

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVE
Quickies
Naughty Nuptials

*Seducing
the Enemy*

Anna J. Evans

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Seducing the Enemy

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SEDUCING THE ENEMY

Anna J. Evans

Chapter One

A matted fur hood cast a dark shadow over the man's face so only the tip of a nose and the barest hint of a strong chin caught the orange glow of the firelight. The hands that held his robe closed were blackened with dirt, and by the way the door guard covered his nose as he waved the stranger inside, his scent must be as unpleasant to take in as the rest of him.

All in all, Heaven's Gate's most recent patron looked the furthest thing from a young, vibrant prince on the verge of becoming his planet's next king.

"That can't be him," Mina whispered into her purple drink, but Astrid understood her perfectly, probably would have been able to read her friend's thoughts from the slight quirk of her eyebrow without the words being spoken.

Mina had been her closest friend since the year the women and girl children of their tribe had been exiled to the remote planet of Tiber fifteen years past. They had starved together, fought together and at times even comforted each other with their bodies during the long, steamy nights of Tiber's ten-moon summer.

Though they had both realized long ago that the love between them wasn't of the passionate sort, they were sensual women with bodies that cried out for a few moments on the edge of bliss. They suspected it was a male's touch they truly craved, but how was one to know when the only creatures on their planet with shafts between their legs were the wild animals they fought to survive?

"There must have been a mistake."

"There is no mistake. It's him. I'd know that chin anywhere," Astrid said, eyes narrowing as she homed in on the shadowed face.

It was him, all right, the man whose visage was plastered over every available posting board on the Endelvean moon where their ship had landed late the night

before. No one else would suspect that the Prince of Endelvea would dare land on one of the rough, outlaw-ridden moons, but Astrid had known he would come. Once he realized the sacred sword of his forefathers was missing, he would have no choice but to search, and Astrid had risked everything to ascertain she knew exactly where he would go looking.

“This was a horrible idea. We should never have come. What are you going to do if we fail? The Glagors won’t be merciful, they’ll make you pay the—”

“We won’t fail. He’s here, and he’s unguarded. The hardest part is accomplished, now all we have to do is get him to our ship without being observed.”

“He’s enormous, and we have no weapons. How will we ever force—”

“We aren’t going to use force,” Astrid said, letting her simple fur cape slide off her shoulders to puddle in the seat behind her. She shivered from the double hit of the cold air on her nearly bare skin, and the heat of dozens of male eyes suddenly upon her. Heaven’s Gate was one of the roughest bars on Endelvea Moon Three, and she and Mina had already created quite a stir even in their bulky, shapeless clothing, simply by being female.

“Oh dear goddess mother,” Mina whispered.

“Relax, you look scared.”

“I am scared. These men look as if they’re going to leap upon you and tear you limb from limb.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Endelveans aren’t cannibals.”

“You know what I mean,” Mina said, her deep green eyes expressing just how little humor she found in their current situation.

“Calm yourself. Men only rarely force a woman into intercourse, and never in a public place,” Astrid said, taking a slow sip of her drink and praying she was right. Her mother and older aunts had told her much about men—their bodies, their customs, the way they behaved in the marriage bed—but who knew how the world had changed in

fifteen years? Maybe men really did leap upon women and ravage them like the giant fruit bats on Tiber ripped into ripened ganna melons.

She had no way of knowing for sure. Not a single woman of the Artuan tribe had laid eyes on a man for fifteen years. They had borne no sons or daughters, and each day that passed brought their once powerful race closer to extinction. Astrid had sworn that she would make a deal with the demons of the universe themselves if it meant a chance to save her people, to bring the comfort of the handfast and the marriage bed to women still haunted by memories of the husbands the Endelvean king had slain.

Nothing could bring those husbands or fathers back, but at least her mother and the older women of her tribe, as well as Mina and her other friends, would have the chance to find love. They could put their years of exile behind them and once again share their lives with a man who would care for them and their children. Her mother had sworn that not all men or kings were hateful creatures who would exile women and children to an inhospitable planet. Astrid had believed her, but it was becoming difficult to hold on to that dream of a decent, loving man when all she had seen since their ship landed were criminals and skeevers of the worst sort.

“Oh goddess!” Mina squeaked, her eyes round as she buried her face in her drink and took a deep draw on her curly, pink straw.

“Be careful. This liquor is stronger than what we brew at home.”

“I think I just saw a man’s shaft. He pulled up his robe, and winked at me!”

“Did you wink back?” Astrid asked, unable to keep her eyes from scanning the crowd, incredibly curious to see that part of a man with her own eyes.

“Don’t joke, Astrid. It was hideous, fat and red and...monstrous-looking.”

“Surely it can’t be that horrible. Our mothers say the marriage bed was a pleasurable place,” Astrid said, her voice sounding amazingly sure to her own ears, despite the knot of anxiety that tightened her belly. Monstrous or not, she would soon be taking a man, and his shaft, to bed. There was no other choice for her.

Her eyes found him almost of their own accord, drawn to the nearly seven feet of man who still lurked near the entry to the bar. He leaned against the wall, hidden in deep shadows, but she could feel his attention on her. He was looking at her, taking in her pale skin, covered only by the shining blue pluran scales she had strung together especially for this mission. With her long, nearly blue-black hair hanging in a silky wave down to her waist, and the shining scales catching the gray of her eyes, Astrid knew that she was a striking vision. She'd had doubts about whether that vision would entice the male of the species, but those doubts were gone. She could feel the burning desire, the hunger that pulsed through the room. These men wanted her, wanted to bed her, but only one would have the privilege—her future husband, the man most of the galaxy considered the most handsome male alive.

If the galaxy could see him now, however, covered in grime and apparently smelling like a shit stack, they might have other ideas. She'd had other ideas from the beginning. What did it matter if the man was beautiful? He was the son of an evil tyrant, and most likely as wicked as his sire. She was in for a lifetime of misery as his wife, but it was a small price to pay for the freedom of her people.

"I'm going to approach him." Astrid pushed aside thoughts of her fate. The price for failure was even greater than the misery of success, the Glagors had made that clear. She would not fail.

"Astrid?"

"Yes?" Astrid turned back to where Mina still sat in the booth, looking incredibly small. She was at least two hands taller than Astrid herself, but huddled in the oversized chair, she looked like little more than a child.

"Don't forget me. Don't leave me here," she whispered, her eyes wide and frightened.

"I would never leave you. You're my tribe sister, and always first in my heart," Astrid said, her heart in her throat as she bent to press a quick kiss to Mina's lips.

Three of the men seated to their left let out a chorus of approving grunts that surprised Astrid enough to break off the kiss and turn in their direction. The lust in their eyes was menacing. They had obviously enjoyed watching her and Mina touch lips. It wasn't at all the reaction she would have expected, but Astrid gave them all a slow smile and stored the bit of information away for later. If she was going to coax the kind of responses required for the handfast from her prince, she would need all the help she could get.

Jorunn watched her approach, and fought to control the instinctive response of his body. The woman wasn't much taller than his younger sister Grelod, who had only ten summers, but every inch of her was pure, ripe, tempting female. Her full hips twitched temptingly as she walked and the heavy orbs of her breasts, only barely concealed by the shining fabric she wore, bounced to the rhythm of the music that filled the bar. Her body was built for a man's pleasure, but that alone he might have been able to resist. He'd had his pick of women in this system from the time he was barely a man, and had learned long ago that there was more to a good bedding than a pretty face or a beautiful body.

No, it was the look on her face that tipped him over the edge. Her eyes held the confidence of a woman who knew how to take what she wanted from her lover, and allow herself to be taken in return. She was the type who would push his head down between her legs to feast upon her cream, then let him fist his hand in her silky hair and show her how deeply, how quickly, he liked for her to take his cock down her throat. The thought of those plump lips parting around his engorged shaft was almost enough to draw a groan from his own lips, and more than enough to make him lose the battle with his body.

"Hello, stranger. You've not been here before," she said, her voice liquid honey.

“Neither have you.” As he spoke, he shifted position slowly, wondering if she’d already noticed the erection tenting his thick robes or if there might still be some chance of disguising his reaction and convincing her to leave him be.

Bedding beautiful women was not on his agenda tonight, especially not the kind of woman who frequented bars on Moon Three. The prostitutes here were just as likely to gut you as fuck you, and he had never enjoyed the idea of sex for hire. He’d thought the Grunu dung he’d smeared on the hem of his robe before entering the establishment might help discourage such attention. Evidently he’d underestimated the work ethic of the juicy girls here at Heaven’s Gate.

“How could you tell?” she asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

“You and your friend are attracting too much attention to be regulars.”

“Maybe we regularly attract attention.” She smiled, a slightly wicked grin that sent another jolt of electricity surging down into his already aching cock.

“You won’t live to attract anything if you don’t watch yourself on Moon Three. It’s not the place for a woman like you.” Even as the words left his mouth, Jorunn wondered why he bothered speaking them.

He didn’t have time to concern himself with a foolish prostitute who was prowling waters too dangerous for her to handle. If the sword wasn’t found within the next moon cycle, his father’s throne, soon to be *his* throne, could be legally challenged by anyone in their clan. Knowing the bloodthirsty Beltorians, they would gladly leap at the opportunity to challenge him in the combat ring. Jorunn didn’t fear for his life or his throne, but he didn’t relish the idea of killing relatives, especially relatives who had wives and children.

“And what kind of woman is that?” The words were at once combative and flirtatious, and the fire in her eyes almost enough to make him give her the standard signal of engagement.

He could have her, right here in the bar, if he so desired. Here in the shadows, a man could get his cock serviced, by mouth or cunt, any time of day or night as long as

he and his juicy girl kept the noise at a respectable level. Not many bar patrons had the cash to rent a room, but the owners of these places knew that women were as good a lure as any when it came to drawing in customers. They and the other patrons would turn a blind eye, and he could be buried balls-deep in her sweet little pussy in less than ten seconds.

And her pussy would be sweet, he had no doubt about that.

"I'm not buying tonight. You're wasting your time," he said, turning his eyes to scan the bar. If he kept looking into those liquid blue-gray eyes, he wouldn't be able to resist temptation much longer.

"I don't understand. I have nothing for sale," she said, her tone frustrated as well as...something else. Desperate? Why would such a woman be so anxious to score a client?

She was beautiful, stunning enough to engage dozens of men a night. In fact, she was almost too beautiful. Even if she came from one of the less socially desirable tribes, this one should have been able to find a man to handfast with her. She should never have made it to such a low place, forced to earn her living by men's use of her body.

"What's your name?" Jorunn asked. There was something off here, something that alerted his fine-tuned survival instincts. The traces of moon dust left behind at the sword's resting place had been a perfect match to Moon Three, but the way the dust had been so carelessly strewn about the crypt had made him wary from the start.

It was too easy, too sloppy for a criminal capable of slipping past his father's guards and gaining entrance to the crypt in the first place.

"Astrid. My name is Astrid."

"Astrid. A beautiful name, and a beautiful woman." Jorunn spoke the words slowly as he scanned Astrid's small frame. The blue fabric wasn't cloth at all, but some sort of animal scales, not anything like the women's clothing he'd seen for sale in the system's many shopping satellites.

She was most likely a citizen of one of the more rural planets where they still made their own coverings, which only increased his suspicion. Women from the outer reaches rarely made it to the Endelvean regions. Their men were fiercely territorial and prostitution was illegal on all of those planets. No woman was allowed to go unmated, no matter what her social status, especially not one as stunning and fertile-looking as this one.

“And what is your name?” she asked, a frown twitching at her lips even as her cheeks blushed bright red.

“You don’t enjoy having your beauty praised?” he asked, ignoring her question. She had to know who he was. His father had distributed the announcements of his impending coronation over every settlement in the realm. They might not have holographic posting boards where she was from, but he wouldn’t be surprised if his father had demanded his image plastered on the milking towers and grain-storing sheds.

“Beauty is passing, strength is what matters.” She stepped closer, not showing any response to the stink that surrounded him.

“I’ve never underestimated the strength of the female of the species,” he said, as he casually gave the three-fingered signal that would tell a true juicy girl that he was ready to engage her services. If she didn’t respond, he’d know that his suspicions were founded, if she did...well, then he supposed he’d have to follow through and fuck her.

“Wonderful. Then would you like to come with me to my ship?”

“To your ship? You prefer I take you there? I won’t pay a bed rental fee,” Jorunn warned. Her response seemed to indicate that she was ready to accept his signal, but he’d never heard of a prostitute who owned her own ship. Perhaps he should take things a little further with Astrid, simply to make sure they understood one another. “In fact, I’m not sure I want you lying down.”

Her eyes grew wide as he looped one arm around her waist and pulled her toward him, spinning them until her back pressed against the wall. "What if I prefer to stay in the bar?"

"Well, I...wouldn't..." Her words trailed off into silence as he ran one hand casually along the delicate column of her neck, and down to where her dress dipped low between her breasts. He traced the line of her garment, teasing over each full swell, until her breath came faster and her eyes fluttered closed. Only then did he tug at the fabric, causing her breasts to spill out the top.

She gasped and her eyes flew open. "Wait, I—"

"You would rather end the engagement now?" Jorunn tried to fix his attention on reading her expression, but it was impossible to keep his eyes above her neck. Her breasts were exquisite, two ripe mounds topped by dusky nipples that practically begged to be suckled into his mouth. His mouth watered at the thought and his cock responded in kind, beginning to leak with excitement.

"No," she whispered, her nipples tightening under his gaze

Gods, he wanted to bed this woman, and he wanted to do it properly, not here with a hundred eyes on them. And eyes *were* on them. Half the bar had grown silent as men became aware of the show taking place against the far wall. This wasn't what he'd intended. He'd planned to lay low, to do his best *not* to attract attention. But now that he'd started with Astrid, he couldn't seem to stop.

"So you'd let me touch you, take you, right here? If I chose?" He cupped one breast in his hand and ran a thumb over the erect tip. Astrid shivered, her eyes sliding closed as she nodded her head in affirmation.

"Yes?" he asked, moving both hands to her chest and rolling her tight nipples between his fingers. Her show of desire seemed utterly free of affectation. Either she was a consummate actress, or Astrid was truly aroused by what they were doing.

Maybe that's why she'd become a juicy girl in the first place—maybe she actually enjoyed fucking strange men in public. There was one way to find out...

He dropped one hand and slid it up the inside of her thigh, nearly groaning as a trail of wet heat meet his fingers before he'd even reached her sex. She was drenched, sufficiently ready for him to turn her around, lift her dress, and ram into her sweet depths. Or perhaps, considering her height, it would work better between them if he hitched her up around his waist and fucked her against the wall.

Jorunn did groan then, his furiously swollen cock nearly enough to persuade him to finish this right here. But no matter that Astrid seemed to enjoy a public display, he wasn't the type who liked to share, especially with a bunch of criminals and thieves. He didn't want anyone else to see Astrid's face when she came, her slick pussy gripping his cock as he pumped away inside her.

"We will go to your ship," Jorunn said, his voice tight as he pulled her dress up to cover her. "But, as I stated, I will not pay extra."

She breathed heavily for a moment, meeting his eyes with undisguised heat before she swallowed, visibly taking control of herself. "Not only will I not ask for payment, but I will serve you drink and make sure that you sleep tonight with a smile on your face."

"I have no doubt of that," he said, dropping one hand to her hip and squeezing the full flesh there.

"All I ask in exchange is that you wash the stink from your body," she said, sliding away from him when he would have closed the distance between them. "You smell like you spent the night on a shit stack."

He laughed, a genuine laugh that rumbled out of his core and surprised him more than he would have liked to admit. By the gods, how long had it been since anything, anyone had made him laugh? It might have been years, certainly before his father demanded he return to Endelvea and begin his training to take over the throne of his people. Ruling was not something he feared, but ruling the way his father insisted would kill a part of his soul. Jorunn knew there was a core of ruthlessness in his heart,

but he couldn't believe it was necessary to slay his own citizens to protect his right to rule them.

"I'm not jesting, you will bathe. I insist upon it," she said, her full mouth pursing into a thin line that begged him to tease along it with his tongue.

"For you I would submerge myself in the boiling sea," he said, taking her small hand in his and pulling her toward the exit. Heaven's Gate would still be standing in a few hours. He would sate his lust with the beautiful Astrid, and then return to root out the man or men who had dared steal the sacred sword of his forefathers.

"Wait, I must bring my companion along. She is very attached to me and will not be left behind," Astrid said, motioning to the red-haired beauty he had seen her gift with a kiss before she approached him. He had lain with several women who enjoyed another female in their bed, but for some reason, the thought of Astrid in the larger woman's arms made him jealous. He didn't want to share her, not even with a member of her own sex.

"Of course. It isn't safe for her here alone, but let me make this clear, Astrid. I want only one woman this night, and I want her all for my own." He wrapped an arm around her narrow waist and pulling her close, fitting her body against his until he was certain she could feel the thick shaft of his need pressing against her.

The electricity that arced between them the instant their bodies touched nearly took his breath away.

"And I only one man." She whispered the words only inches from his lips, seemingly as drunk on the anticipation of what was to come as he himself.

Dear gods, he was going to enjoy this night, more than he had dreamed when he set out for Moon Three this morning, certain that no good was to be found in such a den of outlaws and thieves.

Chapter Two

“Will you not have another drink? The night is cold and the ship has yet to—”

“My thirst for liquid is sated. Tell your friend to leave us,” he said, his bright amber eyes never wavering from her own. Astrid shifted uncomfortably on the edge of the cot, struggling to ignore the pulse between her legs and the sticky juices that already coated the dress beneath her.

“I’ll go to the control room, Astrid, and check our coordinates. I’m not tired just yet,” Mina said, giving her a hard look. The sedative should begin to take effect any minute. All Astrid had to do was entertain the prince until that time.

“Very well. Thank you for the drinks.” Goddess, she sounded as out of sorts as she felt. How had she thought she could manage this kind of seduction when she knew about as much about men as she did piloting this ship? She and Mina would have crashed for sure if the Glagor who gave her the vessel hadn’t preprogrammed the coordinates and set the ship on autopilot.

“Put down your drink,” Jorunn demanded as soon as the portal slid closed behind her friend.

Astrid did as he asked, trying not to notice how her hand shook as she placed the mug on the table beside her. By the way she trembled, one would think she was afraid of this man, but she wasn’t. At least not that he would hurt her. Despite the muscles that were clearly visible in his arms now that he sat before her freshly bathed, wearing nothing but a loose brown vest and drawstring pants, she instinctively knew Jorunn wouldn’t harm her. He had a kindness in his eyes that was the last thing she had expected to see in the visage of the son of a murdering tyrant. Even when he touched her in the bar, he’d been gentle...not to mention skilled enough to take her breath away.

No, it wasn't the strength in his giant body she feared, it was the reaction he caused in hers. From the second he'd touched her, something deep within her had turned molten, fiery, and the place between her legs burned with a need unlike anything she had ever known. The tips of her breasts ached and the friction of the scales against her aroused flesh gradually became a strange kind of torture.

"Show yourself to me." He leaned back on his elbows, propped comfortably on the bunk across from her. He seemed completely at ease, but the bulge at the front of his pants told another story.

She had sensed the heat of him even through his thick robe, had clearly felt the pulse of his member against her belly. The prince wanted her and was more than ready to stake his claim. It was a pity that the ritual of the handfast had to come before the consummation of their union. At this moment, Astrid knew Jorunn wouldn't object in the slightest to lying with her. After he realized her deception...she feared it would be quite a different story.

"I am seated directly in front of you. I'm certain you can see me quite plainly." Astrid meant the words to be cool and distant, but instead they sounded almost playful, and far more breathy than she would have preferred. Like it or not, this man affected her, made her desire him, yearn for him to touch her again, take her in that way she had only imagined. She was no better than the rest of the females in the galaxy, won over by a handsome face.

"What I can see only makes me want to see more." His eyes swept over her, making her tremble and a rush of wet heat flood between her thighs. She shifted uncomfortably, but the friction of her legs rubbing against each other only intensified her need. Astrid bit her lip to hold back a moan, struggling to focus on the job at hand.

"And you are accustomed to getting what you want?" Just a few more moments, she only had to stall for a few more moments and certainly even a man as large as Jorunn would succumb to the sedative she had placed in his drink.

“I am, but I am told I am also skilled in giving women what they want.” He slowly drew his shirt over his head, baring a purely masculine chest that quickly became an object of fascination. He was beautiful, perfect, and her mouth watered as she imagined kissing her way down that well-muscled stomach, toward where his shaft jutted proudly. Maybe then she would pull at the tie of his pants, satisfying the burning need to see him, touch him, and hold the hot length of him in her hand.

Jorunn smiled at something he saw on her face and pushed away from his bunk to kneel on the floor in front of her. Her breath caught and words abandoned her as he placed his warm hands behind her knees and slowly, but firmly, spread her thighs wide. He held her gaze as he lowered his face between her legs and pressed a soft kiss to the inside her thigh. Another kiss followed, and then another, and then his tongue was laving at her electrified skin, even as his strong hands caressed the backs of her thighs, getting closer and closer to where her buttocks perched on the edge of the cot.

“You smell so very sweet,” he murmured, as he pushed her dress up around her hips, baring her slick, swollen sex to his gaze. “So beautiful, so perfect.”

“What are you doing?” Astrid asked, her hands flying to his head, tangling in surprisingly soft brown hair. His locks were nearly as long as hers, but tied back with a leather tether. She suddenly wanted to set it free and run her hands through its length, feel that softness sliding against her thighs as he kissed her sex.

Great goddess, he was going to kiss her sex! Even the thought of it was enough to draw her nipples into painful points and make the bud of her pleasure strain toward Jorunn’s mouth. Never had she even dreamed that a man would want to do such a thing. She had heard of some women tasting each other so intimately, but she and Mina had only ever used their hands to bring each other to ecstasy. The knowledge that this man’s clever lips would soon be busy between her legs drew a plaintive sound from deep within her, a helpless, needy sound that made her ashamed...but not ashamed enough to push the prince away.

“If you truly don’t plan to charge me coin for this night, then I must pay your price in pleasure. Don’t you want me to bring you pleasure, Astrid?”

He followed the words by opening his mouth and flicking his tongue, just once, across her engorged clit. Astrid cried out and her hips thrust toward him of their own free will, desperate for more, for all of this man who aroused her more than she had even dreamed possible.

He answered her with a growl, pushing her back onto the cot and ripping at the front of her clothing with strong, desperate hands. The garment gave without protest, and scales scattered across the room as he bared her body to his touch, his mouth, the heat of his skin. His lips were suddenly upon hers, hot, needy, his tongue demanding entrance into her mouth. Astrid opened for him without a second thought, her hands clawing into his strong shoulders, pulling him closer, feeling as if he would never be close enough.

His kiss was more erotic than any she had ever known, so different from the soft, sensual caresses that she had known with Mina. Nothing about Jorunn was soft. He was firm, demanding, owning her lips with his until she groaned into the crushing velvet of his mouth, abandoning herself to his possession. She closed her eyes and the musky smell of him flooded through her, the taste of him the most magnificent thing she had ever known. The feel of his calloused hand sliding up the length of her ribs to cup her full, aching breast in his hand soon completely overwhelmed her right mind.

“What is it that you do to me?” He breathed the words against her lips, more a statement than a question and then he was gone, kissing a searing path down the length of her throat.

Astrid’s gasp turned into a desperate cry as his mouth closed around her tightly puckered nipple. He suckled her as a babe would suck at his mother, sending jolts of electricity, of pure raw need, down between her legs. Her already pulsing clit began to throb painfully, building her arousal to a pinnacle of desperation. Astrid writhed beneath Jorunn’s heavy weight and tried to pull his mouth from her breast. She couldn’t

take any more of this sweet torture, she needed, *needed* something from him, something more than his fingers, more than his mouth.

“Please, please,” she moaned, her head tossing feverishly from side to side. He was driving her mad, completely mad, and she didn’t even have the good sense left to care. She wanted, ached, hungered for what this man would give her, whatever he would give her, and goddess damn the consequences.

“I will never make you beg, my sweet,” he said, his words were soft, almost affectionate, completely at odds with the violence with which he wrenched her legs wide apart. He forced her bent knees up and out, baring her completely, from ass to clit, to the mouth he dropped between her legs.

Any shyness she might have felt was banished as soon as his tongue began to spear through her slick, swollen flesh. He explored every inch of her, tracing through the petals of her sex, circling her clit, plunging into the center of her need until Astrid’s entire body quaked. She was so close, so close to a kind of bliss she had never known, but he kept her on the edge, moving away from her pulsing clit just seconds before the tension low in her belly reached the crisis point.

He came back to her entrance, tracing it with his tongue, while his hand spread her juices back to the puckered flesh of her ass. She shuddered at the unexpected contact, but didn’t dare pull away when he gently breached her with a blunt finger. Unexpected or not, it felt too good to try to force him to stop. In fact, she moaned with pleasure as he pushed deeper and deeper, mimicking the motion with the tongue he shoved further into her pussy. Gradually he found a rhythm, in and out with finger and tongue, until every inch of flesh between her legs was quivering, and Astrid practically sobbing with need

“Jorunn! Jorunn, goddess, please,” she moaned, her hands fisting into the rough blanket beneath her.

“I never told you my name.” He said the words casually, never ceasing the torturous work of his tongue against her most intimate of places.

Astrid didn't even have time for her mistake to cool her lust for a moment before one of his large hands slid up and captured her breast. He pinched her erect nipples with his fingers, first one and then the other, rolling them with a roughness that was almost painful, but wasn't because it was what her body burned for. Then, he abandoned her aching breasts, dropping his hand back between her legs. Suddenly, two thick fingers pushed deeply inside her pussy, almost too deeply, and a bolt of real pain sliced through her pleasure, making her scream.

"By the gods..."

He never finished his sentence, but withdrew from her ass as the fingers inside her pussy became softer, gentler. He resumed the sweet circling of her clit with his tongue, this time with a firm pressure that quickly pushed all thoughts of pain far from Astrid's mind.

"Yes, oh yes," she cried, the erotic tension in her womb building, taking her impossibly higher, until every nerve in her body screamed for release.

At that exact moment, Jorunn opened his mouth and took her clit inside, pulling on the straining bud until her world shattered. Her eyes squeezed closed and her heels dug into the mattress, straining to get even closer to the source of so much incredible pleasure. Her channel clutched at the fingers Jorunn still worked gently in and out of her molten core, as her womb contracted with fierce waves that wrung sobbing sounds from her throat.

Her mumbled softly against her pulsing flesh, his warm breath and the tenderness in his voice seeming to draw out her release, until the bliss became too much for her to bear. Hot tears streamed down her face as she reached down to cup his strong jaw in her hands. Whatever he had done to her, he'd touched something more than her body, for now she ached to kiss him, to hold him against her until their hearts beat in time. Surely it could not have been like this with just any man. Maybe, just maybe, the goddess had smiled on her, making her duty to her people a pleasure for her heart as well.

“Did that please you?” he asked, his breath still coming fast as he let her pull his face up to meet hers for a kiss that quickly made her body burn for him once more.

“More than I can express,” she answered, letting her hands roam up and down his back, stroking him, showing with her touch how deeply he had moved her.

“Sweet gods, you are so wet, but I don’t know if it will be enough.” There was a pained expression on his face as he gently slid a finger inside her. “I may hurt you, and I will most certainly ruin you.”

“I don’t understand,” Astrid said, her mind unable to function when he touched her like that.

“You are a virgin, Astrid, but you are no fool. Why waste your maidenhead on some man from a bar on Moon Three, no matter that he is a prince?”

“It will not be wasted,” Astrid said, her heart starting to beat faster as Jorunn’s eyelids drooped slightly. He was starting to succumb to the drug she’d slipped in his drink, and not a moment too soon if he was contemplating taking her virginity. She’d been playing with fire and was only lucky he’d taken a moment before dropping his pants and thrusting inside her, thoroughly ruining any chance for her to make this a completely legal and binding union.

“I can pay you in coin, and find you quarters on Endelvea, but I can’t make any promises. I have important...business...and—”

“I do not want your money, but I will have your promise, Jorunn. I have no other choice,” Astrid said, cupping his face in her hands and praying that he would forgive her. She cared for him, more than she would have thought possible in a few short hours. She saw a chance for a happy union between them, and would not let that chance be destroyed if she could do anything to prevent it.

“You’ve drugged me.” His words were slurred and his eyes filled with shock that slowly turned to rage before her eyes.

“Please, I’m sorry. I didn’t think there was any other way. It won’t hurt you, only make you sleep, and—oh!” Astrid grunted in pain as Jorunn tried to move away, only to fall heavily upon her as the strength in his arms abandoned him.

“How dare you poison your future king?”

“It is not poison, I promise you I—”

“Who are you that I should...take your...word?” His words were nearly incomprehensible and his body as heavy as if he were already asleep, but Astrid took his face in her hands and lifted. He would look her in the eye and know the truth before he succumbed to unconsciousness. For it was the truth, whether he chose her willingly or not, he would belong to her in a day’s time—for now and forever.

“I am Astrid, first lady of the Artuan tribe, and your future bride, as foretold.”

“No,” he muttered, obviously straining with everything in him to hold his eyes open.

“Yes, and I hope—”

He groaned something that sounded completely insulting and then his eyes rolled shut and he fell limp, beginning to snore.

“Mina! We’re clear for departure,” Astrid yelled as loudly as she was able with the weight of such a giant fully on top of her. She heard the ship rumble to life almost immediately and knew Mina’s duties at the controls were finished, but she didn’t call for her friend to come help her move Jorunn. The weight of him was strangely comforting, and a part of her wanted to enjoy a few more moments of closeness with this man. Something told her there wouldn’t be a chance for this kind of contact once they landed on Tiber.

“Or maybe ever again,” she whispered. There was a sudden stinging at the backs of her eyes, but Astrid refused to indulge her emotions. No matter what foolish infatuation she had with this prince, he was nothing more than a means to an end, an end she must achieve for her people, regardless of the consequences to her heart.

Chapter Three

Jorunn's mind moved toward wakefulness with a caution that simply wasn't like him. He was the type of man who leapt out of bed as if the world were on fire, or, at the very least, his home planet under attack.

"And so it is done, the gift given, never to be repaid." The soft, honeyed female voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. The chanting of dozens of other voices nearly overwhelmed her quiet intonation, and the thick smell of burning spices and incense did nothing to banish the fog at the front of his mind.

There was something wrong, he knew that much, but for the life of him he couldn't remember what it was. He was simply too comfortable for anything so terrible to have happened. The bare skin of his chest was caressed by the softest furs imaginable, and his body cradled in what felt like a hammock that listed slowly back and forth. The room was warm, but not too warm, and the smells of the incense mixed seductively with the perfume of Astrid's skin as she leaned close to his body —

Astrid! The lunatic who'd poisoned him, and kidnapped him to boot if he wasn't mistaken.

Carefully, he opened his eyes just enough to take in the roof of a cave, and the bare, oiled breasts of what had to be the sexiest criminal in the galaxy. Even now, with his right mind insisting Astrid should be thrown in the deepest prison hole he could find for her, his body still yearned to mate with hers. He was immediately rock-hard, his cock remembering all too well that he'd lost consciousness before he found release.

"I think he wakes," she muttered, moving swiftly away from him. Good instincts. Too bad she would never be able to run far enough to escape the consequences of her actions. Jorunn considered himself a good man, one who was slow to anger and quick

to forgive...unless you drugged him and carted him off to some godforsaken cave. Then, all bets were off.

“But his eyes are still closed,” came a second female voice.

“I know, but his shaft it...woke and rose toward me.”

“You could see his shaft through the furs?” still a third voice asked. “Oh yes, I suppose you can see it through the furs.”

Jorunn almost picked that moment to lunge from his hammock with a growl and demand that he be returned to Endelvea, but then Astrid spoke again.

“It is an enormous beast. In all honesty, I don’t see how it will fit. He said he would ruin me and I believe it. I’ll walk like I’ve ridden a yadol without a saddle for the rest of my days.”

Laughter filled the cave, a mixture of young and old voices, and Jorunn had to suppress a small smile of his own. He hated this woman, wouldn’t mind seeing her strapped to a wall in his father’s torture chamber and beaten with a cane whip, but what man didn’t like to have his cock praised for its giant size?

Heaven help him, he was as shallow and foolish as the foot soldiers he’d suspended for losing their laser guns to a pack of whores in the Falgar conflict.

“Perhaps it only looks big when covered,” said another familiar voice. It was the voice of Meera, or Minga, Astrid’s friend, and she didn’t sound in the least amused. Guess the woman-loving bitch didn’t enjoy cock. That was just fine with him. He didn’t enjoy being taken captive, and no amount of praise for his member was going to make him merciful.

“No, it is large uncovered as well, even when the wakefulness has gone from it. I peeked at it last night before we landed, I couldn’t help myself.” Astrid giggled after she said the words and several other girlish voices joined her. Dear gods, this was getting ridiculous. These women acted as if they’d never seen a man before.

Never seen a man before...why was that triggering something in his mind? Damn it, if he could just get out of this cave, free of these soft furs and that sweet-smelling smoke, perhaps he'd be able to think clearly.

"Enough, girls. Go fetch the ale. Astrid may drink and then we must find a way to wake Prince Jorunn so that he may partake of the husband's share."

"When my carcass rots on the barren side of Mt. Eldis," Jorunn said, hurling his body forward, only to find his dramatic gesture severely hindered by the bands that secured his wrists to the hammock. Still, he managed to gain his feet, and move a few steps forward toward the ring of women who surrounded him.

Several of the women gasped and backed away, but Astrid and the older, golden-haired woman who stood beside her stood their ground.

"So you are awake. Good then. That will make the rest of the ceremony much easier," the older woman said.

"Mother, I am not sure if he remembers we are to wed, perhaps I should —"

"It matter not what he remembers, only what will soon be accomplished." The look the woman shot her daughter was every bit as hard and cold as the King of Endelvea himself.

But then, she might have been queen one day if his father hadn't killed her man and banished the women of the Artuan tribe. The prophecy said an Artuan first daughter would sit at the left hand of the king, but be as his right. There might have been equal rule between a royal couple for the first time in centuries if his father hadn't committed his atrocities. He hadn't been willing to risk that the prophecy might mean an Artuan man would take his throne, and would never have been able to co-rule with anyone, especially a woman.

His father fucked women, and owned them as worker slaves. He didn't care for them, or respect their opinions. Hell, he'd never even married Jorunn's mother, had only used her to make a son and then ordered her away from his palace, never to contact her child upon penalty of death.

“Listen, I know who you are. You are the Artuan women and no doubt have every reason to wish my father’s death. But this is not the way to right this wrong. You have violated the laws of the—”

“We have violated nothing!” The woman spat the words with such venom that Astrid flinched beside her. “Look, at your feet lies the bride price. Not fit for a prince, but it is all that we have, every ounce of precious metal that we could claw from this hard earth. You and your bride have both been anointed with sacred oil blessed by our priestess, and even now we fetch the ale. Every custom has been observed to make this a legal and binding union, Prince Jorunn. We have violated nothing.”

“You’re insane. You can’t force a man to handfast!”

“We will force nothing. You will perform the ceremony of your own free will,” Astrid’s mother insisted.

“The devil’s dick I will!” Jorunn’s shout rang through the cave and some of the women began to cry, forcing him to bite his tongue and take a long, deep breath. He was not the type of man who inspired weeping in women, and he would not let some psychotic would-be mother-in-law drive him to that sort of behavior. “Excuse my language, but I insist that you set me free. I have important business to attend to.”

“If you mean searching for the sacred sword, you don’t have to worry. It’s here, in my chamber,” Astrid said, bearing up under the wicked look he shot her amazingly well. “We need it for the ceremony to be complete. Afterward it will return to your possession.”

“It will return to my possession now, and you will set me free or I’ll see you hanged for violation of criminal and ancestral law!”

“You wouldn’t hang your wife. Even if you tried, I’d have your father hanged first for murder and denigrating a prophecy and a people,” she snapped, that blue fire in her eyes that had drawn him to her in that damned bar.

“On what authority?”

“On my authority as the new Queen of Endelvea. The law is plain. Once the current ruler passes his third quarter, your marriage automatically makes you king and your mate queen.”

“And who says that my father has passed his third?”

“We may be exiles, but we are not completely ignorant,” Astrid said.

“We are also capable of performing basic arithmetic, you simp,” her redheaded friend sneered, her loathing clear in every word.

“Mina, I will not allow anyone to treat my man with contempt,” Astrid warned, surprising the hell out of him. She was magnetic, beautiful, passionate, clever, devoted to her people and loyal to her would-be husband. In short, she would have been his ideal mate, if she hadn’t enraged him beyond reason.

“You will never be my wife.” He spat the words at her, his anger and frustration at being tricked and held captive by a tribe of women making his voice venomous.

“Perhaps not, but I have seldom failed to achieve my goals.” The words were brave, but he heard the slight tremble in her voice. She feared him, at least a little.

The knowledge should have pleased him, but for some reason it made bile rise in his throat. He forced himself to believe it was the toxin disagreeing with his stomach, not any regret he felt for inspiring fear in a woman who he desired beyond all reason. Even now, with the knowledge of what she meant to do clear in his mind, he still couldn’t keep his gaze from wandering to her breasts, down her softly rounded stomach, and on to the thatch of black, silky hair that covered her pussy. That sweet pussy that had opened to his mouth, his tongue, with an innocent passion that completely took his breath away.

Damn it, he was hard again, and the thin pants he wore would do nothing to hide the fact. Thankfully, Astrid’s mother spoke again, her voice an arousal-killer to beat all others.

“And you will not fail now, my daughter. Failure is not tolerated in an Artuan first daughter,” her mother said, placing a firm hand on Astrid’s bare shoulder that looked

far from gentle or comforting. Too bad the woman had been exiled, she and his father would probably have been an excellent match—if they hadn't killed each other first. "Come, Artuans, let us leave our princess to her prince. We will return after nightfall. Do not fail us, Astrid."

The woman turned and strode through the assembled crowd, toward a distant light that Jorunn assumed was the entrance to the cave. She'd said she would return after nightfall, that must mean that it was daylight outside. Whether it was the day after his kidnapping or many days, however, he had no idea. He had half a mind to demand the knowledge from Astrid, but sensed that his silence would serve him better. Women, all women, no matter what their history, social status or upbringing, craved conversation. Deprive them of that feminine need, and they quickly became unbalanced.

"Jorunn, please, stop looking at me with such hatred. I can't bear it," she said, already starting to shift on her feet. She was nervous. Good, he wanted her nervous, nervous enough to make a mistake that he could exploit to gain his freedom.

He said nothing, only increased the ferocity of his scowl and moved a few inches closer to where she stood, straining his bonds until the cuffs around his wrists began to burn.

"I promise you that I didn't mean to— Well, I did mean to, but that was before I— before we—I mean you... Goddess help me," she cursed, dropping her face into her hands and heaving a desperate sigh.

Jorunn smiled. She might talk tough, but Astrid was nothing like her mother. She was easy prey, a soft female, at the mercy of her emotions. He would be free before her tribeswomen returned and then the Artuans would learn what a very poor decision it had been to kidnap a Beltorian prince.

Astrid took a deep breath through her hands, drawing in the scent of the incense. The smell had always calmed her, even when the giant strews had hunted just outside the door of their cave, trapping them for weeks in the darkness of their shelter. Even

then, she had never lost faith that she and her tribeswomen would one day be free of this savage planet, and she'd be damned before she would let one man make her despair.

"Right," Astrid whispered, forcing herself to face him, to confront the rage in his eyes.

He might hate her, he might wish to punish her for what she had done, but if the strained fabric of his pants were to be trusted, he still wanted her. She would use that want, manipulate that desire to guide them both through the remainder of the handfast ceremony. She had no other choice. Success meant freedom for her people, and failure a future too terrible to contemplate. Mina was right. The Glagors would not be merciful. If she didn't hold up her end of the bargain, she would pay the price, and time was running out.

"Very well, my prince. I had hoped we might be able to enjoy the coming—"

He cut off her words with a loud snort that told her exactly what he thought of enjoying anything with her. Fine. He could choose to make this difficult if he wished, make her feel a fool for letting him so easily touch her heart, but it would do nothing to alter his destiny. He was hers, and she would soon be his. It was prophecy, and none could fight the will of the gods.

No, but he could resist you for days, until it's too late and the Glagors come to collect.

Astrid pushed away all thoughts of failure as she lifted the goblet of ale from the floor.

"I will die of thirst before I take ale with you," Jorunn said, then clamped his mouth shut, the twitch of the large muscle in his jaw showing how tightly he pressed his teeth together.

"You will die of thirst?" Astrid asked, taking a long, slow sip of the ale. It was the sweetest they had ever brewed and slid down her throat with a burning caress that made her sigh with pleasure. "What a waste that would be."

“I will not be seduced so easily, Astrid. Now that I know the coldness in your heart, your body is no longer a sweet sight to my eyes.”

“But it is still sweet to your shaft, I think.” A shiver worked its way over her skin as Jorunn’s scowl turned truly menacing. Astrid reminded herself it would be wiser not to crack the whip of her sharp tongue. She did not hate this man. In fact, in those long hours when she had held him close to her as he slept, she had almost come to believe that she loved him. Maybe, just maybe, if he knew her true feelings, his temper would be soothed. “Jorunn, my heart is not cold. The way you touched me, kissed me, last night was more beautiful than I can express. My heart has...softened for you, and I wish for this union to bring you pleasure, to—”

“There will be no union, but you will bring me pleasure,” he said, moving a step closer until the bands on his arms looked as if they would snap in two from the pressure. “For I will have your maidenhead, Astrid. You will not have me for your husband, but neither will you have another when I am finished with you.”

The words were hard, but for some reason they still made her sex throb with excitement. What sickness had claimed her mind that her body responded even to his rage? Was she so desperate to mate that she was willing to sate her lust upon him, regardless of the terms?

No, you are not! You are an Artuan first daughter, not some lovesick fool.

“I understand your anger, but I have done this for my people. Your father killed my father, my uncles and my two brothers, all of them dead before my seventh year. Can you not take a moment to think of any but yourself?”

“These were my father’s sins. Are you so desperate for a husband that you would kidnap an innocent man and force him to bind with you against his will?”

“This from the man who was so desperate to kiss my sex that he practically ran all the way from the bar to my ship!” Astrid cursed herself as soon as the heated words left her mouth. So much for sweetness, now she would simply have to rely on seduction.

Before he could speak again, Astrid took a deep drink of the ale, holding it in the warmth of her mouth as she stalked toward him. His eyes narrowed as she approached, but he didn't move, did nothing to stop her when she ran her hands up over the oiled muscles of his chest.

His skin was slick and smooth, and deliciously hard, and Astrid was suddenly possessed by urge to press her breasts against him. What would it feel like for every inch of their bare bodies to slip and slide against each other as they mated, as the need within them built to a pinnacle of ecstasy? Would the oil help ease his way as he pushed inside her, finally ridding her of the maidenhead that she was more than ready to be free of?

"If you set me free, I will swear an oath to take up the cause of your people," Jorunn said, a hint of shame in his eyes.

Astrid answered him by slipping in between his bound hands, wrapping her arms around his neck and jumping into the air, hooking her ankles around his waist. His breath hissed from his slightly parted lips and every muscle in his body grew tense, but he moved his hands to cradle her bottom, holding her in place. Astrid let her eyes close as she felt his shaft thicken between her spread legs. Goddess, she wanted him. Not for her people, but for herself. She wanted to lose herself in his smell, his taste, the feel of his roughened hands upon her, and never find her way free.

He groaned as she nuzzled her face into the crook of his neck, running her lips along his skin. She answered by wiggling her hips, grinding her center against his arousal. Jorunn immediately began to help her, using his bound hands to urge her clit closer, harder, until Astrid felt her nipples tighten and things low in her body twist with pleasure.

"By the gods, what dark magic do you work upon me?" he asked, following the words by fisting his hand in her hair and pulling her away from his sweet skin. "Did you hear me? I will right the wrongs of my father, but you must stop this, before—"

Astrid closed the distance between their mouths, pressing her lips against his. The second they touched, she felt the wicked desire from the night before rage to life with a vengeance. Her sex let forth a rush of cream and every nerve ending in her body screamed for her to hold him tighter, to press him closer, to never let him go until they were joined in every way that a man and woman could be.

The sensations were so intense, that she would have completely forgotten what this kiss was meant to accomplish if Jorunn hadn't chosen that moment to part her lips with his tongue, sending the ale gushing into this mouth. Quickly, Astrid angled her head, sealing their lips together, letting the liquid flow between their sparring tongues until he swallowed it down, and then licked the last of the honeyed taste from her own lips.

"I suppose you won't be dying of thirst."

"Neither will I be handfasting."

"We'll see about that," Astrid said, unhooking her legs and sliding down his chest until her feet touched the floor. Without hesitation, she gripped the waist of Jorunn's pants, more than ready to see her future husband as naked as the day the great goddess made him.

Chapter Four

Astrid's breath was hot on his throbbing cock, and that alone was almost enough to send Jorunn over the edge. The way she made him feel, the way she could make him ache with the slightest touch, was pure madness. Never had he yearned to mate with a woman so desperately, and never, in nearly fifteen years of bedding women, had he ever felt his throat grow tight as a woman's lips parted and slid down over his shaft.

"You are...so beautiful." The words slipped from his lips against his will, the pure passion, pure enjoyment on Astrid's face as she explored him with her mouth inflaming him more than the caress of her tongue along his heated flesh.

She really did care for him, or at the very least, desire him beyond all reason. The same way he desired her, the way it should be between two who would handfast. He'd never thought to take a wife, at least not anytime in his near future, but would it be so very horrible to claim Astrid as his own? She was beautiful, she was kind, she stood up to him like one of his most trusted advisors, but melted in his arms with a passion that was as true and magnificent as any he had ever known.

And she drugged you, kidnapped you and stole the sword of your forefathers, making the entire Endelvean ruling system vulnerable to civil war.

"Stop," he said, groaning as she dragged her teeth gently along his shaft and swirled her tongue along the tip of his weeping cock. "Stop!"

Her eyes flew open in surprise as he fisted his hand in her hair and pulled her away from him, as if she truly hadn't heard him. Her mouth hung slightly open, and the tip of a pink tongue flicked out to sweep along her bottom lip, gathering up a salty drop of his essence that clung there.

“I can not do this. I...can not,” Jorunn said, squeezing his eyes closed. He couldn’t look upon her face for another second without giving in to the carnal invitation written there.

“Please, Jorunn. I want you, so badly.” Her voice was breathy, desperate and completely free of guile. She begged him for her pleasure, not for her people, and the plea was almost enough to break his will.

“I want to bed you more than I have ever wanted a woman, but we can not. I will not finish the ceremony. I will not say the words over the sword, and I will not bring you the bridal gift in the morning. I do not want you for my wife, and it would be cruel of me to take from you what I could never repay,” Jorunn said, his speech taking just the slightest edge off his desire, making him foolish enough to open his eyes and look down into hers.

She was weeping, slow, silent tears that flowed down her beautiful face. For all of her youth, at that moment, she looked older than her mother, older than his father, as if the fate of the universe rested on her shoulders and she had failed it, failed everyone she cared for. It made him hurt right along with her, made him fall to his knees and take her face in his hands, planting a soft kiss on her sweet lips.

“I know that you are not cruel, Jorunn. I saw that the second I looked into your eyes. I know that you are not like your father,” she said as she pulled away from his kiss, swiping away her tears with the back of her hand, once again the strong, in-control princess.

“Then will you believe that I will help your people? Whether I am your husband or not?” he asked, the word “husband” making him strangely sad. He didn’t want to be her husband, couldn’t want such a foolish thing. To handfast with a complete stranger, an exiled princess, no less, would be insanely impulsive. Jorunn was neither, never had been, never would be.

“I believe you will try,” she said, refusing to meet his eyes.

“I keep my promises, and I swear to you, Astrid, that your people will have sanctuary within forty-eight hours of my return to Endelvea with the sword. Now, let us go tell your kinswomen that we have come to an agreement and—”

“No, they will never let you go,” she said, jumping to her feet with a shake of her head that made her silky hair fly around her face. “You will take the encoder stick for the ship with you and go out this way.”

Astrid removed the sword from underneath the pallet in the corner of the room and used it to cut his bonds. Then, she handed the sword and encoder to him, though the look in her eyes still said that she suspected her actions were sealing the doom of her tribe.

“I will return for you, Astrid, I swear it,” he said, running a finger down the soft skin of her cheek.

“Return for my people. Forget about me.”

“I will never forget about you, no matter how much I might wish to,” Jorunn said, and then turned and fled. He knew he had to run now, or he never would. One more second with the most tempting woman he had ever met and he would stay, for today, for tonight, for forever.

* * * * *

Four days later

Astrid stubbornly clung to unconsciousness. Even in sleep, her mind remembered what waited for her in the waking world. Pain, and more pain, and the promise of more pain for the rest of her days until, finally, that pain would kill her. The Glagors had come, and they had more than fulfilled their threats. She had failed to win the prince, failed to become the queen and failed to pardon the two thousand Glagorian war criminals executed en masse by the King of Endelvea just the day before. Therefore, she

had more than earned her place as an ill-treated slave on their largest prison ship. She'd only been a resident of the ship for one day, and already she wished for death.

Just one day, three days after Jorunn had said he would return for her tribe. He had never come, but the Glagors had, and they had taken her mother as well, judging Astrid too poor a compensation for their loss. She had known the horror of her strong, unbreakable mother's screams before her own pain eclipsed everything else, known that her own trusting, foolish heart was responsible.

How could she have believed him? How could she have thought it better to set him free rather than force him to handfast with no love in his heart? Surely failing one man would have been better than failing her entire tribe. If only she hadn't felt him as much a part of her as any other person in the universe, even her mother and tribe sisters.

"Astrid...please...you...sorry." The words, spoken in a strangely familiar voice, penetrated the haze of pain and thirst that clouded her mind, but Astrid did her best to push them away.

She was hallucinating again, just as she had earlier in the night when she'd dreamed Mina had come to her and held her in her arms and soothed away her tears. Poor Mina, she had been destroyed when she learned that Astrid had set the prince free, had wept as if her heart were broken.

"Get away from her, you fool. She needs water, not your weak words." It was her mother's voice, and she sounded near.

"She needs water and my words," the man said, his arms tightening around her, pulling her close to a strong, warm chest.

"Your words come too late. You made a vow! Never in all my —"

"Mother?" Astrid hardly recognized her own voice.

Her tongue was thick and her throat raw from screaming. The Glagor weapons had been unlike anything she'd ever seen. The blue fire they shot at her skin had burned her from the inside out, until she felt she would explode, felt death would come for her, but it never had.

“Astrid, don’t try to talk. Drink this,” her mother said, and Astrid felt a cup pressed to her lips. She tried to open her eyes, to see her mother and ask if she was all right, but it felt as if her eyelids had been sealed closed.

“Don’t try to open your eyes. You’ve got an infection from this filthy place, but I have medicine on my ship. We’ll have you good as new before we land on Tiber tomorrow morning.” Astrid nearly spit out the gulp of water she had in her mouth, no matter her thirst. She knew that voice, would have recognized it sooner if she hadn’t been half sure this was a hallucination.

“Jorunn? You came?”

“I did. I would have come earlier...but I was...detained,” he said, hugging her close and smoothing one of his roughened hands down her bare arm. “If I’d known this would be your fate, I never would have left. Don’t ever conceal things from me again, Astrid. I would endure any hardship, if it would have spared you this.”

“He looks as if he did endure some hardship, if that eases your heart, daughter. It seems his father would rather kill his own blood than endure an Artuan woman on the throne.”

“What do you mean?” Astrid asked, clinging to the hand Jorunn placed in hers. Never had she wanted to open her eyes so badly. The sensation of feeling her lids sealed closed was making her heart race with unhealthy speed. She had to calm down or she’d be unconscious again before she could learn what had happened to Jorunn, or her people or the Glagors, for that matter. Surely they hadn’t agreed to set her free after her failure. “Where are the Glagors? Are we safe? Should we—”

“Their agreement was against Endelvean law, and there was no binding signature even if it had been legal. The Glagors are very poor students when it comes to the laws and customs of other worlds,” Jorunn said.

“As is my daughter. If she had told me what she risked to bring you to Tiber, I never would have agreed. My daughter is more precious to me than any throne, Prince

Jorunn. I will not have her harmed, so I fear we must refuse your offer of a handfast between you.”

“Great Duchess, I must ask –”

“Following the acts of your father, civil war is unavoidable. I won’t have Astrid –”

“Don’t speak of me as if I wasn’t here. My eyes may not be functional, but my ears are working perfectly well,” Astrid said, her heart racing even faster as she tried to discern the meaning behind her mother’s words. Surely she didn’t mean, surely Jorunn hadn’t returned to –

“Are they working well enough to hear my offer for your hand?” Jorunn asked, his voice unsure, almost nervous, as if he feared her answer. But what did he fear? That she would say no, or that she would say yes? Damn the goddess, she needed her eyes, now more than ever.

“I hear, but I would know your reasons for the offer before I give my answer,” Astrid said, her words so soft that she could only pray Jorunn had heard them. Her mother pressed the cup to her lips again and she drank, though it was difficult to swallow with tightness possessing her throat as she waited to hear the words that would decide her future.

“You are in my heart, deeper than I could have dreamed possible in such a short time. You are my future, Astrid of the Artuan. Prophecy or no, I could never have resisted you. You are the partner I never had the sense to wish for, and all the woman I will ever need. I love you, and I wish for you to be my wife, my queen, and the mother of those who will rule our world in the years to come,” Jorunn said, the tenderness in his voice making tears sting at the backs of her eyes, though she had no idea where those tears would go with her damned lids sealed tight.

“Queen if his father doesn’t kill us all before you have the chance to ascend the throne,” her mother said, ever the voice of optimism and hope in a time of trial. “Why are you laughing? Astrid, is your mind affected?”

“No, my mind is well, better than it has ever been.”

“It is true what she says, Astrid. When I told my father of my decision to return to Tiber and make an offer for your hand, he had me taken prisoner. The captain of my guard set me free two days later and we fled with four legions, but it will still be a battle to reclaim the throne. I wouldn’t want you to answer without knowing—”

“I never expected claiming our throne to be easy, Jorunn.”

“Are you saying...”

“Yes, I’m saying yes,” Astrid said, the smile on her face only growing wider as Jorunn pressed soft lips to her own.

“You’re both fools,” her mother said, but Astrid could hear something in her voice, something she’d rarely heard in all their years of banishment. It was hope, and if she weren’t mistaken, maybe even a hint of excitement. Astrid had always known there was little her mother enjoyed more than a good fight, but now she suspected she might be just as moved by a happy handfast.

Chapter Five

“And so it is done, the gift given, never to be repaid,” Astrid said, placing the basket of gold and precious stones at his feet. The sunlight caressed her golden skin, catching the oil her attendants had worked into her bare flesh, their hands flying over her arms, legs, breasts, and even between her thighs.

Don't even think on that, man. You'll never live down the embarrassment if you lose control now, when you're so close to taking her for your own.

“I drink of the cup, and pass it to you, my husband, for whom I will always save a portion of all that is mine.” Astrid drank the ale from the cup and handed it to him, her eyes shining as bright as the clear sky above them. In the week since he and his men landed on Tiber, they had cordoned off part of the planet for their own, using electric barriers to keep the larger predators away from the human settlement. That meant his and Astrid's handfast ceremony could take place outdoors, as was tradition for both of their people.

“I drink from the cup, and promise the same to you, my wife, the one who will always be first in my thoughts from now until the coming of my death.” Jorunn drank deeply of the ale, relishing the honeyed taste, remembering how he'd drunk the same from her lips.

His heart twisted violently in his chest, as it always did whenever he thought of how foolish he had been. If he had claimed her that day, she would have been spared so much. Her eyes had healed and the burns on her skin faded, but a piece of her innocent spirit had been bruised, perhaps never to be repaired. He blamed his father for that, and vowed to make him pay for what he had done. They would head to war not three days hence, he and Astrid together, to claim the throne that would be theirs once their union was complete.

“This is the sword of the Beltorian clan, long may it defend and keep you both.” The priestess of Astrid’s tribe held the sword out in front of them, blushing slightly as her eyes slid down to Jorunn’s arousal and quickly back up again.

The Artuan tradition left the bride and groom alone for this part of the ceremony, but the Beltorian tradition demanded the sword-swearing be observed by witnesses. That wouldn’t have been quite so embarrassing, if the Artuan tradition hadn’t demanded they both be completely nude.

“I swear to you on this sword, to be your defender, your keeper, giving all that I am to protect you whom I hold most dear,” Jorunn said, blushing himself as a shout rose from the legions of his men. Tradition didn’t require quite *this* many witnesses, but neither he nor Astrid had wanted to shut out the men who had so willingly agreed to fight beside them. Still, he swore this would be the last time another man’s eyes looked upon the bare skin of his wife. His love for her was rivaled only by the fierce need to possess her for his and his alone.

“I swear to take up this sword, to defend and keep and protect you, my husband, when infirmity stills your hand,” Astrid said, tears in her eyes though a smile stretched wide across her beautiful face.

By the gods, the way she looked at him took his breath away. To think he had believed love such as theirs to be nothing more than a tale told around the fire, the stuff of fairy stories created by fools. He had nearly missed his chance at this love, and that made it all the sweeter. As he reached for his Astrid’s hand, he swore to himself that he would never forget the way he felt at this moment, and never give Astrid reason to doubt that her heart was his most treasured possession.

“Let’s go,” she whispered through her smile, squeezing his hand before turning and racing toward the entrance to the cave. Cheers sounded behind them, followed by laughter and the ringing of bells as the musicians began to play. Their soldiers and Astrid’s tribeswomen would feast late into the night, but for him and Astrid, the time had finally come for a feast of a different variety.

“Kiss me, I can’t wait another moment,” she said, leaping into his arms as soon as they turned the first curve into the darkness of the cave.

“Gladly, my love.” Jorunn wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight against him until her oiled breasts were flattened against his chest and his cock trapped between their bare stomachs.

Their mouths met with a fevered hunger, open-mouthed, tongues waging gentle war until Jorunn pulled away with a sound very like a sob. Gods, he wanted her so desperately, was shaking with the need to part her legs and thrust inside this woman, *his* woman, but he had to regain control. She was still a virgin, the Glagors had spared her that violation, and the last thing he wanted to do was cause her any more pain.

“Touch me, I want you to touch me everywhere,” she said, pulling him to the ground.

“Wait, the floor is hard and cold and —”

“I put furs down earlier, I knew I wouldn’t be able to wait until we reached my chamber. I’ve been dying for you, Jorunn, ever since that first touch in Heaven’s Gate.”

Jorunn grunted as his knees hit the furs, but the pain was quickly forgotten when Astrid guided his face to her breasts. The bruises his father’s guards had inflicted still caused his joints to ache, but what sane man could think on old wounds when he was taking the most perfectly puckered nipple in the universe into his mouth?

“Oh yes, Jorunn,” she moaned as he suckled her, teased his tongue across the underside of her breast and then nipped at her with his teeth.

Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as she arched toward him, giving him complete access to both of her perfectly shaped orbs. Jorunn made the most of the offering, plucking and rolling one nipple with his fingers as he laved at the other with his tongue, switching back and forth between her breasts, deciding each time that one was more lovely than the other.

Astrid writhed beneath him, her breath becoming a swift pant that called to some savage part of him. Jorunn forced her legs wide and brought his hand between,

groaning as the liquid heat of her cream met his fingers. Forcing himself to maintain control, he explored her swollen sex, sliding in and out of her petals, teasing the bud of her pleasure until she clawed at him, arching her hips into his hand, silently begging for release.

“Easy, my sweet, this will only sting for a moment,” Jorunn whispered against her lips, circling her nub harder with one hand, brining her to climax at the same moment as he used his other hand to stuff two fingers deep into her spasming cleft.

“Ahh!” she cried out, her eyes squeezing shut for a moment as he pierced her maidenhead. Slowly, gently, he continued to thrust in and out of her pussy, his fingers stained with the barest hint of red blood. Watching his digits disappearing into her body made him even hotter, more desperate for his cock to replace his hand. But still, he held back, dipping his head to her breast, her lips, teasing the sensitive flesh between her legs until her passion began to build once more.

“Jorunn, I want this,” she said, following the words by wrapping her small, cool hand around the engorged length of his arousal. Jorunn moaned and felt a bead of sweat roll down the side of his face.

“Wait, just a few more moments, and then—”

“I don’t want to wait,” she said, biting down on his bottom lip hard enough to draw a hiss from his mouth even as she spread her legs and pulled his hips down to hers with fingernails clawing into the mounds of his ass.

Jorunn reached down and opened her sex with a cry of abandon, positioning the head of his cock and easing into her inch by tortuous inch. She was so tight, so insanely tight, hot and wet, her pussy a fist that gripped him with a pleasure so wicked that he knew he would shoot himself inside her faster than he had the first time he claimed a woman.

“Yes, goddess, yes,” she cried, a smile on her face that made him feel like the luckiest man on the planet.

"I love to pleasure you," he whispered against her lips, pulling out until only the thick head of his cock breached her entrance and then slowly thrusting back in to the hilt with a groan of satisfaction.

"Goddess, Jorunn, this is so much better than even your hand or your mouth. It is...wondrous," she said, tears in her eyes again. They had lain together every night since their return, but had somehow managed to keep from consummating their union. They had both wanted to wait, wanted their handfast to be exactly as it should be.

"It is wondrous," Jorunn said, his own throat tight as he began to quicken his pace. He loved this woman with all his heart, but even so, he was not ready to weep in her arms. Not just yet anyway. "I want to feel your pussy grip my cock. I want you to come again for me."

"If you insist," Astrid said, her words ending in a sharp gasp as he flipped over onto his back, holding her hips so that when their roll ended she straddled his cock. She immediately brought her hands to his chest, bracing herself as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, adjusting to the new way he filled her.

"Lean over me, let me kiss you," he said, taking the lips she offered in a heated kiss before pulling gently away. "Not there. Here."

He cupped her breasts and pressed them together, bringing the nipples close enough that he could take both in his mouth at once. Her whimper of pleasure told him just how fine it felt, as did the way she began to rock her hips up and down his length, grinding into him until her breath came faster and her lips parted, her skin flushing pink as she drew close to taking her pleasure.

"Come for me, my wife," Jorunn demanded, moving his lips to hers as his fingers captured her slick nipples and pinched and teased.

"Jorunn!" She screamed his name and her pussy tightened on him with a power that made him cry out and buck up into her clutching sheath.

He thrust into her, again and again, filling her with every inch of him until finally the pressure became too much and his world exploded, his arousal pulsing within her

as he spilled his seed. She moaned against his mouth, her tongue tangling with his as she wiggled even closer to him, as if to ensure that not a drop of his essence would escape her body.

“My queen,” he mumbled, feathering kisses over her cheeks, and down the length of her neck. Her hair fell around them, soft and smelling of citrus, and for a moment Jorunn wished for nothing more than to stay here in this cave forever, lost in the arms of the woman who had captured his heart. Was a throne worth risking that these might be the only days they would ever have? Was he willing to hazard her life by taking her into battle?

“I will be your queen, my king, never doubt it. Together we can not fail,” she said, pulling back to look in his eyes, as if she could read his very thoughts. “We owe this to our people, to all the people who have suffered at your father’s hands.”

“You are right, but will you not reconsider your choice to join me in battle? You and the other women could stay here, guarded by —”

“I will rule by your side, yes?”

“Of course,” Jorunn said with a laugh. As if he would dare to exclude her. Astrid was innocent and sweet in many ways, but when it came to her duties as a leader of her people she was every bit as fierce as her mother.

“Then I will fight for the right to rule by your side. Besides, I want to be there when we declare victory, so that I can help you celebrate in that big bed you’ve told me so much about.” She smiled and her tongue darted out to sweep across her bottom lip, a telltale sign that his wife was starting to think thoughts of the carnal variety.

“Sometimes it troubles me that we know each other so well after so little time together,” Jorunn said, letting his hands smooth down her back to cup her ass in his hands. Already his cock was swelling again inside her as he wondered if Astrid would enjoy feeling him push into her from behind. If he weren’t worried that she would still be sore from their first mating, there was no way he would be able to resist satisfying his curiosity.

“Then let me ease your troubled mind,” she said, catching his lips for a kiss that sent his cock surging into a state of full arousal.

“I don’t want to—”

“You won’t hurt me. I’m ready to be completely ruined.”

“The first time wasn’t complete enough, my wife?” Jorunn smiled and delivered a swift swat on her ass, a growl rumbling in his throat when Astrid moaned in pleasure.

“Not nearly complete enough, my husband.” She laughed and jumped from the furs. Jorunn rose to chase her down the hall to their chamber, knowing that for the rest of their lives, no matter who might lead and who follow, they would be facing each challenge together, armed with a love that made them stronger every day.

About the Author

Anna J. Evans is a multipublished author who thinks romance is sexier with a sense of humor. She loves reading and writing paranormal romantic adventures and is thrilled to hear from fans. You can visit her website, email her, or join her Yahoo group (Anna_Evans_lolsexy-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) for free reads, the latest publishing news, and monthly member-only give-aways.

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