

KAROLA'S HUNT



DEIRDRE O'DARE

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She smiled, enjoying the brightness of his eyes as he looked at her, the feel of his hand, stroking her arm, sifting through her hair. Like her mother, she wore a tunic that was cut away on the right side, leaving no fabric to foul an arrow or slow the snap of a bowstring. The garment left her right breast bare, and she saw how his glance kept slipping to focus upon it. Her nipple hardened to a rosy pebble under his attentive gaze.

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BY

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Karola, daughter of Diana, knew this forest. She knew every tree and rock, every glade and glen of it. The forest was the only home she had known. This day she had gone out with her bow and a quiver of arrows, more to be roaming free than seriously hunting. But this was the day she found him in her woods.

Child of a careless mother, or perhaps merely a busy one, she had been reared as much by the Dryads and Kelpies as by her mother. Of her father Karola knew nothing at all...in truth not even that she had one.

Spring was newly come to her forest the day she met the stranger. Birds trilled among the delicate new leaves, while rabbits and squirrels chased one another through the flowering bushes in carefree joy. Although Karola had heard there were others of her kind, she had seen none of them. Living wild and free as she did, she'd had no chance. Thus, this strange creature fascinated her at first sight.

Like her, he had two legs and two arms, walking upright instead of

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on all fours like the beasts. But there, the resemblance between them ended. Where she was rounded, he tended to be hard and flat. His limbs were roped with muscle, and much more massive than hers were. A pelt of soft, curly hair covered the lower part of his face, and a matching mat decorated his brawny chest. He had bright blue eyes that sparkled like a dancing stream and all his hair was a beautiful tawny hue lit with highlights of fire.

Karola crept close to him, moving cautiously as she would approach a wild beast, not sure what to expect. Normally, she moved in cat-footed silence, but with her attention focused on the stranger, she stepped on a twig. When it broke with a sharp crack, he whirled to face her, grabbing for the short sword sheathed at his side. He stopped the motion when she stepped from behind a tree.

Unabashed, she stared at him. At close range he was even more beautiful than she had first recognized. Suddenly, Karola knew she had been lonely, wishing for a friend. Perhaps she had now found one. "Hello. My name is Karola. Who are you that hunts in my forest?"

"Who gave you leave to call this forest yours? I have always hunted here. My name is Damien. I dwell in the village of Athenara, a long morning's walk away."

She did not think it odd that he spoke her language for she knew of no other. But he spoke with an accent that, at first, sounded strange to her ears. His voice was lower than hers and deeper, almost a rumble. And he spoke of strange things.

"Village? What is a village?"

At this, he raised one straw-hued eyebrow and looked at her with disbelief. "By the gods, girl, do you not know what a village is? Where have you been all your life? A village—well, it is a place where many people live close together, each family or couple in their own hut. There is a well from which we all draw water. There are fields and pasture around, enough for everyone's crops and beasts. My father is the head man of our village."

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Tiring of this complicated talk, most of which had little meaning for her, Karola gave him a teasing glance and darted off. If the rabbits and squirrels could play such chasing games, perhaps she and Damien could too. In an instant, Damien was hot on her heels.

For a time they played, as young folk were likely to do, running and contesting. Karola found Damien was able to run even faster than she ran, although she was fleet of foot. He threw a stone almost as far unaided as she could with her sling, but she shot her arrows much farther and straighter than he could. They laughed about this, although she sensed his pride was nipped by her superior skill in archery.

"I've been shooting arrows all my life," she said to mollify him. "It is no shame to you that I can outdo you in this. My mother is the Huntress. She made my bow and arrows and schooled me in their use."

He looked at her dubiously. "The Huntress? But that is the goddess Diana! You cannot be her daughter. 'Tis said she is a virgin...that no man or god has ever lain with her so how can she have a child?"

Karola shrugged. "I do not understand all you are saying, but my mother is the Huntress. She told me so. And you cannot catch me this time."

Again they ran, dodging among the trees and leaping fallen logs and rivulets until they were both breathless and sweating. Their running brought them to a tiny grass meadow cut in twain by a sparkling stream, which meandered over a bed of pale sand and white pebbles. Karola knelt by the stream, cupping water in her hands to quench her thirst.

"I have something better than water," Damien said. He drew over his head the cord holding his *bota*. "Here, this is the honey mead my mother makes...the best in our village."

Karola took the *bota* and raised its spout to her lips. She took a cautious sip and then drank deeply. Indeed it was better than water, and was sweet yet tart on her tongue. She licked her lips, savoring the pungent taste. "Ah, that is good! I could drink it all day."

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Watching her, Damien laughed. "You had best save some for me," he warned. "If you are not used to it, too much will make you dizzy."

Karola took a final swallow and handed the *bota* back. Damien took but one deep drink then slung the container over his shoulder again. He looked around the meadow and then started for the shady spot beneath a towering tree.

"Come. Let us rest in the shade for a while. It is too hot today for more running."

They flopped down on the soft bed of springy green grass. Karola lay on her back, her arms folded beneath her head, gazing up through the leaves at the sky. Damien settled on his side, facing her. Either the mead or the exertion had left her feeling deliciously languid, as if she floated on one of the small clouds overhead.

They looked as white and fluffy as the sheep she had once seen grazing in a meadow beyond her woods. For a moment she dreamed of flying up to land on one of them, drifting along and looking down at the world spread beneath her. But dreaming could be saved for a time she was alone. Today she had a companion. She turned to gaze at him, absorbed in his beauty, in the differences between the two of them.

It seemed totally right when Damien reached out and stroked her arm. His hand was rougher-skinned than hers, in spite of her forest life, yet his touch was not harsh. It sent sparkly tingles running along her skin. She felt as if fireflies were dancing over her body, just out of sight.

"Your skin is soft as the pelt of a baby rabbit," he said. "I could touch you forever."

He lifted a tress of her hair, which had come unbound in their frolics, and sifted the raven strands through his fingers. "And your hair is as dark as night. There are pretty girls in my village, but none of them have hair like yours. I have never seen hair this color—yellow and brown and russet, yes, but not black as moonless midnight."

"My hair is not so very strange. Darlisa and Melody have green

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hair, while Brylana's is almost the color of yours—just a bit lighter. My mother's is very dark brown like the bark of the oak trees. Everyone has their own color, I think.”

“Green hair? Now that *is* strange! I never saw green hair.”

Karola laughed. “They are Kelpies and Bry is a Dryad. All the Kelpies have green hair...at least all the ones I know.”

He shrugged. “I like yours anyway. It is much better than green.”

She smiled, enjoying the brightness of his eyes as he looked at her, the feel of his hand, stroking her arm, sifting through her hair. Like her mother, she wore a tunic that was cut away on the right side, leaving no fabric to foul an arrow or slow the snap of a bowstring. The garment left her right breast bare, and she saw how his glance kept slipping to focus upon it. Her nipple hardened to a rosy pebble under his attentive gaze.

He gave her a knowing smile before he reached out and brushed his fingers across the tip. At that caress, it hardened even more and a shivery sensation coursed through her body. Then he cupped the whole of her breast in his hand and kneaded it gently with his fingers. Her lassitude deepened as a tingling itch spread from his touch, sinking into her chest, into her belly, into some inner recess she could not name which suddenly felt achingly empty.

Ha, the exploration should not be all one-sided, she thought. The downy golden mat on his chest intrigued her. Would it be as soft as the wildcat's pelt beside her bed or wiry as the golden color hinted? She raised one hand and wove her fingers through the hair, finding it soft but springy to the touch. Her questing fingers located a smaller nub, but nearly matching hers. The tawny button was in almost the same spot as her right breast, and peaked through the golden thatch. She rubbed her fingertip across the nub. It rewarded her by swelling and stiffening to her touch. He made a soft, purring growl deep in his throat.

“Do you like that?” she asked, watching as his eyes darkened to a violet shade almost as dark as the sky after the sun slipped from view.

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They were such a wonderful color! The Kelpies had green eyes to match their hair, but she had never imagined eyes of such a brilliant blue. Her own were brown with flecks of green and gold.

“Nearly as much as you do.” Shifting his hand to her other shoulder, he slipped the band of her tunic aside and pushed the fabric to her waist, freeing her other breast. The left one was paler, almost white from missing the sunshine. The tunic had left a slanting line across her body; one side warmly golden and the other pale as the lilies that bloomed in the vale around her home.

For a moment, he only looked then he began to caress her second breast, gazing intently at them both as if he studied the difference in hues between them. Before she could sense what he was going to do, he rolled to lie on his stomach and brought his face close to her body. His tongue took the place of his fingers, sliding moist and warm over her pebbled nipples. Circling, stroking, tasting. As he moved and licked, the soft hair on his face brushed across her skin in delicious tickles. She trembled.

She was so engrossed in the amazing new sensations his attentions stirred that at first she did not realize he had moved one hand to her right leg. He rested it beneath the tunic's hem, which ended a long hand span above her knee. He stroked, rubbed, and squeezed gently, ever so slowly moving his hand up her leg, his fingertips feathering over the sensitive skin inside her thigh. She shivered.

When he raised his head from her chest to watch her face, the slight breeze chilled her moist breasts, stiffening the pink nipples even more. Now she felt his hand, sliding, brushing, stroking, higher and higher. She'd lain down with her legs crossed at the ankle, but she uncrossed them now, shifting restlessly, although languor still strove to hold her immobile.

A liquid heat flowed from deep within her body toward that teasing touch, tracing a path of slick, urgent wanting. She twisted, moving her hips, reaching for his caress. His hand now rested almost at the spot

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where her legs joined her body. Ever so gently, he combed his fingertips into the black curls that covered her there.

"Ah," she sighed. Nothing had ever felt quite so good and yet quite so unsatisfying as this touch. She wanted to press her thighs together to hold in the delicious feelings, but also to part them further and invite that touch to continue, to deepen. She sensed there must be more, not sure how she knew or what it was...but wanting it all the same.

His deft fingers probed and shifted, parting the fleshy petals beneath the curls, finding a small knot there that came alive at the first stroke, quivering, throbbing, demanding. With one fingertip, he circled the little pearl, which stiffened and stretched, reaching for the blissful caresses.

How did he know what to do, where to touch, exactly how much pressure and friction to apply? As wooly as her mind had become, she had to wonder. And what could she do to make him feel this wonderful way, too?

"Ah," she said again. "What are you doing to me? I never felt anything like this before. Can I do these things for you, too?"

He laughed. "If you wish, although it will not be the same." He rolled away for a moment and unfastened the buckle at the waist of his leather kilt. The soft suede slipped from his body as he turned back. She saw then another difference between them. Like her he had thick curls between his muscular thighs, but his were golden, like the rest of his hair.

And from that golden nest, something jutted—ruddy, quivering, and thrusting toward her. Almost another limb but rounded at the end instead of finishing in fingers or toes. She stared in amazement. Suddenly, she realized she had seen something similar on stags and boars when they were ready to mate with their females.

Ah, do humans come in two kinds then, as do all the other beasts?

He caught her wrist and tugged her hand toward him. She held her breath as he brought her palm into contact with the strange appendage.

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Then he wrapped her fingers around him. He caught her wrist and moved her hand slowly, in toward his belly and then out again. "Like that," he said.

The skin on that part of him felt like the softest, most velvety of suede, yet beneath that plush warmth laid a core of hard, hot and unyielding iron. She stroked him, squeezed gently, released and stroked again.

She looked up at him with a smile. "I see you have two swords," she said. "One of iron that hangs at your side and another of flesh for a different purpose."

He smiled back. "You learn swiftly, Karola. Are you truly as innocent as you seem or do you make a mockery of me?"

She shook her head. "I do not know what you mean. Besides my mother and the Dryads and Kelpies, I have seen no others of our kind until this day. I know that the animals of the forest come in male and female, and at times, they come together and mate. Later, the little ones are born to the female. Is that also the way with our kind as well? I did not know until today that we, too, had males as well as females."

"Aye, that is the way of it, Karola. I would gladly mate with you, but in Athenara there is a girl I am to wed after the harvest. Before her, there have been other girls, but none of them as enchanting as you are. They were coy, playing hard to get, covering their bodies with layers upon layers of cloth so it is hard to touch them."

Again she shook her head. "You use so many words I do not understand, but let us not talk of all that. Let us, instead, continue to pleasure each other."

His hand had fallen still, resting on her thigh, but now he began to stroke and fondle her again. She held his fleshly sword in a gentle clasp and stroked in the same rhythm his fingers moved on her. She bent one knee and stretched the other leg out to the side to give him access and felt his fingers slide on the slick wetness that flowed to her surface. Moving down that slippery slit, he probed one finger into the empty

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hollow while his thumb stroked the little nub above.

A storm began to build in that nameless space inside her. Every muscle in her body drew tight and quivered—waiting, reaching. All of this felt so good and yet she wanted more and more and more. Suddenly, a quaking quiver started deep inside and moved gradually down from within to the places he touched. She bucked and heaved, lifting her hips from the ground as the waves of sensation crashed over her. She felt as if the very earth beneath her trembled. The storm broke at last, leaving her limp and shaking.

“Oh!” She let out her held breath in a rushing sigh. “Oh, what was that?”

He smiled. “Have you never been to that peak before, Karola? Ah, but you are a hot one!” He gasped as her hand tightened on him and tugged, sliding the skin along his shaft. “Ah, do you want more?”

She nodded, watching as the limb she stroked grew thicker and longer, and a drop of liquid beaded at the tip. “Yes. If there is more, I want it all!”

He moved to kneel between her legs. With a hand on either side of her body, he moved up over her until she felt the velvet-skinned sword pressing where moments ago his fingers had been. It was softer in its touch than his hand, yet insistent, probing and pushing for admission to her body, to that hungry, needy hollow space inside.

“Open to me, sweet one, and I will take you up again.”

She spread her legs as wide as she could, reached up to grasp his shoulders, and drew him down against her, feeling the brush of his chest hair across her breasts as he lowered his body onto hers. With a swift thrust, he entered her. She gasped as a sharp, tearing pain pierced her, but that was soon lost in sensations even more powerful than those she had felt before.

Acting purely on instinct, she lifted her legs and locked them around his hips, tilting herself up to meet his thrusts. The hollow place inside was no longer empty. He filled every bit of it, stroking and

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driving into her. Again the shivery shuddering began, just past the farthest place he reached.

She felt the spasms move down to her opening, alternately squeezing and releasing as he moved, in and out. As the pulsing waves burst free, she heard him groan and felt a delicate spurt inside her. For a moment they clung together, shaken as if by the eruption of a volcano, or a massive tidal wave. The world turned and rolled beneath them, in tremors that slowly subsided.

After a moment, he withdrew, settled back on his haunches and looked down at her. "You are amazing, Karola, my hunter-girl, but I have to go soon," he said. "And I had better find something to shoot and take home to my mother for the dinner pot lest she wonder how I spent my day. I would not want to tell her."

What would my mother say to me should I tell this tale? Karola decided she would not speak of it either, at least to her mother. "I will walk with you for a ways," she said. "If we see some game, I can also shoot and then you will have more."

For a moment he frowned, but then he nodded. "Well enough. I admit you are a fine archer. Your skill exceeds that of anyone in our village. When I come again, you must show me how you do this. But in Athenara, the maids do not hunt. That is the province of the men."

"My mother is the Huntress," Karola repeated, stung by his assertion. "I have hunted since childhood. In my seventh summer, I could down a stag at twenty bow lengths or put an arrow in the eye of a running rabbit. Perhaps in your village, the maids hunt not, but I am not of Athenara."

Now he smiled. "Aye, that is clear, Karola. You are not of Athenara. If I were to take you there, I do not know what the people would think. No one there is like you in any way."

"Is that bad or good?"

"Perhaps a bit of both," he said. "But, for me, your skill in the amorous arts make up for any lack in those of housewifery."

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Though his words continued to puzzle her, from his expression, she took this as a compliment.

Before they reached the edge of the forest, beyond which Karola did not go, they flushed a flock of partridge. Between them, they killed five birds. Damien tied their feet together with a thong and slung them over his shoulder.

"That should do to feed my family," he said. "Mother will make a delicious stew for us."

For a moment, he paused, looking at Karola. He eyed the proud thrust of her bared breast and smiled. "I will be back as soon as I need to hunt again. Maybe even sooner. Will I be able to find you?"

She nodded. "The birds and the small beasts will let me know. They tried to tell me today, but I did not know what they were saying. When they said a man was here, I did not understand, but I grew curious and moved through the forest until I saw you. Yes, you will find me—if I choose to be found." She flashed a sly smile. "If I choose otherwise, no one will find me. I can vanish into a Dryad's tree or a Kelpie's pool."

"But you won't," he said, his voice strong with masculine confidence. "You will want to be found, so we can play the games we played today."

"Perhaps." With a toss of her head, she turned away, determined not to watch him go. But a bit later, from the top of one of the highest trees on the highest hill in her woods, she saw him crossing the golden fields and glimpsed a cluster of dark shapes on the far horizon that she had never understood before.

A village. The huts of many people. He goes there with his game, which I helped to kill. And he is to join with a girl there when the leaves turn? Nay, I think not.

She ran her hands over her body, remembering how his touches had felt. Indeed, she would be found the next time he came to her forest. She would be hunting again, for the game she had found this day was unlike any she had ever claimed. What a hunt she had enjoyed today!

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With a joyous laugh, she slid from the tree and leaped into a run, eager to make her way home. Now she had a tale to match the wildest ones Melody and Bry could tell, and *hers* was unquestionably true.

* * *

The sun rose and set five times before Karola's little forest friends told her that the stranger came again. She had instructed them to keep watch, and to send a messenger to her if the golden-pelted creature, who walked as she did, should come again to her forest. She had almost given up hope, waiting for such word.

That morning she lolled in the meadow near the stone hut she called home. She listlessly chipped at an arrow point or two, shaping some fine-grained flint she'd collected back in colder weather, but her thoughts were not on the chore. Putting aside the antler she used to flake tiny delicate chips from the stone, she lay back in the grass. The blades tickled the backs of her legs, reminding her of his teasing touch. Her tunic rubbed across her left breast, stirring the nipple to swell and tighten. The right joined it in sympathy.

Karola knew she could touch herself and stir some pleasurable feelings, but the effect was not the same. Damien's hands felt different. The grain of his skin against hers abraded just enough to be exciting. The scent of him and the deep rumble of his voice—both so alien, so different—awoke tingles of desire and delight throughout her body. Why did he not come?

She drifted into a daydream, recalling every move he had made, every word he spoke, every caress and kiss. Lost in these pleasant reminiscences, at first she ignored the twitter of the two, little, blue birds. They dropped lower to circle around her, their sweet chirps growing sharp with anxiety.

"He comes. Your golden creature comes! Red Nut-Cacher the squirrel saw him and told Shy Grappelt the rabbit. Shy told the Robin and she told us. The strange, golden one comes!"

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Karola bolted into a sitting pose and struggled to her feet. "Where? Which way? When will he be here?"

The two birds looked at each other and twittered. "We don't know, but Red Nut-Cacher lives near the cataract where the stream goes down into the gully. That is toward the sunrise side of the forest. Shy dwells in the meadow just past the spring where the stream breaks out of the cliffs. Robin's nest is between, in the place where the trees grow close to the stream."

Even as the birds chirped out their directions, Karola gathered her bow and arrows, and a small pouch full of cheese and bread. She slipped her best blade into its sheath on her belt and started off toward the east. At one small, still pool, she stopped to see how she looked. She straightened her hair and washed the dust from her face and arms.

She frowned down at her image. Her tunic was old and growing shabby. She would have to kill a deer soon to get the skin to make another. She'd grown so much this one was skimpy anyway. Next time, she had better kill a large buck in order to have plenty of leather with which to work. Soon she would be as tall and full-figured as her mother. Diana was slender from her busy life, but still voluptuous enough to appear clearly female. Karola wanted to look exactly the same.

Trotting as she left the streamside, Karola hurried to the spot where the wee beasts had seen Damien enter the woods. Below the cataract, she knew there was a fine pool, deep enough for swimming. If this day proved as hot as it had been when they first met, a swim would be just right. She could almost feel the cool water on her skin, hot now from the sun and from her thoughts of the day's coming frolics with her new friend.

Although eagerness made the distance seem long, Karola actually found Damien quickly. He sat on a boulder near the cataract, gazing down into the pool below.

"Damien," Karola called. "You have come again to the forest! I am

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glad to see you.” Out of regard for his feelings, she refrained from calling it her forest, although of course it still was. Just because he had come here to hunt and they had met did not mean the forest was no longer hers.

She leaped up the rocks with her customary agility to gain a spot at his side. He watched her, his beautiful face marred by a frown. “I have not been able to come back until today,” he said. “And today I have come to say goodbye.”

Karola looked at him, shock making her dizzy. “Goodbye? But...but why?”

“Our village goes to war with the people across the valley. They have grazed their sheep and cattle on our pastures, stolen two horses, and taken my little sister captive when she went out to gather her flock. Come tomorrow, all the men of our village will march on their settlement at daybreak and fall upon them. We intend to slay them, every single man.”

A chill of foreboding washed over Karola like a winter wind. “Oh, no, that is terrible! What if they slay you and the men of your village instead?”

“Nay, we are strong and brave. We can best them. They are cowardly, thieving rogues, uncivilized and lazy, not at all like our folk. We will kill all the men and maybe bring the comeliest of the women and healthiest of the children back to Athenara as slaves.”

“What are slaves?” Some intuition told Karola she would not like what she heard, but she still felt a need to know.

“Slaves are prisoners—captives we make our own, like our animals. They must serve as they are told and obey to earn their food and shelter. It is always thus in war. The losers are taken for slaves.”

“This is bad,” Karola said. “No person should be treated so and I am not even sure of the animals. Here in the forest, none of the animals belong to me, but most of them are my friends. I do not want to speak more of these ugly things. Let us enjoy each other again instead of

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talking of such evils.”

At that, Damien smiled. “I thought you might not want to. At home—in Athenara—a girl who today is willing may tomorrow toss her head and say, ‘No, no. I do not want to play now,’ so I was not sure you would seek to repeat our sport.”

“How silly,” Karola said. “Do they change like the wind, then, blowing now hot and then cold?”

He nodded. “Aye, that is the way of it. Women are ever thus, I have been told.”

Shaking her head in dismay, she set her bow and arrows, the pouch, and her belt with the knife carefully in a spot where they would not slip off the stones. Then she pulled her tunic over her head, sliding a sly glance at him. “It is a warm day and I got hot coming to find you. Let us go for a swim.” She turned slowly, letting him feast his gaze on her nude body. Stooping, she undid her sandals and kicked them onto her tunic.

She enjoyed the way his eyes went dark and the tip of his tongue appeared when he licked his lips, watching her. After a moment, she turned and dove into the pool, sliding under the water as sleekly as an otter. Moments later, Damien followed her.

After they splashed and raced for a while, they swam to the shallow end of the pool and came to the surface. Damien stood and shook the water off him, sending the bright drops flying. Beads of water on his skin caught the sunlight and sparkled like stars. The water darkened his hair to the hue of old bronze. Karola popped up beside him, shoving her own wet locks back from her face. The chill of the water had beaded her nipples and they responded even more to the bright, hungry look he cast upon her.

“You are as lovely as a water sprite,” he said. “Wet, your hair looks almost blue, like the night sky when there is no moon. And what a lush body you have! Come closer and let me touch you.”

Karola needed no second invitation. They stood waist deep in the

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water that flowed past them, silk-smooth and sparkling. She stepped forward until her body was flush with his and wrapped her arms around his neck. When she opened her mouth to speak, he covered her lips with his, nibbling and licking as he kissed her. His skin was cool from the water, but rapidly grew warm where they touched, even as hers did. With a laugh, Karola bounced up, wrapping her legs around his hips. He caught and held her, his hands just below her waist.

“Ah, you are the bold one today.” He smiled, his teeth flashing white. “I can give you what you are seeking, wild girl. It will not take me a minute to be ready.”

She pressed close until the dark curls between her legs meshed into his golden pelt there, and felt his shaft stir and stiffen. Within moments, he was thrusting against her, eagerly seeking passage into her heated channel. She wriggled, opening herself to him, slick, moist and ready. Taking one arm from around his neck, she reached between them to guide him into her.

Ah, the wonderful sense of completion when he slipped past the outer ring and into her depths, filling her. Involuntarily, her legs tightened around him. She tilted her hips to allow the deepest possible penetration, and then let the water buoy her into a rocking motion, which had him sliding in and out, in and out, deeper and harder with each thrust.

The contrast between the cold water and their heating flesh felt delicious. Their motion stirred the water into small waves, which lapped at her bottom, tickling her sensitized flesh and adding to the marvelous sensations of their union. The hot, itchy tension spiraled up within her, tightening every muscle and charging her skin with tingling energy. She bounced harder, clutching at the slippery skin of his wet shoulders, and clenching her legs around his lean butt and hard thighs. She used the grips to hold their bodies close together.

At last, when she thought she could endure no more, she threw her head back, eyes closed to the blue above. The coiling tension released

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in a sudden, shattering explosion that rolled from deep within her in swift, forceful spasms. Her climax triggered his. He gave a whoop of ecstasy, shooting his seed into her in a strong spurt.

For a long moment, they clung together, quivering with the aftershocks of their passion. Finally, when he withdrew, she released her hold on him, letting her legs slip down until her feet found purchase in the sandy bottom of the pool. He looked at her, his eyes violet-dark, no trace of a frown now, but with a small smile curving his lips.

"What a wonderful wild creature you are, Karola! I would do this again soon but for now, why don't we climb back up to rest and dry off in the sun on the rocks where we left our things?"

"We'll only get hot again," she warned, smiling up at him.

"Aye, but then we can come back and swim some more or find a shady spot in the grass along the banks."

"Did you bring your *bota* with more of that wonderful drink?" She wrinkled her brow, trying to recall if she had seen it when she approached him.

"Yes, I did. It's up there with my weapons and clothing."

"Ah, that is good. I am thirsty and your drink is so much better than water! But I also brought some bread and cheese, and bunches of new grapes, just turning purple. We can have a feast when we are ready."

He laughed. "I am always ready to eat good food, just as I am always ready to fill the quim of a willing maid. In you I have found a treasure—a girl with both food and the lusty appetite to enjoy sporting with me."

Karola raced up the steep pathway, intent on beating Damien to the spot from which they had dived into the pool. She scampered over the rocks, pausing to look back when she sensed he was not close behind her. Then she laughed. He stepped gingerly from one rock to the next, trying to avoid the roughest spots. Obviously, he seldom went without his sandals.

"Come on. Don't be a baby. The rocks are a little hot, a bit rough,

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but not that bad.”

“Maybe not to you, wild girl, but I always wear my shoes!”

Finally, he reached the boulder where he had been sitting when she saw him. He sat on his kilt and put his sandals on right away. “You won’t trick me into leaving these again,” he said.

Karola put hers on, too, but instead of donning her tunic, she simply hung it across her arm.

“I know a better place,” she said. “The rock is smooth there and spray from the cataract keeps it nice and cool. Follow me.”

She scooped up her quiver and bow, her belt with the knife, and the bag with the food she’d brought. He gathered his things and fell in behind her. She led the way up to the very top of the cataract. From there, they could cross the stream by jumping from one to the next of several huge stones that broke through the water.

Just below the crest on the far side, they came to the place she sought. A ledge jutted out from the hillside, the stone worn smooth by eons of wind and water. A fine, misty spray from the cascading stream moistened the air and cooled the surface of the stone.

“This is the place,” Karola said. “But be careful. The stone is slippery and it is a long way down to the pool. If you land badly, it hurts!”

She tossed her tunic down on the rock and sat on it as she opened the pouch and took out two chunks of bread and two wedges of cheese. Damien took the *bota* off his shoulder. “We will have to share,” he said. “I did not think to bring a cup.”

“That’s all right. I don’t mind putting my mouth where yours has been.” She glanced at him and then coyly looked away, dropping her lashes to veil her eyes.

He smiled knowingly. “Nor do I mind. The mark of your lips will but sweeten the mead for me.”

Together, they ate and drank, passing the *bota* back and forth between them. When the bread and cheese were gone, Karola brought

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out the grapes. She pulled one plump, red grape from its stem and held it teasingly in front of Damien's mouth. He moved as swiftly as a snake strikes and snatched it from her fingers, his lips briefly capturing her fingertips as well as the fruit. She giggled.

They took turns feeding each other, playing with the succulent grapes, crushing a few so the juice dripped down their faces and bodies. Laughing, they flopped back on the rock, side by side. Damien took Karola's hand and slowly licked off every sticky bit of grape juice. His tongue slid along each finger and down between them with excruciating tickles. Then he shifted to do the same for her face. With delicate licks, he cleaned her mouth and chin and then moved down her throat. Finally he dropped to her breast and captured one nipple, suckling and swirling his tongue around the budding tip.

Warm and lazy, Karola lay back on her tunic and let him tease her. A melting lassitude spread along her limbs until she felt as if her body was seeping into the warm stone beneath her. He shifted to her other breast then began to work his way down her body, probing into the hollow of her navel and laving her belly with slow, sweeping strokes. As he moved, excitement began to build inside her. Finally, he drew back, pausing to watch her.

He lay now on his side, leaning on one arm, his shoulders even with her hips. He looked at her with a sly smile. She gazed back with slumberous eyes, relaxed and yet a-tingle with electric energy.

He caught her by surprise when he lifted her right leg and ducked beneath her knee, bringing the limb to rest across his body. Now his face was close to her nest of dark curls. She could feel his warm breath feathering across her dampness as he drew closer. A quiver of anticipation flowed over her. *What is he going to do now?*

She did not have long to wonder. He twisted around a bit more. Then he reached with his free hand to comb aside the dark ringlets and part the petals of flesh beneath the curls. Again he found her bud of passion and began to stroke it with a fingertip. She whimpered and

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trembled at the exquisite sensations.

Just when she thought she could bear no more, he bent even closer and stroked his tongue along her moist slit. She cried out with shock and wonder. He alternately sucked on the tiny bud and licked up and down across the tender flesh within her slit. Her body drew taut as a bowstring as the tension began to build. He continued to plunder her with the most delicate and exquisite of caresses. She writhed and cried out, bucking, arching to meet the full effects of his delicious onslaught. Her climax swept over her like a tidal wave, rocking her until it seemed the very stone beneath her twisted and rolled. When the waves subsided, she lay limp and weak.

He rocked back on his right arm, sliding free of her leg. His smile held total male satisfaction. "How did you like that, my wild girl?"

"It was wonderful, but I am undone," she murmured. "Too melted to move, although it should now be your turn."

He smiled. "Well enough. What do you want to do to me?"

She found herself able to sit up and leaned toward him. "Have you not also got grape juice on you?"

He tilted his head, shrugged one shoulder. "Perhaps."

She moved to face him, edged up close, and caught his ears in her hands. "You must hold still and let me wash you."

Copying the manner in which he had cleaned her face, she licked across his lips. The silky gold of his beard felt strange beneath her tongue but she tasted sweet juice among the strands and licked the soft hair clean as well as she could. When she was done, she pushed him gently to lie back, as she had done, and bent over him, making a leisurely exploration of his body from throat to stomach.

His muscles leaped and quivered beneath the probes and strokes of her tongue. When she looked down, she saw his shaft thrusting up from its sheltering thicket of golden hair, throbbing gently in time with his heartbeat. For a moment she watched, fascinated.

"Why does it do that?"

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He lay back on his kilt, watching her though lowered golden lashes. His eyes were purple now and so dark they almost looked black. "What?"

She reached and clasped her hand around his rod. "Why does this stand up and move that way?"

His voice sounded half choked when he answered her. "He is just as greedy for attention as you were," he said. "He wants to be warm and safe, held in a sweet, dark embrace."

"I see." Karola moved to kneel between his knees. When she bent forward, her hair drifted down across his stomach and thighs. Shudders shook him. She wrapped her fingers around his shaft and stroked slowly, up and down, watching as it grew even larger and harder. A drop of moisture appeared at the tip. She bent down and touched the drop with her tongue, licking it away. He groaned.

She snapped her head up. "Oh, did I hurt you? I didn't mean to. Should I not do that?"

"No, not hurt," he said in a heavy tone. "You must not stop. Go on and do whatever you are moved to do."

So she tasted him, swirled her tongue around to test the texture of the skin on his shaft and on the tight sacs below it. He tasted of salt and a faint, earthy flavor she could not name. Finally, she took him into her mouth as far as she could and drew gently with lips and tongue, echoing the way their bodies moved together when he went into her. He groaned again, but the sound was not one of pain. She moved faster, sliding her lips up and down along his shaft, sucking as she would draw water into her mouth with a reed.

Now it was his turn to buck and arch and twist. He reached out and fisted both hands into her hair, holding her to him as his hips moved convulsively, up and back, and then again. A heavy shudder went through him and then a gush of sticky, salty fluid flooded her mouth. She pulled away and reared back in surprise, watching as his rod subsided slowly to lie at rest in its thicket of golden curls.

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This tool of his is completely amazing. What must it be like to possess such a thing? She could but wonder. Yet if her attentions had felt half as good to him as his had to her, they were both luck-blessed beyond reckoning. His breathing slowed to normal in a few minutes and he sat up, looked at her and grinned.

“Had I not broken your maidenhead myself in our last encounter, I would be unable to believe you had never known a man before. You learn quickly, hunter girl. Is your mother then a trollop to teach you how to please a man and take your own pleasure?”

She glared at him. “I have told you that my mother is the Huntress. I am very sure she is not a trollop, whatever that may be, and we have never spoken of these things that are done by a man and a woman. But yes, I do learn quickly. To survive in the forest, it is necessary to learn quickly, and from watching and listening as well as one’s own experiences.”

Damien shook his head. “I mean no insult, Karola, but I find you so amazing. None of the girls in Athenara are like you at all. They all pretend to have no desire to share these pleasant sports and most of them will only go so far without a promise of marriage. It is a wonderful surprise to find a girl like you.”

Karola looked at him sharply, trying to unravel the meaning of the words he used, many of which were not known to her. “What is marriage?” she asked. “Is it like slaves?”

He laughed. “In a way. The man agrees to care for and support the girl for the rest of their lives, to build or barter for a hut for them, to acquire a patch of land to grow vegetables and perhaps some animals—a goat for milk and chickens for eggs. In return, she will give him children, cook his meals, care for his garments and weapons, and keep their hut tidy. It is the expected arrangement when a young couple become friends and lovers.”

Karola recalled their earlier conversations. “And you are to do this soon with a girl from Athenara, are you not?”

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"I have not yet promised," Damien hedged. "I might change my mind and choose to bond with someone else. After such joining, the custom is that I would not sport with anyone else. I'm not sure I am ready yet to settle down with just one woman."

Karola turned away from him and gazed out across the cataract, the pool and the forest beyond. A vision of future loneliness washed over her like a chill rain. "I would miss you," she said very softly.

She was not sure if he heard her or not for he did not reply at once. Finally, she edged around and glanced at him. An expression of melancholy dimmed his normally bright and merry face.

"It may matter not," he said finally, "since tomorrow we go to war. Perhaps I will bring home a captive and be content with a slave instead of a wife. Then I could come and go as I pleased. She would be obliged to serve my needs and desires, but I would not be obligated to remain loyal only to her."

Afternoon had come now to the forest and the sun slipped off toward the west. The ledge fell into shadow and the mist felt chill instead of only pleasantly cool. Karola stood and picked up her tunic. She pulled it over her head and knotted her belt around her hips. Damien watched her and then, with a sigh, rose and donned his kilt and the rest of his gear.

"I do not want this day to end," he admitted. "And I want even less to say goodbye. Does that idea make you feel sad, too?"

Karola nodded, still not looking at him. "Yes, it does. I want you to come again to see me, want to share pleasures with you and learn more about the world beyond my—beyond this forest. But I have a bad feeling you will not come again, especially if you go to the war as you have said. Either you will not want to come again or you will not be able to."

He reached out, caught her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "I will make you a promise, Hunter Girl, and that promise is I will come back. I will not let anyone's blade or arrow take my life

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tomorrow. I will come back hale and whole, and I will return again to you and your forest. Nor will I take any other woman to be my wife unless you choose another to be your man."

Karola looked up at his earnest face, at the beautiful, deep blue eyes that continued to amaze her. She saw in them a new light and intensity, like the way he looked at her when they were touching and teasing one another, but different, too. That look stirred a different kind of excitement within her. "Are you sure you can keep this promise?"

"I swear it by all I hold sacred," he said. He bent down and kissed her on the lips, a kiss that did not tantalize or entice, but one that stirred her heart to a swift pounding and caused her to tighten her arms around him. After a moment, he drew back, smiling until she had to smile, too.

He reached down and took her knife from its scabbard. Then he lifted a lock of her hair and cut off cleanly a finger-long length. He tucked the ebony tress into a pocket in his leather kilt. Then he cut a shorter bit of his own golden hair and handed it to her along with the knife. "I will keep this lock of your hair close to me at all times to remind me of my vow," he said. "And you keep mine to confirm my promise to you."

She slipped the golden curl into her pouch. "Let us go then. I will walk with you again to the edge of the forest."

They scrambled down the rocks to the side of the pool and then moved off into the trees. Hand in hand, they followed the winding path among the boles, beside the stream and across the meadows. As they wandered along together, the heavy feeling gradually left her heart. Surely fate would not be so unkind as to give her such a wonderful friend only to snatch him away from her. For today and for days into the future, she would trust in his promise. That was the only way she could bear this parting.

At the edge of the forest, they kissed again and he held her close for a long moment. Finally, he turned away and began to trot off across the open land. She stood and watched him until he looked as small as a

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squirrel in the distance. Today she did not go running home, for melancholy tempered her joy, but happiness also eased her sorrow.

Brylana had often spoken of a thing she called “love,” some mysterious emotion that was clearly very intense, a wonderful yet awesome force linking two hearts. Could that be what she was feeling? She pressed a hand between her breasts where she felt a keen, small pain, as if a fist squeezed around her heart or a needle-fine blade pierced it. Melody always said there were no roses without thorns.

So, if love is a rose, then the pain of parting must be its thorn.

Perhaps, though, the blade a man bore between his legs was the thorn, and if that were true, then the piercing was not so bad after all. At that memory, Karola's heart lightened further.

Either Damien would return ere long, or in time she would make her way across the open lands to the village and seek him there. Perhaps she would even take him prisoner and make him a slave.

No, that was wrong—an ill and evil thing—but she didn't think she would have to resort to such tactics to bring him back to her woods. Confidence in her own feminine prowess surged warmly through her. She strode off boldly toward home, filled with the magic of her sex and the wonder of being woman.

DEIDRE O'DARE

Deirdre O'Dare, who also writes contemporary romance as Gwynn Morgan, has loved reading and writing since early childhood. She started writing-simple verses and paraphrases of Nancy Drew and Zane Gray—before she was out of grade school and finally settled into romantic fiction in the last decade after leaving her “day job” as a civilian employee of the U. S. Army. She lives in Arizona and frequently sets her stories in the Southwest she knows and loves, but now and then another locale calls to her creativity and she strays, even as far as prehistoric Greece and places that exist only in her imagination.

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