubbed her bare shoulder more tenderly, sending sparks of desire to thrum throughout her veins. "So did I, but I suppose I miscalculated him. Sven and I have been friends since our boyhood. We did everything together, including our pursuit of the village girls. Usually I won the particular girl in which we were both interested. There was a very bad bout with him concerning a raven-haired girl that had come with her family to Darvisson. Brigitte, I think her name was. Sven thought she fancied him while I thought she fancied me. We both courted her, and, in time, she made her choice."

"She chose you," Morgana muttered. The sordid story of Erik's previous exploits was not something she wanted to hear, but there was probably a good explanation for Sven's actions in the story.

His hand caressed her loose hair with infinite care. "Aye, she did. Sven grew angry and challenged me. That was his first mistake. We fought, and I won that battle as well. After that, we swore we would never quarrel again over a woman. Since then, we have not. That was until you appeared over the horizon."

Her eyebrow lifted. "So his anger grew when you declared me off limits to every one but you."

Puzzlement crossed Erik's face. "Where did you hear that?"

"Sven."

Erik's thumb skimmed the underside of her jaw, igniting her senses. "I should have known something like that would have stoked his anger, but I never imagined that he would have signed his own death warrant by taking you."

She let out a resigned sigh. "It does not matter now, Erik. I am here with you, where I belong. You and our child." She shifted and sank back down onto the bed, snuggling deeper into the warmth of the bed. Exhaustion was creeping in faster than she could stop it.

He moved next to her, his hand stroking her cheek then moving down toward the hollow of her neck where desire exploded in one large pulse. "Are you still afraid?" She nodded.

"I think I might have a way to take your mind from your fear," he whispered then lowered his head to taste the skin of her neck. "Give yourself to me, Morgana. Let me take the terror that holds you so."

Morgana submitted herself without hesitation to the salvation of Erik's hands and love. She belonged to him, at this moment, body and soul. Together, they joined as one, climbing to the highest of sensations, culminating in one joyous climax.

Chapter 16

"Why are you up?" Erik's voice was warm and inviting as it hovered near her ear, his hands coming around her waist to rest on the rising swell of her belly. "How is our child today?"

"He is fine and sleeping inside of me," she answered in a solemn tone.

"What is the matter, my dear? You seem as though something troubles you," Erik remarked as his grip on her tightened, sending waves of desire through her system.

"I was just looking at the fjord and thinking of how Wales must be this time of year," she sighed, pulling the edges of the woolen blanket around her shoulders a little more.

"I know you miss your homeland, Morgana. Perhaps in time we may pay a visit to your family."

Morgana whirled around, curving herself into his taut body. "Do you mean that?"

Erik nodded. "Aye, that we can, my dear. Now, 'tis time to come to bed."

"But I am no longer tired," she protested.

"Sleeping is not what I have in mind, Morgana," Erik murmured as his hands swept the cover away from her shoulders. It landed in a soft heap at her feet.

Morgana's blood turned to molten metal as Erik's lips touched hers, stoking the internal flame to a full roar. Before Erik, she never knew a man could do this to a woman.

Before she could move a muscle, Erik swept her up in his massive arms and carried her to the bed, laying her down gently. Between the tender caresses of his hands and the soft fur under her back, Morgana's senses heightened two-fold, the climb toward the heavens much more pleasurable than she could have ever imagined.

* * * *

Though Erik wanted her to stay in bed for the day, Morgana decided to join him down in the hall. Putting on her best blue gown, though it was growing snug in the waist, she braided her hair and wound it around her head like a coil of gold. Several bands of silver decorated her wrists as well as her ears, all presents from Erik. She let out a soft sigh. This was not the life she had imagined for herself. It was much better than she could have ever dreamed.

She drifted down the stairs and heard Erik's voice as well as Einar's. Apparently, the hunt for Sven did not go well this morning so that was why Einar was in the hall.

There was a third voice as well, a timbre she could not place, though it sounded familiar. To whom did it belong?

She descended the stairs and peered around the stone chimney next to it. Erik was sitting in his usual chair with the edges of his boots propped up on the edge of the table. His hands threaded behind his head in that self-confident way that drew her to him like a moth to a flame. He wore a half-hearted grin on his face. Einar, on the other hand, was enjoying the banter with the midnight-haired stranger sitting across from him.

Morgana stared at the stranger's back, noting his build. He was tall, perhaps as tall as Erik but not as muscular. A black tunic covered his upper body while matching breeches covered his legs, tapering down into finely crafted ebony boots. White fur, crafted onto a smoke colored cape, topped with a large gold hasp, decorated his shoulders.

Morgana took a deep breath and entered the room, sweeping in as though she had no idea someone else was there. She stopped at Erik's side, her fingers touching his shoulder. Erik's fingers immediately went to hers, stroking the digits with infinite care. "Would you like your meal?"

Erik had stopped her from doing any type of servant work since they had married, but she used that ruse to get a closer look at the stranger.

He said nothing but simply nodded, not bothering to look at her. She frowned. Normally, he would have jumped up and kissed her then ushered her back upstairs for a while.

Morgana cast her gaze to the stranger. Her heart fell to her feet. The man sitting across from her was none other than her brother Kennuric! How long had it been since she had seen him? Several months perhaps, long enough for her to become with child and marry Erik.

Kennuric's hair was well past his shoulders, dark and curling. A black beard covered his face, but there was no mistaking his eyes.

"Is there anything I can get for you, milord Einar," she stated, not taking her eyes from Kennuric, "or you, milord?"

Einar let out a hearty chuckle as he stretched out his long legs. "Nay, Morgana. I have already eaten this morning. I think you better get my brother something before he begins to gnaw at his own arm."

At the mention of her name, she saw the emotion register on Kennuric's face. Please do not let them know that you know me, she begged silently. Suddenly, Kennuric's face relaxed. "No, my good woman. Tell me, why is a woman as beautiful as you serving in a hall such as this? You know my tongue very well, so I suppose you have sailed"

“She has been nowhere. If you have any questions about her, direct them to me,” Erik stated firmly, his voice tinged with an undercurrent of menace. “Now, what is it that you have brought to trade with us?”

Kennuric’s gaze broke with hers and returned to Erik. “I did not mean to offend you. I was merely asking the young girl where”

He slowly lowered his feet to the floor, resting his elbows on the table, gazing at Kennuric through murderous eyes. “As I said before, any questions regarding the girl are to be directed to me. I will not be responsible for my actions if those orders are not followed.”

Kennuric nodded as his gaze lowered. “I understand. Now back to what I have brought to trade with you.”

“One moment,” Erik replied then turned to her. “Go back to bed, Morgana. You are not looking well.”

“I feel fine, milord. As a matter of fact, I think I will go out for a while today and enjoy the sunshine.”

Erik shook his head. “Nay, Morgana. Go back to bed,” he ordered in a stern voice as he turned his head in order to keep his gaze firmly locked on Kennuric.

“It is much too glorious of a day. I will return within the hour,” she replied tartly as she picked up a small basket nearby. Erik was not going to play the master anymore. He gave that role up when he married her.

Erik gripped her wrist in one of his large hands. “You can not go alone,” he ordered then turned to Einar. “Go with her if she wishes to go out. I do not want her alone for any reason.”

Einar rose from his seat, gripping the hilt of his sword. “It is my pleasure, brother,” he said jovially then turned to Morgana. “I will follow where you lead.”

Morgana expected more of a fight than that from Erik. She gave him a quizzical look then exited through the side door with Einar on her heels. A smile of anticipation curled her lips. Perhaps later tonight Erik intended to punish her for her stand against his orders, in the most pleasurable way possible.

Erik noticed the looks passing between his wife and the dark-haired man named Kennuric. From the man’s style of speech and dress, Kennuric was Welsh and very wealthy. No mere merchant would be wearing accoutrements such as he wore.

Erik’s eyes narrowed. There was something else about this Kennuric. His eyes and mouth were similar to Morgana’s. Though the hair was different, there were too many subtle similarities to ignore. Who was this man? A cousin or the intended groom she left behind? They came from the same region or else why would the look so similar? He was certainly going to find out who this stranger was before he had any more contact with Morgana.

* * * *

Thick rays of ghostly gray moonlight streamed through the window, bathing the room in silver. Morgana could not sleep no matter how much Erik exhausted her. The thought of Kennuric here, with her, kept invading her mind. Why was he here? Did he honestly think she was going to go back to Wales? Even if she wanted to go back, she could not. Her father would hate her, and the King of England surely would not want her.

She would simply be an exiled Princess, destined to live alone and without love. The love that she had found here, with Erik, was beyond measure. Their child was an additional gift.

Morgana rolled over and touched Erik's back. His skin quivered a little, and he shifted but remained asleep. Perhaps it was just as well. If he were awake, he would no doubt want to make love again, and she was just not ready for it again. Too many thoughts clouded her mind, preventing her from enjoying the passion exuding from his every pore.

She took a deep breath and got up slowly, holding her breath to see if Erik would notice she was not there. Normally, he was awake in an instant the minute she got up, but, this time, he did not move. Her breath let out. Good. She could move about the chamber uninhibited.

Shards of moonlight danced on the floor through the open window near the fireplace, highlighting the smoky stones. The patch of light looking inviting, prompting her to look out that window. Morgana followed her intuition.

She pushed herself up on her tiptoes and peered out. Standing below the open orifice was the figure of Kennuric, waving his arm to her. She rubbed her eyes. Was she dreaming?

Kennuric waved again, his midnight-colored hair riding the wind around his strong body. Morgana nodded. She must go to him. Kennuric must know that it was impossible for her to leave. She was reluctant to tell him about the child. If she knew her brother at all, Kennuric would be happy for her.

She stepped away from the window, quietly slipping on an old gown and putting on a pair of shoes. Taking a deep breath, she removed a cloak from the peg on the wall and pulled open the door. Please do not let it make a sound. To her amazement, the door was quiet. She released her breath in a long exhale as she stepped out, drawing the door behind her. With swift hands, Morgana put the cloak around her shoulders and clasped the giant hasp around her throat. Her heart banged in double time while a lump formed in her throat. What was she going to say to Kennuric?

* * * *

Kennuric stood on the ridge before the fjord, like a dark angel. His hair took on a silvery tint, making him seem more alive than ever. He looked out onto the pale whitecaps rushing into the inlet before it swept out to sea again, his large hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Giant sprays rose on the rocks below, the water glimmering like precious gemstones against the dark fabric of the sky before falling back down. From the back, he seemed so solemn and grave, with his shoulders stiff.

Morgana drew a deep breath as she halted behind him. Before she could say anything, Kennuric turned around and rushed to her, clasping her into his strong arms. "Oh, Morgana, I cannot believe I found you after all this time!" he pulled her away, letting his gaze take in her form. "Are you all right? Are they treating you well?"

Morgana clasped her arms around his waist, reveling in the fact he was here, in front of her, and not some distant memory. "Aye, they are, Kennuric. Oh, how I have missed you!" she cried softly.

He tilted her face up to meet him. "Aye, they must be treating you well. You seemed to have grown a little heavier since our last meeting."

She paled and pushed away from him, walking a slight distance away, her gaze drawn to the magnetic sea. "There is a reason for it."

Kennuric caught up with her and spun her around, his eyes blazing. "What do you mean?"

Morgana's shoulders stiffened. This question came before she was entirely ready for it. "I am with child, Kennuric," she stated, whirling around as her hands clasped together. "Please do not think badly of me! The child" The confession escaped her lips, swirling in the air above her. There, the truth was out in the open. No matter what Kennuric thought, she would still be proud to have this child and to be Erik's wife.

"Tell me which one of those monsters is the father. Tell me who it is so that I may defend your honor!"

Morgana wrested herself out of his grasp and stepped backwards. "It is not what you think, Kennuric. It is true that I was captured by the Vikings, but I have come to know them and have fallen in love with one of them."

Kennuric's fury deepened. "How can you do this to our family? You are not even married?"

Tears moistened her eyes, but she refused to let them show. Instead, she held her head high. Her actions were her own. She had to account to no one. "I can assure you that the child was not the product of ravishment. This I swear."

Kennuric threw his hands up in frustration then ran his fingers through his hair, pacing around in circles. "Why are you protecting those heathens, Morgana? After what they did to you, you still want to protect them? What are we going to do?"

Fear screamed along her veins as her heart pounded in her chest. "What do you mean, Kennuric?"

"I have come to take you home, Morgana. Wales is where you belong, not this God forsaken place."

Morgana shook her head. "I am not leaving, Kennuric. This is where I mean to stay."

Kennuric stalked over to her and gripped her upper arms painfully. "No, Morgana. Wales is your home. I want you to go with me tonight. It matters not about the child. You can have it in secrecy then send it away where no one will know of its identity. No one will be the wiser."

"Except for me," boomed a fury-laden voice behind them. Morgana and Kennuric turned and looked to see Erik standing behind them, dressed in his boots and breeches minus a jerkin. Several of his men surrounded the party. "Morgana, get behind me," he ordered.

Morgana took a step toward Erik when Kennuric's hand grabbed her wrist. "You do not have to do what that heathen says, Morgana. You are the Princess of Wales, beholden to no one."

Morgana looked to Erik just in time to see shocked surprise cross his face. She turned back to Kennuric. "I must, Kennuric."

His black eyebrow lifted. "Why? He is not your master."

"But she is my wife," Erik answered for her as he advanced menacingly toward Kennuric, his sword shining in the ghostly light.

Kennuric paled under his tanned skin as he pulled out his own sword from its scabbard. "Is this true?"

Morgana gripped her brother's arm tightly, forcing his sword back into the sheath. "Do not draw your sword, my brother, and I will ask my husband to put down his." She turned to Erik as a weak smile crossed her lips. "Please put away your sword."

Erik's expression darkened as he looked to her. "He is your brother?"

Morgana glided toward Erik's side, putting her hand on his wrist and forcing the point of his sword down. "Aye, he is. Please put away your blade."

Her husband resisted. "No, Morgana. He may be your brother, but I still consider him dangerous to you as well as our child," he growled, turning to the men surrounding him. "Put him in chains."

Kennuric simply stood there with his head held high as the others stepped forward and grabbed him by his arms. He struggled slightly but not enough to free himself.

She turned to Erik, her own anger mounting. "I beg of you to let him go! He will not hurt me nor our child, I swear it!"

Erik gripped her wrist in an iron hold, drawing her toward him as a muscle flickered angrily in his jaw. "Do you know what went through my mind when I awoke and discovered that you were gone?"

"No," she answered quietly.

The rest of the crowd behind Erik, including Kennuric with his captors, dispersed, leaving them to the thick of the night.

Once they were alone, Morgana let her fury loose on Erik. "Why did you humiliate me in front of my brother? He had no intention of harming me at all!"

Erik's brow rose as he leaned against a nearby tree, crossing his arms. "How do I know that? When I looked out the window and saw you embrace another man, especially a stranger, what was I supposed to think? Do you not understand what you do to me, woman?"

"And you have no idea what kind of havoc you wreak on my senses, Erik, but that does not stop me from trusting you," she spun around. "Did you think I was meeting him secretly, that he was my lover?"

Erik shrugged, his voice losing its fierceness. "I know not, Morgana. After what Kristen did"

"I am not Kristen, Erik. She did not understand the meaning of love as I do," she snarled as the stab of pain bored through her heart. Deep down, she knew that he still compared her to his old love to a certain extent, but she did not know it ran as deep as this. "Now, I wish to retire for I grow weary. If you can stop comparing me to Kristen and trust me long enough, you may join me."

Morgana stalked away, leaving a stunned Erik in her wake. Good. She was through with his childish games and ways. It was time to move forward and see how best to get her beloved brother out of this mess.

Erik watched his wife stalk away in that assured gait, his heart thumping deep in his chest. Her anger burned him as assuredly as a hot piece of metal before it is forged. She was right. He deserved her anger, possibly more. Morgana was not Kristen. That

much he knew. Yet, when he had looked out and saw her with her brother, all his fears and doubts returned. Nay, he must stop this entirely or else he would lose her forever!

He pushed away from the tree and started in the same direction as Morgana, keeping her steadily in his sights, not letting her get too far. Sven after all was still unaccounted for, undoubtedly waiting for the right time to strike. He must never let that happen again. His guard would never be down.

* * * *

Morgana slid into the bed and stared at the door. She knew Erik followed her closely, keeping an eye on every move she made.

She turned to her side, pulling the covers to her chin. Her words had been harsh but so had his insinuation that she would leave him at any given moment like his former love, Kristen. It was almost too much to bear. Morgana gave herself to him in the most intimate way possible, a stranger in a strange land to a man who was not her husband. It had not been attraction driving her to his arms, it was the passion and love he was offering. Now, she was having his child and was his wife. Why in the world would she give up all that she found here for a loveless life with someone else?

Sharp ticks filled the air as Erik pushed open the door, a candle in his hand. The gold of the candle shimmered on the silken blond strands of his head, turning them to a pale color. Morgana slammed her eyes shut to give the impression she was already asleep.

Erik made his way around to his side of the bed with the tallow, setting it on the low table. He sat down and removed his boots then his breeches before joining her in bed. His last act was blowing out the candle, plunging the room into total darkness.

Morgana felt his hand softly caress her cheek. "Morgana, are you awake?"

She said nothing. With any amount of luck, he would go to sleep and not bother her.

Erik let out a soft, resigned sigh. "If you can hear me, I want to beg for your forgiveness. I should not have compared you to Kristen. You are all the things she was not. Besides your beauty, there beats the heart of a true woman beneath your magnificent breasts. That is what drew me to you in the first place as well as the fact that you are a very good swordsman. I have never encountered a woman that had the nerve to stand up to me the way you did," he whispered then rolled over so that he faced her. His fingers traced patterns on her cheek then slid down to the hollow of her neck, sending waves of wanton desire searing through her system. "I must admit I was taken aback by it all."

He paused to take a breath. "I know you wish me to let your brother go, but I cannot. He came to take you away from me, and I can not let that happen. I will do what I must to keep you and our child safe with me. I wish you were awake so that you could hear me."

Morgana's heart beat in double time, her anger abating while her love for him soared immensely. She was angry at the fact he would not let Kennuric go, but she understood his reason for it.

Her eyes flew open. "I heard every word, Erik. You have my forgiveness about comparing me to Kristen, but I am still angry about my brother's captivity. Will you please reconsider and let him go?"

Erik drew her into his arms, holding on tightly. "In time, perhaps, but not now. He is too much of a threat to you and our child," he commented as his brow lifted in puzzlement in the darkness. "Why did you not tell me that you were a Princess?"

Morgana pushed herself out of his embrace, though her body demanded that she stay in it. "What difference does that make when my brother is locked up with the others! I chose not tell you because I thought it would make you want to hand me back to the King quicker had you known," she retorted angrily. "I know you consider Kennuric a threat to me, but he is not. What if I promise that he will do nothing? Kennuric loves me. He would never harm me."

Erik pulled her back, stroking her hair. "I believe you, Morgana, but I must still follow my instincts," he said slowly while his hand lazily stroked her hair. "What if I let you visit him and the others as much as you wanted? Would that soothe your savage mood?" he murmured in the dark. "After the child is born, he can be released."

"Why after the babe is born?"

Gentle chuckles escaped his lips. "That way, I know my child will see the light of day and not be born before its time. I thought you would have wanted your brother to see our child before he leaves."

Morgana snuggled into Erik's chest, stroking the soft skin. "I do, but I also do not want anything to happen to him in the meantime. All right, if you do not wish to let him go, you must promise that no harm will ever come to him."

"You have my word," he whispered as his lips nuzzled her forehead. "There is one question that you have failed to answer, Morgana."

She looked up into the fathomless depths of his eyes and read the rising desire behind those gray orbs. "What answer is that?"

In the dim light from the moon, she could see a seductive smile cross his lips. "Am I forgiven?"

She bit her lip in order to stifle the urge to kiss him. "That all depends."

"On what?"

"On you."

Erik let out a hearty laugh as he pulled her closer, nibbling her neck a little more. "Then I will just have to earn my forgiveness. In the next few moments, you will forget why you were ever angry with me."

Chapter 17

Each day ticked by, one blending into the other with a seamless flow. Morgana visited her fellow captives, including her brother, as often as she wished. Her belly expanded at a normal rate, indicating that the child grew in a healthy manner.

Erik had indulged her in every whim, carrying her upstairs to bed when she was tired or gathered things for her when she needed them. He was a most doting husband and

would be a wonderful father, she had thought repeatedly. His actions always made her smile.

Early one morning, Morgana awoke to a cloud filled day, the air saturated with moisture. Gray beams of light drifted into the room, adding to the already dark stone. The only thing that even gave it a little warmth was the fire and the shield, emblazoned with skilled metal relief, hanging over the hearth.

She looked over at Erik. He was asleep on his side, his large hands tucked under his head. His breath was deep and even, indicating he was ensconced in the land of dreams.

Morgana rose slowly, not wanting to cause the slightest shift in the bed. If she did, Erik would turn and pull her close to the hard line of his chest. Not that she minded of course, but it was the idea of spending a little time alone that intrigued her.

She dressed in a new ivory gown left over from Colean's childbearing days. It fit Morgana like a glove, hugging every curve. Colean took special pains to bring it back into fashion with new trim and pale ribbon.

The sooner she paid a visit to Kennuric and returned, the quicker she could return to bed without Erik being any the wiser.

She drew the dark cloak around her shoulders, pulling the cowl over her head. She drew on her matching shoes, padding softly across the stones. Just as she put her hand on the iron ring to open the door, Morgana felt a strong hand clamp onto her shoulder.

She spun around. Erik, with his hair rumpled and a tired look on his face, stood behind her with his eyes blazing. "Where do you think you are going?"

"To visit Kennuric," she replied staunchly.

Erik shook his head, while running a sleepy hand through it, calming down the wild golden strands. "Nay, not right now. I am tired and did not sleep well last night. Come back to bed and you will be able to visit them by midmorning." He yawned, stretching his body to his full height, his fingertips nearly touching the ceiling.

Morgana's anger boiled over. "Do not treat me as though I were I child! When I want to do something, I will, regardless of your demands!"

Erik advanced on her, backing her up against the door. His hands slammed against the wood either side of her face so she could not escape. "Did you quickly forget that Sven is still waiting to take you again and cause the death of our child as well as mine?" His finger hooked under her chin, drawing her face up to meet his sleepy and somewhat angry eyes. His glare softened. "You are a strong woman, Morgana, but you are hardly foolish. Did you think you could slip away and have me not notice?"

"'Twas not like that, Erik. I planned on returning before you had awakened," she confessed.

"So you counted on the depth of my slumber to keep me from finding out," he said dryly.

Morgana put her hands up on the hardened cords of muscle comprising his chest and tried to push him away. He did not budge. "Erik, please let me go. I need some time to myself."

His brow lifted. "Why?"

She could not contain her emotions behind the wall. "Because I need some peace! I can not even think when you are constantly at my side!"

The expression on his face deepened as one of his hands trailed down the side of her face. His long fingers traced lazy patterns over her shoulder before descending toward the hollow of her throat, giving rise to spears of desire. "Get accustomed to it, Morgana. I do not intend to change a thing. I am going to be by your side, like it or not. If you have not noticed, I am prepared to defend your life and the life of our child with my own, if necessary.

"Please, Erik, allow me some time"

"Nay."

Erik bent his head and kissed her neck the way she liked, pushing the hard form of his body against hers. She felt his rigid shaft against her belly, exciting her even more. "You must, Erik, or else ... ," she murmured as the warm waters of ecstasy started to close in on her.

He lifted his head as a mischievous smile spread across his lips. "Or what?"

"Or else ... I shall be ... forced ... to do something ... most drastic," Morgana managed to choke out amidst the heavy pounding of her heart and labored breathing.

"I think not," Erik whispered hoarsely, lowering his lips again. His hands slipped around her waist, holding firmly. Tanned thumbs moved in slow circles over the hardening plane of her belly, sending the flames higher. Her eyes closed as the pace of her heart quickened, reveling in that heated pool of emotion.

Before she could say any more, Morgana felt herself lifted up, held against the door by his weight. She opened her eyes in wide wonder and gazed down at him. "What are you doing, Erik?"

"Wrap your legs around my waist," he murmured, looking at her through wanton eyes, making her privates moister with desire.

"Why?" she questioned as the feel of his fleecy hair tickling her bottom sent her spiraling out of control.

His hands caressed her legs, dipping into the blessed divot between them. "I will show you."

With the flames of passion burning hotly inside of her, Morgana did as he bade, pulling her gown up and locking her legs firmly around his waist. Erik's weight held her against the door, allowing his hands to roam all over her body. This must be Valhalla on earth the other women speak so much about.

Erik slipped inside of her moist cavern, pushing her desire higher. With each thrust, he took her to a higher place, the nerves of her womanhood on fire. Somehow, he managed to keep his rhythm and still toy with her nub, manipulating the core until it became as hard as rock.

His pace was brilliant, rising and falling like a perfect wave, making her body scream. Her hips bucked, taking him deeply inside, his shaft kissing the mouth of her womb. Gasps of ecstasy rose from her throat and rumbled through the room, mixing with his groans of pleasure.

"Oh Erik," she said breathlessly in between the taste of his lips, "No one has touched me like you."

Sweat dampened his forehead as he thrust deeper, her hips tilting forward to take him all in. "You have not seen all that I have to teach you. Come, 'tis time for a lesson."

Dark clouds rolled away from Darvisson reluctantly after the storm, with all the grace of a defeated army. Bright rays of sun burned through the gray haze, bathing the world in a warm golden glow. Choppy waters of the fjord, complete with whitecaps, settled into a leisurely pace, washing in and out. Juts of the stone inlet glimmered with fresh rain, their stark charcoal color muted to a pale gray. Trees rustled with the needed moisture, sending droplets sailing through the air. The wind smelled of rose petals and wildflower, the sort of perfume that always arrived after a spring rain.

Under the horse's hooves, blades of grass crunched, each reed full of water as well. Morgana took a deep sigh, holding the wonderful scent in her body as long as possible. The day was going to turn out wonderful after all.

"How are you feeling, Morgana?" Erik's voice echoed from behind her shoulder, his grip around her waist tightening.

She was feeling better now that most of the morning sickness had left her. Her mind was more comforted and at ease. Aye, there would be times she would yearn for solitude, but it was not good to do so until Sven had been captured.

Morgana leaned her head back against Erik's chest. "Aye, fine now that the morning sickness has departed," she said softly as the aura of the day enveloped her. There was nothing better than starting the day with Erik's love, followed by a visit to her beloved brother.

Sven watched from the thicket of the forest, his breathing labored. He would have struck now, but it was not the time. Erik was smart enough to keep several men around him and Morgana at all times. Damn Erik's arrogance! Of course, if Erik's air were more inflated than it was now, there would be no men accompanying him at all.

He leaned back on his haunches and watched Erik move through the dense patch of reeds standing between the horse and the cottage where they kept the prisoners. The gentle rustle was almost more than he could bear.

Sven rolled over, pushing himself deeper into the brush, quieting his breathing down to a slow tick. It was too dangerous now. He must come up with a plan of some sort and soon, before the babe in Morgana's belly got too large. Sven frowned. The only way he would ever catch Erik off guard was to take him by surprise. His curled right hand pounded softly against his left. That was it!

He pushed himself up a little way from the damp earth and crawled away as quietly as possible with a smile of utter satisfaction on his lips. When Erik least expected, he would pounce and take what belonged to him.

* * * *

Morgana stepped into the dim chamber, her eyes narrowing as they adjusted to the darkness. She stepped lightly between the men, pausing here and there to say a few words to them, including Robert, who seemed most happy to see her. "Milady, you have come!" he exclaimed weakly.

Morgana knelt at his side, completely forgetting the precious gown she had on, and brushed the stray locks of silver hair from his face. "Nothing would keep me away from you," she whispered softly, her gaze flicking on each man, "All of you have served me well, and that is not a feat I cannot forget." She looked back to Robert. "You seem pale and wan. Are you all right?"

“Aye, that I am, milady. These bones are old and tired.” His soft sigh exacerbated her concern.

She frowned then leaned back on her haunches. “You are not well, Robert. I will speak to my husband about your conditions and get them more livable than they are now.”

Expressions of shocked surprise crossed Robert’s face as his eyes widened. “What do you mean your husband? That big hulking beast over there?” He pointed to Erik whose scowl seemed to deepen with each passing moment.

She nodded. “Aye, that he is, Robert. I swear by the blood of my Welsh ancestors, I will make all of this right.”

“Do not listen to the whore,” called a menace filled voice from the corner.

Morgana cringed as Kennuric’s words floated over toward her. Perhaps she deserved that, but Kennuric must understand she followed her heart and not convention.

Before she could rise from her position, Erik stalked over to Kennuric and struck her brother hard across the face. “What did you call my wife?” Erik’s deep timbre rang out into the dim light.

Morgana rose to her feet and rushed to Erik’s side, holding his massive arm before he could administer any more blows. “Erik, please.”

“I called her what she is. A whore,” Kennuric retorted in a mocking voice, his chains rattling slightly from his straining against them.

“Get up!” Erik shouted as his hand gripped the pommel of his blade, “or else I will run you through with my blade as you lay there!”

“No, Milord! Please, let me talk to Kennuric and make him see reason,” she begged.

Erik turned to her. “I will not stand for blasphemy against you in such a manner. No man who ever calls you that shall live,” he growled, his large palm letting go of the hilt of his blade. It slid back into the sheath with a dull thud. He turned to Kennuric, casting him a murderous glare. “Your sister saved your life this time, but next time you will not be so lucky.”

Morgana tiptoed and placed a small kiss on Erik’s cheek then stepped to Kennuric’s side, sinking to her knees next to him. “Kennuric, look at me.”

“No,” he snarled, refusing to acknowledge she was even there.

With gentle fingers, Morgana cupped his chin and drew his resisting face over to meet hers. “Kennuric, please try to understand what I have done. I have married the man I love, and I am having his child. I did it all for the name of love, nothing less. I did not give myself to him because of some rise of lust. It was out of love and caring, nothing more.”

Contempt and hatred glittered behind those deep azure orbs, replacing the brotherly love he had once felt for her. “You lie, Morgana. You laid with this monster like a whore and allowed him to plant a child in your belly.”

The swift strike of Erik’s fist across Kennuric’s mouth halted his words. “I will only warn you once more, boy.”

Blood trickled down from the corner of Kennuric’s mouth, rounding his chin before falling onto the darkness of his tunic. He nodded. “Aye,” he muttered.

Erik stepped back. "Good. I do not want you to say anything to upset my wife at all, especially in her condition," he growled then turned to her. "Say what you must then we will leave."

Morgana turned to Kennuric. "Kennuric, I love you with all my heart. I wish you would understand how I feel about Erik and our child as well as why I did what I did. I can only dream that in time you will come to know the woman I am and not the child you last saw."

"You have betrayed our family," he hissed, wiping the congealing blood from his lip with the edge of his sleeve.

Morgana shook her head. "I did nothing of the sort. I followed my heart, as you should yours. If you should find such a woman that is worth giving yourself to, then you will know what true love is like."

Kennuric's eyes blazed even hotter. "You should have stayed in Wales and married someone of your own choosing instead of remaining here with these heathens and adding to their population. You would have been safe there."

"Even if I had stayed, I would have betrayed my heart. I could not have found what I yearned for. Here I found where I belong and who I am," Morgana remarked as she ran her hands over her slightly bulging belly. "I was meant to be Erik's wife and his child's mother, not a Queen." Morgana rose to her feet unsteadily, allowing Erik to help her to regain her stability. "Please think on all I have said and do not hate me for what I have done. Perhaps you will find yourself in the same situation someday and discover you must do things in the beginning to survive that go against every fiber of your being. It is only after the passage of time that you find that it was not all in vain." She turned to Erik and held out her hand. "I am ready to leave."

Erik nodded then swept her up into his arms. "With pleasure, my dear."

Before he exited the door, Erik stopped and said something to his men in the Viking tongue then strode through the open door with her.

"What did you say to them, Erik?" she whispered, laying her head in the crook of his thick neck laced with that deep masculine scent.

His hand stroked her back reassuringly as he put her on his horse, the tingling sensations riding rampant throughout her body. Once she was secure, his hand slipped to the pommel as he gazed at her through storm-ridden eyes. "I told them to take your brother out to the fields when you are visiting your fellow Welshman. I do not want you upset anymore than you have to be. I want my child to grow strong and healthy and not be born before its time because of some foolish man. Come, you are looking quite tired. You need to be in bed."

She shook her head. "Nay, Milord. It is a wonderful day. May we go for a ride?"

Erik's hand shifted from the pommel to her leg where it stroked in a soft, gentle motion. "Whatever you wish, my dear. Today, I am your slave, ready to do your bidding," he said, climbing up behind her in the saddle, his long legs slipping into the stirrups easily. "Where shall we go, Milady?"

Kennuric slumped back against the wall, his hair sliding down behind him. In his mind, he knew Morgana did what she had to do in order to keep herself alive. The only unfortunate thing was that she fell in love along the way. He could not blame her there

either. If the situation were reversed and he was Morgana, more than likely, he would have done the same thing.

He rolled over, tucking his arm under his head. Two days since his shackling in this wretched place and he had not even seen the sun yet. Just how long did those heathens intend to keep him under their thumbs?

The corner of his mouth stung hard, but he ignored the pain, keeping his focus instead on Morgana. How innocent she seemed when he last saw her yet her face had a strained quality to it. He could never figure out why she appeared that way.

When Kennuric had seen Morgana for the first time in the hall those elusive two days ago, that strain had disappeared. In its place was the countenance of a woman, mature in the ways of love and life. Her face was relaxed almost to the point of a translucent glow, shimmering for all to see. From what he could tell, the hulking beast of a husband did care for her. That was one fact in which he could seek solace.

Perhaps it was not so bad for her here then. It was not as he imagined it. Mayhap, with time, he would return to Wales and tell Father all of this news.

Chapter 18

“Erik, I think we have found Sven’s lair!” echoed Ragnar’s shout through the hall.

“Where?”

“Just on the other side of the fjord,” Einar stated forcefully then turned his glare on Morgana. “I do not think your wife should hear how we know it was him.”

She trembled underneath her cool demeanor. What news could Einar have brought that was so terrible? “Tell me, Einar. I am a grown woman, not a child,” she stated sharply.

“There are certain things a woman is better off not knowing, especially one in your condition. Do you not agree, brother?”

Erik nodded then turned her around to face him. The depths of his eyes glittered with husbandly concern, his hands gripping tightly onto her shoulders, allaying her fears. “Einar is right, Morgana. I want you to go to our chamber. Take my mother and a few of the other women with you if you wish, but I do not want you to be here for the moment. Am I understood?”

“I do not wish to go to our chamber.”

“Do not worry about her, Erik. I shall take great care of her,” chimed Colean’s voice from the other side of the room.

He turned and nodded his golden head. “Much thanks, Mother. I feel better knowing she is in your care.”

Colean drifted across the chamber with all the liveness of a fabled fairy. "She is my daughter and the mother of your child so she will receive the best care. Lin, Freya, Bestla," she called to the kitchen, "come out here so that we may spend some time with Morgana."

All three girls emerged from the kitchen as if on cue. "Aye, mother," answered Bestla before the others had a chance to.

Colean's hand on her shoulder was warm and comforting. Morgana turned away from her husband like a weary child, saying nothing, allowing herself to be led to her chamber. Part of her wanted to fight while the other half yearned for the rest her bed provided. If she had not been with child, the urge to fight Erik on this matter would have won out. Morgana let out a weary sigh. It was best this way, perhaps.

Erik waited until Morgana was safely on her way back to their chamber, escorted by his mother and sisters. "What did you find?"

Einar looked to their father then turned back, clasping his hands together in the front. "We found Boreal near a cave on the other side of the fjord, or at least what is left of her."

Erik's mind burned with hate, a poisonous pool of thought and emotion. The distance between him and Sven grew wider, gorging through old childhood friendships. Good. When he caught Sven, it was not going to be pleasant. "Have you seen to her burial?"

Ragnar nodded. "Aye, Erik. She was given a proper Viking burial near the rest of the clan at the clearing."

He pounded one fist into the other as his rage mounted. "This has gone on long enough. Sven is so close that I can feel him. He waits for me to leave Morgana unattended so he can sweep in and take her again. Thor's teeth, I will never let that happen!" Erik hissed through clenched teeth.

"We will find him, Erik, do not fear," Ragnar announced then turned to the husbands of Erik's sisters. "Jurgen and Mowry, I want one of you to guard the door to Erik's chamber while the other guards the window. Erik, come with us. You know Sven's movements as well as he does."

Hesitation clouded his mind, but he knew his father was right. "Aye, Father, you are right. I am reluctant to leave, but with Jurgen and Mowry standing guard, I will not worry."

"That is the spirit, my boy! Now let us ride. The quicker we find Sven, the safer we all shall sleep."

Sven lurked in the deep, shadowy recess of the large fireplace, dressed in dark clothing and breathing little. His heart felt as though it were about to pound out of his chest as the words of the conversation floated over from where Erik. They had found Boreal after all!

A devious smile of triumph crossed his lips. It had been so easy to sneak up on the old woman as she picked her disgusting herbs growing wild in the meadow just beyond the great hall. When his hand had slipped around her mouth, it came as a total surprise. From the snapping of her neck to the warm blood flowing over his arm, he had never felt

such pleasure in his life. What would even be better would be the breaking of Erik's body. Now that would please him beyond all measure.

Sven watched with baited breath as the others exited the chamber, striding out in the bright sunshine in search of him. His smile widened. They were just wasting their time.

Tiny pops emitted from the roaring fireplace, filling the air with a crisp, burned wood smell, reminding him of certain herbs his mother used to light to drive away sickness. The smell slightly sickened him, but he pushed it out of his mind. There were things more important to worry about, such as getting Morgana out of their clutches.

The kernel of an idea suddenly blossomed into a full-grown plan. With Jurgen and Mowry guarding the only two entrances to get to Morgana, he could not touch her. He brightened up, his heart pounded against the inside of his chest as waves of warmth washed over him. If he could not go to her, she would come to him. He chuckled softly to himself. The only way to get a rat out of its hole was to smoke it out.

* * * *

Morgana stood by the window, gazing out at the green world beyond, only half listening to the conversation between Colean and her daughters.

"You know what Ingmar said about Sevig?" Brestla chimed in as she tatted the infant garment in her hand.

"What did she say?" Freya demanded as she finished the hem of a new blue gown destined for the next feast.

"Aye, tell us," Lin stated grumpily as she slumped back in her chair.

Morgana heard the idle gossip behind her, blocking it out from her mind. She let a tired sigh escape. For some reason, something did not feel right today. Perhaps it was the babe within her making her feel that way, but mayhap it was her inner sense telling her that not all was right.

Below her window stood Brestla's husband, Mowry, keeping watch for the elusive Sven. Lin's husband, Jurgen guarded the outside door, his strong back against the scarred wood.

She turned her head toward the slave cottage, barely noticing anything, choosing instead to listen to the churning thoughts of her mind. Her chin slipped to the cup of her hand. Would Erik find Sven before he destroyed them both?

Before her mind could answer, Morgana caught the whiff of smoke as it wafted through the window. It caught her off guard. Servants banked the morning fire but kept the embers glowing until the midday meal. She turned her head toward the direction and noticed a white hazy swirl of smoke coming from the thatched roof of the prisoners quarters. "There's a fire!" Morgana screamed, running toward the door and banging on it fiercely. "Let us out, there is a fire!"

Colean and the rest of the girls threw down their sewing, scrambling to the window to look. "Jurgen, open the door!" Colean shouted as she turned and hurried to the door, beating on the ancient wood with her tiny hands.

Fear soared through Morgana's veins with newfound speed, increasing her breathing as well as heart rate. Kennuric was in that cottage. If she did not reach him in time, he would surely die.

Flames shot toward the sky, menacing and bright, eating at the dry thatch roof. Black smoke swirled around the tiny house, like a swarm of insects ready to devour available flesh. Morgana's heart pounded ferociously at the inside of her chest, her body wanting to collapse.

Suddenly, the door swept open, banging against the solid wall of the house. Mowry emerged from the fire with the end of a chain in his left hand. At the other end were all the captives. He led them far away from the flames, urging them to sit in the grass beyond the structure then joined the others in putting out the flames. All of them gasped for air and coughed in an effort to clear their lungs of the offending smoke.

She looked from left to right, searching for Kennuric. She found him sitting in the middle of the rest, his face buried in his hands. Her breath escaped her chest in a sigh of relief. He was alive.

She turned to Mowry. "Unchain my brother."

Mowry's dark brows knitted together. "But, Erik does not want him separated from the rest."

"Erik is not here, and I wish to speak to my brother privately, so do as you are commanded."

Mowry shrugged his big shoulders then produced a key from his pouch and strode over to the rest of the garrison, unlocking Kennuric. Her brother did not even bother to look up to see why he unchained or as to whom was doing it.

The minute he was free, Morgana knelt at his side, placing her hand on his shoulder. "Please, brother, come and walk with me. We have so much to speak about."

Kennuric looked up. "We have nothing to say, Morgana."

"Do it for me, Kennuric, if you ever cared for me at all."

Kennuric's face went blank for a moment then he slowly rose to his feet, helping her to hers.

Together they walked a short distance away from the rest. "I take it you still have not forgiven me for what I have done, Kennuric."

Kennuric halted then cast his gaze heavenward in a gesture of resignation then turned to her. "I have thought long and hard, my dear sister, about what has happened to you. I know that if I were in your same place, I more than likely would have done the same thing. Love is hard to find in these times, and it would have been foolish of you not to follow your heart," he murmured softly. "Father was wrong in trying to force marriage on you. I can see that now. If he had let you choose your own husband, perhaps you would not have chosen a heathen."

"I know you do not approve, but you do not yet know him. If you want to know the truth, he is half Welsh."

Kennuric's eyes widened. "How can this be?"

A small titter of laughter escaped her lips. "His mother was a Welsh captive when his father married her. Erik is not entirely heathen. He was raised with Christian beliefs, though he clings to that of the Viking."

Kennuric's worried brows softened. "This changes things a bit but not entirely. Does he take care of you as he should? He does not beat you or harm you in any way?"

“Nay, he is most good to me” The sudden appearance of figures melting out of the forest halted her words, inciting her heart to pound furiously and blood to beat in her temples.

They circled Morgana and Kennuric, their swords waving wildly. “Someone wants to have a word with you, milady,” snarled one man.

Before she could even ask, Mowry, Jurgen, and the others noticed what was happening. Long swords withdrew from their sheaths, blazing in the sun like bolts of lightning. Hurried feet brought them over toward her and Kennuric, the blades slashing left and right. Steel dug into the soft bellies of the enemies as their breath flowed out of them for the last time, groans of agony filling the air.

There were only a few left, still battling for their lives. One of them stepped forward and grabbed her in an effort to drag her into the woods. “Kennuric, help me!” she screamed at her only hope of salvation.

Kennuric rushed forward without hesitation, wrapping the chain around the grimy neck and pulled tightly. The offender fell to his knees while his thick fingers tried to pry the iron from around his neck. Kennuric, taking this as a sign of defeat, viciously kicked the man forward and stood on his back, pulling the chain taut.

Suddenly, another pair of arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. “Unhand me, you brute!” she shouted, driving her heel into the offender’s shin.

A sharp intake of air echoed behind her. “Why did you do that, Morgana?” Erik questioned through gritted teeth.

She spun around in his arms, burying her face into his chest. “Oh, Erik, I am so happy to see you!” she cried, wrapping her arms around his strong waist.

“You are safe now, my dear. Sven did this,” he stated with absolute certainty as he gazed at the grisly scene. “He is going to pay dearly.” Erik turned to the others of the party who looked on. “The rest of you, fan out. He could not have gone far. Do not come back until you carry his head on a sword,” Erik growled. Without hesitation, the others mounted their horses and took off, searching the brush for the elusive Sven.

Morgana looked up into the depths of his storm-ridden gray eyes. “Aye, it was Sven. He must have started the fire at the cottage in order to drive us out of the chamber after you left. He planted his men deep within the woods to take me.”

His gaze flicked to Kennuric. “I have you to thank for saving my wife and child from that evil bastard’s clutches,” he snarled, his anger still glowing within.

Kennuric stood to his full height, his dark eyes issuing a challenge. “No matter how I feel about your union with her, Morgana is still my sister and part of my family, including the child in her belly. There is nothing I would not have done to save her.”

“Perhaps my perception of you is wrong, Kennuric.”

Kennuric’s brow lifted in surprise. “What perception is that?”

“That you would cause harm to my wife and unborn child. I can see now that you would not, though your venomous words caused me to think so.”

Kennuric shook his head. “Morgana and I were close growing up since we only had each other for company. Nothing would ever change that, including the circumstances or the distance between us.”

She looked up into Erik’s eyes as the storm clouds passed from behind them. “I swore to you that he would not hurt me and he as not. Please reconsider letting him go.”

“When Sven is caught and taken care of, I promise to give it some more thought. Until then, the answer is nay.”

Morgana put a hand on the back of his neck and brought his cheek down to her level where she placed a tender kiss. “Much thanks, Erik. Perhaps I can assuage your decision.”

Erik straightened, his fingers caressing the side of her face. “There is time enough for that later, my dear. Come with me to the stable while I choose a fresh horse.”

Morgana stepped from the confines of his arms and glided over to Kennuric, placing a soft kiss on his cheek. “I will take care of you, my brother, just as I always have. I promise that within a fortnight, you will be on a ship bound for home.”

Before Kennuric could answer, Morgana felt the strong hand of Erik clamp onto her wrist, urging her to part Kennuric’s company. She blew a kiss in her brother’s direction, her heart light. Her dearest wish was that the two men she loved most would reconcile. It seemed now that her wish had come true.

She stepped into the stable behind Erik, her nose twitching at the flying bits of hay in the room.

“Erik, why have you brought me? I could have gone back to our chamber,” Morgana offered as Erik guided her down the straw laden path between the horses.

“I wanted to keep an eye on you, Morgana. With Sven still out there, I wanted to make sure that you were safe,” he murmured as he strode the length of the aisle, his gaze locked on the hindquarters of the animals.

“Erik, if I ask you something, would you grant it to me?”

“That depends on what you wish, Morgana,” he answered gruffly as he moved toward the stall of a chestnut colored horse, releasing his grip on her wrist. A saddle, complete with a polished canticle and bow, obviously English in nature, stood on the armature near the horse. Erik picked it up, as well as the saddle blanket underneath, placing it on the animal.

“I want you to let Kennuric go now. I do not wish him to wait until after the baby arrives because that is unreasonable.”

“No,” Erik barked.

She gripped his arm tightly. “Kennuric saved me from Sven’s clutches today in your stead. How much more does he have to prove himself to you?” Anger thrummed through her body. She was going to get Kennuric free no matter what it took with Erik.

Erik whirled around on her, his gray eyes turning stormy yet again. “I trust no man, Morgana. How do I know he is not going to whisk you back to Wales so that you can marry some King when you are bearing my child?” She could hear the frustration in his voice. Somehow, she had to prove she was going nowhere.

She caressed his cheek, feeling the slight bit of stubble growing on the sides. “I love you, Erik. That is what holds me here. I was taught that once I married, it would be for life,” she confessed, caressing his bare arm with her other hand, “Wales holds no magic for me anymore, Erik. I have no desire to return except for a visit with our children. Tell me what I must do to prove that I am not going to leave you and I will do it.”

Erik stopped his motions, staring at the length of the straw laden aisle, propping his arm on the horse's quarters. "Morgana, do you know how much I love you? If you were to leave, I would search the earth for you. I swore after Kristen's betrayal never to give my heart to another woman again yet you have mine. It frightens me. What frightens me even more is the prospect that you may leave and I would never see your beautiful face nor the child growing in your belly."

Morgana's hand slipped to his back, feeling the cords of muscle twitching under his vest. Excitement coursed up and down her body, causing the cleft between her legs to throb with anticipation. "I promise on the blood of my ancestors, Erik, that I will never leave you. I am here to stay."

With that, Erik took her into his arms, pulling her up so she balanced on the edge of the stall. Hard wood dug into her backside, but she did not care. At least she was closer to Erik's lips. He gingerly touched her lips with his tongue, the tip dancing around the edges in order to induce excitement. It worked. Her heart pounded in double time, beating furiously against the strong cage of bone.

Slowly, Erik's arms went around her while hers went around his neck. Her fingers buried themselves in the rampant blond strands streaming down his shoulders, pulling slightly.

Just as she reveled in the kiss, Erik pulled away.

Puzzled, she looked at him, her chest heaving. "Why did you stop?"

A sensual grin pulled at the corners of his mouth. "This is most uncomfortable. Let me take you somewhere that is much more pleasing than this."

With that, Erik hoisted her from the railing and swept her into his arms. He walked the length of the stall until he reached the end one, which was empty. What exactly did he have in mind?

Chapter 19

Morgana nudged her head in the hollow of his neck, between his strong collarbone and the underside of his jaw. The crisp, masculine scent wafted over her like a heady potion, making her body tremble with anticipation.

Erik advanced into the hay filled bay, gently laying her down. Without hesitation, he stripped the leather vest from his chiseled chest, all the while she watched with eager anticipation. Each muscle rippled, highlighted by the thin sheen of sweat forming over his flesh.

Her arms went upwards to receive him as a smile curled her lips. Erik happily obliged, sliding downward and taking possession of her lips. Her heart pounded in her chest as well as her temples while her skin quivered at his touch.

His hands swam over the swollen globes of her breasts that had become more sensitive each day by the baby in her womb.

With quick fingers, Erik unlaced her gown and exposed her upper chest to his sensuous lips. His teeth nibbled lightly here and there, moving toward their intended goal. Morgana could do nothing but arch under his touch as her skin burned with hunger for him, begging for as much as he could give, closing her eyes as she did so.

His hand kneaded one ripe and ready mound gently while the nipple of the other remained buried between his lips, turning to a rich marble hardness.

The sea of emotion was closing in fast, and she was on the edge ready to dive in when Erik stopped his ministrations, his fingers freezing in motion on her breasts.

"I see you are readying my wife for me, are you not Erik?" growled the menacing voice behind Erik.

Her eyes flew wide open to see Sven standing behind Erik with the tip of his sword between Erik's shoulder blades. Fear quickly replaced desire, screaming along her veins as though it was fire eating its way through a dry forest.

Erik turned around, easing himself in front of her, covering her partial nudity with his own body, backing her slowly up to the corner of the stall where she would be safe. "I knew you would come back, Sven. Only you would be low enough to initiate a battle then leave the others to tend to it."

Morgana clutched the edges of her parted gown together, all the while keeping close to Erik. Her breathing was labored as well as her thoughts. How did Sven evade capture only to find them here?

Sven let out a great peal of laughter all the while keeping the deadly end of his sword trained on Erik's chest. "I planned all of this so that I could get you alone, but I did not count on Morgana," he smirked as his lustful leer flicked to her. "She is an added coup for me."

"Do you intend to run me through before I have had the chance to defend myself or will you let me dine at Odin's table?"

Sven stepped back and waved his sword in a melodramatic gesture. "As you wish, Erik. The sooner I dispatch you and the brat in her belly, the sooner I will be enjoying her fruits. Now pick up your weapon."

Erik hefted his sheath in his hand, leaping to his feet and drawing the long blade out. "If you want me, bastard, here I am."

"Oh, I am going to enjoy killing you, Erik," Sven snarled, "but it will not be half as enjoyable as taking your vixen once you are dead."

"I swear by the blood of Odin, you will be the one who dies today, Sven," Erik vowed as he moved in the circle of death, taunting Sven with his blade. "Start asking for the Valkeryies to come and whisk you away to Valhalla."

"Arghh!" Sven grunted and thrust his sword in Erik's direction. He managed to miss the brunt of the assault, but the tip caught Erik's upper arm, his lips emitting an agonized snarl. Morgana gasped as blood flowed freely down his arm.

"That is one for you, Sven," Erik snarled as he raised his blade. "Now, 'tis one for me!"

Erik's sword flashed in a blinding arc, caught by Sven's blade in mid air. The sound of clashing steel rose in the air, making the horses nervous in their stalls. Hooves crashed against the stone as snorts of annoyance escaped their flared nostrils.

Around and around, Erik and Sven hefted their weapons, dancing the ancient steps of death. Sparks of metal flew from where the steel struck together, landing on the floor in scattered patterns.

Morgana's heart leapt in her chest each time Sven thrust toward Erik, her breath strained until she saw that he was unharmed. A frightened hand went to her throat with every tense moment as she watched the man she loved battle the one she hated. Erik will be the victor, she told herself.

"I will have your woman, Erik, perhaps before your very eyes before you die," Sven taunted. His eyes had a mad look about them, as if Sven really believed what he said.

Erik stepped back, holding his sword in front of him. The thin sheen of sweat had turned into a thick coat, dripping from his magnificent body in rivulets. In Erik's eyes, she could see the raw determination that reigned within him. He would shed his own blood for her and die if necessary, for her and their child.

Morgana felt her heart swell but not with fear. It was with pride and love.

"Nay, you will not, Sven. I hear the Valkyries coming for you, my friend. It is best to get on your knees and submit to their desires," Erik instructed.

With that last taunt, Sven let out a grunt then thrust forward, causing Erik to maneuver himself to the left, making him lose his balance. He fell on his back as hardened steel clattered on the wood floor, flying underneath a small bundle of hay.

Sven moved on Erik with lightning speed, his sword up for a final thrust. "Did you say I was going to die, Erik? I think not! 'Tis you who must call for the Valkyries!"

Before Sven could lower the sword, Erik thrust his right leg forward while his left foot pushed the hilt of a dagger hidden at the top of his boot. The blade of the dagger pierced the heavy leather as he thrust forward, digging deep into Sven's gut. Erik twisted his leg, burying the blade deeper while howls of agony pierced the hostile air.

Without hesitation, Morgana hurried over to where Erik's sword lay and picked it up in both hands. She dragged it over to where Sven remained impaled on Erik's dagger. Taking a deep breath, Morgana brought it up. With a mighty swing at Sven's head, the blade severed it from his shoulders. Blood gushed from the open tubes of Sven's neck splashing over both of them, head to toe.

Morgana pushed away from the grisly scene, dropping the bloody sword onto the ground where it clanged with a dull thud. She retched in a corner of one of the stalls, her belly howling at her.

Behind her, she heard the unmistakable sound of Sven's lifeless corpse hitting the ground. There was a slight shuffle as Erik rose to his feet, making his way over to her.

Strong hands encircled her waist. "Are you all right, Morgana?" murmured Erik's voice over her shoulder.

"Aye, Erik, I am all right now," she murmured then spun in Erik's arms. Her gaze flicked to the lifeless corpse where the blood started to congeal in a deep crimson pool under what was left of the neck. It was hideous, made even worse with the knowledge that she did it. You did it to save Erik, nothing more. There is nobility in saving those you love from certain death. "Sven is out of our lives forever."

His hand stroked her hair. "He will bother us no more because of you, Morgana."

The rest of the clan burst through the doors of the stable, swords drawn and worried looks on their faces. "Are you all right, Erik?"

Erik bent from his waist and picked up Sven's head by the grimy red strands, holding it up for all to see. "I am, but Sven is not. Take his body out of here before he fouls the air," he commanded and tossed the head to the man at the head of the group. "Make sure you bury him so far from Darvisson that it would take a thousand years for Odin to find him."

Jurgen, who caught the head, nodded. "Aye, that we will, brother."

Morgana turned to Erik, her worried fingers still clutching the edges of her bloody gown together. "Please take me out of here, away from this den of death."

Erik enclosed her in his arms. "You must have read my mind, Morgana. This is no place for you or our child," he stated then picked her up with one swing of his arms. "I am going to give you a bath then put you to bed."

She laid her head on his shoulder as the erratic pace of her heart slowed down now that she knew nothing else would try intruding on their love. "That sounds wonderful."

* * * *

After Erik bathed her body, Morgana snuggled deep into the bed. Here she felt safe, warm, and protected, as though nothing in the world could bother her.

Erik bathed himself after he tucked her in bed. Morgana watched him with a desire-laden fascination. She was truly a lucky woman to have a man like Erik. He was more than she could have ever dreamed of, attending to her every want and need.

Erik stopped putting on his clean breeches and stared at her with an eyebrow cocked upwards. "What 'tis the matter my dear? You should be sleeping."

Morgana leaned up on one elbow and rested her head in the cup of her palm. "I was just realizing how lucky I am to have you as my husband."

He pulled the breeches up and tied them with the thin leather cording. "Do you mean you regret not marrying the King?" he teased her playfully, the corner of his mouth turning into a smile as he sank into the nearby chair to put on his boots.

Morgana picked up a small coverlet and threw it at him. He caught it in one hand. "Nay, Erik! To the end of my life, I will never regret one thing I have ever done. Besides, I have already married my King," she said mildly, "My Viking King."

"And I have my Viking Queen," he said, stroking her cheek lightly.

"I have no intention of going anywhere, Erik," she sighed as she rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling, her hands behind her head. "Oh, I almost forgot to ask. Have you seen Boreal? She was supposed to see me today, but I have yet to see her."

Erik's fingers froze at the lacings of his boots, and he grew silent. A grave expression slipped over his handsome features, hinting that something was amiss. "Boreal is not here."

"Where is she?"

Erik finished tying the leather then stood up. He strode quietly over to the bed and sat down next to her, his hand on her naked shoulder. "Boreal is not coming back, Morgana. Sven killed her this morning."

Stunned disbelief flooded her body as the hot tears formed in her eyes. "Why, Erik, why?" she cried as she flung herself into his arms.

“Shhh, Morgana. Boreal is in Valhalla, tending to the Valkeryies with her magic, not having to worry about much anymore,” Erik murmured as his hand stroked her head.

“No, Erik, this cannot happen! She was going to deliver our baby when the time came,” she howled into the dimming light of the room. She clung to Erik as though her whole world was falling apart. Sweet Boreal who delivered her and her baby from Sven’s evil clutches was gone, dispatched by the same madness that prompted Sven to kidnap her in the first place.

Erik’s strong hand cupped her chin. “There are other midwives as well as my mother, Morgana, so you will not be alone. Boreal’s spirit lives in all of them. She will be here when our babe is born,” he whispered as his lips nuzzled her newly clean hair.

She buried her face into his chest, letting the tears flow as he gently rocked with her. She cried for the loss of Boreal as well as the mess she had made of things along the way, Kennuric’s imprisonment and every other imaginable sin she imagined she had committed.

Morgana brushed away her tears and looked up into his eyes. “I want to see where she is buried.”

Erik’s thumbs wiped away the tears from her eyes. “Of course, but I want you to rest until tomorrow. I will take you then.”

“Much thanks, Erik,” she murmured then turned her head up. “I truly love you.”

“And I love you, Morgana, more than any other woman in existence.”

His soft lips brushed against hers in a feathery kiss, tantalizing every inch of the quivering flesh. Somehow, Erik always knew the right thing to do to allay her fears and worries.

* * * *

King Eynon stood on the prow of his magnificent vessel gazing out into the deep blue waters of the sea thundering past the hull. His golden hair rode the wind behind him as well as his navy cloak trimmed with bits of ermine. Pale gold topped his head, feeling heavy now. Normally the sea held a deep fascination for him, but now it was only a nuisance because of Morgana. That girl could never do as ordered.

He let out a heavy resigned sigh. If only Morgana had done as she was bid, he would not have to leave his impossible brother Regent while he chased her halfway across the world. When he caught up with her, the nunnery would be too good for her. Why he should arrange a marriage to a common farmer since she loused up all his negotiations with England!

“We are close now, Sire. The Viking village is not far from here,” informed the captain.

“Does this village have a name?” he snarled.

“Darvisson, I think.”

“Is your informant sure that is where she is?” His captain nodded. “Then arm the men. We will go ashore friendly until I know for sure that Morgana is among them. How much longer until we reach the Viking shore?”

The captain shrugged his jaunty shoulders. “I know not, Sire. It could be as soon as a month but not more than three. With the fogs that encumber this part of the world, sometimes it is hard to say.”

Eynon drew in a deep breath and exhaled hard. "Push the ship as fast as you can. I want to get to Morgana before they do."

* * * *

Morgana's belly expanded day by day, with the child moving around inside of her in a healthy fashion. One of the new midwives checked her weekly, pronouncing her pregnancy the healthiest in all of Darvisson. Still that did not replace the void of Boreal. The day after her trial with Sven, Morgana went to Boreal's grave, guided by Erik's gentle hand. She had placed a small bouquet of flowers at the earthen mound, whispering a silent prayer. If Erik was right, Boreal had found peace in Heaven.

The animosity between Erik and Kennuric seemed to lessen. Increasingly, Erik allowed Kennuric out of his chains to work with the others on the high wall behind the Great Hall. She had many long talks with Kennuric, most of them productive. At first, Kennuric could not get used to the idea of her marriage, but, after he saw the way Erik treated her, his view changed. The same went for Erik.

Morgana never tired of watching Erik and Kennuric interact, knowing that they would both be in Darvisson when her child was born. It was a sign of good things to come.

* * * *

The winter came and went without much snow, which was strange for this climate. Coldness remained a constant factor, but Morgana chose to ignore it. Erik kept her warm with the heat of his body next to hers, his hands roaming all over her swelling belly. No icy chill could penetrate that.

Spring arrived before she knew it. Bits of green vegetation popped up from the ground as well as the prevailing warm winds from the south blowing through the land. Creatures that hibernated were appearing, nosing about for food after the long sleep. By now, Morgana wished the child to give signs it was ready to be born. Her ankles as well as her hands swelled with fierce abandon. Exhaustion was an ever-present factor. Would it ever end?

* * * *

Morgana sat near the fire in the Great Hall, tatting some clothes for her baby, surrounded by Erik's sisters, Lin, Brestla, and Freya. Brestla's little girl rocked in a small cradle near their feet. Morgana doted on the small infant, learning all she needed for her own child. It was a pleasure, much more fulfilling than she could have ever imagined.

Colean hovered over them proudly, commenting here and there on the work they produced. Her experienced fingers inspected it all carefully. "All of you do wonderful work. You should be proud."

"Of course, Mother," chimed Lin with a quick toss of her braid, "we were taught by your hand."

Colean tilted her black head in a nod. "Ah, Morgana was not. Whoever taught her needlework was a master as well."

Morgana felt her cheeks heat up at the praise. "My mother started to instruct me when I was little, before her death. Since then, I have practiced the stitches she has taught me."

Before Colean could reply, Ragnar, Erik, and the rest of the Vikings burst into the room, their faces painted with concern. "Go to our chamber, Morgana," Erik ordered.

Her brow rose. "Why?"

"Get up," he said brusquely as he urged her to her feet, "I have not the time for questions."

Without further word, Morgana and the others were hustled to her chamber. Other servant girls as well as the midwives were taken there as well. Once they were all inside, the door locked securely behind them.

Morgana gripped Colean's arm tightly. "What is going on, Colean?"

Colean's slim hand brushed the stray golden strands from her forehead. "Do not fret, Morgana. There must be a threat to our shores. Our men put us here for safekeeping."

Fear rumbled through her body. "What threat?"

"Possibly an invader. I know not," Colean reassured in a calm voice. "Please sit down and try not worry about it. Erik will be back soon and all will be well."

Erik and the others watched a lonely ship push through the fog and advance toward the shoreline.

"Where do you think they hail from, Father?" Erik questioned as he leaned over to Ragnar.

Ragnar shrugged. "I know not, Erik, but something tells me that they are not here for trading."

Inside, Erik's ire burned. Who were these strange men and what did they want in Darvisson? Something was not right with this situation. He frowned as the wariness set in.

* * * *

The golden haired man at the prow of the ship seemed familiar. He was tall, perhaps a rod, well built as though he had seen many battles. A scarlet tunic with a matching cloak covered him. Dark leather cinched around his waist, holding his ornate sword at his hip.

Wood crashed against the bed of broken rock as the ship pulled ashore. Several of the man's servants jumped into the water, pulling the hull further up.

One man with a mane of chestnut curls jumped from the ship and stood on the shore, bowing before them all. "Greetings, I am Ranoulf of Rogalund. I speak on the behalf of King Eynon of Wales," Ranoulf spoke in the Viking tongue.

Erik's heart turned over in his chest. That was why the man looked so familiar! It was Morgana's father! "Halt," he ordered, holding his hand up, "We speak the Welsh tongue." He turned to King Eynon. "Why are you here?"

The King rose from his seat and stepped gingerly from the boat, putting his feet unsteadily onto the rocky ground. "Since you seem to know my language, I will tell you. I am here seeking a young woman that might have crossed your shores. If you know nothing of her, then I will leave your company. If you have seen her, I must know where she is."

Erik crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at the man. "Why do you want her?"

The blond head shook. "She is my daughter, and I wish to bring her home."

"We may have seen her, but I am not sure. We did capture a young woman some time back, but I hardly think she would be your daughter." Erik was hoping this would

throw the man off track about wanting to see Morgana and put him on his merry way back to Wales.

The older man's eyes brightened, reminding Erik of Morgana. There was no mistaking this man's claim that Morgana was his daughter. "May I see her? It would do my old heart good to see if this is my beloved daughter."

Ragnar's hand clamped into his shoulder, pulling him aside. "Do you think this to be wise, Erik? Suppose she wants to go back to Wales?"

Erik cast his gaze to the ground then returned to his father. "I must, Father. If she finds out that her father was here and I sent him on his way without so much as a hint that she might be here, Morgana would never forgive me. I will not risk losing her heart over this."

"You may risk losing her physically, Erik. Think of the child."

Erik stepped out of his father's touch. "That is what I am thinking of." He turned to King Eynon. "If you want to see this prisoner, follow me. I can assure you that she is not who you seek."

A smile of triumph crossed the old man's lips. "Please lead the way and let me see for my self. If it is not her, I intend to compensate you for your trouble."

Erik let a deep growl escape his lips. "Follow me."

* * * *

Morgana stood quietly as Colean brushed her golden strands that flowed over the claret colored gown as though it was made of silk. There was no sound in the room, except for the soft murmurs now and then from the rest of the women in the room.

Suddenly, the locked ticked. Morgana's heart soared. Whoever threatened them must have moved on!

The door swung open, allowing Erik's voice to drift into the room. "I assure you that she is not your daughter."

"But she may be, my good man. I wish to see for myself. "

Morgana remained frozen as the familiar voice drifted over her shoulder. Could it be? Nay, it could not! Her father was safe in Wales and not here. She spun around.

King Eynon stood before her. His gaze traveled up and down her form, a smile forming on his lips until he reached her belly. "Morgana, is that you?"

She rushed over to her father, taking him into her embrace. His arms remained at his sides. "Oh, Father, what are you doing here?"

Rudely, he pushed her away and pointed to the mound under her kirtle. "What is this?"

"I am with child, Father," she stammered, completely taken aback and hurt by his demeanor. Where is the fatherly love she expected after not seeing him for nearly a year?

"Who is this child's father?" he demanded.

"'Tis not what you think, Father."

"Oh, it is what it looks like, Morgana. I should have known you would have fallen into the arms of one of these heathens," he snarled, gripping her upper arms.

Erik's strong hands removed them, throwing Eynon's hands to his sides. "If you ever touch my wife like that again, I can not be responsible for what may happen."

Eynon turned to Morgana, his eyebrows rising. "Wife?"

She nodded, stroking her belly gently. "Aye, Father. I married him, and now I am having his child."

"Do you not understand what you have done? Not only have you ruined my negotiations with England, you have bed a heathen and are going to bear his child! No, I will not let this happen! You must forget all of this nonsense and return to Wales with me where you can have the child in a convent then return home as though nothing has happened. No one will have to know you have ever had a child. Even the King will not know. I think I can still salvage the betrothal."

Morgana held her hand up. "Stop, Father. You are not making sense. I love Erik, and here is where I am staying. My child will be born here as well as our future children. I have no desire to be anything other than Erik's wife and my child's mother."

"I see you are staunch in your decision, Morgana. There is only one thing left to do."

"What is that?"

"Defend your honor. I challenge your 'so-called' husband to a match."

Erik stepped between her and her father. "No, Eynon. You will board your ship and return to Wales without further word."

Eynon's hand went to the hilt of his sword, drawing the blade out. He pointed it at Erik's chest. "I intend to defend my daughter's honor to the death. If you care for her, you would do the same."

His strong hand slipped to the handle of his sword, and he withdrew the weapon, holding it toward Eynon. "I will defend her honor to the death, Eynon, but I will not do it in front of her. The only way I will do this is outside. Sheath your sword until we are in the clearing."

Several of Erik's relatives stood outside of the door, waiting for the next command. After Eynon sheathed his sword, Erik nodded, and they stepped forward, gripping his upper arms, leading him from the chamber.

Erik brushed a soft kiss across her forehead. "I will return most readily, Morgana."

She gripped his arms tightly as the beat of her heart became more pronounced. "Do not hurt him, Erik," she pleaded.

His fingers swept across her cheek, sending spirals of anxiety thrumming through her body. "I will not hurt him, Morgana. I am merely going to make him see that you belong with me and that our love is what binds us together." With that, Erik's lips moved across hers with delicious lightness, becoming harder and more passionate with each passing moment. Back and forth, their tongues danced until Erik parted the kiss.

He caressed the side of her face gingerly. "Forgive me, Morgana, but I had to stop. Otherwise, I would be dismissing everyone and forgetting about your father for a while. I must admit you are an addicting diversion."

The corners of her lips curled into a smile. "Aye, and you are, too."

With that, Erik exited the chamber, the sound of his footfalls echoing through the stone hallway. Perhaps she should follow and watch to make sure ... a sudden spasm of pain gripped her belly, and she doubled over.

"Morgana, what is it?" Colean's warm fingers wrapped around her arm.

"I ... I ... think the baby is coming," she choked out as another spasm of pain crossed her belly.

"Girls, get her to bed while I get the linens and the hot water ready," Colean ordered.

There was a bustle of excitement around the room as all the others sprang into action, from helping her to bed and undressing to gathering the necessary tools.

The pain seemed as though it occurred every few minutes, growing in strength. "Here, put this between your teeth," Freya ordered, thrusting a bit of leather in her direction.

"What for?"

"Bite down on it when the pain comes. It seems to help make them less."

Morgana took it from Freya's outstretched hand and put the worn hard leather between her teeth just in time for another pain. Freya was right. It worked at least little.

* * * *

Erik's sword gleamed in the dull daylight, polished to a razor hone. "So you seek satisfaction? Now you may have it," he snarled toward his opponent. The rest of the clan penned them into a circle, watching to see who would be the victor, going so far as to place gambles.

"I am going to enjoy cutting you down, rogue," Eynon growled, circling Erik with his own weapon drawn.

"We shall see, old man. Your daughter is quite happy with me. Why do you seek to ruin it?"

"Because she ruined all my plans for the future, heathen. I could have had an iron clad alliance with England as well as income from their crown. Instead, my daughter sought to ruin me."

Erik walked in the same circle in the beaten path among the reeds, his eyes trained on the older warrior. Why was the man so hell bent on revenge against his daughter? Why could he not be happy? "You sound more like a jealous lover than a father, Welshman. Why do you put your politics above your child's happiness?"

Eynon's sword dropped slightly. "Nay, I do not! My daughter's happiness is of the utmost importance."

"How can it be when you say she ruined your plans? She is the most precious thing to me, a light in my life that I never thought to see again. Even if I did not care for her, I would keep her here rather than return to Wales with you."

Eynon's face turned a darker crimson. "She is of no concern to you! She is my daughter, and I will do as I see fit."

"Morgana is also my wife, Welshman, bound to me forever by the laws of Odin."

"Enough talk!" Eynon shouted as his sword raised. "I am going to run you through and take my daughter back to Wales where she belongs!"

"We shall see about that, Eynon."

Before Erik could finish his sentence, Lin's head peeped out of the window. "Erik, Morgana has begun to labor with the child!"

Erik gestured with the tip of his sword for his men to take a hold of Eynon. "Take care of him until I return."

With that, he rushed into the hall and up the stairs, his heart pounding excitement. His child would make an appearance by the end of the day!

At the door of his chamber, Colean stood in front, barring his entry. Her dainty hand went to his chest in an effort to stop him. "No, Erik. Morgana needs to be with women right now, not you. You have done enough," she chuckled then gently turned him around toward the stairs. "You will be called when the child his here."

His heart pounded in his chest as the fear for Morgana's safety bolted through him. "Is she all right? Does she call for me?" Fury, mingled with anxiety, rumbled through this body. His door remained closed, and he could not see in to witness what was happening.

Colean tilted her black head. "Of course she calls for you, but it is not time for you to see her. Once she and the babe are clean, I will permit you to see them. Now run along."

His mother pushed him with a gentle nudge, and he stalked down the steps. He only wanted to be by her side when the child emerged, that was all. His mother thought differently. Nay, she was not the final rule.

Chapter 20

Her pain lasted for hours or so it seemed as the twilight covered the land in a rich velvety blue tapestry. Morgana wanted to cry out, and, several times, she did, only succeeding in bringing Erik pounding on the door with a demand to come in. Colean stood firm, refusing him entry.

"Bear down, Morgana," Colean urged from the void between her legs. "We can see the head now."

"I ... I ... do not think I can," she mumbled. "I am exhausted."

"Just a few pushes and the babe will be free from your womb," Colean stated.

Lin and Freya both held her hands while Brestla wiped her forehead with a cool clothe as the midwife and Colean kept constant watch on the babe.

Morgana rode the next wave of pain and pushed. It felt as though the crevice between her legs split in half.

"The head is out, Morgana! I am going to clear the nose and mouth. When I tell you to push, do it," ordered the midwife sternly. A few quick swipes of the midwife's fingers freed the baby's passages of mucous. "Now push, Morgana."

Morgana leaned up again, pushing with all she had in her, using the next pain as a starting point. Grunts echoed from her mouth as she did so. The exhaustion crept in and took everything she possessed.

"You can stop now! The babe is out!" cried the midwife.

There was a slap and a distinct wail of the child echoing through the room. Morgana leaned back onto the pillows and took a deep breath. It was finally over.

Erik heard the wail of an infant in the hall, as did her father who sat chained in a chair next to him. His heart soared. "I have a child and you have a grand child. Is that not something to rejoice in?"

Eynon only looked away, hanging his head as if he were ashamed about the child.

His body trembled with excitement as well as anxiety. Did he have a son or a daughter? He leapt from his chair and paced in front of the roaring fire, his hands curled to fists at his sides. Were Morgana and the child all right? Did it possess all it was supposed to? It took all he had to wait for a summons instead of rushing up to the chamber as his heart told him to.

Suddenly, his mother appeared at the top of the stairs with a bundle in her arms. "Erik, would you like to see your child?"

In stunned disbelief, he nodded. Colean drifted down the stone stairs carefully, holding the hefty bundle out to him. "Erik, I present to you your son."

She pulled back the covers to reveal a light haired infant that was a beautiful combination of them both. "Would you like to hold him?"

He did not know what to say, his chest hurting with so much pride and love. He held his arms out, taking the baby from his mother. It was large and hefty, as though the child must be composed of all muscle. "Is Morgana all right?" he whispered as he looked down at his newborn son, his heart swelling with pride. This was the most magnificent gift any woman had ever given him.

Colean nodded. "Of course. She fed the little one then went to sleep for a little while. As you can see, it has been a most trying day for her," she murmured brushing the baby's fine hair. "He reminds me of you when you were born, Erik. He will be a big man like you."

Colean turned to Eynon. "Here is the child of your daughter and my son. Do you not wish to see him?"

Eynon turned slightly, his face turning into a scowl. "Nay, I do not. That child was conceived under false pretenses, and you know it."

He walked over to Eynon, holding the baby towards him. "Come, Eynon, you must look at the child." Eynon shook his head. "That is your own undoing, Eynon," Erik remarked as he moved toward the stairs. "Morgana will be most disappointed."

With that, Erik mounted the steps carefully with his newborn son in his arms, his mother closely behind him. This was perhaps the most joyous day of his life aside from day that he had married his true love.

* * * *

Morgana heard the door creak open. Her eyes fluttered a bit. In the dim light provided by the tallow in the wall sconces, she saw Erik coming in with their son in his arms. Weakly, she pushed herself up among the pillows. "I see that you are pleased it is a son," she smiled.

Erik nodded as he sat next to her on the bed. "I know not what to say, Morgana. No woman has ever given that side of herself to me before. This is far more precious than anything I could have dreamed about," he murmured softly, laying one of his large fingers into the baby's hand. The infant instinctively curled its tiny fingers around it.

Morgana brushed the baby's white hair. "We should name him. What would you like to call him?"

Erik leaned back a little bit and stretched his legs out. "His second name will be Eriksson. As for his first, I think I will let you decide."

Morgana leaned against the pillows, her sore belly straining a little. She winced slightly at the pain. "I think I should like to call him Kenyon."

"Why Kenyon?"

Her smile broadened. "It is combination of my father's and my brother's name." Erik grew more puzzled so she explained further. "If it had not been for my brother's love growing up, I would not have had the strength to leave. As for my father, his iron will forced me out of Wales. Little did I know I would find true happiness beyond the boundaries of my beloved homeland."

Erik's lips pulled into a half grin. "Then 'tis all settled. Kenyon Eriksson it is."

Her mouth turned into a frown as the panic flooded her body. "Where is my father? He is still alive, is he not?"

"Aye, my dear, he is. We barely drew our swords when Lin shouted that the child was coming. I had your father, as well as the rest of his party, taken into custody while I tended to you."

Morgana let out an exhausted sigh of relief. "It does my heart wonders to hear that you did not fight Father, but I am not pleased he is in custody. Where is he?"

He stroked the Kenyon's soft cheek, marveling at the wondrous beauty. "Downstairs, chained to a chair."

"Would you bring him to me?"

Erik looked up as surprise registered on his face. "Why?"

"I wish to see him and make him understand that my life is here, with you."

Erik's gaze flicked to the baby who by now was beginning to stir. "I do not know, Morgana. Suppose, he tries to harm you or the child."

She laid a reassuring hand on his arm. "He will not, I promise. Deep down, my father loves me and respects my decision. Once he sees Kenyon and knows his name, I think things will change."

He let out a deep grunt. "All right, if that is what you wish. Just remember that my sword will be close at hand should he try something."

Morgana leaned forward, brushing his stubble filled cheek with a kiss. "I have never broken a promise to you, have I?"

* * * *

Morgana drew the edges of her gown together as Kenyon finished his next meal when her father entered, followed by Erik. His hands remained shackled together, his magnificent sword stripped from his waist. The dark eyes she remembered held puzzlement as well as anger mingled with other undefinable emotions. "Please sit down, Father," she murmured softly, gesturing to her side of the bed.

Eynon said nothing as he sat down, casting his gaze to the other side of the dim room. "Why have you called me here, Morgana?"

"I wanted to show you my son," she stated gently, holding out the bundle toward him.

"I have seen him," he replied icily.

Morgana shook her head. "No, Father, really see him." With that, Morgana peeled back the blankets and held the babe out for him to see. Eynon's stare remained diverted

for a moment then turned toward the infant. His old eyes widened as his fingers reached out to touch the silky softness of the new flesh.

"He looks just as you did when you were born," Eynon murmured, his fingers stroking the cheek.

"Do you not see, Father, he is a part of me just as he is a part of you. He was meant to be the son of a Viking lord and Welsh princess. This is my destiny, and I have fulfilled it. No words can describe the incredible happiness I feel."

Eynon turned his face toward her. "Are you truly happy, Morgana? Can you truly say that this child was born of love and not ravishment or lust?"

Her gaze flicked to Erik as a wide smile crossed her lips. "I can say that with all my heart."

* * * *

Bright rays of sun burst through the haze surrounding Darvisson in the few days since Kenyon's birth. Morgana stood next to Erik on the rocky shore where the edge of the water lapped at the bed of stones. Kenyon lay asleep in his father's arms, his belly full of new milk. Morgana held tightly onto Erik's arm as she watched her father and brother get ready to leave.

Eynon kissed her on both cheeks and stepped back. "Morgana, my darling daughter, I am truly happy that you are in love. I spent too much time worrying about negotiations and politics. I know now you had to do what you did in order to be happy." He peered into Kenyon's face, his wide grin infectious. "If it had not been for all that madness, my beautiful grandson Kenyon would not be here."

She returned the embrace. "Aye, Father. I have never been happier in my life. I have a husband I love as well as his child that I treasure. I need nothing more."

Kennuric kissed her warmly as well, stepping back. "My sister, how I am going to miss you," he remarked as his eyes moistened. "Wales will not be the same."

She kissed his grizzled cheek. "It will, Kennuric. You will be a great King someday with a beautiful wife by your side."

Kennuric let out a small laugh. "That may be, but she will never stand up to the indomitable presence of the Viking Queen."

She frowned. "Who are you talking about?"

He chuckled her playfully under the chin. "That is you, you silly goose!"

"Kennuric, we must leave," his father ordered, "before the winds turn on us and we will not get the proper sail."

"Goodbye my sister and fare well. Please come and visit us in Wales because I would like to get to know Kenyon a little more."

"Only if you promise to visit Darvisson now and then."

Kennuric nodded. "That is a promise."

"Goodbye, Morgana. May God's graces rain down upon you," her father offered as he climbed into the small boat.

"They already have, Father. Take care, and I hope to see you again someday."

He nodded. "Aye, that you will. I love you, Morgana."

"I love you both," she confessed as the tears pricked the inside of her eyelids.

Kennuric and Eynon climbed into the boat as well as the rest of the captives. She waved goodbye to them all, especially Robert who helped her through this trial. His aged

hand rose weakly as he waved. Deep in her heart, she knew he would not make the journey home. It saddened her slightly, but she knew Robert. There was no better place for him to die than the sea.

The tiny ship shoved off from the shore filled with its Welsh passengers, rowing toward the larger ship anchored in the fjord. The fog had cleared leaving the effervescent blue of the water as the whitecaps gently rolled in, cutting across the bow of the smaller ship.

Morgana kept waving, even as the boat passed through the inlet and disappeared into the slight curtain of fog at the other side.

“Are you all right, Morgana?”

She nodded as she wiped away tears. “I am much better than I have been in a long time,” Morgana said then turned to Erik. “Shall we go inside and get to know our son a little more?”

Erik’s sensual lips pulled into a tight smile. “I can think of nothing better.”

THE END