

Hermod's Love



Berkana



Tonya Ramagos

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By

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Chapter One

A hand covered her breast, massaged, as another hand pushed her legs apart, snaked its way up her thigh. A contented sigh escaped Quenell's lips and she let her head fall back. She closed her eyes though she could see nothing through the strip of cloth that blindfolded her anyway. The hand on her breast squeezed, the thumb flicked over her nipple until it hardened almost painfully. A mouth captured that taut nipple, licked, sucked and bit ever so slightly until she writhed from the heat that sizzled through her body. Her hips came up off the bed and the hand between her legs found its mark. It cupped her pussy, pushed her hips back down to the mattress and entered her one long, slender finger at a time until it felt as though three fingers pushed inside her wet opening, stretched her.

"She's so wet," a deep, husky voice whispered.

Quenell knew that voice—Richard's voice. Though she couldn't see him now, she pictured him in the darkness behind her lids. Hair the color

of autumn leaves, short and curly, framed a long, thin face and accented cat-shaped eyes of greenish-gold. A long, jagged scar marred his right cheek and curved down to his jaw. It was a battle injury, a reminder of their last day in slavery before they were released and took out on their own. She thought Richard the most handsome of the men who followed her that day—*her men* as she so often called them.

“Do you want us to remove the blindfold before we fuck you?” another voice asked, this one a bit higher; it sounded a bit younger, more innocent than Richard’s.

Innocent the man was not, Quenell knew. Victor often liked to play the naive adolescent but the days when those words described him vanished long ago. She felt his hair, long and as silver as the full moon, brush over her flesh and she shivered from the thrill. She could almost see him as he gazed down at her with eyes as black as night, a sly grin tilting her lips.

“No, leave the blindfold,” she answered, and her own voice sounded rough, full of the raging flame their touch lit inside her. She liked being cut off from sight, enjoyed the way it heightened her other senses. More, she wanted the feeling of being helpless, under their control. “For now, for these moments, my body is yours. Do with me as you will.” She knew she could put her trust in

these men for these few moments. They would not harm her. At least in no ways that she didn't enjoy, she amended to herself.

"I cannot wait any longer, Quenell," Richard said. His fingers slid in and out of her hole, wiggled, twisted, and drew quiet sighs of pleasure from her lips. "My dick is so hard and ready for you. It throbs to be inside you. I know how you like to play but if it is to be our control, *my* control, I say fuck now and play next time."

His fingers pounded into her now as if to give her pussy a small taste of what his dick was about to do. She panted louder when Victor returned to suck and bite her breast and when she spoke her words came on spurts of breath. "Fuck...me...now...Richard."

His fingers left her and she instantly felt the loss, wanted to scream to have them back inside her. His hands skimmed her legs, wrapped around her ankles and lifted. He draped her legs over his shoulders, gripped her hips and shoved his dick inside her in one solid, vicious thrust.

"Oh Goddess," she cried out. She reached blindly for something to hold onto and found long, silky strands of hair – Victor's hair. She fisted her hand and pulled. She heard Victor's low growl, knew that he liked just a little pain with his sex too.

"Damn, you're tight," Richard grunted. His

cock slid in and out of her in quick, measured strokes. He reached the end of her with each inward thrust, eased almost completely out of her pussy before he slammed back inside again.

She writhed on the mattress, bucked in his hands. Her heels dug into his shoulders. Victor, she deduced, because Richard's hands remained with a firm grip on her hips, took hold of her breasts and squeezed, kneaded and pulled them. Hot darts of pain laced with pleasure shot straight to her middle, brought her closer to that orgasmic edge.

"Quenell, let go of my hair."

It took a moment for Victor's words to penetrate the sexual fog that clouded her mind. She didn't want to let go, liked having something to hold onto while Richard fucked her. When she didn't release her hold, she felt Victor's hand move from one breast, latch onto her wrist. He pulled her hand from his hair and pinned it to the mattress above her head.

"Leave it there," he told her, and his voice no longer held that sweet, innocent tone. He reminded her that he had control. He let go of her wrist, hesitated as if to make sure she followed his order not to move, then grabbed her hair and forced her to turn her head to the side.

Quenell felt the smooth, slightly wet tip of Victor's cock rub over her lips.

"Such my dick, Quenell. I want you to suck me off while Richard fucks you."

Happy to oblige, she opened her mouth, wrapped her lips around his shaft. Both men were well endowed but where Richard's cock was the widest, Victor's was the longest. At first, she couldn't take him in completely. Her throat protested and her gag reflex threatened to kick in. She'd sucked Victor's dick before, trained herself to deep-throat him to give them both maximum pleasure. She made herself relax, as much as she could, with Richard still pounding hard and fast into her pussy, and slowly took Victor's cock inch by inch into her mouth, down her throat. When her body wanted to reject the obstacle obstructing her throat, she ignored it, forced herself to relax the muscles in her neck and throat and swallowed more of him. He waited until she took all of him in her mouth, until her lips met with the smooth skin of his body, before he took control.

They fucked her, Richard between her legs and Victor in her mouth, until she screamed her release around Victor's dick. Together, they brought her to orgasm once more before they allowed their own release. Hot, thick cum shot down her throat and she fought to swallow it even as she heard Richard's grunt, felt his body shudder between her legs.

Spent and exhausted, Richard collapsed on top

of her. Victor let his dick fall out of her mouth then lay down to curl up next to her. Her body felt like jelly, completely used and sated. She didn't try to move, couldn't. She simply lay still and waited for her breath to return to normal.

"Did we hurt you?" Richard asked, his breath warm against the side of her face. His body felt glued to hers, the sweat between them thick and sticky.

Quenell managed a breathless laugh. "Are you kidding? That was great!" Still blindfolded, she threw one arm around Richard's back, felt blindly beside her until she felt Victor's chest. He went rigid beneath her hand. "Victor?" She made his name a question.

"Someone is here."

Richard rolled off of her and she felt him sit up beside her. She heard voices outside the hut, recognized all but one. Then even that one clicked in her mind and she struggled to sit up, even as surprise wanted to render her paralyzed. Her heart skipped, her pulse quickened and a love she forced to die long ago rushed back to life. She reached for the blindfold, pulled it up from the bottom and found Hermod just inside the door.

* * * *

Hermod knew of jealousy but never knew how it

felt until he walked in on Quenell, found her naked on a bed between two equally naked men. The jealousy seeped into him, ran through his veins like molten lava. It surprised him, this feeling for a woman he spent little time with, hadn't even seen in nearly a year. He dreamt of her though, he admitted to himself. She filled his thoughts, his dreams, for many, many nights though he saw himself in her bed rather than the two men beside her now.

"Quenell," he said by way of greeting. "I see life has treated you well since we last met." He forced himself to look her in the eyes, to not allow his gaze to drop to her generous, softly rounded breasts, or further still to the smooth curve of her hips. Her legs spread just enough to reveal a glimpse of the treasure between them.

As though his eyes mirrored his thoughts, she closed her legs, sat up straight and drew her knees to her chest to cover her breasts. "Better then when our paths first crossed anyway." She looked around, her gaze searched then she cleared her throat. "Clothes please, Victor."

The man to her right slid off the bed, retrieved a small pile of cloth from the floor and handed it to her. Hermod noted neither of the men seemed concerned with their own nudity but more so his business here.

"What brings you to our little space of the

unnamed forest, Hermod?" Quenell asked as she dressed. "Are you not worried about the demons who have traveled this land before us?" She smiled when she said the last and it brightened her face, brought out her beauty.

Hers was not a conventional beauty, nor one of magic as of the Gods, but one of a hard earned beauty, a rebel, a warrior. He feared once freed she would cut her hair but saw now she still wore it long. The ebony strands, as dark as the deepest cave, fell like a curtain around her shoulders. Her blue eyes sparkled like the sun shining on the sea. He knew those eyes could darken though, go midnight blue in the heat of battle. He saw that when she fought beside him against a rival of her former master. As payment of defeat, she and the other slaves were given to Hermod. Slaves he later set free to wander alone.

Hermod returned her smile. "I know of the rumors of demons in this land." He nodded. "I also know those rumors to be false. The only demons who travel here are you."

She laughed at that and the sound equaled that of a thousand harps; beautiful, melodic and intoxicating. "I can be a demon when forced, I suppose." Her gaze moved down him in a slow slide that nearly made him squirm. His blood pressure soared and his dick hardened beneath his toga. She laughed again. Her expression revealed

that she knew full well what her gaze did. "But that is not why you are here."

For a moment Hermod thought to argue that but she was right, more pressing matters brought him to her this day. "You have heard of Balder's fate."

Though it was more statement than question, she answered. Her face grew solemn, her eyes sad. "Yes. I know of what happened to your brother. I wept for him."

"As did we all," Richard said, and the other man chimed in as well.

"I thank you," Hermod said. He knew Richard and Victor. Both men fought beside he and Quenell in the battle that led to their freedom. Though he hadn't known the three to be a ménage at the time. "But one in the land did not. Hela sees this as a breach of our bargain."

Chapter Two

Hela, the Goddess of the inglorious dead and Queen of the underworld, Helheim. Quenell knew of her, knew of the bargain between she and Hermod. Hela took Balder upon his death and refused to return him to the Gods. When his mother, Frigga, asked for one to save her son, Hermod offered himself. He traveled on the eight-legged steed gifted to him by Frigga to Helheim to bargain for his brother's release. Hela pledged to return Balder if Hermod could prove that everyone and everything in all the lands mourned for Balder. But if one living creature refused to weep, she would keep him.

"What of this person who refused to weep?" Quenell asked now.

"She is Varra, giantess and daughter of the ruler of Jötunheim."

"The city of the giants," Quenell whispered. She studied Hermod, figured she knew what he wished to ask. She would do it, of course. Though

he never demanded such a thing, never would, she felt she owed him her allegiance. If not for Hermod, she and her men would still be slaves.

Dressed now, she felt more comfortable in Hermod's sight. Still, he had an imposing presence in the hut. His stature as the son of the God, Odin, did not intimidate her in the least. His handsomeness and the power he could hold over her did. No man ever awoke desires in her the way one look from Hermod could. She could only imagine the brush of his lips, a lick of his tongue. Orgasm from a mere touch. What a novel idea, she thought. She longed to run her fingers through his mane of long, shiny hair so yellow it looked like the sunlight's kiss. She wanted to skim her palms over his expansive shoulders, down his muscular chest, remove the toga so she could see all of him. She wanted to explore his body like nothing she ever traveled before. And to feel his hands on her flesh...

Quenell sighed. For those reasons and many others, she ran from him upon her release, led her people to this far unnamed forest where they formed their own little tribe away from any and all who would seek to rule them. Now he followed her here.

"You wish to kill Varra," Quenell said, and pushed all salacious thoughts to the back of her mind. No need to fantasize about seducing the son

of a God. Though she knew she would do just that at the next opportunity she found alone.

"She cannot be slain by a man's hand."

"Ah, the reason for this visit comes clear. You want Quenell to kill her," Richard said. He sat beside Quenell on the bed; his legs folded in Indian fashion, his cock now soft and smaller lay limply against his thigh.

"With her death, all left in the lands will weep for Balder." Hermod moved a couple of steps farther into the hut, crossed his wide, muscular arms as if he wasn't sure what to do with them.

Quenell would have kept one hand on the hilt of her sword, the other free and ready to throw a few punches. Even in polite company, if it were someone she had not seen in nearly a year, she would never stand at such ease without first establishing a treaty for trust. People changed. Especially rogues and warriors like herself and her men.

"And Hela will have to set him free," Victor concluded. He stood beside the bed, still as equally naked as Richard. His hands rested at his sides but Quenell knew he had a knife somewhere in arm's reach. She couldn't see it but it was there, somewhere.

Quenell looked to Victor, to Richard. Both seemed to have forgotten their state of undress. She barely restrained from shaking her head at

them. They could be so immodest sometimes. She thought to tell them to dress but decided not to bother. They would cover themselves in due time. She looked to Hermod instead. The hope, the love, the sheer confidence she saw in his eyes tore at her heart. Love for his brother, confidence in her that she could kill this giantess and hope that she would agree. She would, of course and she bet he knew it.

"Do you know the way to Jötunheim?" Richard asked. "We will need directions, a map."

"I know the way," Hermod answered, but his gaze fell on Quenell and not Richard. "I know the directions. I am your map."

"You intend to go?" Quenell couldn't hide the surprise in her voice and knew it showed in her expression as well.

"I would not send you to do this alone," Hermod answered simply, as if the thought was unheard of.

"She won't be alone," Richard said. "I will go with her."

Hermod seemed to study Richard for a long moment, appeared to size up the other man. Quenell thought she would give a block of gold to know what went through Hermod's mind at that moment. If she had a block of gold, that was.

"Then you will go with us," Hermod finally said. "This is for me to do. As I am a man, I cannot

slay Varra myself. But I will not send someone to kill her without my being a part of the search. It is because of her that Hela still has my brother. I will see Varra dead."

Though she desperately wanted to, Quenell couldn't argue with his determination or his logic. "Very well. We shall set out at first light." Though it cost her dearly, she let her gaze skim down Hermod, slide back up to meet his eyes. "You may want to find something different to cover yourself. You will stand out in this land like a sore thumb dressed like that."

* * * *

She left Victor in charge of the tribe with strict orders to be on constant lookout for anything suspicious in the surrounding forest. To Quenell's way of thinking, slay the giant ruler's daughter and an army of angry giants may decide to seek revenge. Not that she worried about fighting giants so much. Though very large, she often found them to be dimwitted and untrained in true fighting techniques.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall, she thought, as she followed Hermod through a thick batch of trees. Richard trailed behind her to bring up the rear of their mini parade. She wished, not for the first time since they began their journey to

Jötunheim, that they rode horses. After careful deliberation, they decided to travel on foot instead. Much of the land between the unnamed forest and Jötunheim was too rough, too thick and had too many waterways that ran through it. Horses would slow them down, they decided. They would wish for them, however, once they reached the end of the uninhabited lands, Hermod told them, as there the region would open up and allow them to travel faster.

Forget the open region, Quenell thought, she wished for a horse now—one to put under Hermod to conceal his incredible ass. Who knew, she thought, as her gaze dropped to admire it now. *Take the man out of the toga, put him in a pair of leather pants and oh my, yummy didn't begin to describe it enough.*

Reluctantly, Hermod agreed to the change of dress. He first argued that he could easily fight in the toga and Quenell knew this to be true. She saw him do it when he faced her old master's rival. But she wanted disguise as much as ease. People recognized the son of a God. Dressed in a white toga with a gold drape over the left shoulder that crossed the body and met with a gold belt at the waist, he looked every bit the God's son. If they crossed paths with anyone on their journey, she thought it best for him to be seen as a rogue like herself and Richard. Who would look for the son

of a God in uninhabited lands dressed in leather pants and boots with a sword at his back, the strap across his chest and his hair pulled into a ponytail at the nape of his neck?

"You're starting to drool." Richard's amused voice cut into Quenell's thoughts. She heard something else in his voice too but couldn't define it. He walked so closely behind her he merely needed to lean down to whisper in her ear.

"I am not." Quenell spoke out of the side of her mouth. She felt her cheeks grow warm and she silently cursed Richard. This would prove to be a long journey, traveling with these two men. One blinded by love for his brother and hell-bent on revenge at any cost, the other strong and ready for battle but still playful to the bitter end. She liked that about Richard, his ability to make light of most situations. Except when his playfulness fell at her expense, she thought and picked up her step.

Sticks crunched under their feet, birds chirped and somewhere in the distance she heard the roar of a lion. She hoped their path would not cross with his, preferred to save her battle wits for the giantess. However, a slain lion would provide meat for the night's meal as well as fur to take back to the tribe when they returned. They walked in silence, dodged low lying branches, treaded over ground wrought with holes and jagged rocks.

"The land is rough here," Hermod said, and stopped, turned to offer a hand.

Quenell looked at his hand, looked back at him with a raised eyebrow and a scowl. None of the men in her tribe would make such a gesture. They knew her too well. She silently reminded herself that Hermod did not. "You think me strong enough to slay a giantess but not balanced enough to walk over a few jagged rocks."

His hand slowly fell back to his side. "My apologies. May I at least say watch your step?"

She started to tell him there was no need for that either. One look at the ground ahead and common sense told her to tread carefully. "Just keep moving, Hermod," she said, and heard Richard snicker behind her. She shot him a look over her shoulder that would silence most men and started walking. The rocks shifted under her feet and she nearly stepped into a deep crevice left between rocks by a narrow stream. Just what she needed after her little show of bravado, to fall flat on her face, she thought.

"We should stop," Richard said, and saved her the embarrassment of Hermod noticing her stumble. "Fill up the water bladders. We don't know when we will come to another stream with drinkable water."

"Not for many hours." Hermod slid the strap of his bladder off his shoulder, knelt on a particularly

unstable rock to reach the stream.

"Looking to get a bath while you're at it?" Quenell asked, and found a more sturdy rock for herself.

"Hey, it's nice and cool, clean." Richard waggled his brows at her. "Too bad it isn't larger. We could go skinny dipping." At Hermod's frown he said, "You could join us. Make it a threesome."

"Wouldn't that anger Victor, my taking his place?" Hermod asked and with admirable balance, stood on the shaky rock. His gaze landed on Quenell as he spoke, as if he asked the question of her.

Surprise rendered her speechless. He seemed to want an explanation for the scene he walked in on at the hut. She hadn't expected that nor had she expected the flickers of what she could only define as jealousy in his dark eyes.

Quenell stood, capped her water bladder and swung the strap over her shoulder. She owed no one an explanation for anything she did. Though she found it interesting—okay, exhilarating, she silently admitted—that he would be jealous of her men. "Which way?" she asked, choosing to ignore the situation for now.

Hermod looked around, gazed up at the sky and gauged the position of the sun. "We continue this way for now," he said, and began walking.

Toward the lion. Quenell followed Hermod. If

they continued on their current path they would certainly cross the lion. "Guess we will be eating good tonight."

"Planning to kill some fresh meat?" Richard asked, and she could have sworn she heard his stomach grumble.

"Yeah, that lion if he gets in our way. Didn't you hear his roar back there?"

"That lion would not make good supper." Hermod slowed his step until she walked beside him. "Not unless you have developed a taste for human flesh as well."

"Not especially."

"He is Lionel; part lion, part man. He was punished by the Gods and banished to the forest for all time. That was his roar you heard."

"What did he do to get on the bad side of the Gods?" Richard asked. The trees they walked through stood too close for three people of their size to fit so he remained in back, positioned himself so that the three of them formed a triangle.

"He had sex with the daughter of a god. It is said that when they were found Lionel was roaring like a lion as he spilled his seed inside her."

Quenell's mouth fell open. Richard let out a hoot of laughter.

"The gods decided rather than kill him," Hermod continued, "they would leave him with

the memory of his last ejaculation as a full man for the rest of his life."

"That's horrible!" Quenell gasped. But as the shock slipped away, the laughter began to bubble. She glanced at Hermod, saw the glint of humor in his eyes, the quirk of his lips and her own laughter spilled over.

"Horrible, yes," Richard said, around fits of boyish giggles. "But you've got to admit, that's some retribution."

"And they say the Gods have no sense of humor," Hermod said.

"Should we prepare to fight?" Quenell asked, once she regained her composure. "I've battled a lion before but never one that was part man. Should be a new experience for me."

Hermod looked at her and shook his head. "A new experience I am sure you would enjoy."

"You make that sound like a bad thing."

"No, not bad." He hesitated, studied her for a couple of steps. "More interesting than bad, I would say. Intriguing. I've never met another woman like you, Nell."

"Nor will you ever," Richard muttered behind them.

"Still, it is one experience that will probably wait for a later date. Lionel should not try to fight us. I do wish to talk to him, however. He knows the ways of these lands, knows of Jötunheim and

where Varra will be in the city. Since his transformation, he has become a bit of the eyes and ears of these lands and those that surround them."

"He lies." The voice, high-pitched and foolish, sounded as though it came from a dense patch of bushes not two feet away.

On instinct more than design, Quenell stepped in front of Hermod, drew her sword.

"What in the hell was that?" Richard asked, his own sword now in his hands. He moved forward to stand next to Hermod.

Quenell shot a quick glance over her shoulder, saw that both men stood with weapons out, each just to the side of her so that this time they formed a loose triangle with her as the point. Neither man attempted to move around her, to protect her, but they stood ready should the blades start to fly.

"The beast lies," the high-pitched voice said from the bushes. "The giants have bargained for his loyalty. They know you are coming for her."

"Show yourself," Quenell ordered. Her hand tightened on the hilt of her sword as she tried to see into the thick brush. What was in those bushes? Not human, she thought. Of that she could almost be certain. *But is it dangerous? Will it come out sword swinging or with a tail tucked between its legs?*

It did neither but stepped boldly out of the

brush, a forest gnome barely tall enough to reach Quenell's knees. She felt the men behind her relax. She didn't think they put up their swords but knew they no longer held them ready to slice the thing into bits. She wasn't so eager to trust. She came across smaller creatures in her time that could do as much damage as a giant grizzly or a rogue wolf.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I am Stolig," the forest gnome answered. His large, pointy nose reached higher in the air as if his name were some kind of royalty.

Maybe among the forest gnomes it was, Quenell supposed, though from the look of him he was anything but royalty. White hair topped his head in short, matted locks. His beard, white with a twinge of brown, stretched to mid-chest. The belt of leaves he wore around his pudgy waist divided the brown of his unclothed torso and the brown pants that stopped at his knobby knees. Twines of leaves intricately woven and tied served to cover his feet. He looked at her through beady eyes somewhat sunken in his plump face. Sly, trickster eyes, she thought and immediately deemed him untrustworthy.

"What were you doing hiding behind that brush?"

"Waiting for you, my lady." He gave her a small bow though his beady gaze never left her

eyes.

"You do not have to bow to me. I am neither royalty nor deity."

"Just showing my manners, my lady."

"The name is Quenell and forest gnomes don't have manners."

He made a tisking sound with his tongue, shook his head. "So misunderstood, we are."

"How did you know we would be coming this way?" Richard asked.

"I was there when the giants bargained with the beast. Hid in the bushes there too. They know you plan to kill the giantess, Varra. They know you plan to learn her whereabouts from the beast."

"And they paid Lionel to lead us the wrong way," Hermod concluded.

Quenell couldn't tell by his tone of voice if he bought the forest gnome's story or not. She knew she didn't buy it though. Forest gnomes were a seedy bunch, liars, thieves and swindlers. But she would play along for a moment or two at least.

"Yes, my Lord. I came to warn you. I wept for Lord Balder. I weep still that he has not returned."

Okay, enough of the sucking up, Quenell thought. "Why should we trust you?" she asked. "How do we know it wasn't you who made the deal with the giants to lead us the wrong way?"

Stolig stiffened, his beady eyes narrowed and in a movement almost too quick for the eye, he drew

a sword and lashed out.

Quenell caught the blur of silver just before Stolig turned and ran. She brought her sword down and sliced the forest gnome in half from shoulder to ribs. "I guess that answered that question," she muttered, and pulling a cloth from her rucksack, wiped her sword clean.

"Quenell."

The alarm in Richard's voice made her turn. He knelt on the ground beside Hermod, blood staining his hands. "Shit! How bad is he hurt?"

"Not bad," Hermod answered, though pain laced his words.

Quenell knelt beside him opposite Richard to examine the wound. A clean slice opened the thigh of Hermod's borrowed leather pants. The flesh beneath seeped blood. "It doesn't look too deep but we need to stop the bleeding."

"Tie it off with something," Hermod said. "We don't have time to deal with it now. We need to keep moving."

"He's right," Richard agreed. He pulled a cloth from his backpack, used it to make a tourniquet for Hermod's thigh. "There may be more of them." He looked around the forest as he spoke, searched with his gaze.

"Can you walk?" Quenell asked. She wanted to chastise him for being stupid, for letting his guard down, for being so trusting. Just like his brother,

she thought. Hadn't he learned anything from Balder's fate? Balder trusted in his mother's powers to keep him safe instead of watching his own ass. And look where it got him. Pierced by a dart of mistletoe and taken by Hela to the underworld.

Quenell trusted no one but herself. It was a personal rule made long ago. She lived among others, was friends with them, slept with some of them, but only gave them half her trust. She justified her actions with the knowledge and belief that it kept her alive.

"I can walk. Help me get to my feet."

She hooked an arm under Hermod's and helped him stand.

"We will move slower now," Richard said, with a pointed glance at Hermod's wound. "But we still have a few good hours of daylight left."

Chapter Three

Hermod bit back an oath as he lowered himself to sit on the ground. The last few hours proved to be a test of his endurance. Each step caused the pain in his thigh to mount. At one point, he even noticed his vision start to blur. He sustained injuries in battle before but never below the waist. To get slashed in the leg when it was the part of his body he needed most right now angered him. He'd been so stupid, to let down his guard so easily. If not for Quenell, the forest gnome would have injured him more. He hadn't sought her out to protect him, dammit. He simply needed her to kill the giantess.

"How's the leg?" Quenell asked. She sat down beside him, leaned over to examine his wound. "Hurt like hell?"

"It's not too bad," he lied.

She looked at him, one corner of her lips tilting in a half smile. "There is no need to play macho for me."

"Okay, it hurts like hell."

She laughed and the sound drifted to him on the air, caressed his skin like a physical touch. "Let me look at it." She began to untie the tourniquet.

Hermod put his hands on the ground behind him, rested his weight on them as he watched her. He loved the way her hair spilled over one shoulder, framed one side of her face as she cocked her head to study his wound. He couldn't help but wish she studied points a bit higher up from his injury.

"It doesn't appear to be too deep. I don't think it needs stitches." She turned her head, glanced at him and must have seen something in his eyes because she asked, "What?"

"You're beautiful," he said, and before he could stop himself he reached out to cup her cheek.

Her hand came up to cover his. She gazed at him and her blue eyes seemed to swirl with emotions he couldn't quite read. "You need to take off your pants."

Hermod blinked at her. "My pants," he said dumbly. He'd been working up to that, he thought, but her forwardness and guts shocked him speechless.

"We need to wash them, clean off the blood. It will make it easier to clean the wound too."

"Got your hopes up, huh?" Richard said on a chuckle, though Hermod thought it sounded a bit

forced. He stopped beside them, set down a belt pouch of food he gathered.

Quenell pulled back, a hint of a smile on her lips. "What do we feast on tonight?"

"There's a tree at the edge of the clearing bursting with berries. I found some nuts too. Should be enough for the three of us tonight. I figure we can gather a few more for the journey before we set out again tomorrow."

"Sounds good." Quenell gazed down at Hermod, a glint of humor swirling in her blue eyes. "Now, off with the pants so we can wash them and take care of that leg. I'm starving."

* * * *

Quenell tried not to think about Hermod. Not an easy feat when it was his borrowed pants she washed in the nearby stream, his leg that she cleaned and dressed. He covered himself with a tunic he pulled from his pack while his pants dried but it didn't help much. She'd seen what lay beneath and the desire, the want for it, churned in her blood.

They made a fire for light when the sun went down and settled around it to eat the berries and nuts Richard gathered. And the needs inside her continued to grow. He thought her beautiful. Her surprise at that continued to linger. How many

times had she thought of him since last they met? Too dammed many, she answered herself.

She could have him now, tonight. But what of tomorrow? What of the next day? His was a different world than hers. Though not a God himself, he came from the Gods and she, well she was little more than a peasant in truth. Could he love a woman not equal to himself? Could she love the son of a God knowing his responsibilities to the lands?

Love. You stupid fool, she silently scolded herself. *Want and sexual fulfillment don't equal love.*

"Stolig said the giants know we are coming," Richard said, breaking into Quenell's thought. "How do you suppose they found out?" His gaze fell on Hermod as he asked the question.

"I told no one of my plans." Hermod placed a hand on his upper thigh above the wound as he stretched out the leg. "Lionel is the only creature I talked to. He told me where to find you." He looked to Quenell.

Richard popped a berry in his mouth and spoke around it. "Yet you still think we can trust him?"

"I do," Hermod answered, and his voice rang with confidence. "Lionel would not deceive me. Even if he would, I did not tell Lionel of the reason I wished to find Quenell. I only asked her whereabouts."

"Then how did Stolig know of your plan?"

"That I do not know, Richard." Hermod sighed and shook his head. "Somehow, someone found out and they betrayed me, betrayed my brother."

Quenell listened to the conversation with a growing dread. She never expected this to be a simple mission but she hadn't thought it to get this complicated, this dangerous, so fast. With only one day's journey behind them and most likely two or more to go, she calculated, they found themselves already at a loss on who to talk to, who to accept aid from. "They will hide her," she said, and didn't realize she spoke aloud until she saw both Richard's and Hermod's attention focus on her.

"Probably," Hermod agreed. A frown etched itself between his brows. "Her father, the ruler of Jötunheim, will want to protect her. Word has it Varra is not loved by most in the city of the giants."

"But liked or not, blood is often thicker than water." Quenell nodded.

"Of that I can certainly attest," Hermod said on a half laugh with a pointed glance at his thigh.

"We should try to sleep," Richard said and stood, brushed grass from his backside. "If we are going to be forced to track all over Jötunheim and the surrounding lands to look for Varra, battle who-knows-what on our way there, we will need our strength."

* * * *

Hermod woke to a sharp stab of pain in his thigh. A rock, he realized as he pushed himself up on his hands. In his sleep, he rolled over onto a damned rock. Of course, said rock would be positioned so that it bore straight against the tourniquet and therefore his wound. He wished, not for the first time in his life, that he had been gifted with the powers to heal. Instead, he got shafted. The son of a God and no real powers to speak of, except the abilities to love and fight.

Although he couldn't help but question the last after their run-in with the forest gnome today, he thought with a scowl. However, berating himself about his idiotic actions would not change anything. He fought and killed many in the past. Hell, if not for him, Quenell would not have been there to save his ass today he reminded himself, in an attempt to sooth his bruised ego.

He started to lie back down, to try to catch a bit more sleep before sunrise, when he caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. His hand was already reaching for the sword he placed at his side when his eyes focused in the dark, trained on Quenell. She stood at the edge of the clearing, one foot propped on a huge boulder. Her arms were crossed just below her breasts and

she stared up at the three-quarter moon. For a moment he could only watch her as the need to have her, to be inside her sprang to life once more. She looked so...vulnerable, he thought. This tough as nails woman with muscles to rival many men and the attitude to boot. Yet, in the paleness of the moonlight, he saw the fragileness under that hard shell, recognized the pain in the slump of her shoulders.

Not physical pain, he told himself as he slowly sat up straighter, careful not to draw her attention. No, that pain would be internal. Something hurt her emotionally, nagged at her insides. To see her that way pulled at his heartstrings and drew him to her like a magnet.

Because he knew better than to spook her, lest he wish to have another blade slice through him today, he purposely made a bit of noise as he walked to her, quietly said her name to alert her of his presence. Still, he saw her reach for her weapon before she slowly let her hand fall to her side as recognition took hold.

"What are you doing?" He kept his voice low as not to wake Richard. For once—hell, maybe the first time ever—they were alone and he wanted to keep it that way as long as possible.

Quenell sighed. She looked up at the sky, gazed over the trees rather than meet his stare. "Couldn't sleep," she answered simply.

"I gathered that. Do you want to tell me why?" He stepped closer to her until their bodies nearly touched; his chest to her shoulder. Heat all but sparked in the air between them. "Want to tell me what's on your mind?"

She fell silent for so long he didn't think she would answer. When she did, her voice was laced with so much anguish it tore at him, slashed him deeper than any blade. "It's one of my people."

Not exactly sure he knew what she talked about, Hermod didn't say anything but simply continued to watch her in silence. A light breeze fluttered the air, toyed with her hair. The moonlight glistened off her ebony strands and gave her an almost otherworldly look.

"I've thought about it all night and it is the only explanation I can come up with." She crossed her arms again, squeezed, and seemed to hug herself. "All of my people knew of the plan. If you told no one then who else could it be?"

And with that, he understood. She believed someone in her tribe betrayed her, turned against her. Though he didn't want to admit it, it did seem like the most probable answer. "I'm sorry, Nell," he whispered. He slid an arm around her waist, tried to tug her to him.

She resisted, dug her heel into the ground and proved just how much muscle she possessed. "I don't need to be coddled because of hurt feelings,

Hermod."

"No, but you are human. You feel the pain of deceit. You have the right to let it show, to allow someone to comfort you if only for a while." His arm still around her waist, he stepped to her side until he stood in front of her. When her gaze dropped, he reached with his free hand, hooked a finger under her chin and tilted her face up until she had no choice but to meet his gaze. "Let me comfort you, Nell. Let me hold you, be with you."

"I can't, Hermod. We can't." Her fingers clasped his wrist but she didn't try to pull his hand from her chin, didn't try to back away.

He felt the tug of war going on inside her as though it were a tangible thing. Because he felt the same tug of war begin in himself the minute he stepped into her hut, saw her on the bed with Richard and Victor, he knew how hard it was to fight, how much effort it took to deny yourself what you wanted most.

What he wanted most was her. Not just her body but all of her. He wanted all she could offer him, all she could give him and so much more. Yet, he feared he could have none of it. She was not of his world. She would need to be for him to keep her. Would she give up all she gained, all she built since they won her freedom for him?

Though he wanted so much to believe she would, to hope, he feared it would be a prayer left

unanswered. Yet, would it be so wrong to take what he could from her now? To have her body, give her his?

“Just for tonight,” he whispered and slowly moved in for a kiss. “Let us take one another tonight. Let there be no other but you and me, Nell.”

Chapter Four

Just for tonight. Quenell felt a tightness form in her throat. She knew that would be all he would offer her, all he could. It hurt, she realized, as she swallowed down the lump of tears that threatened to choke her, nearly as much as knowing someone in her own tribe turned against her.

But she would not cry, she vowed, as his lips neared hers. Her eyes closed on their own accord and she felt the first brush of his mouth against hers. She let go of his wrist, slid her arm around his neck and gave herself to the kiss, to him. Though she wanted more than just one night, she would take what he offered and cherish it always.

His arm tightened around her waist, drew her closer as his tongue urged her lips to part. She opened for him, heard herself make a low moan when their tongues met, tangled. He kissed her until she felt certain the stars would explode in the sky from the change in atmospheric pressure then

he slowly pulled away just enough to meet her gaze.

"By the Gods, Nell, I have wanted to do that for so long," he whispered, his voice raspy and deep with desire.

Nell. He called her Nell and every time he did her stomach fluttered wildly. His name for her, she thought. No one would ever call her that but him. She felt lightheaded with the knowledge, so full of wants and desires that she was dizzy with them. No man ever made her feel this way. She hadn't known one could. "Do it again." She heard the pleading in her voice but didn't care. "Kiss me like that again, Hermod."

He did and this time she melted in his arms. They folded together down to the cool patch of thick grass that surrounded the rock she'd used as a foot rest, both mindful of his wounded thigh.

"I need to touch you," he whispered against her lips. "Please, let me touch you."

"Yes. I want you to touch me," Quenell said breathlessly. She found his hand, clasped it in hers and brought it up to cover her breast. He made a low guttural sound and gently squeezed. "Yes. Hermod, yes. Put your hands on me, feel me, take me."

Skillfully, he pulled away the cloth that covered her breasts, replaced his hand with his mouth. She arched her breast into him as he tasted her, sucked

and fondled with his tongue and drew a strangled cry from her lips. Her hands glided over his shoulders, through his hair, down his back as far as she could reach. Hard toned muscle and heated flesh met her palms as she moved her hands around him to splay them flat on his chest, to skim over his small, beaded nipples.

His mouth moved from one breast to the other, licked the valley between them then did a slow, wet climb up, until his lips found hers once more. His fingers fumbled with the cloth wrapped around her waist as their tongues danced and explored. When he had her completely naked, he pushed her legs apart, delved a finger into her pussy.

She cried out but it sounded more like a quiet moan muffled by his mouth. He found that spot inside her that instantly put her on the edge, flicked it with his finger and she went mindless from the sensation. Her fingers dug into his flesh as her pussy burned, throbbed, convulsed. Her inner muscles contracted around his finger, her body now jelly in his arms.

"Again," he said and flicked that spot once more, made her writhe against his hand even when her body still shuddered with the aftermath of the orgasm.

To her surprise, she felt her body start that climb all over again. "No," she said, and reached

between her own legs, caught his hand. "Inside me," she panted. "This time I want you inside me. I want to feel your cock fill me, consume me." She fumbled with the tie of his leather pants, helped him out of them once more. When he attempted to lay her down, she stopped him with a hand on each shoulder. "You're hurt. Let me be on top."

She went down with him as he lay back on the grass, straddled his waist. When he reached for her hips, she caught his hands, pushed them over his head and held them. She showered him with kisses, explored his flesh with her lips and tongue. He tasted sweet, salty and utterly male, delicious.

"Nell, please," he breathed in a barely audible whisper. "You are driving me mad. I need you, need to be inside you."

Quenell shifted her hips, positioned them above his rigid cock and reached with one hand, wrapped her fingers around his shaft. She squeezed just a little, just enough and watched his eyes roll back in his head as she pumped his dick with her hand.

"No," he panted, pleaded. "By the Gods, Nell, I can't take much more of this. Please."

"Open your eyes, Hermod. Look at me," she said, and when his glassy gaze met hers she guided his dick to the wet opening of her pussy, lowered herself onto him. His cock was long and thick and the position pushed him impossibly

deep inside her, filled her like she had never been filled before.

Her body wanted hard and fast, all but demanded it, but she denied herself that urge. For her heart, she took him slow, drew out the moment to make it last. *Just for tonight.* She heard his words echo in her mind. If this would be their only night together like this alone in the dark, she would remember it always, make sure he remembered it too.

"Say my name," she said, as she slowly lifted herself until his cock nearly slipped out of her, eased herself back down until their bodies met, kissed.

"Quenell." The name came on a growl of control.

"No." She shook her head, looked down at him. "Your name for me."

He met her gaze, his eyes shining with lust, understanding and something else she could not read. "Nell." He said it softly and with such power it crawled over her skin. "Nell. Nell. Nell." He said it again and again.

Gazes locked as he continued to whisper her name, she rode his cock, slow at first but gaining in speed as the feelings, the sensations took control. She released his hands and they found her breasts, covered them in his callused palms. He squeezed and kneaded them, held onto them as he

would the straps of a horse's rein. Her own hands flattened on his chest as she pushed with her arms, dug her knees into the ground on either side of his hips to push there too so that she could ride him faster, harder. His dick slammed into her and the sound of sweaty flesh slapping on sweaty flesh filled the quiet night air.

"Nell." This time when he grunted her name it held the tone of warning.

"Cum for me, Hermod. Cum with me. I want to feel your hot seed shoot inside me, fill me while my juices flow over you." Her nails bit into his chest, made tiny half-moons in his flesh. His hands moved from her breasts to her hips, gripped and lifted, released. He lifted his own hips as she came down, drove his cock so deeply into her that he bumped her cervix. It hurt, made her cry out, but it was a pain she enjoyed, one that gave her the last push she needed down that orgasmic slide.

She drowned in the waves of her release, heard Hermod's grunted cry as she took him under with her. Her body bucked, jerked, her toes curling in the grass as the cum spilled from her, washed over him and she knew he bathed her insides with his own thick spray.

Breathless and completely spent, she swam to the surface of reality only to collapse on top of him. She lay her head on his shoulder, felt the fast

paced beat of his heart in time with hers against her breasts and closed her eyes. His arms tightened around her waist and they lay there, their bodies glued together by sweat and exhaustion.

Just for tonight. His words echoed through her mind once more and she knew tonight, just once with this man would never be enough. Because she wanted to tell him so, because she felt tears sting the backs of her lids, she opened her eyes and started to pull away. She hesitated when she spotted Richard crouched in the darkness, his now limp dick in his hand, the evidence of his own release glimmering softly on his hand and lower stomach.

He watched them, she realized. Watched and jerked himself off as he watched. A part of her wanted to be angry with him for that. It had been her time with Hermod, their moments of shared passion and they thought themselves to be alone. Because Richard allowed them to believe that, hadn't interrupted, she calmed her anger. He gave her a quick nod and a sly smile then stood and silently moved out of sight.

* * * *

He let her touch him. Not just his body, but also his soul. And he would be damned for it. Hermod

watched her now, the way her hips swayed when she walked, and the way her long ebony strands blew in the breeze and remembered. He told her one night, knew that she would give nothing more, doubted she would want more. Yet, he knew that because of that night, to walk away at the end of their journey would rip his heart to shreds.

"Branch."

He heard Quenell's warning just before the low lying tree limb slapped him across the cheek. The sting of the fresh scratch came instantly and he uttered a curse. Reflex more than anything made him cup his cheek with his hand.

"Sorry." Quenell stopped and turned to him. When he dropped his hand, she reached with a finger to trace his face just below the scratch. "Guess I let go of it too quickly." She bit the inside of her lip to hold back a smile, but a hint of it twinkled in her eyes.

"It was my fault. I wasn't paying attention." Because he'd been thinking of her, he added silently. He looked at her, at the compassion that danced with amusement in her eyes and allowed himself to wonder, just for a fleeting instant, could there ever be more between them?

"It doesn't do to daydream in these parts." Richard gave Hermod a playful slap on the back of his shoulder that shattered the moment and

dammed near Hermod's control of his temper.

Quick to anger today, Hermod thought of himself and knew the triggers to be jealousy and the sense of impending doom, a life without Quenell once their journey ended. "Yes, I guess not," he said, and caught hold of his temper. To Quenell, he said, "I am okay. We should keep moving."

She gave a small shrug and a smile; let her finger slide down his face before it dropped away. She turned and started to walk again.

"Can't get her out of your mind, huh?" Richard said softly. He moved closer so only Hermod could hear. "She tends to have that effect on a man once he's had sex with her."

Hermod glanced at the other man, took in his blank expression and guarded eyes. Hermod knew nothing of Richard's relationship with Quenell. He knew them to be friends, former slaves of the same master. He knew she shared her body with Richard, had walked in on them at the completion of the act in the hut. But could there be more between them? Did Richard take sex from Quenell as a simple means of release or some deeper meaning? Did he love her?

Hermod started to ask, the words on the tip of his tongue when Quenell stopped in front of him and held out an arm, a gesture for them to stop too. "What's wrong?" He kept his voice low,

cautious.

"Don't you smell that?" She asked, her voice equally low and cautious.

Hermod sniffed the air much like a cat and was met with the foul scent of death. "What is it?"

"I don't know. Probably just an animal but watch your step anyway, keep your eyes open."

They moved forward mindful of every step, their gazes scanning the surrounding trees and brush. They walked only a few feet when she stopped again. "Someone's been here," she pointed to a place at her left where the tall grass lay on its side.

A path, Hermod knew. Someone came this way, detoured through the grass. He looked farther ahead down the path they themselves traveled and his heart skipped a beat. Ahead he could just see the skull of a man perched mid-way up a tall tree that branched over the path. He knew the trunk of that tree showed a picture carved in the bark by a rock of a beast, half man and half lion, feasting on a human. A warning to those who traveled the path, a landmark to friends to know they neared Lionel's cave. The putrid scent of death lingered stronger in the air, weighed on it like a heavy blanket.

"Lionel," he whispered, and saw Quenell look to him out of the corner of his eye.

"We're there?" she asked.

Hermod nodded. "His cave is up ahead, through those trees and in the rocks."

"The smell," Richard said, "it could be one of his kills."

Or it could be him, Hermod thought, because the words caught in his throat, tasted too bitter to speak.

"I'm not taking any chances." Quenell drew her sword. "The two of you keep moving. Watch your backs, watch your fronts, and kill anything that crosses your path."

"What are you going to do?" Hermod asked. He caught her upper arm when she moved to step away.

"I'm going to follow that path," she said, with a pointed look toward the high grass.

"Let me," Hermod drew his own sword. "I know this land better than you. If that path leads where I believe it does, it will come out behind Lionel's cave. You go with Richard. Lionel will know who you are." If he is still alive, he thought. "He will not feel threatened."

She hesitated only a moment then nodded. "Okay. Be careful."

The desire to kiss her swept to life inside him like a fast moving arrow. Instead, he flashed her what he hoped would be a comforting smile and moved down the other path.

* * * *

Quenell watched Hermod walk away and quashed the urge to call him back. Dread kindled in her veins. Dread for what they would find, of what they would come across, of what would happen.

"He'll be fine." Richard laid a hand on her shoulder.

She shot him a quick glance but said nothing. She hated that he could read her so easily. "Let's move."

"You're in love with him," Richard said, his tone bland as he moved to walk beside her.

Whether question or statement of fact she wasn't sure. Either way she chose to ignore him. Her feelings for Hermod were not something she wanted to explore right now. She didn't have the luxury of time for such a task.

"Answer me, Nell. You're in love with him, aren't you?" He grabbed her arm, stopped her.

"Don't call me that." She spoke through gritted teeth, her anger bubbling just below the surface. To hear that name come from his lips cut through her like a knife. Richard never called her that but he knew Hermod did. He heard Hermod call her that last night because he watched them.

"Oh, I forgot," Richard said, his tone mocking. "That's his name for you."

Quenell looked down at his hand on her arm, looked up and met his gaze. "Let go of me, Richard." Her tone revealed only a hint of the anger she felt. "You wouldn't know what Hermod calls me if you hadn't watched us last night." Fury made her steps more like stomps as she started to move again. She hadn't meant to bring up last night and it pissed her off that she spoke without thinking.

"You were out in the open. I was there. What did you expect?"

"Privacy. Consideration."

"You didn't show any consideration for me."

Maybe he was right, Quenell thought. And the fact that he could be pissed her off more. "What's your problem, Richard? You know I sleep with other men. You share me with other men. You and I are friends who have sex when we feel the need. We are not a couple."

"We could be."

Startled, she looked at him and knew her face revealed her shock. She recovered quickly though, forced her expression to go blank and, hopefully, unreadable. He'd never mentioned them being a couple, never expressed a desire for anything more than what they shared. "This is not the time for this," she said, as they cleared the trees. Huge boulders and rocks came into view. She glanced at him, saw that he remained unarmed. "You want

to draw your sword? We don't know what is up ahead."

As if on cue, a creature hopped onto the path before them. No, hopped wasn't right, Quenell thought, for a thing which stood so tall on four legs didn't hop but galloped. A centaur with hooves of white and the body and brown coat of a Clydesdale horse. From the waist up, he appeared like a well-muscled human but for the pointy ears. He wore a sword across his back, but it was the bow in his hands trained on them that made Quenell stop in her tracks. Her hand tightened on the hilt of her own sword and she prepared to swing.

"Lower your sword." The voice sounded human, a strong baritone, both authoritative yet almost friendly.

Quenell weighed the odds. Two against one. Two swords against one bow. She and Richard could take this creature. It may get a shot off first but probably not one they couldn't dodge. She had gotten pretty good at dodging arrows over the years. She nearly rushed him, put an end to her indecision the easy way, but she caught a flicker of movement near the rocks just as three more centaurs, each with bow in hand, stepped into view. Now the odds were four to two. Not good odds when armed with only swords against flying arrows. Slowly, she lowered her sword."

"Quenell!"

At Richard's whispered protest, she turned to him. "Put down your sword, Richard. They outnumber us by two."

He lowered his sword though, like her, kept it in his hand. He didn't look too pleased with her decision.

Tough, she thought. She wasn't too pleased with him right now either. "We mean you no harm," she said to the centaur, though she wouldn't swear she spoke the truth. She knew centaurs to be friendly creatures...excellent with a bow but kind, nevertheless. Yet, she never crossed paths with one until now and never, ever trusted anyone or anything on sight.

"Nor we to you," the centaur said. "If you will tell us your names and why you travel this part of the land there will be no trouble."

"We came to speak to Lionel," Quenell answered. She told him what she figured the obvious considering their current position but nothing more. This centaur need not know of their plan to find Varra, to slay the giantess.

The centaur exchanged a look with the closet of the other creatures, stepped a few paces to one side but still did not lower his bow.

"We lowered our swords. How about you and your—" Richard hesitated, seemed to search for the right word, "men put down those bows? You

shouldn't need them if you don't intend to harm us."

"Is Lionel expecting you?" the centaur closest to the trees asked, his voice a bit on the high side to carry to them with ease.

"Yes. He has information for us," Quenell answered and knew she said too much when the centaur's head cocked to one side. A quizzical look passed through his eyes.

"What sort of information?" he asked.

"The personal kind," Richard answered, before Quenell could speak.

Touchy, touchy, she thought. Her usually playful Richard sure didn't seem to be in the mood to play light today. At this rate, he would end up pissing off these creatures and earn them both an arrow through the heart.

Quenell thought fast. "We wish to speak with him about a bargain for protection, safe passage for our people through these lands."

"Yet you approach with swords drawn."

"He is half lion."

"Then he was not expecting you after all."

Oops, got me there, Quenell thought. She was usually a better liar than this. Contradictions like that buried her quick.

"Glar." The name came from the rock side followed by the sound of fast moving feet. Hermod moved toward them, not in a run but a

brisk walk, his sword secure in its sheath across his back. "They are with me."

The centaur called Glar took one look at Hermod, gave him a slight nod and lowered his bow. The other centaurs followed suit. "Hermod, son of Odin," he greeted, and folded his front legs in a bow.

A sign of respect, Quenell guessed, for anyone that knew of Hermod knew him not to be a God, even if he was the son of one. She wondered fleetingly what it would be like to have people practically lying down at your feet all the time. She doubted she would enjoy it.

"Where is Lionel, Glar?" Hermod asked as he neared them. The regal tone in his voice surprised Quenell. He acted so different when alone with her and Richard. "Why do you guard this path?"

Glar's deep brown gaze fell to the ground. Sorrow so thick it almost seemed tangible sounded in his voice as he said, "We have moved his body inside the cave."

"His—" Hermod stopped in mid-step, mid-sentence, his expression a mixture of deep shock and confirmed fears.

"He is dead."

"How?"

"An arrow."

"One of yours?" Richard asked. The question earned him a glare that could bore a hole in steel

from Glar and the other centaurs.

"Certainly not." Glar's tone held as much heat as the look in his eyes. "A human," he said, and turned back to Hermod. "We know that much though we do not know who, could not see nor could we catch him. Very fast, he was, for a creature of two legs."

Quenell's blood turned to ice in her veins. A human quick enough to outrun centaurs, with enough knowledge of the land to hide from them...

"He snuck up on Lionel," Hermod concluded. "Made the path I just followed."

"Yes. His skill with a bow and arrow rivaled my own," Glar admitted. "He took Lionel down from great distance. Perfect aim," he added, and a hint of admiration sounded in his tone. "He shot Lionel through the heart. An instant kill."

"You said you moved his body into the cave," Quenell said and took a step forward, toward Glar. "May we see him?"

Glar's gaze moved from Hermod to her to Richard and back to Hermod.

"She is Quenell," Hermod said by way of introduction. "A former slave, now warrior and leader of a tribe of like people. He is Richard, a member of her tribe."

Glar nodded. "Very well. Follow me." He led them to the opening of the cave, stepping aside to

allow them room to enter.

The strong scent of death and the beginnings of decay met her on a rush of warm air, threatened to choke her. She smelled death before, knew it well, but even so it did not make it any easier to swallow. There was nothing worse than the scent of rotting flesh, human flesh...even if only part. The creature took up most of the room in the small cave. A ray of sunlight pushed its way through the cave opening, slipped over the body.

He'd been handsome once, Quenell thought, as she studied the creature. A head of shimmering blond hair spilled around a face long and lean. The muscular torso spoke of a once muscular man with long legs. *Probably had great hips and a killer ass too. Before his lower half got changed into a lion, that is.*

The arrow that pierced his heart remained and she knelt to study it. Feathers of brown and gray decorated the end of a long stick of birch wood. Brown feathers...not her tribe, she thought. Not one of her men. She waited for a rush of relief, a wave of warmth to melt the ice in her veins, but it did not come. Why didn't it come?

You need further proof, said a voice in her head. *Arrows can be disguised.* Because she knew this to be true and all too easy to do, she leaned in closer for a better look...and the ice in her veins thickened.

"Quenell." Hermod said her name softly, slowly, as he knelt beside her.

She looked at him, saw the tears that glimmered in his eyes and knew they were for the loss of a friend. She felt tears burn her eyes too and not for a reason that was all that different. She also lost a friend today; maybe more than one, she simply didn't know yet which one or ones. Though she did have her suspicions and the thought of that, of him cut her heart like a knife.

"One of my men did this," she told Hermod. Though alone in the cave, she kept her voice low so only he would hear.

"You are sure of this?" he asked, and laid a comforting hand over hers on her thigh.

"See the way the arrow is tied, the way the feathers are attached?" She pointed to the arrow with her free hand. "He used different feathers, different colors to disguise it but the method of tying is that of our tribe."

"He didn't want you to know, didn't think you would look so closely."

"I probably wouldn't have if I hadn't already feared the truth."

"Do you know who?"

Quenell shook her head. "But I have my suspicions." She sighed, turned her hand over to lace her fingers with his. She knew she shouldn't, knew she should move away from him rather than

accept the comfort he offered. But she needed that comfort now, would take it and pay for the consequences later. "Lets keep this between you and me, okay?"

Hermod nodded slowly, lifted his free hand to her face and grazed the back of his fingers down her cheek. "Okay."

"Hermod." Glar's voice echoed through the cave.

Hermod stood, planted a quick kiss on Quenell's forehead on his way up and turned to Glar who stood in the doorway of the cave.

Quenell stood too and with a final parting look to the body of Lionel, they walked out of the cave. She looked to Richard as they moved back into the opening. He had not followed them into the cave but stayed behind, to the side of the mouth of the cave. There'd been no need for him to follow, she thought. He didn't know of her suspicions, her fears, couldn't guess she wanted to examine the arrow that killed the creature. She figured from the grim set of his lips, the firm set to his jaw that he thought she went into the cave for Hermod, to offer her comfort to him.

Quenell didn't know why she didn't tell Richard the truth and share with him her suspicions. She initially kept them to herself because she hadn't wanted to admit them aloud. To voice them gave them more weight somehow.

Though she told Hermod last night, she found that different than telling Richard. Richard was part of her tribe, knew their people as well as she.

"Lionel's death was not instantaneous as I first said." Glar's words pulled Quenell from her thoughts. "Before he died, he told me to expect your visit, told me he knew of your plan to slay the giantess Varra. The giants have also learned of your plan. They have moved her, taken her to hiding."

"Did he know where?"

"Yes, and he told me so that I may tell you."

Chapter Five

Everything about Hermod hurt inside and out—his soul, his heart, his muscles, his wound. He could do little about his pains but for the last. The throb in his thigh gave him a sure indication the tourniquet needed to be changed once more, the wound cleaned. He untied the string on his borrowed leather pants and prepared to do just that.

A splash and a loud whoop drew his attention to the lake. Richard made it in first, he saw. Apparently the sight of clean, cool water did something for the other man's mood. Until now, Richard had been quiet since they left the site of Lionel's death. Come to think of it, so had Quenell, he thought and moved his gaze to where she stood on the edge of the bank. He wondered fleetingly if the two of them exchanged words while he took the killer's path to Lionel's cave.

Then Quenell began to undress and something sizzled in his brain, made him forget all about any

possible disagreements between her and Richard. A new pain added to all the others, this one in his cock as she slowly, gracefully slipped out of her clothes. Smooth, luxurious, tanned skin shimmered in the sunlight. Taut, large nipples stood out on her perfectly rounded breasts. A thin white line stretched below her left breast down her ribcage. A scar, he realized. She'd been sliced by a knife, a sword, even a whip maybe.

Though the scar did nothing to mar her perfection in his eyes, it surprised him to see it there and he didn't know why. It had been too dark last night for him to see but in the light of day, it showed as bright as a streak of lightning against her bronze skin. She turned her back, afforded him a view of her shapely ass and more scars that traveled along her lower back, reached up under her hair. The scars of a slave, Hermod knew and it tore at his heart to think of all she'd been through, all which made her the woman she was today.

She strolled to the lake and his dick stiffened at the way her hips swayed, at the memory of how those hips straddled him as she rode his cock the night before. She stepped into the water slowly, allowing her body to adjust to the cooler temperature. In the lake, Richard swam closer and waited with open arms to take her.

Jealously sparked inside Hermod so quick and

violent he looked away. Whatever disagreement passed between Quenell and Richard obviously no longer mattered. She would look for comfort, he guessed. After her discovery at Lionel's cave he knew she would need it. She wouldn't ask, would never admit to needing that comfort, but if offered in the form of sex, she would take it.

"Come on, Hermod," Richard called. "The water is great."

Hermod heard the mocking tone in the other man's voice and, because he didn't quite understand it, he decided to ignore it. He glanced up, saw that Quenell stopped several feet from Richard to dunk herself in the water. Her wet ebony strands clung to her flesh. One side fell like a heavy cloth over one shoulder, covered one breast and only the nipple, taut and swollen, poked through. His mouth watered at the sight. He thought she looked like a mix between a seductress and a glamorous mermaid, sexy and provocative yet sweet, prim and perfectly at home in the water. She ruled everything around her. No matter where or what, that was her power over all. She turned to him at Richard's words, pinned him with a smile that he felt all the way to his knees and crooked a finger, and beckoned him to join her.

He made quick work of the leather pants and started toward her. He knew his dick, hard as the

rocks that surrounded the lake, stuck out from his body like some sort of handle but couldn't find it in him to be embarrassed by it. As he neared her, so did Richard. He wanted to tell the other man to leave but held his tongue. If Quenell wished Richard to go she would tell him. If his only way to have her again meant to share with Richard, he would do so just to feel the sweet touch of her flesh once more.

* * * *

Quenell faced Hermod as he stepped into the cool water of the lake, saw the war of emotions that raged in his eyes. He wanted her again. She hadn't been sure he would. Then again, what man turned down sex when offered? But would he share her with Richard? She felt Richard's presence behind her, knew he had no intentions of leaving her alone with Hermod this time, knew what he wanted and that he would take it with little regard for whoever was around. A part of her wanted to tell him to go. This would probably be her last chance for a repeat of last night, her last time to share sex with Hermod. She hadn't expected to get even this. Yet, a larger part of her wanted both men, needed them both to take her mind off battle, death and betrayal.

She moved to Hermod, put her hands flat on

his chest and slid them up, wound her arms around his neck. The water reached to just below her shoulders, met him at mid-chest. His arms snaked around her waist and she felt Richard, still some distance away but within arms reach, graze his hand over her ass. She pushed with her forearms on Hermod's shoulders, urged him to bend his knees to bring them eye to eye then she leaned in, nipped his earlobe. She could feel his hard cock between them, heard his breathing pick up pace.

"Will you join us?" she asked, a whisper in his ear. "Share me with Richard? Give me one more time with you?"

He crushed his mouth to hers in answer and it took her breath away. He didn't wait for invitation—she supposed she just gave him one with her questions—but plunged his tongue inside her mouth, tasted her as though she were his life line, his only source of oxygen and she might take it away, deny him at any moment. She moaned into his mouth, her hand fisted in his hair and behind her Richard's hand moved over her ass, caressed her cheeks.

Then Richard gripped her hips, forcefully spun her, wrenching her mouth from Hermod's, to face him. "My turn," he said gruffly, and moved a hand to the back of her neck, jerked her head back with a fist in her hair and smashed his mouth to

hers.

Still breathless from Hermod's kiss, Quenell thought she might suffocate. The force with which Richard snatched her from Hermod made her weak in the knees. She opened her eyes as Richard devoured her mouth and saw that his eyes were open as well, but he didn't look at her. His gaze seemed fixed on a point behind her, fixed on Hermod.

She felt the water move around her, felt Hermod step closer to her. Then with a strength that equaled Richard's, Hermod reached between her and Richard to cup her breasts and pull her against him. She felt like a rope in an odd game of tug of war. Richard never loosened his grip on her head, never broke the kiss even as Hermod drew her back to him, fondled and kneaded her breasts. Would they fight over her, she wondered, fight over her body? She found herself more excited, aroused by the idea, than fearful.

Hermod released his hold on one of her breasts, skimmed his hand between her body and Richard's to cup her pussy. At the same time, Richard's free hand moved down her back between her body and Hermod's to cup her ass. Both men pulled at her, their hands exploring, gripping her ass, her pussy, her breasts.

Richard finally broke the kiss to lick his way over her jaw, across her cheek to her ear. "I want

this," he said, and he slipped a finger between her ass cheeks to graze over her anus. "I want to push my dick inside here, fuck you here."

Hot embers of desire rained through her body. Even in the water she felt her own hot juices seep through her pussy lips. Between her legs, Hermod delved a finger into that wetness, flicked over her throbbing and swollen clit. Her head fell back to rest against his chest and she closed her eyes only to open them on a gasped shock of pleasurable pain when Richard sank a finger into her anus.

"Nell, are you alright?"

She heard Hermod's concerned voice through a roar of her own pulse in her ears, but couldn't find the breath to answer.

"She's fine," Richard answered for her. "She likes her sex a bit on the rough side, don't you, Nell?"

His finger pushed deeper in her ass and it tore the yes from her lips. She couldn't think, could barely breathe, and couldn't find the frame of mind to chastise him for calling her Nell again.

"Finger her," Richard said, and she thought she heard Hermod say something in return but the roar in her ears grew louder, drowned out all sound.

Hermod's finger delved into her pussy, his hand still on her breast squeezed and Richard pushed his finger deeper still in her anus.

"Oh God!" She heard the cry, realized heartbeats later that it came from her own lips.

"See? She loves it," Richard said, his tone hot and just a bit arrogant. "Want to know what she'll love more?" He didn't wait for an answer but pulled his finger from her ass in one quick move that drew a gasp from her throat yet again. "Fuck her."

Hermod's finger stilled inside her then slowly retreated. "Nell?" He made her name a question and she could hear the indecision in his tone, the uncertainty.

Richard gripped her waist and turned her in Hermod's arms to face Hermod.

"Are you okay?" Hermod asked, and his eyes looked so worried, so concerned, so lost that it tore at her.

Quenell raised a hand to his face, cupped his cheek in her palm, and grazed her thumb over his lips. "I'm okay."

"Is this what you want?"

"Yes, but are you okay with it? Will you share me with him?"

Hermod's hands slid behind her, cupped her ass and pulled her closer still, lifted her to her tiptoes. "I will do what you want."

She thought of his thigh. In this position, still in the water, he would have to hold her to have sex with her least they would both drown. The last

thing she wanted was to hurt him. "Your wound..."

"What wound?" His lips tilted in a half-grin that made her heart roll in her chest.

"Then fuck me," she whispered.

He picked her up, held her weight in his arms as she wrapped her legs around his waist. His dick was hard and ready and needed no guidance to slip inside her. At the first thrust, Quenell moaned and heard him say a quiet, "Oh yes". She locked her ankles behind his back, buried her hands in his hair and gave herself over to his movements. She nearly forgot about Richard until she felt his hands on her back, until he moved closer and brushed his cock against her ass. She knew what he wanted, what he wished to do to her and she wanted it too. She wiggled in Hermod's arms, adjusting herself to take Richard's cock in her anus even as Hermod continued to thrust inside her pussy.

Though Richard fingered her, stretched her, she was still too tight to take him easily in her anus, especially when Hermod filled her pussy. She cried out at Richard's first thrust. The pain shot through her on a razor sharp edge and she dug her nails into Hermod's flesh so hard she feared she might draw blood but she couldn't help it. Hermod stilled inside her and Richard pulled back, slid out just enough to thrust inside her anus

once more. The pain ebbed, turned to an exotic pleasure.

"He's hurting you."

Hermod's voice drifted through the haze in her brain and she looked at him. So tender, she thought, so caring. "No," she told him. Richard thrust again, pushed her further forward onto Hermod's unyielding dick and she moaned. "I like it," she said breathlessly.

He gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod and his hands tightened on her hips. Richard's hands moved to her waist as both men began to thrust. They fell into a rhythm of hard, long thrusts that grew in speed as each reached the tip of orgasm. Sandwiched between them as she was, Quenell couldn't move, could only hold onto Hermod as they fucked her, filled her, used her. The double penetration drove her mad, drew noises from her that she felt certain she never heard from her own throat.

Richard spilled his seed inside her first in a long, deep push that sent him deeper inside her anus than he'd been and toppled her over the edge. Unable to control even her head, she let it lay forward, rested her forehead to Hermod's and gazed into his eyes as her body began to convulse around his cock. She saw when he gave himself to his own release, saw the strained lines around his eyes, the way he clenched his teeth as the relief

spewed out of him and into her.

They stayed joined that way until breathing returned to normal and pulses slowed. Then she felt Richard's dick slip out of her and he took a step back.

"Can you stand?" Hermod asked, his thumb caressed the flesh of her thighs where he still held her.

Quenell nodded, swallowed. Her throat was so dry her voice cracked when she spoke. "I can stand."

Slowly, carefully he eased her down, pulled out of her at the same time. He watched her as her feet touched the sand beneath the water as if to be sure she stayed steady on her own accord then his eyes widened on a flash of shock and he disappeared under the water.

Chapter Six

“Hermod!” The scream of alarm burst from Quenell’s throat, echoed of the rocks that surrounded the lake. Something pushed past her under the water, knocked her leg and she struggled to stay upright.

“Quenell, get out of the water,” Richard’s frantic voice came from behind her, then next to her. He grabbed her hand, tried to pull her toward the shore but she dug her heels into the sand. “Get out of the water,” he said again. “I’ll get Hermod.”

“I’m not leaving him,” Quenell screamed. She wrenched her hand from Richard’s grasp, splashed at the water around her where she’d felt whatever was there push against her leg. The water, a deep shade of blue over an even darker ground of gray sand, concealed everything beneath its surface. She could see nothing, feel nothing. Then a mere couple of feet away, Hermod’s head broke the surface only long enough to gasp and inhale a lungful of air then

disappeared below once more. He could stand in the water, Quenell reminded herself. The lake came only to his chest. Because he didn't, she knew whatever took him under still had him.

She heard a splash behind her, turned just in time to see Richard go under. "Shit!" They were being picked off like flies. As the only one left, she felt all their hope weighed on her shoulders. She knew she had to choose, Hermod or Richard? Which one to attempt to save? Which one to leave to his own fate?

With no time to debate, she sucked in a breath, blew it out, sucked in another, this one deeper and held it as she too went under. The water burned her eyes and she spent a precious moment waiting for her vision to adjust. It didn't do much good, she realized, as she began to swim in the direction she last saw Hermod break the surface. She could see little better under the water than she could looking down into it.

She swam in long, even strokes through the water, feeling in front of her, beside her as she moved. Naked and scared, she felt a chill begin just below the surface of her flesh. Her chest ached, her lungs began a slow burn and she knew she needed to surface soon, refill her lungs with fresh oxygen. If she could only see, she thought aimlessly. The lake wasn't deep or large. How could one lose a man Hermod's size and what the

hell was in the lake with them?

It slammed into her from the side. The force flipped her over, pushed her to the surface. As her face pushed above the water she had just enough time for that lung refill before she was drug under once more.

She struggled against her captor, felt harsh scaly skin beneath her fingers when she found a part of him, a part of it. An arm, she realized as she fought to turn over, then around. But not just any arm. Certainly not a human arm. This arm hung short with skin that dangled off the bone in places, formed to muscle in others. Talons as long as her own fingers curved at the end of its web-shaped hand. Talons that she felt slice across her left breast as she rolled with it, fought with it.

She had no sword, no knife, no weapon of any kind but for her own arms and legs, her own strength. Lungs burning with the need for more oxygen, she grabbed for the arm that sliced her, twisted and yanked until it snapped like a wishbone. Through the silence of the water, she heard a wail of pain, the sound animalistic and screeching. The broken limb still in her grasp, she used it as leverage to flip herself over, catch its odd shaped head between her thighs. With a squeeze and a jerk, she snapped the neck and the screeching stopped. Dead.

Quenell pushed the creature, now limp in

death, away from her and bolted for the air. She broke the surface gasping, eyes burning, ears still ringing from the creatures squeal. Something brushed her leg and she kicked at it, whirled and prepared herself for another battle. She saw hands push through the rippling surface fist. Her mind registered human hands just before the head followed them up.

"Hermod!" She said his name on a breathless sigh of relief. Alive. He was alive. Thank the Gods.

"Swim for the bank, Nell. There may be more of them. I'll be right behind you," he added when she hesitated.

It was a short swim and they reached the shore quickly, pulled themselves to solid ground. Relief and exhaustion battled inside her but another dart of panic stabbed through. "Richard!" She pushed herself up to her hands and knees, gaze darting from one spot of the now still lake to the other. Where had they been when she saw him go under? she wondered frantically. Why hadn't he surfaced?

From somewhere behind her she heard a soft moan. She whipped her head around and saw him sprawled further up on the bank opposite a large rock. Blood sparkled like tiny raindrops on his chest and legs. "Richard."

At the sound of his name, his head turned toward her, his eyes unfocused. Then a haze in

them seemed to clear and he smiled. Smiled! The idiot, she thought, and began a slow, shaky crawl toward him. She was halfway to him when he began to push himself up on his hands. "Are you okay? How bad are you hurt?"

"Just scratches," he told her in a voice not quite normal yet. "Dammed talons on those things. There were more of them. I killed one and the others fled, scampered off in the trees over there." He nodded to a particularly thick patch of trees and brush across the lake.

The first to find the strength to stand, Hermod stumbled toward them. "What the hell were those things?"

"Some kind of lizard folk," Richard answered, and sat up the rest of the way, looked down at himself. He ran a finger over a drop of blood, wiped it away and studied the small puncture beneath. "I've never seen anything like them. Strong bastards," he scowled.

Quenell stopped halfway to Richard and sat.

"Nell, you're bleeding." The concern in Hermod's voice came instant and thick. He dropped to his knees beside her and reached as though he might cup her injured breast. Instead, his hand stopped a mere inch from it, trembled as it stayed there.

"So are you," she said, with a pointed look at his thigh. "Looks like you reopened the wound."

"It's fine." He brushed it away with a quick shake of his head. "Your breast..."

"Will be fine too," she finished for him. She glanced down, pushed a hand under her breast to lift it, turn it slightly. The dammed creature got her good, she thought, and winced at the pain that seared through her chest. It appeared to be fairly shallow. Still, it would leave a scar, she knew. Another scar to add to her others. At least until now she'd managed to keep private areas of her body unmarred. "We'll clean it up, dress it and get moving before those dammed things come back. If they can live on land as well as water, we're not out of danger yet."

* * * *

"Did Balder love his wife?" Quenell walked beside Hermod, this time with Richard leading the way. Each with just enough distance to draw their weapons should the need arise. She kept her voice low as not to draw the attention of anything that lurked along their path.

Though he hadn't said as much, Hermod couldn't shake the feeling that the resistance they met so far had been traps set up to delay or even prevent their journey. By the man in her tribe who betrayed her? He wondered now but pushed the thought away. The time would come when she

would be forced to deal with that but not now, not yet, and when that time came he would do what he could to help.

"He loved her more than the stars in the sky," he answered, his voice equally low. His gaze darted from tree to tree, brush to brush but he looked at her when he said, "My brother lived for love and to love. He was not...is not," he corrected himself, unable to speak of his brother in the past tense, "a man to fight. That is why our mother felt the need for such protection."

"But she is dead now. Is she not?"

"Nanna? Yes, she is dead now. A broken heart took her from our world as such was her love for Balder."

"But if they loved one another so much, do you really think Balder will want to live without her?"

"Are you thinking that Balder would rather remain in Helheim than to be freed to live again?"

"Without Nanna, yes. Possibly. His life will be so much different without her. He will grieve her passing, maybe so much that he will wish for his own death."

Hermod considered that, felt the weight of truth in her words. Balder would grieve for Nanna and weep a river of tears, but could he go on without her? Would he want to? He thought of himself, about the river he would cry when finally forced to part ways with Quenell. He would go on

because he must but his heart would be empty.

"He will go on," he finally answered, "because others in the lands need him. He will know that when he dies his final death, he will be reunited with Nanna." Unlike himself, he thought who, even in death, would not be reunited with Quenell.

"I wonder what that must be like," she said almost wistfully. "To love and be loved without thought of battle or protection, self-preservation."

Stay with me when this is over and you will know. Hermod nearly said it, his declaration of love on the tip of his tongue, but Richard came to an abrupt stop in front of them and he swallowed his words. The moment was gone.

"Didn't you say we should look for a group of rocks in the shape of a boar?" Richard asked, with a glance at them over his shoulder. His features tight, his eyes expressionless, Hermod could tell the man masked his feelings and did it well.

Still, Hermod knew of only one reason for Richard to wear such a mask now. He loved Quenell, knew Hermod had fallen for her too and Richard didn't like it.

"Yes," Hermod answered. "Glar said that would be a marker along the way for us."

"Well, there it is."

Hermod studied the group of rocks Richard pointed to. With a sense of growing dread, he

sighed, looked up at the sky. "Then we shall be there by nightfall."

* * * *

There was a faint rustle in the trees, a silhouette, more than one. Quenell tightened her grip on her sword and held her breath. Not one of Varra's guards. She knew that much for they had staked out the surroundings when they arrived, settled at what they presumed to be a safe distance and kept the guards they found in sight. Only two guards, giants armed with spears and swords. There would be more inside, she assumed, more camped out in the mountainside about a mile north of the giant's city of Jötunheim.

They decided a sneak attack would be their only hope but right now that plan pushed to the back of her mind. Right now, she concerned herself with who else, or what else, seemed to have a sneak attack in mind but with them as the endangered group. She fanned a hand over the small patch of dirt where Hermod sketched by moonlight and stick a sort of map of the mountainside to plan their strategy. When Hermod and Richard looked up at her, she held a finger over her lips, pointed with the same finger to the trees where she'd caught the glimpse of movements. Both men slowly inched their hands

to the hilts of their swords that lay across their laps.

Quenell didn't know if they'd been spotted by the intruders, couldn't tell in the darkness where they were now or what weapons they carried. If bow and arrows, she doubted she, Richard and Hermod could get away fast enough. At least not without alerting the giants to their presence as well. Then they would not only have the intruders after them but a minimum of two gruff and hairy giants. Not good odds, she thought with a silent sigh, definitely not good odds at all.

A birdcall sounded in the distance sliced through the silence of the night like a razor sharp hatchet. Not so distant, she realized when the sound repeated, and not a bird. Victor. His way of clueing her in that he was in the trees about to approach. She exchanged a surprised look with Richard and let down her sword, laid it across her lap. A quick thought that maybe she shouldn't be so quick to lower her weapon flashed through her mind. Victor was hers...her man, her tribe. But hadn't she already reached the conclusion someone in her tribe betrayed her? When she set off with Hermod and Richard to begin their journey, she left Victor in charge of the small stamp of land they claimed, left him to watch over their people. Why was he here now and how had he gotten to this point so quickly? How had he

known the giants hid Varra and which way to go, where to find their hiding place?

Too many questions, she thought, and past time to get some answers.

He made his way toward them like a sly cat in the night, graceful and soundless moves, eyes on the lookout for anything that threatened or seemed out of place. A black cloth covered his mane of silver hair, blended him in with the darkness of night, but otherwise he looked like he always did, youthful and innocent.

Quenell felt her heart swell at the sight of him. She always missed him when they were apart. Though they shared sex on occasion, their relationship ran much deeper than that...friends, confidants, protectors. No way. No fucking way could Victor be the one who deceived her.

She shifted on the cool ground, drew herself to her knees and moved her sword to lay beside her as he reached her. "What are you doing here?" she whispered in his ear as he hugged her tight.

"Let's just say I had a feeling you would need some help. By the looks of things I would say I was right."

Even in the darkness of night, she saw the glint of amusement in his eyes, the anticipation of battle, but behind that lay something more serious, something she rarely saw in Victor, something that chilled her to the bone. "How did

you get here so fast? How did you track us?"

"It wasn't too hard. I left shortly after you did, a few hours maybe. Treaded through most of the first night, all of the last. I ran across the little friend you left behind on the first trail..."

"My friend?" Quenell thought back over their journey then understood. "The forest gnome, Stolic."

"Then I met up with the horseman and all his kin."

"The centaurs, Glar and the others." Quenell nodded. "Someone killed Lionel," she added and watched a deep knowledge and understanding slide behind his eyes. He knew.

"I saw his body, saw the arrow, followed the tracks. Quenell..." He shook his head and froze. "Where is Richard?"

Quenell looked to where he had been, saw only an empty space. Hermod sat facing her and Victor, his back to where Richard had been, but he looked now too over his shoulder then back to Quenell, alarm in his eyes.

"You don't think he moved on the plan without us?"

Quenell began to stand, fear building inside her. A man didn't just disappear into thin air. She barely contracted her leg muscles to push herself up when Victor grabbed her shoulders.

"He's part of it, Quenell."

She wanted to shake her head, refuse to believe, to play dumb and ask, "Part of what?" but she knew. A part of her knew the truth long before now. "And Cyrus?"

Victor shook his head. "He is still out there, out here." He let his gaze travel along the trees. "Somewhere."

Quenell didn't bother to look. If Cyrus hid in the trees he would not be found unless he gave himself away. Cyrus—the absolute best of her men at tracking, at shooting a bow and arrow, at hiding out. She'd known back at Lionel's cave that the lion-man's death was on Cyrus's hands. And even then, something deep inside her also knew of Richard's involvement, his ultimate betrayal. That's why she felt the need to keep her suspicions to herself, to share only with Hermod.

"Richard," she said softly, hardly aware she spoke his name until she felt a hand slide into hers at her side. Hermod's hand offering comfort and warmth. Always offering but never taking, she thought, even as tears burned her eyes.

Then a soft whistle on the air passed near her ear and Victor fell. Hermod leapt, sword instantly in hand. Quenell still knelt but spun on the balls of her feet and crouched down as much as she could to make herself a smaller target. Another whistle of air whizzed past her and she nearly fell on her nose. The second came from a point in front of her.

Friendly fire, she thought of the last and hoped like hell she wasn't wrong. Instead of falling on her nose, she lay on the ground, held her sword over her head, and rolled to the line of trees to her left. She'd had enough of being in the cross hairs of an arrow fight for tonight.

She slowly stood, her back pressed against the huge trunk of an oak tree. She saw that Hermod stood at the tree line as well, sword still raised and ready for battle. Victor managed to do a half-crouch walk to a tree only a few feet from Quenell, his right hand raised to support his left shoulder. An arrow of brown and gray feathers and birch wood stuck out from the flesh like a third arm...an arrow from Cyrus.

"Quenell, watch yourself. It is you they want. You're the target." Victor's warning came on a voice full of pain. "You and Hermod."

"Me?" Surprise sounded in her tone, then she quickly thought through the shock. "Because I am the only one here who can slay the giantess. But why Hermod?"

"No. Because one loves you and the other wants to rule the tribe. It isn't the giants that you need to worry about. It's our men. The giants, the two guarding the entrance to the cave on the mountainside, they will let you pass. They are here on orders from Varra's father but their loyalty is to Balder, to Hermod."

She heard the whistle of another arrow, the thud as it stabbed into the trunk of the tree a mere inch from her head. "Shit!"

"That's Cyrus. He wants you dead. Go. Lose yourself in the trees. Get to Varra and do what you came here to do. John and I will take care of Cyrus."

John, the second best marksman in the tribe—second only to Cyrus. At least he stayed on her team, she thought with a small glimmer of hope. Confusion rocked her, clouded her mind. Who to battle? Who to trust? She felt as though suddenly she knew none of her men at all.

"Nell, let's go." Hermod brushed the tips of his fingers along her upper arm.

With a last look at Victor and a quick prayer that he would survive the night, that the good guys—she didn't even know who the good guys were anymore—would win the fight, she disappeared with Hermod in the trees. The giant guards saw them coming, held their weapons at the ready until they recognized Hermod, recognized her. They stepped aside and let her pass. She would think about the oddity of that later.

What they guarded wasn't a cave but a sort of cove not on the mountainside but between two mountains. Varra stood in the middle of that cove, half as tall as the mountains that flanked her and

nearly a quarter as wide.

"The dammed bitch makes twenty of me," Quenell muttered and tightened her grip on her sword. Her insides vibrated. Not from fear, though a smarter woman would have been scared out of her gourd, but the anticipation of battle, the thrill of the fight.

Varra looked down at Quenell, threw back her head and let out a wail that had sleeping birds for miles around abandoning the trees and flying for safe shelter.

"You got by my guards." More of a statement of surprise than a question, the voice vibrated on the air—a voice rough, harsh and far too low for a female.

Quenell guessed that soft, sweet girly voices didn't come in such oversized packages. She nearly had to shout for her own voice to reach so high. "It wasn't hard." She didn't bother to tell the giantess her so-called guards shied from battle. *Let her believe Hermod and I fought them to get inside*, she thought. Would it frighten her, she wondered, to think two normal sized humans overpowered two enormous giants? Could a woman the size of Varra be frightened by anything?

On the next heartbeat, she answered her own question. Yes. Apparently a giantess could be frightened of a little human such as herself. Otherwise, why the need to hide?

"You won't kill me," Varra snarled. "I'll break you in two before you even give me a scratch." Without warning, she rushed Quenell.

The ground moved under Quenell's feet, made it difficult to hold her balance. She used the shakiness to her advantage, moved with it rather than against it and when Varra neared close enough, Quenell dropped to the ground. Sword up and out to slice or stab—either one would do for now—she rolled under Varra's boat-sized foot and came up in a fighting stance behind the giantess to plunge her sword into the back of Varra's knee.

Somehow Hermod appeared at her side and plunged his own sword into the giantess's other knee. So, he could fight against the giantess, injure her but he could not kill her, Quenell thought. Some spells simply weren't thought out enough. Oh well, at least he could help.

With both her knees useless, Varra went down on an ear piercing howl of agony and a plop that shook the earth. Then Quenell made her first mistake. Believing the giantess's brain to be clouded by pain, she didn't move fast enough. A hand dammed near the size of her upper body came around, crashed into Quenell and sent her flying.

She hit the mountainside with a force that rattled her insides and made her see stars. Dazed

and a bit confused, she pushed herself to her hands and knees. She needed a second, just a second or two to reorient herself but she knew even that much would be precious time wasted. She forced herself to stand, to raise the sword she still miraculously held and run. Her mind quickly registered the disappearance of Hermod. Where had he gone? With no time to think about it, she leapt, narrowly missed Varra's hand as it sliced the air toward her, and plunged her sword into the giantess's chest. She watched Varra's enormous black eyes grow even larger, saw the shock pass through them before the pain took over, heard her small cry just before her life ended.

Her breath coming in quick gasps, Quenell put her hands on her knees and allowed herself a moment to rest. The sound of steel striking steel brought her back to reality with a jolt and she whirled around. Two silhouettes in the darkness, two men, she realized as her eyes focused once more. The fact that the silhouettes belonged to Hermod and Richard registered at the same instant that she saw Hermod's sword penetrate Richard's belly, push through his body and come out the other side. Hermod pulled his sword free from Richard's body as Richard fell.

The scream Quenell heard this time came from her own throat. Her sword slipped from her hand,

hit the ground almost soundlessly, or maybe it just seemed soundless, drowned out by the roar in her ears. She didn't run to him, couldn't. Instead, she walked. Each step felt wrong, empty, as though she took the final steps of her own life. In a way, in the deep recess of her shattered mind, she knew she was. These were the final steps of a part of her life, a part she would never forget, never get back, never replace.

She dropped to her knees when she reached him, a solitary tear sliding down her face. Gently, she eased an arm under his head for support. Not dead, she thought as she gazed down at his handsome face now wrought with pain and the edges of death. Not yet.

"Quenell." His voice, barely audible, cracked as he said her name. His breathing fast and unsteady as life seeped out of him in a pool of blood.

"Why, Richard?"

"I love you."

The words moved over her like the air, but the weight of them made her feel as though she might suffocate. "So you betray me, try to kill me?"

"He was going to take you from me. I wanted him dead. Not you. You and me..." He swallowed, winced from the pain. "We were going to go off together, leave the tribe."

"To Cyrus's rule," she concluded.

"He was supposed to set traps, talk to people,

set up ambushes all against Hermod. You and I were to be safe."

"He turned on you too."

"I only wanted to be with you, Quenell, but he was going to take you from me."

Quenell shook her head. "Hermod came to get me to kill Varra. Nothing more."

"He..." Again, Richard swallowed and she saw the light dim in his eyes. "Loves..." His face went white, his focus gone and his lips moved on the last word but no sound came. "You."

Quenell closed her eyes, tears streamed down her cheeks, her body numb with grief and pain. No matter what he did, how mad he became in the end, he'd been hers. For years she thought him a friend, a companion, a lover. He took a part of her with him as his soul drifted to the afterlife, a part of herself she would never get back.

She gazed down at him through eyes that blurred and slowly pulled her arm from beneath his head as she whispered, "I love you too, Richard."

* * * *

"Come back with me." Hermod's hands gripped Quenell's shoulders, slid down her arms to hold her hands in his. They stood outside the door to the hut, alone but for the other members of the

tribe rustling around the surrounding area not paying them much attention.

Members of the tribe struck with as much grief as she over Richard's death and Cyrus's betrayal. While she'd been wrestling with the giantess, John proved himself more than a second rate marksman. Quenell still wasn't sure of all the details, of all that happened outside the cove that night but she knew it had been John who brought Cyrus down. With Richard and Cyrus dead and Varra slain as well, the battle ended. In the days that passed, she made it back to the tribes' camp with Hermod, Victor, John and the others who came to help, and during their journey all in the lands wept for Balder's return.

It seemed like such a dream now, a terrible nightmare packed with beasts, assassins, deceit...and love. She'd wondered what it would be like to be loved above all else, without thought of battle or protection, self-preservation. Maybe she'd been loved that way by Richard and didn't know it. Yet, his had been a love of madness in the end, she reminded herself. A love she hadn't returned and wouldn't have been able to return even if he lived.

Because her heart belonged to Hermod, she thought now, as she gazed into his eyes. Maybe it had for years. Since the days he set her and her people free from slavery. Yet, she learned to live

without him, built a life in this space of the unnamed forest. They built a life now torn apart by love and betrayal, the ambition to rule.

Not torn apart, she decided, but fractured. She and her people would work past their grief and rebuild their lives. But would that life for her include Hermod? That option, that decision faced her now. "My people..." She began and let her words trail off.

"They can come too." At the skeptical look she knew showed on her face, he quickly added, "Not as slaves. Never again as slaves, Nell. It is because of you and your people that my brother lives again. You will be honored, given safe passage to all the lands. No more hiding, no more battles for survival. Isn't that what you wish for your people?"

"Yes," she whispered. She did want that, a better life for her people, a life they'd never known.

"And we can be together."

Those words seeped into her, flowed down to her heart, wrapped around it. They hadn't talked about themselves, their feelings, and Richard's last words to her. Hermod offered her and her people new lives in the lands of the Gods, offered her a life with him, but would that life be one of a one-sided love, her love for him not to be returned? Would that be her fate, payback for her not

returning Richard's love? She knew Hermod felt something for her, could see it in the depth of his eyes, but was it love?

Instead of asking the question most on her mind, she voiced another concern instead. "The Gods, your parents, Odin and Frigga, they will never let us be together."

"They will. You will be my reward for the completion of my quest, for Balder's return." His lips tilted in a sly grin at his words.

"I am a warrior, Hermod, not some sort of concubine."

That made him laugh. "Not a concubine but my wife. I want you to marry me, Nell."

"M—marry you." She stumbled over the word.

"That is how I wish to be together. Man and wife. How do you think I could be with the woman I love and not marry her?" And there came the word she waited to hear, needed to hear. "You love me?"

He drew her into his arms, all smiles gone now, his expression one of seriousness and compassion. "Richard was right. I do love you and would have done anything in my power to take you away from him, away with me. Come with me, Nell. Say you love me too. Say you will be my wife."

It slid over her, through her in a wave of emotions too many and too fierce to count. Love, happiness, and serenity all within her grasp with

the man she loved, never thought to have. She did have it after all. She had Hermod's love. "I do love you and I will be your wife," she said, and brushed her lips to his.

About the Author

Tonya Ramagos is an author of erotic romances as well as traditional contemporary titles and young adult romances. To find out more about Tonya's books visit <http://www.tonyaramagos.com>.