

LEIGH BALE

THE HEAR'S
WARRIOR



Now Kerstin saw her chance! She could flee, with Jonas in no condition to pursue her.

She would race back and the king could do nothing to stop her from marrying Elezer. She took a step, then stopped. Guilt nibbled at her, holding her in place.

Jonas would die if she left him and the king might hold her responsible. Though she offered to tend his wound, Jonas refused. Surely the king wouldn't blame her if Jonas died.

But she had given her pledge and promised her loyalty. Even resenting him, she couldn't stand by and let Jonas suffer. If she ran away, her people would be doomed and hate her for it. She might have Elezer, yet nothing else. Not even her honor.

Jonas's shadowed face paled in the dim light. Kneeling beside him, she cursed him as she tried once more to awaken him. A rock dug into his chin and she brushed it away. He looked so handsome, so innocent in sleep. So controlling when awake. She had never known such a man.

Should she run for help? He was so big, she didn't think she could move him even if she wanted to. Bending low, she placed her lips against his ear and whispered. "Do you want to die, Jonas? If you lie here like a big ox, I will flee to Elezer. Is that what you want?"

Jonas moved and a murmur of disapproval came from his lips. He lay still again and Kerstin persisted in her efforts, unable to resist taunting him. "I'll give myself to Elezer if you die. Do you want me to give birth to his son, or yours?"

Rage rumbled from within Jonas's chest and he rolled onto his back. In the shafts of moonlight, Kerstin saw his eyes open and spit flame as he glared at her.

"Perhaps I will beat you after all, woman."

Only love can heal wounds of the heart.

Golden Heart winner Leigh Bale pens her second novel, a poignant tale of love, war and learning to trust your heart.

This book was a finalist winner in the Orange Rose Contest and also in the Ignite the Flame Contest.

The Heart's Warrior

by

Leigh Bale

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Heart's Warrior

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad,
for teaching me to love our family tree.

And to Steve,
the warrior of my heart

Only love can heal wounds of the heart.

Chapter One
Northern England, AD 954

Death surrounded her, a gruesome specter threatening to consume them all. The stench of lifeless bodies filled the early morning air. Screams of men vibrated throughout the forest along with the ringing clash of swords. A chilling breeze swept the copse and the tall pines surrounding the glade shivered.

Cold fear washed over Kerstin of Moere. She stood at the edge of the woods and stared at the carnage. Sweat trickled down her neck and forehead. Her knees wobbled and her arms shook with fatigue.

The destroyer had come. Not a dark heathen with fangs and cloven hooves, but a golden warrior, fighting in the thick of battle. He stood shoulders above the rest, broader with hardened muscles. He wielded his sword with the skill and strength of a berserker.

As he yelled orders to his men, they obeyed. His mighty sword gleamed crimson as he thrust and lunged. Several of Kerstin's men surrounded him, seeking to cut him down. He hacked his way through one and sliced through another. Blood sprayed across his chain-mailed chest, spattering against a tree trunk to his right. As his muscled arms heaved, his shrill war cry vibrated in the air.

The cry of death.

Kerstin's throat tightened at the grisly scene. She longed to look away, but could not. He must be stopped else all would be lost.

With trembling hands, she reached over her shoulder and plucked a long, straight arrow from the quiver strapped to her back. Her metal helmet made it difficult to see, but it shielded her identity and protected her head. Raising her bow, she aimed it at the warrior. His wide

back made an easy target. Drawing back her arm, she let the arrow fly.

The thin head of the shaft pierced through a link of his mail and buried deep in his left shoulder. He didn't scream at the impact, but grunted.

Pity that her aim had been poor, but her arms were weary from firing arrows at the enemy.

The man whirled, a snarl on his lips. His gaze stabbed her, marking her for death. With little concern, he snapped the shaft off, leaving the head embedded in his shoulder. Did he feel no pain?

He continued to slash his way toward her, his gaze leaving her long enough for him to slaughter any foe who stepped into his path. Kerstin's men had little chance against his greater strength and a blaze of panic shot up from her toes. He would cut her down if he reached her.

Knut, one of Kerstin's best warriors, turned in time to see the threat. Having been her protector since her mother's death a year earlier, Knut placed his own large frame in front of her. "Flee! We have lost the advantage and it's only a matter of time before we are finished."

Kerstin couldn't move, her feet leaden with despair. She couldn't abandon her men.

She stared at the demon warrior as his burly shoulders flexed beneath his chain mail.

He came for her.

Terror clogged her throat. This man showed no mercy.

"Warn our people," Knut said. "Your father will carve the blood eagle in my back if I let anything happen to you."

He pushed her around to face the dense foliage of the forest. With a mighty shove, he thrust her toward the sheltering trees.

"Go!" he roared.

She ran. With her bow clutched in her fist, she sprang through the forest, ignoring tree limbs and branches that snatched at her as she passed. Her long shirt of chain mail slapped against her knees, hampering her flight. Tripping, she crashed hard upon the ground, her heart pumping.

Lying in the dirt, she tried to catch her breath. Her

lungs burned and her calf muscles cramped, but she had no time to tarry. She must warn the women, children and the old ones. Kerstin dragged to her knees, wiped her bleeding hands against her woolen hose, then picked up her bow where she had dropped it. As she placed one foot beneath her to stand, she heard a crashing behind her. Whirling, she saw the demon warrior plunging through the forest, moving at an alarming rate.

She gasped. Knut must be dead—slain by this monster.

As she sprang to her feet, her heart lurched with grief. She raced through the woods, veering uphill, away from her home. Never would she lead this heathen to Moere, but she must find a way to outwit him before he caught her.

Dodging hanging branches, she swooped over fallen logs. She glanced over her shoulder and saw him gaining fast. Relentless in his pursuit, he didn't bother to push tree limbs aside as he charged after her. His heavy chain mail and helmet didn't hinder him at all. Clutching his bloody sword in his hand, he yelled with fury, like an evil fiend from the netherworld.

Twice, she evaded his grasp. For all his enormous size, he moved fast and light on his feet, his heavy breathing now at her back. Something brushed against her neck. His sword!

With a fresh spurt of speed, she dipped around a tall pine. He hurtled after her. She couldn't lose him.

He knocked her to the ground, then fell upon her. Screaming with terror, she sprawled upon her stomach, her face pressed into the dirt. Bracing her hands beneath her, she tried to rise, but he flattened her again. Her skin crawled, awaiting the sharp bite of his sword.

She rolled to press a frontal attack, kicking and biting. He straddled her with his great thighs, his chain mail leggings digging into her hips. He tried to grasp her flailing hands. Had he dropped his sword? Why didn't he kill her? He had plenty of opportunity.

Their scuffling knocked his helmet from his head. His fierce gaze clashed with hers, blue as the ocean on a clear day.

If he subdued her, he would kill her. She clawed at

his face. He knocked her hands away with a stinging blow and she sank her teeth into his hand.

“Cease!” he roared.

He struck a blow to her helm, knocking it from her head. As her long hair fell about them, the man grunted with surprise and his grip loosened.

“A woman?”

Kerstin took the advantage and clouted his head, knocking him backward. She scrambled from beneath him, but he recovered and grabbed hold of her ankle, jerking her back.

Clawing the ground, her fingernails filled with earth. She scooped up dirt and threw it into his eyes. The man roared with fury and she tensed, ready to duck a blow from one of his hammer-like fists. Instead, he lay against her, holding her wrists to the ground. She lunged upward, meeting the solid wall of his chest. She couldn’t move, nor barely breathe. Her skin prickled. Terror screamed inside her mind.

“Hold still, woman.” His deep voice shook her.

Tears burned the backs of her eyes and she swallowed, refusing to let them fall. Her brothers had taught her to be strong and she wouldn’t disappoint them now.

His breath whispered across her lips, his chilling eyes crinkled with curiosity. Drawing back, he studied her, his voice like thunder. “Why would a woman battle amongst the men?”

She jutted her chin. “I came to fight for my people. If you plan to kill me, have mercy and get it over with.”

An evil chuckle shook his chest. “Nay, I have other uses for such as you.”

Even subdued, his suggestion outraged her.

“How dare you? You’ll have naught of me,” she vowed and shook her head.

He peered at her chain mail and hose, as if amused by her man’s garb. “Why did your men attack? We were on a peaceful mission.”

“Hah!” She snorted. “When has a Sigurdsson ever sought peace? You’re dressed for war.”

“We are dressed for protection.”

“Oh? And I suppose you also sought peace a sennight

ago when your men raided our flocks and killed my youngest brother. Your presence in our hills can only be taken as a sign of hostility. You can't blame us for attacking."

He frowned. "I find it difficult to believe your men take orders from a mere girl. Yet, they followed your command."

Pride enveloped her. "They are loyal."

"Loyal to their death."

"You could have sailed up the river, where we would've seen you. Instead, you hid your ships and landed behind my father's steading. If you came in peace, you should've sent us word you were here."

"Your father?" He tilted his head to one side, his brows quirked. His mouth tightened, his entire body tensing against hers. "The Witch of Moere," he whispered in a scathing tone.

Kerstin cringed. With her foolish babbling, she had given away her identity.

"You are Kerstin of Moere, are you not?"

She froze. Dare she deny it?

His eyes narrowed. "With your cheeks smudged with dirt, you look like a puling boy."

It had been her intent to pass as a lad to hide her identity, but pride got the better of her. "I am no puling boy."

His deep laughter filled the air, cold and hollow. "Nay, you are all woman. Your eyes aren't blue, like most Vikings, but green as the damp moss that covers the trunks of pine. I've heard you're Irish."

She locked her jaw. "My mother was from Eire."

His brows lowered in an ominous scowl. "Is she the one who taught you the black arts of witchcraft?"

Breathless with anger, she shook her head. "Of course not. She taught me the ways of healing."

"Your people say you practice magic and you're a witch. I think you're also a silly girl who likes to fight with men."

"Let me up." She clenched her teeth. "I'll show you what a silly girl can do with her bow and arrows."

He flexed his injured shoulder, flinching at the pain it caused. "You've already shown me your skill. I should

kill you and be done with it.”

Her throat closed.

Releasing one of her hands, his fingers skimmed along the column of her throat. She tried to hit him but he leaned hard against her, stifling her fight. Swallowing heavily, her gaze never wavered as she glared at him. She was the daughter of a great earl and would not beg for mercy.

A deep sigh whispered past his lips and he spoke as if to himself. “We hid our ships so an Eiriksson spy might not discover them. Though your people have long feuded with mine, we’ve come to form an alliance and put aside our differences. The king wants us to unite with him against the Eirikssons.”

“You’re lying. You could be an Eiriksson, one of those heathens who murdered my mother last summer.”

“I am no Eiriksson.”

“I have no reason to believe you.”

“Be very careful, witch. Your treachery is well known. I won’t play games with you.”

His warning made her tremble. “I never play games of war, but I would like to know who you are before I end your life.”

He laughed, a rumble she felt deep in her bones. “I think you’re in no position to make threats.”

Kerstin placed the sharp point of her dagger against his throat and he froze. When he had released her hand, she had taken advantage of the opportunity. Her father and brothers taught her well.

“I underestimated you,” he said with a hint of respect.

“It would be wise for you to let me go.”

Dipping his head as if cowed, he raised his chest to release her. She gave a satisfied smile and started to sit up. In the next moment, he knocked the blade from her hand and pinned her once again to the ground.

His hearty laughter brought a rush of blood to her cheeks. Her hand throbbed from the blow and her face burned with annoyance. As he lowered his face to hers, his dazzling blue eyes sparkled with wrath.

She jerked her head away. “My father will kill you for this.”

His probing gaze roamed over her, touching her face, hair, neck and chest. "I don't think so. Our king has sent me here on a mission of peace, not war."

She frowned. "Again, you're lying."

He drew back, but not enough to allow her an escape. Crinkling his nose, he sniffed, then nuzzled her temple. "Your hair smells of lavender."

Shocked, Kerstin didn't think to struggle until he lifted his head again. Did he seek to distract her with nonsense?

"Who are you?" she asked.

He showed a chilling smile. "Your new husband. By the king's word, ere this day is through, you will belong to me."

Outrage flooded her mind. It couldn't be true. Never would she be trapped into wedding this horrible man. "I'm already betrothed to Elezer of Lade."

"No longer. The betrothal is broken and you are mine."

Her mouth dropped open and she stuttered over a denial. "But...but that can't be. Will you get off me?"

He stilled, considering her. "If you run, I'll catch you. Will you give your word not to try to escape?"

"Only while the sun is high." Thankfully the sun would soon slide behind the western hills.

He squashed her once more and she groaned at his solid weight, like a wagonload of rocks. "I cannot accept that."

She grit her teeth. "I won't promise more."

For a moment, he hesitated. Then, he lifted himself up and watched as she took a deep breath. Her bow lay close by in the pine needles littering the ground and he positioned himself so she couldn't reach it without going through him.

He was a shrewd one.

She faced him bravely. "Why have you spared my life?" The wind blew her curls, clinging with dirt and leaves, about her shoulders. She pushed them back and glared at him. He stood close by, easily within reach.

"I thought you were a boy. I don't murder women and helpless children."

Should she be pleased or insulted? "I'm not helpless

and I'm certainly no child."

His gaze lowered over her body and she felt the heat of a blush rise to her cheeks. "Aye, you are a woman, though it's hard to tell in your present attire."

The man's long hair stirred in the breeze, the color of ripe wheat at summer's end. He wore no beard like the other warriors, his lean cheeks high and chiseled. Golden and bronzed, his brutally handsome face appeared angular and harsh.

Kerstin watched as he bent and picked up his sword from where he had tossed it upon the ground. The slim weapon bore the signature of Ulfberht, the blacksmith from Germany, one of the finest blades Kerstin ever saw. Many a man would covet that sword, and no doubt much rich coin purchased it.

He reached for his helmet and held it beneath one arm, his gaze never leaving her. When he sheathed his sword, she breathed with relief.

The scent of rain teased her nostrils. A storm was coming and she must get home.

His sardonic smile showed even, white teeth. Though his alert gaze remained on her, he gave her a deep courtly bow. "At last we meet, Kerstin of Moere."

His words brought a thud of dread to her chest. She looked at him with curiosity, feeling as though she should know him. There was something vaguely familiar about him. Her heart pounded. Had the king truly sent him to marry her? How absurd.

The crooked length of his nose showed it had been broken before. His blunt jaw gave him an arrogant look. A thin, white scar ran along his left cheek. Did he have other scars won in battle? Aye, he was indeed a man of war.

Above them, clouds gathered in the heavens. He glanced up, his face grim. "Odin must be angry."

She shook her head. "I am a Christian, like my mother. I don't believe in the pagan gods of my father."

He snorted.

"You haven't told me who you are. I'd like a name to place you." She spoke in a tight voice, eager to run home and tell her father what had occurred.

"In time. For now, I wish to know why Alrik sent his

only daughter to meet me in battle. Are all your brothers dead?"

Her youngest brother died less than a sennight ago, killed by one of this man's warriors. The memory was still raw and a tremor of pain washed over her. "My father and two of my brothers yet live."

"Why aren't they here? Do they hide behind your skirts?" His brows quirked as he looked at her calves. "Such nice legs. Do you prefer woolen hose to a skirt?"

His words bit into her mind. She had always preferred her soft tunics and pinafores to the coarse garb men wore, but battle was no place for long, tangling skirts. "My father lies in his bed, wounded by a sword from the last battle he fought against your people."

"Will he die?"

"Nay, I won't allow it."

"You do practice witchcraft, just as your people say," he whispered in a harsh voice. "Do you call upon the powers of Hel to aid you?"

Kerstin drew in a sharp breath, hating his insinuation. At one time, her people had called her a good witch out of fondness. Later on, it became a vile label that brought suspicion and hatred from those who didn't know her or understand her skill. "I am no witch. I simply tended his wounds and gave him something to ease the pain. I'm more interested in healing than causing mayhem."

The man stepped closer, taunting her with a wave of his hand. "Your actions today indicate a desire for blood. Now that I have the Witch of Moere, my brother's life can be avenged."

Kerstin gasped. Of course! She knew him now. He was a Sigurdsson. All his people hated her because they thought she murdered his brother, Bjorn, last summer when he had come to wed her.

"Jonas? Jonas Sigurdsson?"

Even as she said his name, she recognized him from the few times she had seen him at the clan gatherings when she was no more than a child. The muscled body, the stubborn tilt of his head, the harsh jawline. Eyes bluer than the sea.

A brutal warrior replaced his boyish charm. People

didn't call him the Strong Arm without good reason. Never beaten in battle, he was the youngest son of Sigurd, the Earl of Hawkscliffe. Jonas—the Undefeated.

Closing her mouth, she blinked her eyes. What a shame they must be enemies. She found him easy to look upon and respected his fighting skills. "I heard you were traveling the world, selling your sword arm as a mercenary. You've been gone several years. When did you return?"

"Recently."

She lifted her brows. "Why did you come back? I would think our farms quite boring after the adventures you've had."

Jonas's eyes flashed. "I returned at my father's bidding when he sent word you had murdered my elder brother."

"I murdered no one."

"You deny it?"

"Of course. I would have honored the betrothal my father made with your brother."

"If you didn't kill Bjorn, then who did?"

"I don't know." She refused to cringe or feel shame over a crime she did not commit, yet she couldn't push aside the doubts shadowing her mind. Because of Bjorn's death, people branded her a witch. In spite of the good she tried to do with her healing skills, the stigma remained.

"Now, who is the liar?"

"Nay! I tried to save his life. I wanted him to live."

"Who would know better how to administer poison than a witch? Your own people accused you of killing Bjorn." The low rumble of his voice filled the forest glade, seeming to join with the encroaching storm.

Shifting her weight, Kerstin crunched dried leaves beneath her feet. Sweat dampened her woolen shirt. She tried to ignore the cloying wetness, but wished she could remove the heavy chain mail and yank off the shirt.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she moved back, chilled by her damp clothes and the increased cold. He watched her in silence and though she couldn't deny what he said, for hours she had tried to purge Bjorn when he became ill, to remove the poison from his body. Her efforts had been in vain. When he had drifted into a deep sleep

and died, she had sobbed bitterly, knowing what his death meant to her people. Already there existed harsh feelings over land disputes. Bjorn's death meant all-out war and they all paid dearly for it.

A drop of rain struck her hand and Kerstin shivered. The bleak clouds above them compacted, the treetops swaying like hulking beasts.

"I know you're ruthless and cruel, Jonas Sigurdsson, but I've heard at one time, you were a kind man, a farmer and trader. That you had mercy and delighted in peace."

His face whitened. As he took a step toward her, his fine mouth curved in a sneer. "Mercy has no place during battle. I know your black deeds and won't listen to your denials. I wish I could kill you and end this feud between our people, but the king has forbidden it."

Kerstin held her ground, prepared to meet her death. Her blood ran cold. A morbid shiver ran up her spine and she drew in a hissing breath.

The wind sprayed dirt in her face and she felt the grit between her teeth. "If you kill me, there will never be peace between our people."

Flickering doubt filled his eyes, so quick and subtle she almost didn't notice. He did seem to care.

"Are you frightened of me?" she taunted. "I would think a strong warrior such as you wouldn't fear a witch."

"I fear no man, or woman. And I don't believe in magic, though I believe in evil."

She believed the same, but a small hesitancy in his voice told her he wasn't quite sure of his words.

"Have you become a traitor to our king?" She gave him an accusing glare.

He cocked his head to one side and gave a thoughtful frown. "Why do you think I've betrayed our king?"

"I saw the banner you fought under. 'Twas the royal colors. You have an Eiriksson with you and they conspire to take the throne from King Hakon."

His shoulders relaxed but his grim mouth betrayed him. "You are mistaken. My men would kill any Eiriksson we found. Like you, we support King Hakon."

Kerstin knew what she had seen. The vivid red and green of the royal house of Vestfold had flown above them as they fought. They must have an Eiriksson spy with

them—the dirty traitors.

She would take the news to her father and he would warn the king. Jonas wouldn't be so smug when he faced the vast army of King Hakon.

There might be one other way to end this feud between their people. Seeking to be brave, she walked to stand before Jonas and tilted her head back to stare up at him.

"I can heal the Beast of Hawkscliffe," she said.

He blanched white and took her arms in his rough hands. As he lifted her close, her feet left the ground and her chest pressed against his. His furious gaze locked with hers. "What do you know about the Beast?"

She braced her hands against his shoulders for support, her fingers biting into his chain mail. "Only that you are the Beast and you suffer from some malady that caused you great pain and many scars. The gossips say that's why you left and have been gone for so many years. To hide and heal."

His brow quirked with amusement. "I've never hidden from anything. There's nothing that can heal the Beast. The scars run too deep."

"How do you know they can't be healed?" She stared at him nose-to-nose.

As he drew back, his eyes narrowed, his voice low and hoarse. "The wounds have long since healed."

"Surely your soul cries out for a healing balm."

"Healing from you?" His eyes widened, his brows drawn together in a horrified glare. "I want nothing more than your death. If not for the king, I would take my revenge and kill you now."

Kerstin cringed as he held her in a gentle grip of steel, forcing herself not to struggle. He sighed with impatience. "No one can mend scars left upon the body, or upon the soul."

"You'd be surprised what can be done. The heart, the mind...close your eyes and you won't see the scars upon the flesh. Look at them with your heart and there is no deformity."

For several moments, they stared at one another. She felt compelled by him and could not look away. Where were his scars? He seemed too solid, too strong, too

godlike to have any flaws for her to heal. Perhaps the blemish was on his soul.

"You want to heal me, little witch?" In his eyes, she saw raw pain. Then, it was gone, replaced once more by the savage warrior.

"Yes, if it would bring peace."

"There is only one way for peace between us."

Pulling her close, he kissed her. His mouth covered hers and stole her breath and her senses. Time spun away until she numbed to the world around her. Nothing mattered except him, his touch, the taste of him. Her reaction startled her. When he let her go and placed her on her feet, her breath caught with indignation.

He gave her a chilling smile. "There will be peace, once you are my wife."

As Kerstin stood in shock, his gaze ranged over her. She opened her mouth to rebuke him but he gave her no opportunity.

"I treasure the thought of having a witch for my wife." His tone filled with contempt. "It'll be interesting to learn what talents you possess. I want to discover if you quail in terror as other women do when they see me without my shirt."

"You seek to frighten me."

If forced to wed him, would he brutalize her? Such a large, towering man could destroy her—and this man had no reason to be kind.

"You *are* a beast," she whispered.

"And you are a witch."

"I won't marry you. You can speak with my father, but he won't agree."

"What, ho?" he crowed. "Just moments ago you pleaded with me to let you heal the Beast."

"You've twisted my words." She quivered with mortification.

The fool. No doubt he would love to have power over her, to wield his strength to hurt her. "I will marry Elezer of Lade."

He scoffed in disgust. "Lade is no longer a strong holding and Elezer has no great army to lend the king aid in battle. King Hakon has said you are mine."

And what about Elezer? True, he had no great army

like Jonas or her father, but he was young, strong and kind. He loved her, as she loved him. Since childhood, they had been great friends. After Bjorn's murder, he had been one of her few allies, offering comfort when others stared at her with distrust and accused her of murder and practicing black magic. Their friendship had blossomed into love. She could never betray Elezer this way. Alrik would not break the betrothal—or her heart.

“I’ll *never* marry you, Beast.”

Jonas laughed and showed her a flashing smile. His blue eyes glinted with a steely edge. It reminded her of a wolfhound scenting prey in the forest.

“We shall see.”

Chapter Two

The journey to Kerstin's home wasn't long. Through the forest, down the green hills that rolled out above the sparkling River Tyne, and along the well-worn path to Moere.

As he looked out on the quay, Jonas saw the protective inlet from the river. The natural harbor provided safe anchorage for Alrik's ships. It also made a surprise attack by an enemy impossible; unless they came from the rugged hills above, which would prove difficult, but effective. Jonas and his men had hidden their ships and done just that, hoping to go undetected should there be an Eiriksson spy close by. Never had he expected supporters of the king—let alone his future bride—to attack him.

The Alriksson's had built the long pier of strong oak. The fortress was a magnificent structure. The stone walls surrounding the hall would not burn and would hold better against attack.

As they walked, Kerstin stared in front of her, ignoring him. How amusing. Would her father refuse the king's demand that they wed? Above all else, Jonas wanted peace—to escape the constant bloodshed of a mercenary. He had returned home for no other reason. But it had been a futile dream. He had arrived at Hawkscliffe and discovered his father and people were not only still feuding with Alrik's men, but also embroiled in battle for the king's throne.

Again Jonas must fight. Not out of duty, but out of friendship for his longtime friend, King Hakon. Having fostered together as boys, they were still close, still loyal companions.

Where were his men? After defeating Kerstin's warriors, perhaps they traveled to Moere with the king. Jonas could only imagine what he might find when he arrived. He prayed Hakon had been able to speak to

Kerstin's people, to stave off more fighting. Once he discovered what Hakon planned, Alrik would either agree or fight his own king. Jonas reached to cup the hilt of his sword. He must prepare for the worst.

Kerstin cast a quick glance at him. Their gazes locked, held, and she flinched. His stare dropped to her shirt of chain mail and he tried to imagine her dressed in women's clothes.

Her gasp of outrage told him she wasn't pleased to have him ogling her. Her cheeks flushed with anger. Ah, she was lovely. A maiden warrior like none he had seen before. With witchy hair that told in truth what she was.

She swallowed and averted her gaze. His instinct was to be gentle with her. Under the circumstances, he doubted she would allow it. Whatever she thought of him, he had never been a cruel man. Yet never could he trust this woman, never could he let down his guard. Even in marriage, there would be no peace.

A thud of remorse filled his heart. Would she at least give him heirs?

He walked beside her along the narrow path, conscious that she held her breath.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" She spoke between clenched teeth.

Shifting his weight, he rolled his shoulder. Her arrowhead burned like a fiery ember lodged in his flesh. What kind of woman fought in battle like a man? No female he had ever met. Once he wedded her, she might try to kill him as she had done Bjorn.

The thought brought a swell of anger crashing over him. He would not allow it. Somehow he would control the witch and put an end to her magic spells.

She stumbled on loose gravel and cried out when Jonas caught her securely with his free arm. He pulled her tight against his side. Her fist barely missed his jaw before he snatched it and held it still. "None of that. Our fight is ended."

She snorted. "You think so? You don't know me very well."

Her green eyes blazed clear as glass, her complexion alabaster smooth. He'd been ordered to wed a treacherous woman, but at least she was beautiful.

As he bent his head down to her, she tried to bite him. She jerked against his hold but he held her fast. Her breath quickened, her lips parted. The curve of her face showed high, smooth cheeks. When her eyes narrowed, he wondered what it would be like to see her smile, to hear her laughter. Was she capable of being gentle and feminine?

She looked away and the scent of lavender spiraled around him, soft and tempting. A womanly scent.

Her warm breath glazed his cheek, her jaw harsh. In her eyes, he saw doubt and fear. When her gaze centered upon his mouth, she licked her bottom lip. The urge to taste her again gave him pause.

"Are you injured?" His voice sounded too low.

Kerstin shook her head. It wasn't normal to want a woman this much. Had she bewitched him? Perhaps she had cast some spell over him. He should release her, but his hold tightened.

"You aren't Elezer," she said.

The way she said Elezer's name—so sweetly, so lovingly—brought a thud of regret to his heart. How he wished someone would speak his name with such longing.

Bah! It must be the magic of her spell that made him think such foolish thoughts. He frowned at her, trying to see the maiden beneath the chain mail.

She struggled to be free and the tranquil moment vanished. He released her. Without his support, she almost fell. Kirsten regained her balance and stepped away. She glared at him, rubbing her arms as if to erase his touch. If he moved toward her, she might try to run. Flexing his throbbing shoulder, he backed off. "For now, I will leave you alone."

Jonas moved down the trail, conscious of her staring after him. The cold wind whipped against him and a spattering of thick raindrops struck his head. The storm was almost here, not a good premonition.

They approached the steading, perched high on a hilltop overlooking the River Tyne. A well-worn path led to the quay where the solid dock had been built. Several elegant ships swayed in the choppy water, tugging at their mooring lines. Higher up, a forest of spruce covered the mountain, winding over the hills as far as Jonas could

see.

Kerstin followed him, plodding through the wide palisade gates of Moere. Thankfully, she didn't try to flee. With his shoulder burning like fire, Jonas felt in no mood to chase her down.

Hordes of their men stood within the main yard, clutching weapons, glowering at each other. It appeared to Jonas they had arrived but moments before. He expected chaos, yet they remained silent as they watched him and Kerstin approach. King Hakon must have spoken to Kerstin's people. Nothing less would keep the two clans from killing each other.

Jonas's gaze filtered through the crowd until he found his father standing amongst the men. Tall and proud, a formidable warrior in his own right, Earl Sigurd of Hawkscliffe smiled at his son. Affection filled Jonas, and also relief. Dying in battle was always a concern, but Valhalla would not claim them today.

The large farmstead included a manor house, a sturdy structure dominating the grounds. Home to many of Alrik's people, Jonas knew they slept on the same wooden benches they used to sit on. Similar to his own home, more of the serfs would live in small huts throughout the valley, close to their crops and Alrik's vast herds of sheep.

Jonas caught the tangy aroma of stewed onions and meat simmering over the cook fire in the main hall. It made him homesick for a hearth and family of his own. Inwardly, he shook himself.

A few chickens scratched in the dirt. A single goat bleated and went back to chewing on a shrub beside the cow byre. Storage sheds, low timbered barns, a stable, and the main hall sat safe inside the stone wall.

A vast stone bathing hut rested across the main yard, with mighty cauldrons for heating water. Jonas made a mental note to enjoy it later. Perhaps a hot bath would relieve his aching shoulder and make it easier to remove the arrowhead.

He sighed, weary of bloodshed.

Men carried away the injured and Kerstin left Jonas's side to give instructions for their care. A thrall woman scurried from the hall with a leather pouch and

handed it to Kerstin. "Your healing herbs and bandages are inside, my lady."

Mumbling her thanks, Kerstin accompanied the wounded. Jonas's men went to one warm barn while Kerstin's men went to another. Relief surged through Jonas that the two clans were separated. They needed the barest motivation to fight again.

Curious about Kerstin, Jonas followed her to where his wounded men were housed. Standing in the shadows of the low doorway, he fingered the hilt of his sword and watched her in silence. It amazed him that Kirsten entered his men's tent first.

"You are foolish to refuse me. I can help ease you," she said with no surprise in her voice when his men rebuffed her offer to assist them.

"You wish to ease us to our deaths. 'Twas your arrows that caused many of our wounds. Come no nearer, witch," one of Jonas's men muttered.

Kerstin drew back, her mouth stiff, eyes crinkled. "We were at war then. Didn't you also try to kill me and my men?"

"Not until you attacked us," another warrior exclaimed. "Leave us be."

The man grimaced with pain, his arm nearly severed.

"You'll bleed to death within the hour if you don't receive care."

"Better that I die from my wounds than from a spell you might cast upon me."

Opening her mouth, she appeared ready to plead her cause. Another healthy warrior rose to his feet and lifted his heavy cleaver. A snarl curved his mouth. "Begone, witch, before I sever that pretty head from your evil neck."

Large, angry men surrounded her, their eyes smoldering with hate. They would never allow her to give them aid. Clutching her healing bag to her chest, she backed away.

As she made a hasty retreat, she collided with Jonas at the door. He reached to settle her and she gasped, jerking away. Hoping to hide his inner thoughts, he glowered at her. Her eyes widened as she scurried around him.

He let her pass, watching as she disappeared into the darkness where they'd taken her own wounded men. Jonas frowned. She had come to tend his warriors first and appeared concerned. It must be an act. A witch would not care who lived or died.

Jonas stayed close by, watching her, listening. He wanted to learn more about this woman he was to wed. What did her own men think of her?

"Ah, here she is," one exclaimed when she entered the dim light of the shelter.

Shafts of fading sunlight filtered through cracks in the walls. The air smelled of straw and animals. The injured men rested upon fresh hay spread on the ground for their comfort. The hay soon soaked up their blood.

As she inspected the worst of their wounds, they sighed with relief, seeming confident in her abilities. Jonas snorted. He expected nothing less from a witch who practiced the black arts.

"I'll need fresh water and more bandages," she said to no one in particular.

An old man gave her a wan smile. He gestured to several buckets of fresh water and piles of clean woolen strips. "I knew what you would need and have it waiting for you, my lady."

Nodding, she set to work. She gave instructions on cleansing, stitching wounds with an antler needle, wrapping gashes, and applying poultices to swollen bumps and bruises.

A fire blazed with a cauldron hanging over it and the barn soon smelled of pungent herbs. Jonas watched to see what magical enchantments she performed, but he saw nothing that didn't seem logical.

She stayed with her own men a short time. Jonas became aware they were more versed in dealing with injuries than his warriors. She instructed them how to wrap mild wounds and tend each other. Too bad Jonas had no healer like her back at Hawkscliffe. His people would benefit from someone with her skills, yet they could never trust her not to cast an evil spell on them.

She left her men and headed for the hall. Outside in the yard, she looked up and saw the old warrior who had tried to protect her during the battle. He wore a bloodied

bandage around his head, to cover the wound Jonas delivered before he had chased Kerstin through the forest. Seeing him hale and alive, she gave a joyous laugh and hugged him tight.

Jonas saw his father standing beside the king. Hakon wore the royal crest upon his shield. When Kerstin glared hotly at the man, Jonas hid an amused smile. She believed the king to be an Eiriksson and therefore a traitor. Jonas would not be the one to tell her the truth. The Eirikssons were King Hakon's brothers and sought to take his title. They were all royals, using the same crest. If Kerstin knew her mistake, she would doubtless bow down upon the ground and beg forgiveness for attacking her own king.

"I'll see if my father can attend visitors," she said.

Turning to go inside, she stopped abruptly, her mouth dropping open, her eyes wide. Alrik, Earl of Moere, stood before the door of the hall. Even with his pale skin, he appeared savage, a fierce opponent in his own right.

If Alrik refused the king's demands, there would be more bloodshed. Jonas couldn't stop it. His warriors were too angry with Alrik's men.

Holding a sword in his fist, Alrik glared at them all, his eyes narrow and shrewd. His sparse, still-blond hair stood on end. Wearing only his trousers and overshirt, the wind slapped at his loose garment. Jonas caught a glimpse of a bandage wrapped about his injured side. It bore a dark stain and Jonas realized the man had opened his wound, causing it to bleed. He appeared to have been roused from bed. He must be chilled, yet his eyes were glazed with fever. Jonas saw moisture on Alrik's brow and anger in his steely eyes.

"I am here, daughter." Alrik spoke with strength but Jonas wondered how he remained on his feet.

"Father!"

She tried to rush to his side but he held out a hand to stop her. "Go inside and make haste with a meal, Kerstin. We will greet our king with the comforts he finds in his own home."

Kerstin's mouth dropped open, her gaze flashing toward the royal. Though she didn't speak, the truth was there on her face. She hadn't known she attacked the

king's party.

"Ohh!" A flush of heat stained Kerstin's cheeks.

She glared at Jonas, her eyes filled with accusation. He kept his face void of expression.

As she looked at her father, her face softened with concern and she took a step toward the ailing man. Her actions confused Jonas. A witch wouldn't feel anything but disdain, even for her father. Yet, this woman seemed so vulnerable. It must be a deception to take them off guard.

A clenching wind stirred through the farmstead. Shifting his feet, hand on his sword, Jonas waited to see what would happen. The next moments would set them on a course of death or of healing. God grant that it be the latter.

"So, Sigurd, you have come with King Hakon." Alrik sneered and rubbed a gnarled hand against his coarse beard. "What devious plans do you hatch now?"

A snide smile curled Sigurd's lips. "It's not what I plan, but what the king orders, Alrik, Lord of Swine. Your foolish daughter had your men attack the king when we brought him here to speak with you in peace."

Kerstin gasped at the insults. Her men tensed and glared at Sigurd's warriors. Hatred pulsed in the air. Tension rushed all around.

Alrik's bushy brows rose and he turned his craggy head. For a brief moment, his disapproving gaze rested on Kerstin. "King Hakon, my daughter didn't know you were amongst the Sigurdssons, or she would never have attacked. Our lookouts reported that you were Eirikssons, sneaking into the hills above us to come down and destroy Moere. You can't blame my daughter for following my orders and trying to protect our home."

"Eirikssons!" Sigurd growled. "Are you all blind as well as dimwitted? Couldn't you see who we were?"

Hardening his jaw, Alrik lifted his sword as he took a step. "'Twas because we saw who you were that we attacked. Didn't you come here recently to fight us?" He gestured toward the injury in his side. "Wasn't that how I got this fine wound? You must bear part of the blame for today's attack. You could have sent us word that you accompanied the king. Instead, you snuck in like you

always do when you try to steal my land and flocks and kill my people. You're no better than the thieving Eirikssons."

Sigurd's face mottled red with fury. "Who are you to accuse us when you—?"

"Enough!" King Hakon barked and the two men stilled. "I've lost many valuable warriors today and I don't wish to lose any more. I've come to ask for your aid, Lord Alrik, just as you gave aid to my father in his many battles. You've always been loyal and I ask that you not fail me now. I demand peace."

Alrik's gray eyes narrowed on his king. "You wish me to fight with you against your brothers, the Eirikssons?"

Hakon nodded. "I know you have no love for the Eirikssons ever since they murdered your wife. Let us speak together of war against them, our common enemy. Let us speak of peace between you and Sigurd."

Jonas saw Alrik's mouth compress with anger. The old earl cast his gaze about the yard, taking in his men, the blood smeared across their swords, the look of hostility in each of their eyes. Alrik could easily grasp the situation for what it was. Though he stood straight and proud, Alrik's pale flesh made him seem weary unto death. He must be in a great deal of pain.

Kerstin faced the king. "Right now, my father must rest. You can plan your war tomorrow."

"Kerstin, go inside," Alrik ordered quietly.

"But, Father, you're not well."

"Kerstin!"

She flinched. Though spoken in a low voice, his sharp command silenced her. She cast a quick glance at Jonas. He refused to meet her gaze, unwilling to let her see the sympathy that stirred deep within him. Against his better judgment, he was impressed by Kerstin's courage and discipline. And dare he admit he admired her compassion in caring for the wounded? But he must never forget what she was capable of, or that she had killed Bjorn.

With a sigh, Kerstin obeyed her father's word. She disappeared inside the great hall, leaving Jonas feeling suddenly alone and empty.

Inside the manor house, Kerstin set about ordering

the few remaining thrall women to place a meal on the long tables. Whether she liked it or not, their enemy was here to stay.

She had attacked King Hakon. How could she have made such a foolish mistake? Tears burned her eyes when she thought of the men who died today, many of them her friends. More would succumb to the wounds they received.

Anguish tore at her heart. Guilt rested on her like a load of rocks on a funeral pyre. It didn't matter that she had done what her father asked, or that the Sigurdssons were partly responsible.

She dashed the tears away with her hands, trying to ignore her misery as she removed her chain mail. It did no good. Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks, forcing her to stop and blow her nose on a cloth she kept tucked inside her pocket. Enough! She must set a good example for her people. Resolved to being strong, she went about her work.

It wasn't a difficult chore to lay out a meal. Great haunches of meat already hung over the open fire pit in the center of the room. Dripping with sizzling juices, the meat awaited ravenous appetites of men returned from battle. They'd also prepared flatbread, golden cheese, broiled fish, baked apples, and vegetables.

The day before, they scattered fresh rushes across the clay floor. The air smelled of sweet spices and cooking meat.

Letta, the wife of Kerstin's eldest brother, ran over to her as Kerstin set a pitcher of honey mead at the head of the table. "Do you know why the king is here? Will he lend Sigurd aid to kill us?"

"Nay, King Hakon has always respected my father," Kerstin reassured her. "Since he needs Alrik's help, he would never jeopardize that by allowing Sigurd to cause mayhem."

Jonas Sigurdsson entered the hall, interrupting them. He stood before the door, still dressed in battle gear, still tall and somber. His sword and war ax clanked as he looked about. Damp tendrils of wheat-colored hair curled on his high forehead. His sharp gaze took in every detail of the room, then rested heavily upon Kerstin. She swallowed twice.

"Your father has asked for shoes and warm clothing." His voice filled the hall like a blast of wintry wind.

At first, Kerstin didn't move. She stood paralyzed as his gaze stroked down her body, then lifted again to her face.

If King Hakon had his way, Jonas Sigurdsson would be her husband. How could she stand to wed such a cruel wretch? She could never give up Elezer, whom she loved.

Jonas cleared his throat, and Kerstin hurried into the backroom. She returned with the requested items and walked to him. As she held out the clothing, her gaze lifted to his face. Flickering shadows twined along the walls as flames danced in the fire pit. In the dim light, it surprised her to see his worried expression as his brows lowered in a frown.

When he took the clothes, his fingers brushed against hers. Drawing away, she clasped her hands in front of her. The heat of an angry blush suffused her cheeks but she didn't look away. She must not back down to this man, or show him fear. Why did his presence affect her so much?

"You've made it clear you don't want to marry me," he said for her ears alone. "But if your father orders it, will you agree?"

Of course not! "Father won't agree. I am betrothed to Elezer."

Jonas offered no denial. "I'm sorry for your love of Elezer, but many lives depend upon our union. We must wed, Kerstin. There's no other way."

He spoke her name for the first time. She shivered at the sound rolling off his tongue, smooth as honeyed butter.

His mouth softened, his eyes no longer angry. Their intense blue reminded Kerstin of rare gemstones she had once seen at a bazaar in York. She must stop looking at him as if he were a man instead of her enemy. If he tried to take her from Elezer, she would fight him—as long as she had breath in her body. "Surely you don't want to be saddled with a woman who loves another man."

He frowned, his jaw tense. "The king has ordered it. I will do my duty, even if I must marry a witch."

She snorted. "I am no witch. You only want me so you

can hurt me.”

He didn’t respond and she became aware of the nervous chatter of the other women as they scurried to the back of the hall. They clutched heavy brooms and meat cleavers, peering at him warily.

“Hurting you has no purpose,” he said. “I need nothing more than heirs from you. Your love for Elezer is a thing of the past. Put it aside.”

Put it aside? To do so would bludgeon her heart.

“You treat me as if my only purpose is to create heirs.”

“You will do your duty.”

The insufferable brute. “I will *not* have your children.”

He flattened her father’s clothes with his hands. “Don’t fight me, Kerstin. I’m a man who never accepts defeat. Unlike my brother, I will never let down my guard with you, so be warned.”

Her eyes narrowed and she prayed silently. *Please, God, help my father understand.* “And I am a woman who won’t be forced to marry a man I hate, so you be warned.”

Brief pain flickered in his eyes and was gone. Surely she imagined it. This man detested her. Her hatred for him wouldn’t cause him any dismay.

“You will do as you are told,” he said.

She tried to speak, but words wouldn’t come. Her pulse vibrated with fury.

He turned around and strode out of the room without even a backward glance. Kerstin stood like a statue where he had left her, stunned and hollow inside.

Her mind whirled. Her father loved her and wouldn’t give her to Jonas.

Or would he?

Looking at the women where they hid behind tall looms and chests, she sought to reassure them. “He’s gone now. You can come out.”

Letta wrung her hands and whined in a pitiful voice. “I’m so afraid. My dead babes aren’t cold in the grave before their murderers come into my home. Your own brother’s death must be avenged.”

Kerstin flinched at the reminder. “You’re right, Letta, but Tostig died in battle against the Sigurdssons

and the Eirikssons murdered your children.”

She tried to place a comforting hand on the woman's arm but Letta jerked away. “I'll grow old and childless because of the Sigurdssons. I watched my own children trampled to death.”

“I'm so sorry for your loss, Letta. But it wasn't the Sigurdssons that caused the death of your babes.” Kerstin's voice trembled with the memory of Letta's face and her heart-wrenching screams when the men carried her children's bodies back to her that fateful day last autumn. Letta had not seemed level in the head since.

“Once Thorir returns from trading, you will have more children,” Kerstin said.

As if that could ever take the place of the two precious souls Letta had lost. Oh, how Kerstin wished her big brother would come home right away. Thorir could calm his wife. Letta always listened to him, and maybe he could also reason with Father.

Thorir would surely take Kerstin's side. He and her other brothers had always doted on her, protecting her. Though her elder brothers had a different mother than herself, Kerstin loved them all; but they weren't here and she must be strong.

“Sigurdssons! Eirikssons!” Letta spat with distaste. “One is just as bad as the other. They both bring death to us.”

Kerstin agreed as she turned her head in the direction of the door. Resisting the urge to go outside and eavesdrop on the men proved difficult. They made plans that would affect the rest of her life. What would King Hakon do when Alrik refused the wedding match?

The women returned to their chores but they paused often, their eyes wide as they listened to the angry voices coming from outside the house.

Minin, who was Knut's wife, ceased stirring a fragrant stew as a low boom of thunder reached their ears. It joined the dull thrum of angry men. Alrik's voice roared in fury above the rest.

Kerstin's breath caught in her throat. Would the battle begin anew? Father was in no condition to fight. He could be easily killed.

“Surely Alrik won't give you to Jonas Sigurdsson.”

Letta sidled up to Kerstin as she set her father's drinking horn on the table.

It sounded like a sacrificial offer. Indeed, Kerstin felt that was just what she would be if they forced her to marry Jonas the Strong Arm.

Drawing herself up, Kerstin jutted her chin and tried to still her trembling hands. "My father knows I love Elezer."

"Elezer can do nothing if your father decides to break the betrothal," Minin remarked. "And perhaps it would be a good thing. Beware of Elezer's handsome face and kind ways, mistress. I've heard the men say he tends to be devious and selfish, interested only in a woman's soft body, comforts and wealth. I don't want to see you hurt."

Kerstin gasped. "You know nothing of Elezer's goodness. How dare you carry such tales to my ears?"

Minin shrugged and Kerstin slammed a jug of wine onto the table, sloshing the contents across wooden bowls. The soft drumbeat of raindrops struck the roof of the hall. The storm had broken and would quickly end, but for Kerstin, it went on and on. She longed to take her fears to Elezer and had no doubt of his devotion. He would help her plead their case to her father.

Sighing deeply, she glanced at her sister-in-law, who cowered in one corner of the room. "Letta, please fetch the iron candle holders while I see about more ale."

Letta seemed not to hear. When the thunder boomed again, her eyes filled with a strange, wild light. Letta grabbed a carving knife from the trestle table and headed for the door. "I will *not* welcome these murderers into my home, nor allow your father to wed you to a savage man."

Kerstin hurried after her, catching the woman as she reached the door. Kerstin yanked the blade from Letta's clenched fist. As much as the thought of killing Jonas and the other Sigurdssons appealed to her, what would it accomplish other than Letta's death? "Nay, Letta, you mustn't try such a thing. You are crazed with grief."

Losing her balance, Letta bumped into the tall loom against the wall. As if the thump knocked her senses back into her brain, Letta burst into tears and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she cried. "We will all be

killed. My poor dead babes.”

Kerstin's throat constricted. Little Elyn and Ari. She remembered their soft hands and gurgling laughs as they pulled her hair or tried to steal sweet meats from the cooking pot. How could she fault the desperation of a grieving mother?

“Shh,” she said, hugging Letta close against her breast as she smoothed her pale hair. “I know your misery, Letta. Come with me, and I'll give you a soothing tisane to help you sleep.”

As she led Letta away, Kerstin wondered about tomorrow. Swallowing her own tears, she tried to be brave. Alrik would make the right decision, wouldn't he? She must trust him.

“You realize,” Letta whispered as they walked to the back rooms, “I could kill Jonas Sigurdsson, and he would die, like his brother did.” She laughed in shrill, harsh gasps.

Kerstin froze as the woman dropped onto her sleeping furs. What had Letta said? She must have heard wrong. A horrible lump settled in Kerstin's stomach. Could Letta have killed Bjorn? Did she know enough about potions to have mixed the poison that took his life?

Letta drew herself into a tight ball beneath the warm furs on her sleeping couch. Keening a quiet lullaby in a singsong voice, she rocked back and forth. Pity blanketed Kerstin's heart as she pushed the unholy thoughts aside. “Don't be afraid, Letta. I will protect you.”

“But who will protect you?” Letta's voice came as a whisper, trembling over Kerstin with such intensity that she flinched.

It took a moment to recover. “Rest now, Letta.”

Kerstin hurried back to the main hall. When she spotted Minin, she pulled her aside. “Letta is still upset. Watch her carefully while I'm gone.”

With a croon of sympathy, Minin nodded.

Kerstin took fresh clothes, linen towel and lavender-scented soap and stepped outside the hall. To her surprise, the men were gone, probably adjourned to the counseling hall farther up the mountain. She could only guess at their mood. Jonas Sigurdsson must have

accompanied them.

Water dripped off the eaves of the longhouse and the air smelled of rain. Black clouds filled the sky, not at all finished with their fury. Stepping over puddles, she scurried across the yard to the bathing hut.

A large stone and wood building, the hut contained an outer chamber lined with wooden benches. The inner room contained more benches and a fire pit, the hearth cold now, and dark. Great shadows played across the walls as Kerstin hastened her task.

She jerked her filthy garments from her body and sighed with relish now that she could finally lather her arms with the fragrant soap. She poured tepid water over herself, then ran her hands over her legs. Sudsy bubbles dripped down her calves. Lifting each leg in turn, she rested a foot upon a bench as she rinsed.

It felt good to cleanse away the blood and sweat of battle from her body. A throaty moan escaped her as she flexed her stiff shoulders. How she wished she could wash the events of the day away. She didn't hurry, wanting to enjoy this time alone before she had to witness Jonas's wrath when her father told him there would be no marriage.

After she scrubbed her face, Kerstin lathered and rinsed her hair, then towed herself dry. She dressed in a long-sleeved, ankle-length tunic of fine pleated linen. She had dyed the soft fabric a deep golden color from the leaves and stems of agrimony. Over this, she wore a calf-length woolen pinafore dyed a vivid yellow from the flowers of chamomile. At each shoulder, she fastened a gilded brooch, decorated with intricate animal patterns—a gift from her father when he took her trading in York last summer. Then, she combed out her hair until it crackled with life.

Letting her head fall back, she closed her eyes as relief washed over her. How good it felt to be attired like a woman again. She dreaded returning to the hall and wished she could remain here, alone. No doubt Minin would have her hands full if Letta awoke and decided to cause more mischief.

Kerstin sighed, feeling the weight of her responsibilities.

Bending, she picked up her dirty clothes. A movement caught her eye and she paused, peering into the deep shadows across the room. She made out the figure of a large man reclining upon one of the benches. The figure shifted and she gasped.

Jonas!

He sat silent. Kerstin sucked in a sharp breath, clutching her soiled clothes to her breast. How long had he been watching her?

His bright eyes gleamed in the shadows. Beside him on the floor lay his sword. She wasn't surprised. Even when he took his leisure, he kept his weapon close at hand.

Embarrassment flooded her cheeks with heat and hot prickles tingled down her spine. "Why are you here?"

Reclining on one elbow, he lifted a foot to rest upon the bench. His free arm relaxed across his raised knee. Cast in shadow, his expression looked fierce, his blue eyes sparkling.

"I came here for the same purpose as you. To wash away the stench of battle and to be alone for a time." His voice sounded low and husky.

"You should have made yourself known to me."

His long body unfolded as he stood up. Kerstin's eyes widened. The movement must have jarred his injured shoulder and he flinched as if it pained him.

Jonas wore a soft, long-sleeved shirt, which molded his torso like a second skin and defined the muscles of his arms and chest. He had tied a bathing cloth about his lean waist to hide his heavy loins and Kerstin's mouth rounded as she took a step backward.

She glanced at the doorway on the other side of the room, realizing she would have to pass by him to reach it. Trapped, like a caged animal. Her gaze drifted back to him.

His eyes never wavered from hers and he appeared to be more pleased than vexed. "I didn't mean to spy on you, little Kerstin. You were so intent upon your chore, I thought to let you finish bathing in peace. But I won't speak a lie and say I didn't enjoy the sight. I am a man, after all."

Kerstin's mouth dropped open. His confession filled

her with confusion, something she hadn't expected. He was toying with her. "Do you think to flatter me with compliments?"

"I merely speak what is on my mind. A man doesn't want an old crone when he takes a wife."

She grit her teeth. "You know nothing about me."

Jonas shrugged lazily, then paled and grimaced, as if the movement pained him. "I know most accused you of murdering my brother. Only a fool would trust you. And I am no fool."

"And I will never trust you."

"It's just as well, Witch." He spoke in a placid tone.

His accusations cut her deep. She longed for people to see her for the healer she was, not a witch. A volcano of anger and frustration simmered inside her, building up until she shook with it, ready to explode. "You are nothing more than a mercenary. Who are you to speak to me of honor?"

Kerstin edged toward the door. If he attacked, she had no weapon. Why had she left her dagger inside the hall? Even if she screamed, her father's men wouldn't hear her.

He took a step closer.

"Stay back!" She held out a hand to ward him off.

Jonas stood in the shadows, his gaze fixed upon her face. Kerstin longed to kick him, but didn't dare get that close. She remembered how he had caught her in the forest, quick and light on his feet.

She took another step toward the door. He also stepped forward and her heart sank. "My father will kill you if you touch me."

He shook his head and his rich laughter filled the room. "I don't think so."

"Then I will kill you myself."

His white teeth flashed with a chilling smile. "I accept your challenge, Kerstin. It'll be entertaining to see if I can prevent such a tragedy from occurring while I bring you pleasure."

Another step toward the doorway. "I will find no pleasure in you."

"Ah," he breathed as he also moved closer. "Perhaps Elezer hasn't been a generous lover. What has he taught

you, Kerstin? Are you still chaste?"

Her eyes narrowed with fury. How dare he ask her such intimate questions? "Like me, Elezer is a Christian and cares for my feelings. You are a vile heathen who believes in nothing but pagan gods."

He came closer and Kerstin eyed him. She must move fast or be ensnared.

"I assure you, Kerstin, I can be most gentle. And when I'm finished, you'll have no doubt that I am a man and you are my woman."

Kerstin felt her cheeks flush. In sudden panic, she tried to dart past him. He simply stepped to the side and she ran straight into his solid chest, jarring his injured shoulder. A low groan came from his throat. Now he must let her go.

Jonas enfolded her shuddering body in his iron-hewed arms.

"Let me go!" She struggled to free herself and felt his chest quake with laughter.

In the forest, she had wondered if his eyes would crinkle and sparkle when he smiled. Aye, they did indeed, but his amusement infuriated her. She managed to pull one of her arms loose and drew back her fist, striking his injured shoulder. He grunted, showing a pained frown.

Picking her up, he squeezed her against his hard body. Kerstin found her mouth seized by his in a searing kiss that curled her toes. Cupping the back of her head, he pulled her closer. She couldn't breathe. The sweet warm taste of him told her he had enjoyed some rich wine before his bath. She gasped for air as his kiss went on and on. A strange warmth spiraled through her, stealing her senses.

Before she realized what she was doing, she returned his kiss. The way her body betrayed her was more than she could comprehend.

Wedging her hands between their chests, she pushed away, succeeding only because he allowed it. Their gazes caught, held. His intense look no longer showed amusement, but sultry desire. "Your passion betrays you, Kerstin."

Humiliated, she stared at the wall, stained by years of weekly steam baths. How could she be so disloyal to

Elezer? "I belong to another man."

His jaw hardened. "Your passion belongs to me."

"I want no part of you."

His eyes darkened. "You shall have all of me, Kerstin. 'Tis only a matter of time."

Jonas placed her on her feet. Relief flooded her when he set her free. She whirled about and fled, the sound of his deep laughter rumbling behind her.

Chapter Three

Careful of the mud, Kerstin picked up her skirts and raced across the yard to the hall. Sigurd's men eyed her with malice as she passed. She ignored them, eager to get inside where she might be safe from Jonas's prying eyes.

The clean scent of washed earth filled the air and she breathed deep, trying to settle her nerves. The encounter with Jonas left her trembling. The swine! How dare he threaten her? Everything within her rebelled at his cold accusations and callous pawing.

Loud voices came from inside the hall, many she didn't recognize. Her father's low, angry rumble was unmistakable.

With little room for all the warriors to gather in the hall, many stood without, craning their necks to see inside.

As she approached, the men opened a path for her—so many men she couldn't count them all. Even Sigurd's warriors stood back to let her through. They towered over her, their expressions fierce and savage. She imagined their swords and axes cleaving her neck in two and the hair against her nape prickled.

No doubt Sigurd was inside with her father, eating their food and drinking their wine—a distressing thought.

Kerstin ducked inside the hall and stood before the doorway, letting her eyes adjust to the dim interior. No one had lit the wicks in the iron candleholders. Only the large fire in the center of the room gave off light. Great shadows flickered off the carved walls and along the benches used for sitting and sleeping. The warm air smelled of cooking meat. Though filled to capacity, the occupants of the hall acted subdued. Sigurd's men sat on one side of the long tables with Alrik's men on the other. She silently prayed they would end this evening without bloodshed.

Kerstin sent one of the thrall women to light candles.

Looking up, she saw her father seated in his great throne-like chair on a raised dais at the head of the room. As the men became aware of her presence, they moved their gazes to her. She shifted uneasily. The feast hadn't begun. How odd if they were waiting for her.

Alrik sat beside the king and Sigurd. He had donned his best clothing and wore his sword at his side. Though pale with pain, his face showed stubborn lines that gave him a savage expression. His hard mouth compressed. His gray eyes took in her appearance and, with a curt nod, he indicated his approval and motioned for her to join him.

Though she longed to run to him, she approached with dignity. She wanted to fling herself into his great arms and pour out her heart to his listening ear. *Please, Father, don't break my betrothal to Elezer. Please don't break my heart.*

Jonas Sigurdsson entered the room and every one of Kerstin's senses perked to his presence. Her gaze followed him as he came toward the dais, walking with a smooth swagger of confidence. Once again, he wore his chain mail. Though he had bathed, bloodstains still covered his tunic.

His cold gaze raked her as he rubbed his injured shoulder. No doubt it pained him. Let it serve as a token of her affection for him.

Even now, she felt the brand of his mouth upon hers, his taste on her tongue. Her cheeks flushed with heat as she remembered their earlier encounter. His eyes glittered with knowledge and his mouth curved in a satisfied smile. He seemed to know what she thought.

Kerstin stared at him in defiance. Oh, how she would love to slap his smirking face. Jonas would not be so prideful when her father told him she would not become his wife.

Jonas sat beside his father and the king, close by Alrik. Placing his dented helmet on the plank table in front of him, he watched Kerstin.

Alrik glanced at his daughter with curiosity. She ignored him, praying he didn't notice her flaming cheeks. Alrik would kill Jonas if he knew the man had watched her bathe. Kerstin dared not speak of it. Their people needed no more incentive to rush into battle.

Alrik signaled for the feast to begin. The men sitting on the dais didn't speak amongst themselves, not even in hushed whispers. They sat stiff and unyielding, barely looking at one another. What a farce! They couldn't tolerate one another, yet they were supposed to be supping in camaraderie.

Had Alrik already spurned the king's request that she marry Jonas? Had the king taken the news badly? It served him right. If true, Kerstin would laugh with triumph.

Alrik raised his drinking horn in toast and called out in a clear voice. "Let us drink to Hakon, King of the Danelaw."

A deafening roar filled the hall as the men raised their horns high in salute. The king smiled with pleasure.

"Wait!" Jonas called.

Every gaze turned to him. Bracing his hands on the table, he rose to his feet. A subtle flinch crossed his brow as he stood. Because his pained expression was so fleeting, Kerstin doubted anyone else noticed, but she was a healer, trained to detect subtle changes in the body.

Hefting his curved drinking horn, he lifted it high. "I would have the witch taste my ale before I partake of it."

Kerstin froze. Did he dare suggest she poisoned his drink?

Jonas lowered his brows in a frown, his eyes glittering like a serpent's.

Alrik tensed and turned white as the buttermilk Kerstin had churned the day before. "What is this?" he demanded.

Jonas glanced at her father, his face arrogant and dangerous. "I don't intend to die of poisoning as my brother did. Let the witch taste my ale so I might know she hasn't been up to more mischief."

A brief surprise washed over Kerstin. Mortification burned her cheeks. How dare he call her a witch before all their men? Her own father? Oh, how she wished she knew some evil spell to cast upon him. She was tempted to learn witchcraft for that reason alone.

Alrik tightened his jaw. "My daughter is no witch. She has just returned to the hall. How do you think she can poison your ale?"

At this point, Knut came to his feet, lifting his sword. He didn't speak, but his steely gaze centered on Jonas and he looked fierce enough to split the other man's skull. Tension in the room escalated. The warriors braced themselves. The scrape of metal being drawn cried through the air. Men scooted back from the table and gripped the hilts of their blades in preparation.

They had all lost their wits. Did they intend to fight a battle right here in the hall?

"She could have cast an evil spell," Jonas said. "If she tastes my ale, I will know she hasn't put a hex on it to poison me."

Kerstin's blood ran cold. As she looked around the room, she saw the accusation in the men's eyes. The suspicion. Didn't they know how hard she worked to heal their wounds and save them if she could? How she longed for them to see her for what she really was.

"My daughter will not go around this room and taste each man's cup," Alrik said. "You do me an injustice, Jonas Sigurdsson. I'm offended by your demand."

Jonas didn't move, but his jaw hardened and his eyes glimmered with malice. "I haven't asked that she go around the room. But she will taste my ale before I honor your toast."

"Jonas," King Hakon snapped. "We're too close to victory to let your temper destroy it now."

Alrik rose to his feet, eyes blazing.

Kerstin put her hands over her mouth to stifle a cry. Though still strong, her father was older now and ill. Certainly no match for Jonas the Strong Arm. If Alrik defended her honor by fighting Jonas, he could be sliced to ribbons. A blaze of panic tore through her. She couldn't stand to watch her father die.

"Wait! I'll taste his ale."

She scurried around the table to grab Jonas's drinking horn. Tilting the brim to her lips, she took a deep swallow. With a flippant toss of her long hair, she handed the drinking horn back to him and went to take a place on the opposite side of her father.

Several tense moments passed before each man regained his seat. They settled once more as Jonas tipped the brim of his drinking horn to his lips. They drank to

the toast, but animosity crackled all around. Kerstin's heart hardened. The idea of marriage to Jonas repulsed her.

Alrik lifted his cup again. "I drink to the death of King Hakon's brother and our enemy, Eirik Bloodaxe, and to the destruction of his sons, the Eirikssons."

Again, the men offered their assent, raising drinking horns, gulping their ale with greedy enjoyment. Kerstin picked up a pewter cup and took a sip of sweet wine from the Rhineland. Curiosity crinkled her brow. Why would her father bring out the wine for the Sigurdssons? So exotic and expensive to obtain? No doubt he would give his best to the king. She longed to become drunk on it and forget her dilemma, but she would not.

"I drink to Sigurd, Earl of Hawkscliffe, my one-time friend." A third time, Alrik offered a toast. "For years our people have been feuding. Now, we will finally have peace between us."

Kerstin doubted this. Her father had hated Sigurd since before her birth. Alrik had vowed to kill him one day.

Seated on the other side of the king, Sigurd showed a scornful smile. Beside him, Jonas remained passive. Kerstin knew better. The golden warrior was silent and deadly, as shrewd as her father.

His gaze unnerved her. His blue eyes seemed so forceful that she felt as if he had delivered her a blow. Flinching, she regretted it, hating to show him any weakness.

She had to force herself not to stare at him. He held her in a hypnotic trance, drawn to him even as she feared him. What would he be like under different circumstances? Handsome and strong, Jonas was everything her father and brothers had taught her to admire. Bold and aggressive, a leader of men.

He was as brutal as he appeared. Aye, she had seen him in battle and felt his iron grip upon her body. Thinking back on the battle, she realized she never saw him strike a fallen man. He spared her life even before he knew her to be a woman. Perhaps he had some scruples after all.

Again, she wondered what blemish gave people a

reason to call him a beast. What hidden flaw stained his perfection?

Jonas smiled slowly and raised his drinking horn, as if to honor her. Kerstin knew differently. She could see the subtle lift of his brows, the flash of his eyes, so mocking. Did he think her such an easy conquest?

With a scathing look of contempt, Kerstin turned her back on him and leaned closer to her father. Very few of Alrik's men honored the toast to Sigurd. They lowered their drinking horns and glared at the enemy. It wouldn't be easy to forget their hatred and the long years of feuding, even if Alrik demanded it.

"We will drink to peace and to the marriage of my only daughter to Jonas Sigurdsson," Alrik's voice boomed.

Kerstin sucked in a breath and sat up straight. Stunned. Incredulous. Had she heard right? Her stomach churned. Sweat broke out on her brow. She couldn't move. Could not breathe!

It must be a jest, made to poke fun at the Sigurdssons. Her father couldn't mean to force her into this marriage. He wouldn't do such a thing to her. Not without telling her about it before he announced it publicly.

Determination filled his eyes. For a brief moment, she detected his sadness, his regret. He knew how much she loved Elezer and wanted to be his wife.

Thick heartache coiled within her. She realized her father didn't want to force her to marry Jonas, but he would. For peace and to preserve their people from the king's wrath.

"This cannot be." Kerstin came to her feet, her hands clenched. No wonder Jonas had been so smug in the bathing hut. The cur! He had known her father agreed to their marriage.

Her face burned with shame and anger. How happy Jonas must be to have his way. And then what? Thousands of thoughts shadowed her mind when she considered how Jonas might humiliate her once they were wed. And what of Elezer? This would crush him.

"Father, don't do this to me."

"Sit down," Alrik commanded.

Sagging into her seat, Kerstin wanted to cry but

refused to let these men see such weakness. Tears were not for a strong woman, not at this moment. Later, in privacy, when none could witness such a flaw.

"Please," she whispered pitifully.

Looking away from her, Alrik spoke to the king. "The marriage will take place on the morrow. The day after that, my army will be ready to accompany you and Sigurd to Hawkscliffe. There, you can gather your own men to travel to York and engage the Eirikssons in battle."

As Kerstin listened to her father and King Hakon make plans for war, she knew she couldn't wed Jonas Sigurdsson, even if it meant peace.

A subtle smile curled Jonas's harsh mouth. He must be pleased to see his plans come to fruition. She would be in his power. His brows lowered and his gaze scoured her body, then moved to her face and hair. He assessed her! Even now, he was eager to dominate her.

The thought terrified her. Fear filled her lungs with every breath she took. The room closed in on her, stifling. She couldn't remain here any longer. Bolting to her feet, she faced her father, not caring that she interrupted him and the king. Thralls served great platters of roasted meats, yellow cheese, bread and creamy butter. Though she hadn't eaten since the day before, Kerstin had no appetite. She felt sickened—heartbroken.

"I will *not* wed Jonas Sigurdsson."

She whispered her defiant words, but they rang throughout the hall. The clatter of eating stilled. Silence reigned in its stead. A tremor of premonition filled the room as the men stared at her. Knut rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. An act of loyalty, but he was only one man. Scores of angry men who would force her to wed Jonas surrounded Kerstin.

Her father's warriors looked at her with sympathy, but their mouths thinned with disapproval. They couldn't be pleased to give her to a Sigurdsson, a little girl they had watched grow into a woman, but they would do it—for peace.

"You will do as I say, daughter," Alrik said in a hoarse voice.

Maybe Alrik had a plan. Some way to protect her from this fate until her brothers had time to return and

lend their aid. She gazed at his stony eyes.

"And what of my oath to Elezer?" she asked.

King Hakon lowered his brows in a stormy glare and Kerstin forced herself not to quail.

"You dare defy my word, Kerstin of Moere?" Hakon's mouth tightened and his rumbling voice sent tremors to her bones.

Kerstin tensed. Hakon was king, but he held no power here in Moere, unless he took it by strength. His boldness infuriated her and she wanted to scream at him for his audacity. She wanted to kick him in the knee and pull out his beautiful, blond hair.

"What do your troubles have to do with me?" she cried. "You have no right to demand I wed a man I can never love. A man who hates me in return."

Conscious of Jonas's heavy glare, she would not be swayed. By Viking law, a woman had rights of her own—the right to refuse Jonas Sigurdsson.

"Sigurd will not lend me the aid of his army without this marriage," the king replied.

Swallowing, Kerstin looked at Sigurd. Both he and Jonas had stood up, almost the same size, Jonas a hand taller.

"Why?" Kerstin asked Sigurd. "Why do you demand I marry your son? I don't even know him."

Even as Kerstin asked the question, she knew the answer. Sigurd hated her and wanted to punish her for killing Bjorn. Revenge drove him to do this dreadful thing.

"Why?" she asked again.

"Because I want you."

Jonas's low rumble filled the room. The heavens shook and thundered from without. Kerstin heard the rain begin anew, pounding the roof of the hall with a vengeance. It mimicked the beat of her heart.

Kerstin thought she imagined a subtle softening in Jonas's eyes, yet she doubted his compassion. "You want me so you can use me. You will kill me if you can."

He didn't deny her words. Their gazes clashed and Kerstin stood transfixed for several painful heartbeats. Jonas showed a puzzled frown. He was cold and heartless—a beast.

Jonas opened his mouth to speak, but Sigurd cut him off.

"You needn't fear my son. Your death would mean his death. The king has ordered it."

"Jonas will keep you safe," King Hakon reiterated as he relaxed back in his chair and fingered the jeweled dagger sheathed at his side. "He's no longer angry with you for attacking us. With time, I have no doubt he will come to appreciate such a spirited woman as his wife."

Aye, when sheep could fly. Cold dread squeezed her chest. Once Hakon defeated the Eirikssons, what then? Would he still offer protection to her? Or would she be on her own, at the mercy of her brutal husband?

No matter what, Elezer would be lost to her, along with all happiness.

"Father, please." Desperation thickened her voice.

Alrik's face remained stony. "You will do as you are told."

Blinking back tears, Kerstin swallowed and took a halting step toward her father. "You would betray me to our enemy?"

He refused to meet her gaze, showing her his shoulder. Kerstin stumbled forward, holding one hand to her throat as tears of pain burned the backs of her eyes. He shunned her!

Was it for the king's benefit, and also the watching men? He showed them his strength and mastery in his own home, over his own daughter. To make Kerstin understand he would not change his mind.

With a choking cry, she whirled about and pushed her way through the wall of men and ran out of the hall. They let her go and she dashed through the pouring rain, racing through the palisade gates and up the winding path that led over the fields and into the forest. It was difficult to see in the dark, but she knew the way. Rain pelted her, cold, and stinging. Her breath came harsh and painful until her lungs burned and her stomach tightened into knots.

Slipping in the mud, she fell to her knees, then scrambled up and ran again. Shrubs and tree limbs snagged her hair and clothing, pulling her back, ruining her lovely dress, scratching her face.

Beneath the protective shelter of pine, she fell to her hands and knees beside her mother's grave. Laying her head against the large boulder marking the spot, she sobbed in agony. Though protected from the storm by the thick foliage around her, her soaked gown caused her to quiver with cold.

Long minutes passed before the rain ceased and her sobbing slowed to pathetic hiccoughs. Her eyes felt puffy and scratchy. She heard the soft tread of someone approaching and saw the flicker of a lighted torch. Joy speared her. Her father hadn't forsaken her after all and would now soothe her fears. Her heart leapt as she turned her face away and wiped her tears so he might not think her weak.

She heard his breathing at her back and felt his presence close behind. Her voice shook as she spoke. "Do you remember when I was a little girl, how you told me I would marry a strong, mighty warrior one day? Someone to give me fine sons and daughters? Someone I could respect?"

With no reply, she continued speaking. "Elezer is fine and good, Father. He loves me, as I love him. I know you wouldn't betray me by giving me to a savage man who seeks my death. Jonas believes I'm a witch."

She gave a croaking laugh. "He doesn't know how I tried to save his brother. Even as Bjorn lay dying from poison, I administered atropine, an effective antidote. But I was too late. He died in my arms and I cried afterward. I would have married him. He was a handsome, strong man like his brother, but he wasn't fierce or cruel like the Beast of Hawkscliffe."

Still no response, only the thunder and blazing lighting as it jagged across the sky. Wondering why her father remained silent, she whirled about and gasped.

"A touching story."

Mortification burned her cheeks as she looked up into the fierce eyes of Jonas Sigurdsson. He had followed her, not her father. Even now, when Alrik knew how distressed she was, he had not come to placate her. He sent the Beast instead.

"Don't stop now, Kerstin. I would hear the rest of your tale."

She gave him a hateful look. "After Bjorn's death, many believed I killed him. I felt bereft, facing the accusing stares and suspicion of our people. Many called me a witch when all I wanted to do was help them. Elezer soothed my fears and offered me a strong shoulder to lean upon. Our friendship soon turned to love."

The memories of that difficult time and Elezer's unwavering support made her tremble. "When Elezer asked for my hand, the proposal filled me with joy, yet my father refused him. A month passed and twice more Elezer asked to marry me. Finally, my father agreed and I was so happy."

"I am sorry I must be the one to destroy your joy."

Kerstin stood and brushed away the wet strands of hair clinging to her cheeks. "I don't believe you."

Jonas came toward her and she backed up until she felt the coarse trunk of a tree at her back and had nowhere to run. She thought of dodging to his side, to escape him. It would be futile. He would catch her.

"And I don't believe you are innocent of killing my brother."

Jonas looked down upon the woman he would wed on the morrow and fury twisted his gut. In the hall, he had felt sympathy for her and respect when she stood up to her father and the king. Though she was a mere woman, she challenged them all even though they could sentence her to death for doing so.

She had faced him in battle, offering to heal the Beast. She was a puzzle, intriguing but deadly. He could not comprehend the hold she had over him. He barely knew her, yet she drew him to her like a moth to flame. He must resist her enchantment or be burned by her fire.

When she had run from the hall, he followed, to reassure her he meant her no harm. She wanted more than a hollow marriage to a savage man and he couldn't blame her. No woman wanted him. Soon, she would see his horrid scars and cringe as other women did.

He had been angry earlier that day, he couldn't deny it. Discovering who she was stunned him. She shot him with an arrow. A woman! Since then, he had watched her closely and discovered that he wanted her, whatever the

cost. But he must be careful lest he be taken in by her beauty and give her the power to destroy him. Jonas tried to tell himself that he didn't care if she hated him. He wanted sons and daughters, a family of his own, but he also longed for affection in his marriage.

He would never have it. Not from this witch.

Holding the torch higher, he peered at her red nose and the tears wetting her cheeks. Right now, she didn't look regal or graceful and her misery didn't seem contrived. He'd been shocked when her father told her of their marriage in such a public manner, without preparing her beforehand. Alrik should have taken Kerstin's feelings into consideration and spoken to her in private. It had been cruel to hurt her so callously.

When Alrik agreed to the match, Jonas began to hope again. To feel some small affection for this woman he would wed. How could a woman with so much courage resort to poisoning her betrothed? Jonas didn't want to believe she murdered Bjorn, but many testified she had done the deed. Only a fool would believe her innocent of the crime.

"You are devious," he said. "You knew I stood behind you and thought to speak pretty words that might turn me to your advantage."

"That's not true." She shrank away from him, her feet slipping in the mud.

Jonas advanced, determined not to let her sway him from the truth. "Remove your spell from me."

The green of her eyes glittered in the night like a cat's. Their color intrigued him, so different from his own.

"I don't know what you mean."

Of course she denied it. He wasn't surprised. He never expected her to admit to killing Bjorn, either.

He could take her now, and none would challenge him. Kerstin belonged to him, their vows tomorrow a formality for the benefit of their people. Courage and loyalty were the two things Jonas respected more than anything else, but could he marry a woman who loved another man?

He must do his duty, but he would never allow himself to desire Kerstin's affection. He needed only what she brought to him. Her body, her lands and wealth, her

father's strength and the heirs she would provide. It would be enough.

Then, why did he long for more? Why did he feel so empty inside?

Lifting his arm, Jonas ignored Kerstin's cringe and twined his hand in her coppery curls. Silk met the callused pads of his fingers as he wound the soft strands around them. She smelled warm and womanly, like lavender after a spring shower.

Jonas leaned down and brushed his nose against her forehead, inhaling a deep breath. She flinched, but didn't pull away. Drawing back, he saw her eyes widen, then narrow, and he felt her tense against him. Her muscles coiled, ready to spring, like the yellow leopard he had seen in a cage in the city of Miklagaard. Pacing and impatient to be free.

"I want peace between us, Kerstin." His request disguised his feelings. Peace, but no trust.

"Never!"

She tried to thrust him away. He caught her hands in his own, holding her firm. How fragile she felt, vulnerable and feminine, but she was a warrior-woman. A witch who wanted his death and might yet achieve it. Though he fought hard to ignore it, he still felt the throb of her arrowhead lodged deep in his shoulder, imbedded in the bone. His men hadn't been able to remove it.

King Hakon had suggested Jonas have Kerstin take it out. Inwardly, he laughed at the idea. By Odin's toenails, she would heal him right into a grave. "I don't want to be your enemy, Kerstin."

Her eyes crinkled. "How can you lie so easily?"

He met her look with a level gaze. "I don't lie, but neither do I trust you."

"I feel the same." Drawing herself up, she glared at him, not appearing at all impressed by his efforts to console her. It irked him for he didn't often stoop to offer comfort, especially to a woman.

"We will never be anything but enemies," she said. "I'll hate you all my life, and I'll fight you at every turn."

Her vow tore at him. Fury pulsed hot through his veins and his face hardened. "Then fight me, little witch. It'll do you no good."

Kerstin cracked her palm against Jonas's cheek. She found her back pressed up against the coarse trunk of a tall pine.

Lowering his head, he grazed his mouth over her temple. She stiffened against him, feeling his warm breath against her flesh, drugging her into submissiveness. Her limbs felt heavy and she wanted to touch him even as she remembered he was her enemy. What were these sparks between them, luring her into complacency?

A vision of Elezer flashed through her mind. She must be loyal to him. As soon as she returned to the hall, she would escape this planned marriage—she knew of a method.

"I think I would greatly enjoy taking you, witch. But that won't be the way of our marriage, at least for the time being."

Kerstin swallowed. "You mean you won't—?"

"Don't look so pleased." His expression hardened. "If I tire of your games, I will take you no matter what your feelings toward me might be. I want children, whether you're willing or not. Don't test my patience."

Children! He must be jesting. Even if she couldn't escape, she could slip an impotency powder into his food. Yet, his words befuddled her and she frowned with suspicion. "Why would you be lenient?"

"No matter what you believe, I'm not a cruel man. We'll take time to become accustomed to each other."

"Time won't help us."

"It's all I can offer."

"Give me more time before we are wed."

Jonas shook his head. "I cannot. The battle with the Eirikssons is upon us now." He let her go, his voice gruff. "I marry you out of duty, nothing more."

She couldn't resist returning a verbal jibe. "'Tis just as well, for as I've told you, I love another."

His gaze turned menacing and Kerstin stepped back, feeling as if he had struck her. He thought her useful only for the alliance between their people. Still, she longed to be a cherished wife, not a bargaining tool.

Peace. She saw it disappearing from her life. Perhaps

there would be peace for their people, but not between her and Jonas. He wanted children? She would die first!

Locking her jaw, Kerstin drew away and wrapped her arms about her against the icy wind. A plan formed in her mind. It would be so simple. By the time Jonas found out what she was up to, it would be too late.

"Come." He picked up the torch. "I'll return you to your father's house so you won't flee or cast another one of your spells." He gripped her arm and pulled her down the path.

"Swine! Louse! I'm not a witch and I don't cast spells." Kerstin struggled to release his hold. "If I were a man, I'd take a sword and carve the runes in your damnable hide. If I'm a witch, then you are a demon."

She pulled and lunged against him, but it did little good. He hugged her tight, his strength wrapping around her entire body like a giant vice. A hulking brute, nothing but muscle, sinew and steel.

"You're a lowly serpent," she hissed. "It's too bad my arrow missed its mark."

In the shadowed darkness, she saw his eyes narrow on her face, his mouth hard. "Cease your evil words, Kerstin."

Jonas halted and stuck the torch in the ground. Lowering his head, he grazed her lips with his own—soft and decadent. Light flared in his eyes, as if he realized he liked kissing her. Growling deep in the back of his throat, he blew out a harsh breath and kissed her fiercely.

Nothing less than Kerstin expected, his mastery, his strength, all there in that single kiss. It went on and on, filling her with a yearning she could not comprehend. His grip on her arms lessened and he held her tenderly. She could have broken his grasp, if she wanted to.

She responded by slow degrees, she couldn't stop herself. Even Elezer's kiss had never consumed her with such hunger. She inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of his warm skin, feeling his lips on hers. The combination was strangely exotic and she longed for more.

Her heart sang and her veins pulsed. Then, she knew, if they did become lovers, she would be lost.

Before she finished her thoughts, Jonas set her to her feet and backed away. He brushed his fingertips against

her cheek. A faint moisture from their kiss glistened on his lips. The urge to taste his musky spice once again rose strong within her and she squelched it by sheer force of will.

He drew in a shuddering breath, his eyes lost their glazed expression. Brushing a hand across his forehead, he blinked, then shook his head. He gave her a scorching frown. "I won't let you bewitch me."

She felt breathless, her head spinning, ashamed of her reaction to his kiss.

Poor betrayed Elezer.

Again, Jonas took hold of her wrist, snatched up the torch, and pulled her with him toward the hall. He didn't pause as she tripped over a stone and struggled to see her way down the dark, winding path. Nor did he allow her to fall. He was fast and strong and caught her several times, setting her aright without a word, then tugging her along again.

At the hall, he thrust her inside. Alrik still sat beside the king, his spine stiff as he spoke with Hakon and Sigurd of their plans against the Eirikssons. His face held a worried expression. The wine had brought a healthier glow to his skin. Perhaps the strong drink dulled his pain. When he saw her standing beside Jonas, his eyes softened and he relaxed, as if relieved she was safe.

Without asking for his leave, Kerstin jerked free of Jonas's grip and hurried to the privacy of the storage room where she slumped against the shelves of provisions. With a shuddering sigh, she resigned herself to what needed to be done.

She could not marry Jonas and destroy all future happiness for herself. If she wed Elezer, then she would be safe from Jonas's vengeance. Elezer would protect her. He was Earl of Lade and he respected Alrik. He respected her.

Her father would be annoyed and the king would be furious when they found out, but she had no other choice.

With swift proficiency, Kerstin grabbed a leather sack and filled it with food supplies. She knew a secret way out of the hall, but must be careful in her escape.

She would dress warm and go alone. She wasn't frightened. Though a difficult journey, she knew the way

to Lade, for she had traveled it many times before. Hopefully, she wouldn't be followed. Plans of war continued to embroil the men and should occupy them for a long time.

Until she was safely married to Elezer.

Chapter Four

"Elezer!" Kerstin saw him the next morning outside his hall at Lade. She limped across the yard of his steading, cursing the rock in her shoe.

Standing with his back to her, he faced a mass of scraggly bushes. At her call, he turned, his hands adjusting the front of his breeches. Had he been relieving himself where everyone could watch?

"Kerstin!" His eyes widened with surprise and he pushed a mop of unruly bangs out of his eyes. His wrinkled clothes looked as though he had slept in them again. It was late morning and it appeared he had just gotten up.

Minin's words about him being lazy haunted her. Perhaps he had stayed up late working the night before. It didn't matter. He was here and a leap of joy caused her to laugh. She had made it! Although ragged and tired, she was free of Jonas.

Kerstin trudged toward him in her mud-spattered clothes and shoes. Leaves and twigs clung to her tangled hair. She stepped over garbage littering the yard. Dogs barked and chickens scattered. Elezer's dismal hall sat to one side, no welcoming stream of smoke rising from the single chimney. Why had no one lit the cook fires and started a meal to break the fast?

Fence rails drooped against rotting posts and doors sagged on their hinges. Wasn't that the same broken watering trough she had seen the last time she had been here? Why had Elezer not mended it? Surely his kindness, his keen mind and handsome looks were not his only good attributes.

"Kerstin, are you hurt?" His concerned gaze lowered to her foot and he hurried to help her.

She shook her head. "I'm just tired."

Having traveled through the night, she was weary from climbing rocky hills, wading across icy streams,

battling the wind and rain. She had rested when she couldn't take another step, but fear of being caught by Jonas drove her onward.

Elezer engulfed her in a giant hug and swung her up in the air. She laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck.

His exuberance caused the bow and arrows strapped to her back to slap against her side. His dear face and twinkling blue eyes warmed her. Then, she noticed his long, blond hair hung lank around his bearded face. Smudges of dirt blotched the front of his tunic and he smelled of sweat and smoke. A bath would do him no harm.

"Oh, Elezer! How glad I am to see you."

Still cradling her in his arms, he studied her hair, her torn clothing, and dirt-smudged cheeks. Dressed in boy's pants, she wore a warm, leather jacket fringed with bear fur.

Mortification burned her cheeks. She didn't look much better than he did. How she longed for a hot steam in the bathing hut back home. Memories of Jonas watching her there caused her pulse to race.

"Truly, Kerstin, I want to laugh at your clothing. But you look so delectable in those boy's britches, I'd rather strip you bare and couple with you instead."

His blunt candor caused a keen thrill to rush over her. The morning wind swept through the yard and she shivered. Her teeth clacked together and her stomach growled.

"You're exhausted and cold. Tell me," he said in a teasing voice as he carried her toward the hall, "why have you left your father's house? You know it's not safe for you to cavort around these hills alone."

The mournful lowing of cattle needing to be milked and fed came from the cow barn. Looking around, Kerstin noticed a few people moved about their labors. On her father's steading, her own people would have milked the cows and been churning butter by now.

She sighed. Sometimes Elezer's lack of diligence frustrated her. Why wouldn't he organize his people and work beside them, like Alrik did? She spent long, hot hours in the kitchen preparing meals and sewing

garments to wear. In her free time, she practiced with her bow and arrows, or gathered herbs for cooking and healing. Only during feasts and special occasions were she and her people idle.

She stared at Elezer's handsome face. He needed her to help him learn what to do. She loved him with all her heart and had to fight back tears of emotion. Wrapping her arms tight about his neck, she buried her nose against his throat, but withdrew. He stank of burnt grease. Jonas had smelled of mint and—

"Oh!" It wasn't fair to compare the two men.

"What is it?" Elezer sat on a bench inside the hall, holding her in his lap.

"Please, can I have something to eat?" she asked.

"Of course. Maida!" he called in a nasty tone. "Get up, you lazy hag. Bring food right now."

A lump covered in furs lay upon the floor by the far wall. It moved and a woman dressed in crumpled clothing jumped up and scurried toward the cooking fire. As she passed, Elezer kicked his foot at her, almost tripping her. Throwing a fearful glance over her shoulder, Maida grabbed a bucket of kindling and squatted next to the fire pit.

Kerstin frowned. She had never liked the rude way Elezer treated his thralls. He should rule with kind firmness. She would teach him how to treat people better.

As he gazed at her, his eyes glowed with tenderness and her heart melted. She could forgive him almost anything when he looked at her that way.

As the heat from the hot, muggy hall seeped into her bones, she stopped shivering. Her nose crinkled with the unpleasant odors of unwashed bodies and the smoky fire. The scent of animal fat filled the air. Maida must have burned the meal the night before. The woman's skills in food preparation seemed sadly lacking. Once Kerstin wed Elezer, she would give Maida some cooking lessons.

Looking about, Kerstin saw that Elezer's home was no cleaner now than when she had last been here with her father. No one had changed the rushes in many months and chicken bones and trash littered the floor. Ashes lay deep in the fire pit and were undoubtedly the cause of the gray smoke filling the hall. The long tabletops held

uncured animal hides and dirty dishes from last evening's meal. Some of the bad smells apparently came from the garbage piled in the corners. With a grimace of disgust, Kerstin gazed at Elezer instead.

Yes, he was in bad need of a woman to direct his household. Inwardly, she tensed. Once she married him, it would be her responsibility to repair these oversights. She didn't mind, but it would be a great chore to clean up the mess.

Elezer was an intellect, with a robust singing voice. A learned man, he spoke four languages and read the runes as well as she. What did it matter that his home was ill kept? She could fix that. Once they were wed, he *had* to change for the better.

Elezer's beard didn't hide the twitch of his smile. "Your father will rebuke me when he finds out you've come here. I've tried to tell him I have no control over you, but he never listens."

With a frown, she slid off his lap and sat beside him on the wooden bench.

"Ah," he breathed in, his hands caressing her arms, "it cannot be as serious as all that. Tell me, what has your father done to upset you?"

Hearing their voices, thralls rose from hard pallets and moved about the hall, setting out a belated meal. They kept a watchful eye on Kerstin, seeming eager to overhear the latest gossip from Moere.

Kerstin shifted with irritation. Why couldn't they mind their own business? Maybe she shouldn't have come here. A strong woman would have stayed and faced Jonas. But she wasn't courageous, not really. Jonas made her feel things she didn't understand. Things she couldn't seem to control. Feelings she had never known before.

Maida returned with a platter of bread, cheese, and cold venison. Kerstin accepted it with gratitude and stuffed her mouth full so she wouldn't have to answer Elezer's questions. The charred meat congealed in her mouth. Ravenous as a goat, she chewed on the stale bread. At least the cheese tasted fresh and good.

"May we speak in private?" she asked after she swallowed several gulps of warm ale to wash down her meal.

"Of course. Leave us," he bade his people with a wave of his hand.

The men and women moved to the other side of the room but Kerstin saw them casting glances over their shoulders. Unless she and Elezer whispered, all could still hear their conversation.

Coughing at the heavy smoke, she came to her feet and took Elezer's hand to draw him up with her. "Please, let's go somewhere more private."

He nodded, following eagerly. As he passed through the doorway, she recalled how Jonas had to duck, his shoulders almost too wide to fit through the threshold. Had he been able to remove the arrowhead from his shoulder yet? What if he couldn't get it out—?

What was she doing fretting over that beast? She had come to her beloved, to seek haven from Jonas. She shouldn't be so disloyal to Elezer.

Kerstin took a deep breath, grateful to be out of his hall where she could smell clean air again. She led Elezer toward the south meadow. Sheep and goats grazed on the new spring grass. She caught the pungent scent of loamy soil. The fertile ground was ready for planting, yet Elezer had not sowed any crops. What would his people eat when the snow came?

Elezer laughed and squeezed her hand as he kept up with her brisk stride. "You must be eager to see me, Kerstin. You're so secretive about this visit."

They crossed the pasture and entered a copse of tall trees sheltered from prying eyes. A large tree stump sat in the middle of the glade with the dull head of an ax imbedded in its center. Wood chips and sawdust littered the ground beneath their feet. Large logs lay on the ground, waiting to be chopped by the woodsman.

Kerstin grasped the handle of the ax and slumped down on the stump. She kicked at a chunk of tree bark and slipped her bow and arrows off her shoulder and laid them at her feet. "My visit has never been so serious, Elezer. I wish you wouldn't joke about it."

His brows quirked in a puzzled frown. "Look at you, all sad-eyed. Come, can't you give me a sweet smile?" Bending on one knee beside her, he took her hands in his own, his voice soft and repentant. "What is it, my love? Is

it your father? Has he perhaps—?”

“Aye, my father,” she blurted.

Elezer lowered his face and kissed her hands. With a grimace, he touched a vicious cut on her right forearm.

“Is your father—dead?” he asked, his tone almost hopeful.

Kerstin looked at him but saw tenderness in his eyes. She must have heard him wrong. “Of course not.”

She tore her hands out of his grasp and rose. She paced back and forth, crunching wood chips beneath her feet. Elezer stood and watched her in silence. His loose woolen shirt rippled about his waist as the wind breathed through the glade. What would he do when she told him of the king's plans?

Elezer frowned. “Perhaps one of your brothers is unwell?”

Again, that buoyant tone filled his voice and she whirled about to stare at him. His eyes crinkled with compassion. If she didn't know better, she would think he wished her father and brothers ill will. That couldn't be true. He often spoke with admiration for Alrik. But more than once, she had sensed his dislike for her brothers. In return, they had made it clear they could barely stand him, which wasn't surprising. She was their baby sister and they were overly protective of her. In their eyes, no man would ever be good enough for her.

She held her hands in a plaintive gesture, her voice quivering with emotion. “Father is going to make me marry that hideous man.”

Elezer drew back. “What man?”

“The king and my father have made a pact with Sigurd of Hawkscliffe. I am to wed Jonas the Strong Arm this very day. I ran away before they could force me to marry him.”

His mouth dropped open. “What?”

Rushing to Elezer, she flung her arms about him, kissing him, trying to feel the passion she had shared with Jonas the night before.

She failed. Elezer's lips felt quite cold compared to the heat of Jonas. She had always thought Elezer's body so strong and masculine, up until she recalled the iron-hewed arms she had clung to last night.

How soon she forgot her resolve not to compare the two men. Why could she not forget the excitement of kissing Jonas? The dangerous thrill of being near him and sparring verbally?

Nay. What she shared with Elezer was love, real and complete. More lasting, more enduring. He would make her happy. With Jonas, she felt constantly under attack, knowing how he wanted only to use her to supply him with heirs.

Elezer held her to him as she sobbed out the entire story, excluding her conversation with Jonas and his heavy, soul-filled kisses.

"So," Elezer breathed against her ear, his hands splayed across her back, "King Hakon plans to join with Alrik and Sigurd to help him fight against the Eirikssons?"

She nodded. "They will be a formidable foe and I'm to be the sacrifice. They intend to break our betrothal and force me to wed Jonas, a man I detest. Help me, Elezer. You cannot let it happen." Desperate, she cupped his face in her hands and stared into his eyes. "Please, say you'll make me your wife now, before Father or that barbarian gets here. Don't wait. Take me to York where we can find a Christian monk to wed us this very day."

A whisper of wind laced around them, the glade so peaceful it seemed nothing in the outside world could interfere.

Elezer stared down at her. "Do you have any idea how lovely you are? Even dressed in boy's clothes, your dirt-smudged cheeks are as charming as a wood sprite's. You look like an angel, not a witch or a boy. Ah, and your mouth, so pink and tempting."

Her cheeks flushed with heat and her heart melted. No one had ever said such things to her. No wonder she loved him.

"Of course I'll wed you," he murmured.

Lowering his head, he kissed her. She held him tight, thrilled by the thought of being his wife.

"Elezer," Kerstin breathed his name with passion. "I love you so. Tell me what I long to hear."

He stiffened and she saw fleeting hesitation in his eyes. "I—I love you, Kerstin."

Her heart warmed. His words meant everything to her. As long as she believed he loved her, she would fight to be with him.

"Take your hands off my wife."

Kerstin gasped. Pulling free of Elezer, she spun around and faced Jonas Sigurdsson.

Dressed in full battle gear and chain mail, he stood before them with his conical helmet tucked beneath his left arm. In his right fist, he brandished his gleaming sword. The same sword that had been stained with the blood of her warriors yesterday.

Kerstin stared at that weapon and despair filled her, cold and daunting. She thought she had more time. How had he found her so soon?

His face was cast in shadow, but she caught the flash of malice in his eye and the harshness of his chiseled face. She almost felt his fury rushing at her, strong and potent. A ripple of fear swept her as she swallowed and stood her ground.

Glancing at Elezer, Kerstin saw he was white with shock. Whether from fear or anger, she didn't know. Doubt shadowed her mind. Would Elezer defend her? Or did he fear Jonas too much to jeopardize his own life for her sake?

"Do you know the punishment for adultery?" Jonas asked, his tone smooth as honeyed butter as he lifted the heavy sword.

"We aren't married."

His fierce gaze and the steady tick of a nerve in his lean cheek belied his easy manner. "We are husband and wife in the eyes of our king."

"I am a Christian and will only be wed according to God's laws."

His blue eyes darkened as his gaze rested on Elezer. He was no warrior, Jonas could kill him so easily. Fear wrapped around her like a damp blanket. "Elezer has done nothing to earn your anger. Please don't harm him."

"Harm him? Of course not, little witch." Jonas's voice remained soft.

The over-grown, thick-headed brute. "Don't call me a witch."

His gaze stabbed her, his mouth curved in a cruel

smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Don't you fear I might change my mind and kill your lover, little witch?"

Was he toying with her? Or would he truly kill Elezer? According to Danelaw, adulterers were to be tied together and drowned. Though she was innocent, Jonas had the power to see it done. Oh, how she despised him.

"Come now," he urged in a low and dangerous tone. "Beg me, Kerstin. If you make your speech pretty enough, I might be persuaded to depart without burning Lade to the ground."

Her mouth dropped open and she felt the blood drain from her face. She took a faltering step. All these people would lose their home because of her. "You wouldn't do that."

"You don't think so? Plead with me, Kerstin. I like to hear you beg when you're desperate. It humbles and softens you."

The fiend! "I'll never beg you for anything."

His blue eyes smoldered. "You haven't been in my bed yet."

She swallowed a painful breath and shook her head. "Never."

One of his brows quirked. "You seem so certain, little witch. I told you, I always get what I want."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Elezer pick up the woodcutter's ax and skulk toward Jonas. It shocked her that Elezer tried to kill in such a cowardly fashion.

With his attention focused on her, Jonas did not see the danger. She opened her mouth to warn him just as Elezer raced toward him with the ax raised high. Kerstin cringed, prepared to see Jonas's head cleaved.

Ducking to the side, Jonas moved gracefully out of the way. With two deft blows of his sword, he struck the ax from Elezer's hands and kicked the man's feet out from under him. Elezer yelled as he fell flat on his back in the leaves littering the ground.

In those scant moments, Jonas could have killed Elezer more than once. Kerstin had watched him do it before. She'd never seen a man more skilled in battle than Jonas the Strong Arm. She stood transfixed with the knowledge. Why had he spared Elezer's life? He had no reason to be merciful.

With both hands, Jonas raised his sword high in preparation to plunge it downward into Elezer's chest.

"Hold!" Kerstin screamed and launched herself at Jonas's back.

He didn't budge at the impact. Kerstin felt as if she struck a wall of granite. She fell back, stunned, trying to push the wild maze of hair out of her eyes. Looking up, she saw that he glared at her, as if she were a bug he might stomp into the ground.

She clasped one of his legs and bit him hard on the calf. He grunted and shook her away. "Cease, witch, or I'll end your lover's life here and now."

Her lover? He said it before, the fool. He didn't know her very well; but if he thought Elezer had already claimed her, he might let her go.

She scooted back, panting hard. "I already belong to Elezer."

Jonas's expression darkened. Placing his heavy foot in the center of Elezer's chest, he poised the tip of his sword at the fallen man's throat. The gleaming steel drew a bead of blood.

Uncertainty flooded her. Had she earned her freedom or sealed Elezer's doom? Slowly, Kerstin rose to her feet. Sawdust and dirt clung to her hair and clothing, but she ignored it. She glanced at Elezer. He stared at Jonas's sword, eyes wide, mouth slack, waiting for the final thrust that would end his life. Sweat dappled his forehead.

Jonas's eyes glittered like shards of glass and a sneer curled his lips. "Have you lain with my bride?"

Elezer's mouth tightened with fright. He visibly trembled. Why did he not answer?

Jonas's sword shook with anger. He would kill Elezer.

"He hasn't touched me," Kerstin said in a shrill voice. "Even so, you and I are not wed so there can be no adultery."

"Your father's word is all that matters. We will have a marriage ceremony for the benefit of your people and your pride, but you belong to me."

"How dare you?" she said. "You're nothing but a heathen. A beast."

His glare hardened and she regretted angering him.

"I would dare anything for you, wife. Whether you are willing or not matters little to me."

Inside, she seethed with fury. She longed to throw herself at him and scratch his eyes out.

Jonas's gaze dragged back to Elezer. "Have you lain with my bride?" His voice thundered and birds fluttered from the treetops surrounding them.

Elezer flinched. "She is untouched, though she offered herself to me. I would have wed her this very day."

Jonas glanced at Kerstin. "Did she tell you she belongs to me?"

"I—I didn't—" Elezer stammered in confusion. "We are betrothed." A look of pain crossed his face.

Jonas shook his head. "Your betrothal is broken by order of the king."

Kerstin's eyes narrowed on Jonas. How could he want an unwilling bride? His determination could be nothing more than the desire for vengeance.

Elezer nodded. "It goes against my will to agree, but I will do as the king decrees."

A low chuckle shook Jonas's chest. "Be grateful I arrived when I did. If you had proceeded further and taken her, I would have killed you. And your death would have been on her conscience."

Jonas stepped back, but didn't sheath his sword. His gaze never left Elezer, who rose to his feet and dusted his clothing. He had dirt and leaves in his hair and looked like a bumbling fool. His shoulders slumped with defeat as he backed away.

"You poor, pitiful ass." Jonas sneered at him. "To be taken in by a woman's treachery. Rest assured I won't allow her to ensnare me with her charm."

"You won't harm her, will you?" Elezer asked in a gruff voice.

Kerstin's heart soared. Though he was no warrior, Elezer cared for her. When others called her a witch and accused her of murdering Bjorn, he had defended her and claimed her innocence.

"That's no concern of yours," Jonas replied.

Elezer glared at Jonas. "If you harm even one hair on her beautiful head, I swear by Odin I will kill you."

Kerstin wanted to sob with anguish. His declaration

touched her deeply.

Jonas sheathed his sword and clapped his hands in applause. "Such compelling words, Elezer. I'm sure you have impressed my new bride with your concern. But 'tis interesting that you show such regard for her well-being after the many women you have abused."

Elezer's mouth lifted in a sneer. His face darkened and he looked like he might charge Jonas again.

Jonas cupped the hilt of his sword. "I wish you would try it."

Elezer stood still as a statue.

Jonas snorted. "'Tis well known amongst my men that you're a coward, Elezer. A whiner, a cheat and a lecher. How many bastard children have you created over the years, hmm? Kerstin doesn't know how lucky she is to be rid of you."

Kerstin glanced back and forth between the two men. "What does he mean, Elezer? Is this true?"

Elezer lifted a hand. "Of course not. Don't listen to him, Kerstin. He seeks to discredit me."

Jonas shook his head with disgust. "Don't worry, she'll be safe in my care. Puny as it is, the king has need of your army to fight the Eirikssons. Your men are to join my father's army. Upon the morrow, you are to depart for York."

Elezer's brow crinkled in a frown and he glanced at Kerstin.

Jonas laughed, the sound cold and hollow. "Come now, Elezer, don't be frightened. No doubt you can run and hide in the heat of battle, just like you always do. I pity the warrior assigned to watch your back. It seems he's always cut down when you desert the field and leave *his* back defenseless."

Anger darkened Elezer's face, his eyes blazing with fury.

"Elezer, tell him it's not true." Kerstin stepped toward him.

"Of course it's not true!"

Kerstin reached out and took Elezer's hand, squeezing it.

"Don't you fear for yourself, little witch?" Jonas's voice sliced through the gesture like a blade of Damascene

steel.

Elezer jerked free of her grasp.

"You won't kill me. The king won't allow it." She jutted her chin, almost daring him to try it.

Jonas's hand trembled on the hilt of his sword and he lifted it. Had she pushed him too far this time? He seemed to grapple with himself and, gaining control, he lowered the sword again. Kerstin breathed with relief.

He tipped his head and raised an eyebrow. "There are other ways to punish a woman for disobedience."

Kerstin's eyes widened. "Punish me?"

"Aye, a most pleasurable torture."

Kerstin swallowed, wondering what he meant. Doubt clouded her mind and her pulse skittered. She bristled, hating the idea of being in his power once more. Never had anyone lifted a hand to her in anger, unless she fought in battle. The thought of being whipped rendered her speechless.

Chapter Five

Kerstin jutted her chin, praying he didn't challenge her now. Her knees wobbled and she could barely stand. Glancing about the forest, she sought a place of refuge. If she could make it to the hills, she knew of a stream that led to a hidden cave she had explored as a child. There was a shallow pond where she could obtain fresh water and fish to eat. She could stay hidden for days, until Jonas and the king gave up this insane plan and left her alone.

Jonas's eyes smoldered as he stepped closer. An aura of danger surrounded him. Shafts of sunlight filtered through the trees and glistened off his golden hair. Huge and ominous, his chiseled face looked harsh, unrelenting. As he advanced, he appeared to be a god, potent and dangerous. "Don't even consider it, Kerstin," he warned in a low tone. "I would find you."

She trembled as if he had read her mind.

Elezer turned to leave but Jonas stopped him. "Elezer, don't forget the price of adultery. Though the witch is beautiful and could tempt any man beyond his endurance, remember she is mine. I won't be lenient if I catch you with her again."

"I'm aware of the law." Elezer spoke with resentment. "Though I must give her to you, I do so against my will."

Jonas took another step, bringing his face into the shadows. Was Elezer a fool to tempt him? Kerstin would never be able to live with herself, knowing she had caused the death of the man she loved.

Jonas gave a chilling laugh, his eyes savage. "I'll remember to watch my back. When I take Kerstin to my bed, I'll guard my door, that you don't try to murder me in my sleep."

A cruel taunt, the insult made Kerstin furious.

Elezer closed his mouth and remained silent.

Her hands clenched into fists and she flung her head back to sweep the hair out of her face. "I will *not* wed without benefit of a Christian monk." She had him now! It could take weeks to find a monk. Jonas would have to travel to York to obtain one. While he was gone, she could escape to Ireland, to her mother's people in Ulster.

He didn't respond and his silence filled her with foreboding. When she glanced at Elezer, she caught sight of numerous warriors standing in the pasture not far away. Dressed in full battle gear, they tramped the sweet grass as they waited for Jonas to complete his business.

Without so much as a nod in Kerstin's direction, Elezer walked away, leaving her alone with Jonas.

Kerstin stared after her beloved, her heart breaking. The next instant, she felt Jonas's hands on her. He picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder like a skein of straw.

Startled by his speed, she screamed and pummeled his back with her fists. She had ignored the first lesson her father taught her. *Never, ever, take your eyes off the enemy.*

He ignored her actions, walking toward his waiting men.

"Put me down." Strands of hair fell into her eyes, blinding her.

Jonas laughed and cupped her left buttocks. The heat of mortification burned her cheeks.

"Be grateful I didn't deal your lover a deathblow or cut off your nose and mar your lovely face for adultery."

"Oh!" She gasped and kicked her legs. "Try it and I'll cut off your man parts and feed them to the vultures." She hit him between his shoulder blades, clubbing his injured shoulder by accident.

He grunted and shifted her weight, jarring her hard against his brawny shoulder until her breath left her in a whoosh. Her temples throbbed from trying to keep her head upright.

Jonas walked straight past Elezer's hall and she saw the questioning looks of his people. He carried her across the steep grade bordering the steading and his men followed as he moved with long strides down the winding trail leading to the quay. When Kerstin saw the clear

waters of the River Tyne right below her, she feared he might throw her in. He had no idea she couldn't swim.

She screamed, hit, and punched. He didn't budge, nor utter one word. He was a wall of marble. Jonas the Undefeated.

"I won't let you kill me without a fight," she cried.

He had the audacity to laugh and she doubled up her fist and struck his wounded shoulder again, this time on purpose. Cursing, he rewarded her by fondling her buttocks, cupping, squeezing.

Outraged, she tried to bite his neck as his men laughed.

"Cease, witch!"

Jonas swerved, walking as if her weight were no hindrance at all. As he moved away from the river, relief swept her. Oh, if only she had her bow and arrows, she would teach them all a harsh lesson.

The dragon prows of three longships filled her view, tall and majestic in their savage beauty.

"Ohh," Kerstin groaned. No wonder Jonas had followed her so swiftly to Lade. He traveled by water while she had traversed the hills on foot.

Of course they were Jonas's ships. They looked like their owner, graceful, sleek, and brutal. His warriors boarded and raised the red-and-green-striped square sails in preparation to leave. The men draped their scarred battle shields over each gunwale, beside each oar hole, to hold them while they rowed.

"Don't take me on board. You'll regret it."

He ignored her, his heels thumping upon the solid oak as he crossed the dock and lifted her over one dragon prow. She hung suspended from his shoulder. Spreading thick tendrils of hair with her fingers, she saw the fierce, scowling faces of his men. They glared at her, their cloaks billowing in the sharp wind, their ocean-eyes glittering from behind their helmets.

Not one familiar face greeted her. Kerstin longed to see her father to appeal to his sense of justice, but the enemy surrounded her. Defenseless without her dagger or arrows, she could do nothing. Indignation burned her cheeks. If he would put her on her feet, she might be able to outrun him. "I'm going to throw up."

Jonas laid her on her back on the deck. She sprawled there, dazed and confused for a moment. Then, she scrambled out of his way as he strode past her and went to the elevated platform in the stern. Crouched in a corner, she stared over the side, into the slapping water. If only she could swim.

"Kerstin, don't try it," Jonas said. "I'm an excellent swimmer and I'll come after you. You won't escape me again."

Her head snapped up and she stared at his wide back. He hadn't even looked at her when he voiced the words. She wasn't about to tell him it would be suicide for her to jump into the water. It might give him an idea for torture.

Sitting back, she braced herself against the prow, admitting defeat for now. She would return to Moere and find another way out of this marriage.

There were twenty men aboard, with a like number in each of the other two ships. Tall, bearded men, their eyes were cruel and ruthless. Their bodies gleamed with metal, armed with knives, war axes, swords and chain mail. Jonas had come prepared to take her by force. Each man lifted an oar as Jonas gripped the tiller.

"Row, men. Take us back to Moere," he called and the men stroked the oars.

With a blast of energy, their ship surged out into the river and pulled ahead of the others. Kerstin's stomach lurched with impotent rage and also from the rocking motion.

She swallowed hard, wishing to travel by land instead of by ship. For some reason it made her ill to sail, much to her father's and brothers' consternation. Her people lived by the sea and it seemed an insult to sicken when she rode the waves. She prayed silently to both her father's and mother's gods.

Please, don't let me embarrass myself by throwing up in front of my enemy.

Her stomach lurched, her throat burned and her temples throbbed. An unnatural heat suffused her body and she felt clammy. Knowing her prayer would not be heeded, she placed a hand to her mouth and squeezed her legs tight against her chest.

Closing her eyes, she laid her head against her knees to sleep, but it didn't help. The ship skimmed through the water like an elegant fish. The wind whipped the sails, filled them and sent them speeding onward as the men continued to row.

Saltwater misted Kerstin's face and she licked her cracked lips. Looking up, she saw scattered clouds in the blue, vibrant sky. Jonas stood tall, his powerful legs spread, one hand guiding the tiller, the other hand riding low on his hip. His face was stony as he stared into the wind, his keen eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun.

It figured he would be at home on a ship. He was a beautiful man to behold. Strong, vibrant, and desirable. And Kerstin hated him.

The rocking increased. With a muted groan, she hauled to her feet and rushed for the side.

Several men lunged for her, thinking she meant to jump over. She evaded them, desperate to reach the railing. With whitened knuckles, she clutched the ship and hung her head over, heaving into the lapping waves until her body shook with chills.

Shuddering several times, Kerstin tried to calm her queasy stomach. She lifted her head slowly. Jonas stood beside her, dangling a damp cloth in front of her nose. Perhaps he wasn't a complete beast. She took his offering, then held it to her cheeks, cherishing the cool vibrancy that eased her misery.

"For your sake, your illness had better be caused by the river and for no other reason," Jonas said in a low tone.

She groaned and rubbed her grumbling stomach. "What other reason could there be?"

"I found you in the arms of another man. Do you carry Elezer's babe?"

She jerked her head to stare at him, her mouth open in astonishment. "How dare you accuse me of carrying a bastard?"

He leaned over until she stared into his angry eyes. She resisted the urge to cower.

"There is much I have been told about you, Kerstin of Moere. Treachery, betrayal, murder. They've all been associated with your name." His voice chilled her more

than her illness. "Your magic spells have destroyed people I loved. Do you expect me to trust you?"

"I tried to warn you. I become dreadfully sick when I ride a ship. You shouldn't have brought me on board."

One of his brows quirked with amusement. "Your illness is the least of my worries, but if I had known you suffer from seasickness, I might not have agreed to wed you."

She gave a croaking laugh. "I wish it were so simple. There's still time for you to change your mind. We haven't spoken any vows and you needn't take a woman who can't board a ship without becoming violently ill."

A slow grin spread its way across his face and she blinked at the predatory look in his eyes. "I don't mind. You'll be suited best on dry land, within my home, flat on your back, in my bed. I don't need to trust you to bed you."

Her mouth dropped open and heat flooded her cheeks. His words stole her wits and she couldn't reply.

"Don't be fool enough to think I won't accept you, Kerstin. It takes little time to discover if you carry another man's child and even less time to reveal if you are still a virgin. It doesn't matter if I'm the first man to have you." His voice was smooth and soft as a lion's paw—with all the claws extended.

The sharp wind struck Kerstin's face, billowing her hair about her. Her eyes narrowed and she struggled not to scratch his face. "Bastard!"

He gave a shout of laughter. "I assure you my parents were legally wed, Kerstin. I am no bastard."

"I wish you had never been born," she whispered.

He ignored that. "Neither will our babes be born bastards."

"We will have no children."

His brows lowered in a scowl. Cupping her chin with his callused palm, he raised her face until she stared into his eyes. Her heart skipped a beat and her pulse skittered.

"You test my patience, Kerstin," he whispered. "I have no doubt the sons you give me will be fine and strong, the daughters beautiful and wise."

He had described the very children she hoped to have. With Elezer.

Jerking her head away, she had no more desire to spar with him. Her limbs felt lifeless. Why couldn't she lie down and die? Would he really jump in after her if she threw herself into the river? She longed for the courage to test him.

He lifted her with surprising gentleness from the hanging perch and helped her to a yellow fur of lynx that one of the men spread at Jonas's bidding. He leaned over and offered her a shallow drink of water to cleanse her mouth. She accepted it grudgingly and he wiped a drop off her chin with the tip of his finger. She hated his tenderness. She found it easier to hate him when he was unkind.

Closing her eyes, she listened to the slap of oars as they struck the water, the grunt of men at their labors.

"Even when you're ill, you show courage, however foolish it might be. But it won't help you, Kerstin. I was lenient with Elezer because he had been your betrothed, but you knew better."

Opening her eyes, she stared at him as he wiped her heated brow with a damp cloth. His actions stunned her when he proceeded to cleanse the cuts and scratches she obtained from her journey the night before. The warmth of his hands went clear to her bones and her body throbbed with awareness of him, his scent, his strength. Her pulse quickened of its own volition.

Turning her head to the side, she closed her eyes again. "Go away and leave me alone."

He reached out to caress her clammy cheek, as if feeling for a fever. Dodging his fingers, she tried to bite his hand, angry she could not deny the molten attraction she felt for this man.

A chuckle rumbled in his chest. "Even when you're barely finished heaving up your guts, you fight like a tigress. You have rightly earned your title of witch."

"I told you, I'm not a witch. I don't even know any spells, or I might be tempted to use one on you." Her voice came out raspy.

He frowned. "If you had wed Elezer, you would have come to hate him. You would have been miserable as his wife."

Her father had said the same thing once. He told her

he believed he could find a better husband for her. She had been so heartsick over Bjorn's death, not because she loved him, but because so many people believed she poisoned him. Elezer's attention had been a welcome comfort.

"I find myself more miserable in *your* presence," she said. "You refuse to see that Elezer makes me happy and that I will never care for you."

The scar across Jonas's cheek whitened and his mouth pressed into a thin, straight line. She had angered him again. Good! He deserved it.

"One day, you will come to me willingly. You will hunger for me, just as I hunger for you."

Kerstin didn't understand what he meant by that kind of hunger. "Don't you fear I might poison you?"

He stared hard at her. Sea birds squawked as they soared and circled overhead. Oh, how Kerstin envied them their freedom.

"In the short time I've known you, I've learned you are no coward." With those parting words, he moved away, once again taking his position at the stern.

Halfdan, his second-in-command, moved back and let Jonas take the tiller. Halfdan's disapproving gaze followed Kerstin as she lay on her side. She ignored the man, disliking him as much as he appeared to dislike her.

She stared at Jonas. He rubbed his injured shoulder, impaled by her arrowhead. Good! She hoped it throbbed, a thorned reminder that she didn't want him here.

Willing her rumbling stomach to be silent, she closed her eyes and breathed deep of the pungent sea air. A breeze stirred across the deck, refreshing her, and she sighed with gratitude. She was too sick to worry about the confrontation she must have when they reached Moere. Even her father and the king could not deny her a Christian wedding.

Anything to buy her more time.

Glittering moonlight reflected off the waters of the river, like sparkling gems of ebony. Shadows gathered about the isolated ridges of wind-swept heather surrounding the steading of Moere. Kerstin lay still, certain if she moved again she might upset the tenuous

control she had over her queasy stomach. Curled beneath warm furs, she sat in a far corner of the ship, shielded from the wind.

She watched as the men scurried to draw in the sails. The dragonship bumped gently against the pier and the men stowed their oars. The water slapped at the ship, seeming to beg it to come out and play again. Kerstin moaned, grateful to be home on dry land once more.

Now, she must face the king's wrath. What arguments might she use? Surely they would honor her plea for a monk to perform the marriage. If not, she knew of an herb she could take that would make her break out in a horrible rash. If they thought she had a malady, perhaps they would forget this horrible plan.

Some moments later Jonas appeared before her. He placed his hands on his hips and his brows drew together with worry. His pretended concern did not fool her.

"I'd like to believe your illness is real and not contrived to win mercy from me," he murmured.

Enough! How dare he accuse her of pretending sickness to gain pity? She lifted her foot and brought the heel of her shoe down hard on his instep.

He barked with pain and moved back a space.

"You can keep your mercy," she hissed. "I told you I won't wed you without benefit of a Christian monk."

He indicated the hall. "One already awaits us."

She snorted. "I don't believe you."

Bending, he picked her up and cradled her against his chest like a little child. Weak from her illness, she chose not to fight him. She caught his scent of cloves and mint and inhaled. Jonas stepped over the prow of the ship and carried her across the pier. "Even if you have to lie abed while the ceremony is performed, we will wait no longer."

The dull thud of his heels striking the wooden planks filled her ears. She looped her arms about his thick neck for support and could feel the solid muscle of his shoulder beneath her fingertips. His flesh was warm and soft, like steel wrapped with silk. Her fingers brushed the edge of his chain mail where it circled his throat, reminding her he was a warrior and her enemy. If they didn't have hatred between them, if there were no Elezer and no

imminent war, she would find Jonas completely desirable, completely male.

Cognizant of his arm braced behind her back, she squirmed when his other hand supported her buttocks.

"You make free with your hands."

"Cease wiggling, or I'll drop you," he growled low. "I'm weary and would have done with this evening and seek a good night's rest."

Something about his voice made her stare into his eyes. His flesh burned, his eyes glazed with fever. A small pebble rolled beneath his foot and he staggered before he regained his balance.

The arrowhead. If not removed soon, it would poison his body. A nibble of guilt tugged at her mind. Though she didn't want to wed him, she no longer wanted his death.

"I can walk on my own."

"You've been ill."

His feet crunched on the gravel littering the path and he climbed steadily, no longer showing any weakness.

"Were you able to get the arrowhead out?" she asked, knowing he hadn't.

He glanced at her, but didn't respond.

How did he remain on his feet? A normal man would have collapsed by now, but Jonas seemed impervious to pain. A bronzed god, virile and lethal. It was just a matter of time before he sickened. What then? If he died, the king had promised to put her to death before he destroyed Moere.

"You shouldn't wait any longer. I can remove it for you," she offered in a stilted voice.

He blew out a harsh laugh. "And have you poison me as you did Bjorn? I'd rather have my men try to dig it out again."

She frowned. "Those bumbling oafs will tear the muscle and make the wound worse. At the very least, they'll maim you. It'd be better to let me tend it for you."

He halted, standing on the thin path edging the palisade above the river. Darkness gathered around them but Kerstin still made out the great boulders lying along the quay below them. Water ebbed and flowed amongst the rocks, spraying up in violent geysers. The rushing roar of the river became deafening and her pulse

quicken.

Oh, she loathed water. Ever since she was four-years-old and had stolen a small fishing boat, intending to follow her father and brothers on a voyage down river. She hated being left behind and, when she had come upon the white rapids, she lost control of the boat. It flipped over and she would have drowned had her father not seen her in time and jumped in to save her.

As she stared at the choppy river, her hold tightened on Jonas's neck.

"Why do you care if I'm maimed?" he asked.

Shrugging, she refused to look at him, conscious of his eyes boring into her. "I don't care, but it seems I'm the only one who knows how to remove an arrowhead."

She glanced at him from beneath lowered eyelashes. In his eyes, she saw doubt and a bit of hurt. This man did have his vulnerabilities after all. He disliked her callous words as much as she disliked his. A pang of regret struck her that they could never be friends.

Certainly never lovers.

He snorted as he continued on his way. "You seem to be the only one of your father's people who practices witchcraft."

Kerstin stiffened. "I don't practice witchcraft. I practice healing."

He grunted an insulting sound and she knew he didn't believe her.

Along the way, they passed some of Jonas's men carrying weapons and cargo up from the ship. They waved at Jonas but had only sullen glares to offer her.

"Let me walk on my own," she said.

He gave a hollow laugh. "And have you run away again? I don't think so."

"I resent your accusations."

"You can explain that to the king, little witch."

Making a fist, she shook it beneath his nose. "So help me, Jonas Sigurdsson, I swear I'll lay you low if you call me that again."

He chuckled and bounced her in his arms, forcing her to cling to his neck so she wouldn't fall. "I wouldn't make idle threats if I were you, little Kerstin. The king might not take them kindly."

Kerstin shivered and Jonas held her tighter as the wind lashed against them.

Jonas tucked his chin against her forehead in a protective gesture. Her warm scent intoxicated him, sweet with a hint of female that tantalized his senses and sent hot prickles of desire through his blood.

Lust! Certainly not love. An animal heat, not human, not caring—nothing he couldn't control.

He tried to be gentle with her, which he thought quite kind, considering she had tried to kill him with an arrow and then betrayed him with Elezer.

Elezer! Thinking of the man caused his blood to boil. When Jonas found Kerstin kissing the man, it had been all he could do not to disembowel Elezer before decapitating him and sticking his head on a pike. The thought that Kerstin might have given herself to Elezer filled Jonas with rage.

Yet, she showed moments of sweetness, like when she had cared for the wounded men. Ah, she confused him. His lust for her would not bring him happiness. It would not heal his broken soul and it would not bring Bjorn and Olga back.

As he packed her up the steep grade, he caught the welcome scent of wood smoke.

By the time they crested the hill, Jonas gasped for breath. Damn this weakness! The arrowhead must be removed and the infection cleansed soon, before it was too late. Why could his men not get it out? He dared not let Kerstin help him. Already, he feared he had fallen under her spell and did not want to give her any more advantage against him.

He tried to ignore the wound, but the pain became almost unbearable and he knew it was swollen and hot to the touch. Had it begun to fester? He would have Halfdan look at it again and try to lance it.

As they passed a giant birch tree, larks flew from their nest. They swooped overhead, then returned to their roost. The scent of damp soil reached his nostrils as he carried Kerstin past the fields. He welcomed the cool evening air against his heated skin.

His limbs sagged with fatigue. After the marriage, he

would rest a day before he went into battle with the king...unless he died from his wound. No doubt Kerstin would like that. He silently prayed he didn't give her the satisfaction.

Somewhere in the steading a dog barked. Boisterous laughter came from the hall. Jonas heard the booming voice of his father, followed by Hakon's delighted chuckle. What was there to be happy about? He was about to force a woman who loathed him into marriage. A woman he himself wanted to hate. And yet, something almost magical softened his emotions toward her. Something he couldn't explain.

He shifted his weight and hers, trying to ease the constant burning throb in his shoulder. It had spread to his arm and he shook with it. Damn the arrowhead. His new bride had put it there! Breathing hard, he trudged onward.

Jonas's men remained outside, calling greetings to him as he passed by. They set up shelters for the night near the forest edge. Standing before their campfires, they warmed their hands and feasted vigorously on roasted meat and ale. Alrik's people kept their distance, glaring with animosity, unwilling to engage the enemy in conversation.

There would be no unity between their people until Kerstin accepted Jonas. Without harmony, they would not join forces to fight on behalf of the king against the Eirikssons.

Jonas heaved a labored sigh. His shoulder burned like the fires of Hel. He was tired of war and bloodshed and wanted nothing more than to return to his home at Hawkscliffe where he could raise crops, flocks and children. Would Kerstin give him heirs? It was all he wanted from her. If she gave him sons and a daughter, he would ask for no more.

"I can walk on my own. Put me down," Kerstin ordered when they reached the hall.

Jonas quirked a brow. "I don't think so."

She grumbled under her breath and he couldn't contain a slight smile. She was a spirited woman, something he always admired. A weak woman didn't survive long.

As he ducked inside the hall, he looked up and saw Kerstin's father sitting in his massive chair, on the raised dais at the head of the room. The king and Sigurd sat beside him, their heads bowed close together as they conversed in camaraderie. They looked much the same as when Jonas had last seen them, except friendlier.

Numerous warriors sat at the long tables, enjoying a cup of ale or wine. Empty platters littered with scraps and bones sat on the long tables, attesting that their stomachs were replete from an earlier meal. Several thralls moved about the room, cleaning up the mess or filling drinking horns with more ale. Upon his entrance, the woman named Minin wrapped a gray woolen shawl about her shoulders and sidled past him as she left the hall, closing the heavy door behind her.

Sigurd looked up and grinned. "Ah, here you are. Our scouts sighted your ships some time ago and we knew your mission must have been successful."

Jonas noticed Kerstin glared at them all, but she refused to look at her father. Would she ever forgive Alrik for betraying her? Though he didn't cherish the thought of being wed to a vengeful woman, Jonas couldn't help feeling sorry for her plight.

"Put me down." She struggled in his arms and he set her on her feet.

In her haste to get away from him, she stumbled and fell to her hands and knees. The room filled with raucous laughter. Her hair blinded her until she pushed the thick curls away from her face and glared her wrath at each man in turn.

Her father didn't snicker, nor did Jonas. Sigurd and his men laughed. Because his father believed she murdered Bjorn, he would show no empathy toward her. Jonas couldn't blame him.

Jonas felt a tightening in his chest, like a piece of dry bread swallowed whole, without water to wash it down. He also could not forgive her for what she had done to Bjorn.

Kerstin scrambled to her feet and stood before her father and the king, her back stiff. Sigurd's laughter ceased as she jutted her chin.

"I knew you'd bring her back," King Hakon said to Jonas. Then, he turned his burning gaze on Kerstin and his eyes narrowed. "It's a good thing Jonas found you. I was prepared to banish you, had he failed."

A hush fell over the hall with only the sounds of crackling from the fire pit. Somewhere outside, men laughed and a dog barked.

Kerstin swallowed heavily as the king's words sank into her heart. Banished? Forced to leave the Danelaw forever? She would never see her beloved home again. If found on English soil, the first man to recognize her could kill her without being punished.

Where would she go? She would never see Elezer's smiling face again.

"I would go to my brother, Einar, and wed the man I love."

The king showed an ominous frown.

Though she spoke bold words, Kerstin's body trembled. They had the power to banish her, but she would not cower before them.

"Kill her, sire," Sigurd shouted. "She's a witch. Burn her at the stake."

Dread settled on her like a leaden weight. Being banished was one thing. Burning to death was another. Would her father allow it? She stood unmoving, hands clenched at her side, awaiting her fate. She longed to plead for mercy but doubted it would make a difference.

The king beckoned to her, smiling, not seeming angry that she still denied him. "Bring her here, Jonas. We will discuss this small dilemma."

"I can walk on my own." She moved forward on shaky legs.

Jonas stood at her back and she felt surrounded by ravening wolves. Her heart hammered against her ribs. A chill rose at the nape of her neck.

The coals in the fire pit winked at her as she walked past, taunting her. Would her father forsake her if the king demanded she be burned? She no longer trusted him.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Letta peek out of the storage room. Wringing her hands, the woman whimpered and Alrik waved her and the thrall women away. Pity filled their eyes as they scurried from the

room. Kerstin swallowed hard. Never had she been so alone.

Not even Elezer could save her.

Jonas frowned. "I believe she prefers Elezer."

The king scowled and Kerstin clasped her fingers to keep them from shaking.

"There can be no union between this witch and my son. She has been with another man." Contempt filled Sigurd's growl.

Kerstin gasped. "That's not true."

Sigurd's eyes glittered like ice. "My people must have retribution. This witch is treacherous. She murdered my first son, now she has betrayed my second son with another man. I demand her death."

Kerstin didn't move. She barely breathed. Jonas's arm bumped ever so lightly against her side and she had the impression he protected her, offering her his support. What an insane thought. Surely he would welcome her death. She blinked, prepared to plead for her life.

The door to the hall opened. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched Knut come to stand beside Jonas. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword, his face stony, daring Alrik to send him away.

Bless Minin. She must have gone to get Knut. Yet, it did no good. If he defied the king, they'd kill him and she couldn't live with that guilt. If Sigurd had his way, she would be put to death. She could not ask Knut to give up his life to save hers.

"You must not protect me. They'll kill you, too," she told him in a pitiful whisper.

His jaw hardened and his gaze moved to rest on the king. Knut did not speak a word, but she knew his mind was set on this course. She almost cried with gratitude and regret.

Father in Heaven, help me! Please don't let me burn.

The king accepted Knut's presence with a grudging nod, then turned his attention to the matter at hand. "What do you say, Jonas? Will you still have this woman as your wife, or do you want her death?"

Kerstin felt the blood drain from her face. A lump of fear clogged her throat. She would be condemned or given life this very night. By Jonas. The man she betrayed.

His shoulders tightened as he weighed his answer. Reaching up a hand, he cupped his injured shoulder, kneading it. The gesture tore through her self-control. She knew he thought about the injury and humiliation she inflicted on him. He would never accept an apology from her.

"I was compelled to do what I must," she said in a low voice. "Just as you are compelled to order my death."

Jonas's mouth compressed and his eyes narrowed. She saw his hatred and knew he would have her killed. Perhaps death was preferable to being married to him. Her heart thumped. A lone tear fell unheeded down her cheek. She felt clammy and weak. Her knees knocked together and she could barely stand.

And still Jonas stared at her.

"Let it be a merciful death," she whispered in a ragged voice.

He blew out a breath and reached a hand to wrap around the slim column of her throat. She felt his fingers against her flesh, callused and strong. His grip tightened and she closed her eyes, accepting her fate. He would strangle her and it would be a blessing. He was merciful after all. To burn at the stake would mean terrible pain.

She opened her eyes and stared at his handsome face as he squeezed her throat. Her vision darkened, her world narrowed to only his sea-blue eyes. Her breath caught in her throat and she could not inhale. Darkness closed in as she found herself pulled into a dark void and everything went black.

Chapter Six

Blinking her eyes open, Kerstin squinted at the dim light in the room. She lay on her back, a thick bear robe thrown over her. She caught the pleasant scent of a birch log burning in the small brazier. Looking about, she saw the familiar surroundings of her parent's chamber.

A bolt of sadness tore through her and she gasped, sitting up.

"Shh, lie down, or you'll faint again."

Minin? Here in the room with her? Relief swept her. She wasn't dead.

"Oh." She clenched her eyes shut. How humiliating to faint in front of the king. Her brothers would tease her unmercifully if they found out.

But that would not matter if they intended to burn her.

Opening her eyes, she stared at the wall where a lighted torch flickered. The door was open wide, allowing the tangy aroma of roasting meats and oat cakes prepared for the next morning's meal to fill the room. It was still night. The chirp of crickets and the distant snoring of men inside the hall reached her ears. She moved her head to the side. Except for her hungry stomach, she felt wonderful.

She lifted her hand to her throat. She felt no soreness there, no pain at all. Jonas had not strangled her. Believing he would kill her must have prompted her to faint. Why was she here in a comfortable bed? She had expected to be tied to a stake and burned alive.

Minin's face appeared above her, worried and careworn. The woman smiled, then drew back to speak with someone else in the room. "She is awake."

The rustle of clothing and scuffing of a shoe on the hard-packed floor could be heard before Alrik sat beside Kerstin on the bed. His features haggard, every crease of his aged face seemed deeper and more pronounced. When

had he come to look so old and tired? Now, he appeared vulnerable and sad.

He took her hand in his own and gave her a relieved smile. She remembered the kind man she had loved all her life. As a child, she had fallen out of a tree and was knocked senseless for several hours. She had awakened to find her father holding her hand, an anxious expression on his face. It had been the same when she nearly drowned so many years ago.

"Oh, Father," she cried, launching herself at his chest.

When his arms closed around her, she melted against him. Father was here, he wouldn't let anyone hurt her. He would keep her safe, just as he had always done.

In the privacy of his room, where their people couldn't see her, she squalled like a little child.

In the darkest corner of the room, Jonas Sigurdsson stared at his new bride. Her coppery curls fell about her shoulders like a silken mass of flame. He flinched at the sound of her tears. He did not believe she knew he was there. Could she be acting, or was her misery real? His first instinct was to ease her sadness somehow. To comfort and protect her. But a witch knew very well how to gain sympathy from those around her. He had met her less than two days before, yet his heart ached for her plight. Surely he must be under her magical spell.

Alrik didn't speak as he held her. He pressed his rough face against hers, his eyes closed. The old warrior showed such emotion after demanding she wed a man she hated. Jonas had believed Alrik didn't care for Kerstin. But nay—Alrik loved his daughter.

Jonas tried to harden his heart to the tenderness of the scene before him, but he couldn't. Over the past years, he had become inured to compassion. Frozen to any deep feelings or emotion. He had forgotten everything but anger and hate. Never had he expected to feel empathy toward his worst enemy.

Bah! What nonsense. He was a warrior, the son of a great earl. Why should he care about a woman who had murdered his beloved brother and shot him with an arrow? She *must* have cast a spell for him to entertain

soft notions toward her. He could be under her spell and not even realize it. He must fight it, resist his compassion for her.

He wanted to repudiate her and avenge his brother's death. Yet he could not. Her beauty, her fierce spirit, her tenderness with her father who had betrayed her, touched the deepest core of his heart. A heart he thought died long ago.

It didn't matter. He needed no woman's softness to make him whole. Even blemished, he remained a powerful warrior, strong and fierce. He could not allow himself to show leniency. To be merciful was to be weak. Only the strong prevailed.

Look at what he had overcome. The fire that killed Olga could have taken his life. Though the flames left their mark upon his flesh, he refused to give in to the pain and restored the full use of his arms and legs, strengthening his muscles in battle.

His throat tightened. When he took Kerstin to his bed, would she find him repulsive like so many other women? None of the others mattered, but Kerstin would be his wife. In spite of his battle to hate her, he wanted her approval more than any other.

He watched as she drew back from Alrik, but kept her arms around him. In the flickering shadows, her nose appeared red, her eyes moist. The desire to comfort her filled Jonas to overflowing.

What was he thinking? The power of her spell almost overshadowed his resolve. The temptation to defy his king and refuse to wed her pulled at him, but if he refused her now, the king would sentence her to death. He had no choice. He must marry her, but how could he remain immune to her charms? He had to find a way. For the sake of his people and his own sanity.

"Am I to die?" she asked her father, still not aware Jonas sat watching her. "I didn't mean to defy you, Father, but how can I possibly marry a man I fear? You know how much I love Elezer."

Jonas's heart wrenched with jealousy. She didn't want him. As he feared, she longed for Elezer. Envy squeezed his heart like a vice. How he wished his name was Elezer and he could hear her happy laughter and

taste the sweetness of love in her kiss. Never would he know the joy of having a woman adore him in such a way. The thought left him feeling empty and bereft.

Drawing away from her, Alrik shifted nervously and Kerstin's gaze glanced off Jonas. When she saw him, her eyes widened with surprise. He stood and her face whitened, draining of blood, as if she would scream.

So many words crowded his heart, words of peace and condolence, words of kindness, and words of beseeching. She wouldn't listen to anything he said. She'd never trust his motives. He didn't trust them, either. No longer could he tell what was real and what her magic spell caused.

He didn't approach the bed, nor did he speak. There was nothing left to say that would soften her toward him. He couldn't explain the sad yearning that replaced his hope for a happy marriage.

The heat from the fire stifled him, the walls closing in. The sting of denial filled his lungs with every breath he took. He had to get out of here. Now!

As he walked to the door, he heard Kerstin sniff. He tilted his head slightly and saw her brush tears from her eyes. He turned away, feeling her glare boring a hole in his back. His skin prickled with regret as he closed the door behind him, his hands shaking.

Leaning against the outside wall, Jonas clenched his hands and damned this weakness. He must harden his mind or he would lose more than his self-control. He could very well lose his heart to a woman who hated him, and that would be a worse curse than death.

Kerstin stared at the closed door, trembling with the memory of Jonas's gaze, cold as leaden clouds on a stormy day. Once again, he was aloof, the Undefeated. His shoulders had squared as he left the room, his jaw set like a hard lump of iron. If he hated her so much, why had he spared her life?

Her chest ached, her throat raw. He heard every word she spoke to her father. He saw her cry—he knew how weak she could be.

"Ohh." She clenched her eyes closed, her face hot with mortification. Why did it have to be *him* who saw her

at her most vulnerable point?

"He spared your life, Kerstin," Alrik said. "He told the king he will still wed you."

"Why? Why would he do such a thing?"

"For peace. Your death would cause harsher feelings. King Hakon wouldn't get the army he needs to fight against the Eirikssons. Jonas knows this."

Dread seeped through to her bones. Jonas would marry her for peace and nothing more. In his eyes, she was still a pawn, still no more than chattel to be passed off for political gain.

Still a witch.

With a deep sigh, Alrik went to take the seat Jonas had vacated. He slumped down, his chin resting on his chest as he spread his legs before him. The fire snapped in the brazier and a pine log rolled, shooting sparks into the air.

"Jonas is a Christian, like you. He brought a monk with him to perform the marriage. They await you in the hall."

Kerstin's mouth dropped open. "Jonas told me he had a man of the clergy, but I didn't believe him."

Nodding his head, Alrik showed a faint smile. "It doesn't matter to King Hakon how your marriage is solemnized. Even though he's a Christian, he will choose the religion most convenient for his political gain. Odin serves his purpose as well as Christ. But Jonas will have a Christian ceremony."

"Ohh." Kerstin covered her face with her hands. It was Jonas's final victory. Even in this, he would not be thwarted.

When she looked up, Alrik gave a weary sigh, his face pale.

"Are you well, Father? Your wound—?"

He lifted a hand. "Don't fret. Letta changed the binding for me and prepared the healing herbs, just as you taught her. I grow stronger every day."

Kerstin's gaze fell on a small, scarred chest sitting at the foot of the bed. It had been her mother's, filled with special treasures, her wedding dress, dried flowers Alrik had given her, and a necklace Kerstin had made for her out of shells. Ancient relics and rare herbs used for

healing were also kept there. On rare occasions, Iona had let Kerstin sit beside her on this very bed as they sorted through the contents, giggling together, savoring every memory, every fondness associated with each precious item.

If I climb inside and close the lid, will the chest and its happy memories protect me from Jonas?

In that moment, she missed her mother desperately and once more brushed a tear from her cheek.

Alrik frowned. "He will wed you now."

Kerstin's head snapped up and she stared at him. "But I've been ill. Can't we wait until tomorrow?"

"The king is determined, Kerstin. Jonas won't be fooled that you're too ill for the ceremony, even though you fainted earlier." He gave her another quizzical frown.

She pursed her lips. "I've never faced execution before. How could you force me into this marriage, Father?"

"Listen to me, daughter," he rasped as he rested his elbows on his knees. "Do you think I enjoy putting you into the hands of Jonas Sigurdsson? But you must understand I have no choice."

He rose and paced the room, his feet scuffing against the hard-packed floor. "He's been patient with you. He could have killed both of you when he found you with Elezer. Yet, he spared Elezer's life. The king has nothing but good to say about Jonas. He's a valiant leader, a man worthy of admiration. He's wealthy by his own hand, and the heir to a great earldom. His men love him and that says a lot. They follow him without question."

A man she had always hoped to wed. Yet now, she longed for Elezer, who seemed to be the complete opposite of Jonas. Gentle and kind, not a great warrior, not valiant in leading fierce warriors, but filled with goodness and love for her. And he knew she was a healer, not a witch.

Alrik spread his hands in a plaintive gesture. "Marry Jonas. Bring peace to our people."

"But Elezer—"

"Is not the man for you. After Bjorn's death, you were inconsolable. I couldn't stand to see you so hurt. I agreed to your betrothal with Elezer only to placate you. Honestly, child, I had planned to postpone the marriage

until I found a man more suited for you."

He could have told her this before now. "And you think Jonas is that man?"

He nodded, his expression grave. "He is more of a man than Elezer. In time, I believe you and Jonas will deal well together."

Kerstin snorted in exasperation. She threw back the fur cover and stood on her bare feet. Someone had cleansed the mud from her body, treated her scratches and cuts, and dressed her in a short shift that reached her mid-thigh. Her bare arms and legs glistened in the dim firelight. Hopefully it had been Minin who clothed her and Jonas had not been present at the time.

Alrik came to her, taking her hands in his larger, coarser ones. "Marry Jonas, and get yourself caught with his babe. It's the only way to unite our people. Do you think they'll fight beside the Sigurdssons as long as you run from Jonas? Nay, they will not, and the Eirikssons will take more and more power until we are all destroyed."

"How can you place the survival of our people upon my shoulders? It isn't fair."

"Life is not fair, daughter. Most of it is duty and drudgery and, once in awhile, there are moments of spectacular joy." He caressed her cheek with his calloused hand. "Like the day you were born."

She licked her lips and tried to breathe. A lump of emotion formed in her chest. What joy could she look forward to?

Her father's gray eyes were intent as they searched her face. Desperate. Alrik, Earl of Moere, fierce leader of men and conqueror in his own right, feared for the lives of his people. For their very existence.

How could she deny him?

A sigh of resignation escaped her lips. "All right, Father, I'll marry Jonas, but I'll never give him my heart."

"I only want your loyalty—and children."

Kerstin turned. Jonas stood beside the door, one hand braced on the wooden frame, the other resting on the hilt of his sword.

She stiffened. "It's rude to eavesdrop."

Easing his weight from the bed, her father left her

alone with her future husband. Kerstin longed to call him back, but the words clogged her throat.

Jonas's gaze lowered to her hips and legs and embarrassment heated her face. With a glare, she grabbed the bedding and wrapped it around herself. "Go away. I want to be alone."

Deep laughter filled his chest, rumbling like thunder. His eyes smoldered as he continued to look at her. "Nay, you might run away and I am in no mood to chase you down again."

He approached, his hands reaching for her, his palms hot as he cupped her shoulders. His gaze lowered to her lips, scorching her with desire. His gaze locked with hers. When he swayed, she noticed the flush of fever apparent on his face. He looked ill.

Though he had removed his chain mail and wore a clean tunic of soft wool dyed a deep, vivid blue, he still kept his sword sheathed at his side. His tunic had long sleeves and a high neck and looked brilliant on him, matching the color of his eyes. If only he were not so handsome, so charismatic.

His hands threaded through her hair, the feel of his strong fingers strangely exotic. She longed to move closer but pulled away instead. He fascinated her as his hungry gaze held hers.

As his fingertips brushed her throat, his thumb glided against her pulse and she fought the desire filling her. She heard him breathing to catch her scent. It embarrassed, yet flattered her. She felt his warm breath against her sensitive skin. His spicy aroma engulfed her and she inhaled deeper. Elezer had never engrossed her in such a way. His choking scent of smoke and grease repulsed her. What hold did Jonas have over her?

The thought made her frown and she felt a twinge of guilt. She longed to be loyal to Elezer, but it became more difficult the more time she spent with Jonas.

Outside in the hall, Kerstin heard her father speaking with his men, rousing the warriors, urging Letta and Minin to gather the thralls and prepare a wedding feast. She could not escape her doom. She would be married this very night. Jonas would touch her, much as he touched her now. And she would be his.

Jonas saw her distraction and kicked the door shut. It didn't slam but the latch clicking into place sounded like a boom to her ears.

She jerked. "It's improper for me to be alone with you."

His deep laughter filled the room. "You didn't care about appearances when you stole away to Elezer."

Turning away from him, she sought some place of succor. He pulled her back, lowering his head to hers. The bedding slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor like a lover's sigh.

As he brushed his cheek against hers, her whisper was so close to his lips that she could feel his warmth. "Elezer didn't frighten me as you do."

The confession brought a frown to his lips and he drew back to look into her eyes. "Have I ever hurt you?"

No, and that frightened her most of all. His kindness was more than she could comprehend. With his accusations of witchcraft, she felt under attack by him, wondering when he might turn on her. How could she ever trust him?

Jonas pressed a kiss to her brow, his mouth warm and languid. She moved her head away but too late. His touch branded her, the heat almost more than she could stand.

He let her go and stepped away, blowing out a harsh breath, as if he fought his own desire. Then, he reached for her and she was in his arms, his lips hovering over hers.

"I'll not allow Elezer to come between us."

Kerstin stared into his glittering eyes as he kissed her, deep wrenching kisses that left her gasping. He pulled her up against him, his hardness and heat shocking as she closed her eyes and returned his kiss.

As his hungry mouth moved over hers, she thought she had never tasted anything so delicious in all her life. More than taste, but rather a feeling of drugged euphoria. An addiction. His passion scalded her and she clung to him, a small cry erupting from the back of her throat.

Spurred by the sound of her desire, Jonas slanted his mouth across hers. His scent enveloped her, staggering her with the effect it had on her senses. Locking her arms

about him, she gasped at the warmth of his tongue against hers. It undid her, his heat. The flavor, the feel of him more than she imagined possible. A raging power that she could not understand, to have, to control, to complete.

By the time he stopped kissing her, she was limp and trembling, unable to stand on her own.

"Open your eyes," he ordered.

She did, her eyelids heavy with desire.

"Tell me you thought of Elezer while I kissed you," he murmured, his voice husky. "Tell me he has filled you with as much need as I have done."

Kerstin wanted to, but she couldn't lie, even to hurt Jonas. She bit her lip, her throat dry.

He let her go, his expression sharp and fierce. He had proven his point.

Placing her hand against her mouth, she bit down on one knuckle, trying to regain her senses. "You'll never have my heart." Her voice sounded weak and watery, not at all convincing.

"I only want your pledge."

Kerstin sat dazed while Minin combed out her hair. There would be no reprieve. Jonas would come for her any moment now; he gave her an hour to prepare. What would he do if she dressed in rags and threw leaves and dirt in her hair?

Alrik ordered her bathed and perfumed. A battering of women descended on her, giving her no opportunity to argue. Her mind screamed with outrage, but she grew resigned to her fate. Yet, her inner soul wept. She mourned her lost love.

She slumped on the bed and watched as Minin walked to her trunk and lifted the lid. Kerstin paid little heed as Minin rooted around inside for an appropriate gown.

The fire in the brazier burned low, casting gloomy shadows about the room. It suited Kerstin's mood. Cold night air seeped through the walls and she shivered in her dressing gown. When Minin held up a garment of scarlet brocade, Kerstin sat erect, her eyes wide.

"I won't wear that." Kerstin pursed her lips. "I was to

have worn it when I married Elezer."

"Come, my lady," Minin beckoned. "Stand and put it on. They're waiting and it'll be over soon enough."

Letta stood before the closed door, wringing her hands and whimpering. "What will we do, Kerstin? How can we protect you from that horrid man?"

"Hush, mistress," Minin hissed. "Do you want to bring bad luck on us all with such talk?"

Letta scurried to crouch in a far corner of the room where she mewled with distress.

Minin brought the dress to Kerstin and a lump of despair lodged inside her throat. Minin draped the lovely dress over Kerstin's body. The hem fell to the floor and swirled about Kerstin's feet in a subtle whisper. She stepped forward, watching the two-foot train flow behind her as she walked.

Next, Minin picked up the calf-length over-dress made of crimson silk. Kerstin's father had bought the fabric from a trader in Kiev, who had gotten it from raiders of Baghdad. The merchant said the gods had spun gold into the shimmery material. It had cost Alrik much silver and Kerstin knew the gift presented was meant for her wedding gown.

"Nay," she whispered, her dream of being Elezer's wife clawing at her soul.

"Your father ordered that you wear the silk." Minin lifted the fluid gown over Kerstin's head. It fell down her body in a clinging sigh, the train pooling at her feet like liquid lava sprinkled with gold dust.

"I suppose my father must be obeyed in *all* things," Kerstin grumbled.

Minin patted her cheek and showed an encouraging smile, then reached for Kerstin's gilded brooches. The handmaiden fastened one pin to each of Kerstin's shoulders, then stepped back to admire her handiwork.

"What jewels do you wish to wear?" Minin turned to pick up a small, wooden jewel box.

Opening the beautiful carved lid, she lifted it for Kerstin's inspection. It contained only a few pieces, but they were each lovely, the workmanship fine and ornate. Two golden armbands made by Knut for Kerstin's eighteenth birthday, a necklace of amber and shells

presented by Kerstin's mother when she returned from a visit to Eire, several pairs of beaded ear bobs, two rings studded with small emeralds, and a golden fillet with a single, dangling red ruby. Elezer had gifted her with the ruby when they were first betrothed.

Kerstin picked up the fillet. Smoothing her hair into place, she raised the strand and rested it around her head.

Minin gasped. "You can't wear another man's gift on your wedding day, my lady. 'Twill bring bad luck to your marriage."

"Do you think I care? This marriage is already cursed." Centering the jewel in the middle of her forehead, Kerstin peered at herself in the looking glass. The ruby gleamed like a drop of crimson blood against her pale skin.

Shaking her head, Minin scurried about the room, tidying up.

Clasping her hands in front of her, Kerstin tried to remain calm. She heard the march of men as they approached her door, the summons of a heavy fist laid upon the oak planks. There would be no more stalling.

Minin opened the portal wide. Knut stood before the threshold, tall, and somber, his wide shoulders filling the expanse. Kerstin heard the other occupants in the hall, their loud voices and laughter. As her door opened, they became quiet, waiting for her to appear.

The strong smells of cooking meat and honeyed mead filtered through the hall. There was to be a feast and she had no doubt the men had already enjoyed the vibrant wines and ales.

Knut lifted his roughened hand to her. As she clasped it with her chilled fingers, she looked into his eyes and he gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't fear this man, my lady," he said in a soft voice only Kerstin could hear. "He won't harm you."

She scoffed. How she wished she dared believe Knut. But how could she not fear Jonas when he admitted he believed her guilty of murdering his brother.

Turning, Knut led her out into the hall. Her heart sank when she saw the tall warriors filling the room. They were dressed in full battle gear; many still wore

their metal helmets. Double-edged swords gleamed at their sides instead of jewels and wedding finery. They opened a path for her leading to the raised dais at the other end of the hall. It reminded her of the story her mother told of the ancient prophet Moses opening the Red Sea so the Israelites might pass through to safety.

Kerstin passed into danger.

Jonas waited on the dais. He wore a horned helmet and held a heavy gold hammer in his fist. Thor's hammer, a sign of strength and virility. He stared at her, his gaze so intense she blinked and looked away.

Alrik, Sigurd, and the king flanked Jonas. Before them stood a Christian monk, clothed in dark robes, his hands clutching a holy crucifix close to his chest. Perhaps she might petition him for aid.

His long nose, bony cheeks, and chilling eyes showed no compassion.

Kerstin inhaled a deep breath and let it out on a slow exhale. The heavy scent of tallow filled her lungs. Numerous candles flickered about the room, casting shadows across the carved walls. Thralls lit several torches to chase away the gloom, but nothing could rid the darkness in her heart.

So be it. She still had her pride, after all.

Jutting her chin, she walked the gauntlet of warriors. How had they crammed so many large men inside? Through the hall's open doorway, Kerstin saw blazing bonfires outside where pigs, goats, sheep, and cattle roasted over the flames. An affirmation of the final wedding vows was all the hundreds of men gathered around the steading needed to hear. Then, they would go to war.

Kerstin glanced at her groom. Still dressed in the blue tunic, Jonas's eyes gleamed like blue ice. He didn't wear chain mail as the other men, but he watched her without blinking, without a glimmer of emotion on his handsome face.

She looked away for a moment. As she approached, he removed the horned helmet and set it aside. Kerstin breathed with relief, for it had made him look most fierce. She detected the ripple of tensed muscles beneath his tunic as he rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. She

recognized this as a sign of tension in him and almost laughed.

When she stood before the dais, she looked for a way around the wall of men's bodies so she might join him. She lifted an arm to push her way past several husky shoulders and found herself lifted through the air as Jonas bent and grasped her by the waist.

She clutched his solid forearms as he set her on her feet in front of him, squeezing her waist with his big hands. Lifting her head, she looked into his eyes. His gaze centered on the golden fillet. His eyes narrowed and Kerstin squirmed beneath his perusal. The blood red color signified her broken heart. But guilt nibbled at her mind and she wished she hadn't worn it.

His fingers were strong yet gentle as he caressed her back. One side of his mouth lifted in a subtle smile and his eyes brightened with warmth. His head lowered until their noses all but touched. "You are beautiful."

Jonas's words took her off guard. Any compliment made her suspicious of his motives. Oh, why did this man have to smell so good? It would be easier to hate him if he stank and never washed, if he weren't so strong and virile.

He leaned nearer, until she felt consumed by his gaze. She saw the wanting in his eyes and knew it mirrored her own. Would he kiss her? How she longed to taste him again.

"Ahum," the monk cleared his voice. "You are not yet married, my son."

"Kiss her, Jonas!" someone yelled. "Show her who is master."

Several guffaws and shouts of approval filled the room and Kerstin tensed.

Jonas didn't smile or offer any reassurance. Instead, with his palm riding the small of her back, he turned her to face the monk.

Folding her hands together, Kerstin waited as Jonas stood beside her. She gasped when he fell heavily against her, knocking her askew. Both Sigurd and the king reached to help her steady him.

"I'm all right," Jonas said as he regained his balance.

He was ill! With her arrowhead still lodged inside his

shoulder, she should have known. Fever, not desire, caused the pink hue of his skin and his glittering eyes.

"Jonas, let Kerstin remove the arrowhead before you drop dead," King Hakon spoke low.

Alrik stepped forward, his craggy face drawn with unease. "If the arrowhead isn't removed soon, you will die."

"Aye, son, let the witch tend your wound," Sigurd whispered as he fondled his war ax. "I'll stay near to make certain she doesn't harm you, never fear."

"I can help you." Kerstin placed her hand on Jonas's arm.

He hesitated, then took her hand in his own, folding it across his arm before he nodded at the monk. "Marry us now. There'll be no more waiting."

Kerstin swallowed the plea that came to her throat. He would rather die than have her tend him. He still refused to believe she was a healer, and not a witch. Tears burned the backs of her eyes.

"Very well," the monk said. "Kneel."

Jonas squeezed her trembling hands and they knelt before the monk. The man of God spoke swift and sure and Jonas showed no more weakness. She could almost believe she imagined it.

Kerstin stuttered through her vows and they were wed. When the monk pronounced them husband and wife, a shout rang throughout the hall. Jonas stumbled to his feet, pulling her up beside him. Again, Sigurd reached to steady him and Jonas brushed his father's concerns aside. Claspng her hands in his, Jonas raised their arms high and presented his new bride to the congregation.

His deep bass voice filled the hall as he married her also by Danelaw. "Know all that I take this woman to wife. Before Odin, I proclaim her mine and will kill any man who tries to take her from me." He looked at her, his eyes both frost and fire. "I pledge my body to give her strong babes. I pledge my life to give her comfort and to keep her safe. Know that she is now my wife and I accept her freely of my own will."

Stepping close, Jonas bade her sit in a chair beside the king. Staring into his eyes, Kerstin did so and watched in a daze as he laid Thor's hammer in her lap.

Another loud shout shook the rafters as the warriors cheered.

Outside, she heard someone yell. "It's done! They are wed."

A deafening roar thundered as the warriors whooped and hollered, loud as a furious winter storm.

An aching knot tightened Kerstin's throat. For so many years their people had been feuding. Was it possible it would end simply because she wed Jonas? And what of his pledge to her? Did he mean what he said? Though he had not pledged his heart.

Knowing she was doomed to a loveless marriage, her eyes burned with tears.

Sudden silence filled the hall and she felt lightheaded and weak. It was now her turn to make her vow to Jonas. Clutching the hilt of the hammer with whitened knuckles, she came to her feet. How could she get through this without voicing a lie? She refused to promise something she would not do. With great discomfort, in a tight voice, she made her pledge.

"I will be this man's wife. I will care for his home and see to his comforts and do my best to keep harm from his door. I will give him my loyalty—" Her voice faltered.

Their customs demanded she promise him sons and daughters. She opened her mouth, but no words came. She imagined a babe with Jonas's blue eyes and golden hair. What beautiful children he would sire. Without children, what joy would she have in her life?

"In due season, if the gods allow it, I—I will give him fine daughters and sons. I accept—" Her voice wavered and she tried again. "I accept this man as my husband."

Another roar of approval stung her ears. Jonas smiled with pleasure and Kerstin found herself clasped in his arms as he kissed her thoroughly, leaving her breathless and shaking. His kiss overpowered her, stealing her breath, leaving her giddy and shaken. When he released her, she stumbled back, the heavy hammer bumping her thigh. Was this her reward for speaking her pledge? She only hoped she lived up to her vows.

One by one, Kerstin found herself kissed by the king, her father, Sigurd, and Knut. The other warriors would have swept her away, but Jonas pulled her behind him

and glared his disapproval.

Minin and the other women fluttered around her, hugging and kissing her cheeks. Letta hung back, glaring at Jonas as if he were something vile from the trash pit. For the rest of the evening, she kept to herself at one far corner of the hall.

Kerstin was soon seated beside Jonas at the long tables and thralls carried in heavy platters of tender meat, golden cheese and fragrant bread. They squeezed their way amongst the men as they plunked their burdens down. The host of men consumed food from glittering gold and silver plates. Toast after toast challenged the women to keep the drinking horns filled with strong ale, honeyed mead and sweet wine.

Her jaw moved as she chewed a piece of tender pork, but Kerstin tasted nothing. She reached for her wine and would have swallowed the meat down, but another toast rang out to Jonas's virility and the blessing that she produce him a fine, healthy son as their first child. Kerstin refused to drink and she chewed the meat inside her mouth again and again.

The hall was too crammed for jugglers or skalds to entertain the wedding guests. At suggestion of the king, the men picked up the tables and carried them outside into the cool night air. Kerstin breathed a sigh of disgust as the crowd pushed her along beside her husband. Someone stepped on the train of her wedding gown and Kerstin was brought up short, almost falling flat on her face. Jonas steadied her, taking her hand in his.

"Allow me, my lady," he said against her ear, his warm breath sending tingles up her spine.

He smelled of wine, his eyes gleaming with promise as he placed warm kisses against her lips and forehead. Though she had consumed little wine, she found his touch intoxicating.

Turning her head, she tried to push her hair out of the way. Jonas pulled her to safety and held her close when the crush of the crowd almost trampled her. So many large men were dangerous to a woman's health.

By the time they made it outdoors, Kerstin felt bruised and battered. If not for Jonas, she would have been stomped into the ground. She remembered his care

of her when she had been so ill on his ship. Why was he so attentive? Might he be a kind man, or did he act to lure her into complacency?

Outside, Kerstin breathed in great drafts of air, filling her lungs, trying to clear her mind. Her flushed skin prickled as a cooling breeze stirred about the steading. Bright stars glittered in the northern sky. This night should have been for her and Elezer. Though she had agreed to this wedding, it scorched her heart with pain.

As they reassembled the tables and distributed the food, Jonas made the ritual offering to the goddess Freya for the bridegroom's potency. Amidst the cheers of their people, they readied the goat for roasting. In the confusion, Kerstin found Minin and asked her to place the hammer in her chamber.

"I'll take it, little lamb. You enjoy yourself." Minin pulled the heavy hammer from Kerstin's numb fingers and hurried toward the hall.

Kerstin watched the woman go, wishing she could join her and escape the crush of men. Jonas warriors engaged him. Now was her chance to be alone. Picking up her skirts, she walked behind the hall, across the fragrant cow pasture and into the forest of trees. She swept along the timberline where she could still see the bright lights of the wedding feast through the heavy foliage. She pushed tree limbs out of her way, thrilling to her momentary freedom. Leaves and twigs crunched beneath her feet as she moved faster and faster, running across the open moors until she reached the river and followed it to the waterfall.

The roar of the river filled her ears. She stared into the mass of dark, churning water and imagined all her hopes and dreams swept away by the tide of war.

Soon, they would find her gone and come after her. Wrapping her arms about her, she stared down at the dark waters below. Flinging her head back, she closed her eyes, breathing in the heather covering the windswept moors. Tears squeezed between her lashes and washed her cheeks. Her hair whipped about her as the wind breathed upon her. The red ruby resting in the center of her forehead felt hard and cold against her skin.

The river surged over great boulders. Though unseen in the dark, she knew the rocks were there, large, frigid, and unyielding. Farther out, shimmering moonbeams danced upon the water making it look like some eerie floor of glass. It beckoned to her and she longed to go. Standing at the edge, she gazed down into the swirling mire. How easy it would be to step off and let herself go—

“You’ll find no freedom from me in death.”

Kerstin screamed when she found herself clasped from behind. Jonas’s arms wrapped around her like steel. She couldn’t move, or she would have slapped him.

She tried to laugh, but it came out a croak. “You delude yourself to think I’d commit suicide.”

He turned her to face him, as easily as a man might turn a rag doll. She felt every inch of his hot body against her own, hardened with muscle, lean and strong. His eyes danced with light, glittering in the dark like twin points of flame.

Gazing at her face, he reached up and brushed a tear from her cheek. “Don’t cry, Kerstin.” His voice sounded soft and tender. “Death is always at our door and we must find joy where we can. There’s so much for us to rejoice in.”

Rejoice? He must be insane.

Through his slurred words, she smelled the intoxicating aroma of sweet wine on his breath. He must have drunk heavily, as all their people did when they feasted. For some reason, she thought he imbibed to ease the pain of his wound.

Nuzzling her temple, he placed soft kisses upon her hair, then touched the tip of his tongue against the heated flesh just below her ear. The breeze stirred across the moistness and brought prickling sensations to the nape of her neck. Her pulse skittered and she drew back, hating the passion he ignited within her.

He swayed on his feet, his eyes glazed.

“You are drunken,” she said in disgust.

“Drunken on your beauty.” He gave her a charming smile that almost melted her heart.

She snorted as he lowered his head and placed a languid kiss against her throat, over her pulse. Though she tried to push him away, her heart pounded and a

yearning grew deep within her chest. She wanted more.

"You're not the first woman to be forced to marry a man. You're luckier than most, Kerstin. I'm wealthy, so you won't starve, and I won't beat you."

She stared at him, hoping she could believe him.

His brows drew together in a doubtful frown. "You gave me your pledge."

His reminder angered her and she jerked against him. He staggered and would have fallen but he caught himself in time.

"You're ill." She moved away from the predatory look in his eyes.

He desired more than a few lazy kisses. She hated that she did, too. Instead, she stepped from the cliff's edge and backed toward the forest. "You should return to the hall and let me see to your wound."

The corners of his full mouth lifted in a wolfish grin. His teeth flashed white, his gaze lowered. "I want to retire to our bed. I cannot afford to let you out of my sight until I've sealed my claim."

He stalked her! Or rather, tried to. If she didn't know he was ill, she might have laughed at the comical sight of him tottering after her, tripping over rocks and sticks, bumping into trees as she eluded him easily. He could barely keep his feet.

"Hold still, will you?" he asked, reaching for her.

When he fell over flat on his face, she gave a cry of dismay. In the darkness, she peered at him. He didn't move and she was a good enough healer to recognize he wasn't faking.

She knelt beside him and shook him, but he didn't stir. "Jonas? Are you all right?"

Placing her palm against his cheek, she felt the raging of a high fever on his skin. Again, more urgently, she tried to rouse him. "Jonas, wake up. Don't lay here like a giant oaf."

Still, he didn't budge. Kerstin tried to push him over onto his back but he was so large she could do little more than lift one of his heavy arms.

Coming to her feet, she looked about in desperation. She caught the musty scent of damp earth. The crashing sound of the water breaking over the falls matched the

shattering of her nerves.

Now Kerstin saw her chance! She could flee, with Jonas in no condition to pursue her. She would race back and the king could do nothing to stop her from marrying Elezer. She took a step, then stopped. Guilt nibbled at her, holding her in place.

Jonas would die if she left him and the king might hold her responsible. Though she offered to tend his wound, Jonas refused. Surely the king wouldn't blame her if Jonas died.

But she had given her pledge and promised her loyalty. Even resenting him, she couldn't stand by and let Jonas suffer. If she ran away, her people would be doomed and hate her for it. She might have Elezer, yet nothing else. Not even her honor.

Jonas's shadowed face paled in the dim light. Kneeling beside him, she cursed him as she tried once more to awaken him. A rock dug into his chin and she brushed it away. He looked so handsome, so innocent in sleep. So controlling when awake. She had never known such a man.

Should she run for help? He was so big, she didn't think she could move him even if she wanted to. Bending low, she placed her lips against his ear and whispered. "Do you want to die, Jonas? If you lie here like a big ox, I will flee to Elezer. Is that what you want?"

Jonas moved and a murmur of disapproval came from his lips. He lay still again and Kerstin persisted in her efforts, unable to resist taunting him. "I'll give myself to Elezer if you die. Do you want me to give birth to his son, or yours?"

Rage rumbled from within Jonas's chest and he rolled onto his back. In the shafts of moonlight, Kerstin saw his eyes open and spit flame as he glared at her.

"Perhaps I will beat you after all, woman."

Chapter Seven

Kerstin took Jonas's arm and helped him to his feet. He tottered and she feared he might fall again, pulling her down with him. Wrapping her arm around his waist, she tried to steady him. He braced a hand on the ground and stood. Together, they walked back toward the stading. Bent like an old man, he leaned against Kerstin, breathing in raspy gasps. She staggered against his weight and felt bone-chilling dread that it might be too late to save him.

The wound must be inflamed and festered.

They arrived almost within shouting distance of the hall in the clear, crisp night. Somewhere near the south pasture, a dog barked. Boisterous laughter came from the wedding feast. The high, sweet trill of a lute and robust singing rose up from the area around one large bonfire. Kerstin's heart squeezed with longing as she remembered happier times when she would have crowded in with the men and women and enjoyed the succulent meats and spicy drinks.

Would she ever feel that kind of joy again?

Jonas pulled up short. Reaching a shaking hand to cup Kerstin's cheek, he lifted her face so he looked into her eyes.

"Why—why did you stay?" His voice trembled, the words garbled.

His thumb caressed her lips, making her skin tingle. Though she longed for it, she prayed he didn't try to kiss her again. If he fell over, she doubted she could get him back on his feet.

Shrugging, she responded truthfully. "I gave you my pledge, and I always keep my word."

Jonas smiled, so handsome she had to blink. "Thank you."

Her heart compressed. Though she couldn't put a finger on it, she realized their relationship changed

somehow. They formed a tenuous bond. Had speaking a few vows caused this? Aye, her promise seemed the only thing left that remained hers to control. Yet, trust and happiness eluded them.

“Come.” She took his hand.

He didn’t argue when she pulled him into a walk, but his footsteps slowed. Kerstin could tell he wanted to ask more questions. How could he think in a rational manner when he was so ill? The man amazed her.

“Just a short ways now,” she said as they passed the cow byre. “You need rest and I’ll tend your wound—”

He crumpled in the tall grass, his great body silent and unmoving as stone. She would not be able to rouse him again. Lifting her hands to her mouth, she cried out, “Father! Father, come quick.”

A murmur arose amongst the crowd and a man pointed at her. “Over there! Who is it?”

Alrik appeared, looking confused. When he saw her, he came running, followed by Sigurd and Knut and a horde of the largest, fiercest Viking warriors that ever walked the earth.

“What have you done to him, witch?” Sigurd bellowed when he saw his son lying upon the ground.

“Nothing. He is ill. Get back before you trample him, you great oafs.” She placed herself in front of Jonas’s prone body, to protect him from being tread upon by so many heavy feet.

Knut pulled out his sword, his eyes showing a feral gleam. “Did he harm you, mistress? Is it your wish that I kill him?”

“Of course not.” She gasped, realizing how vulnerable Jonas was.

Sigurd also drew his sword.

Kerstin held up her hands. “What are you doing? He’s ill from his wound. Put aside your weapons and take Jonas to the hall so I can tend him.”

In a whirl, capable hands lifted Jonas and a path opened as they carried him to the hall. Kerstin raced ahead of the crowd. Inside, she moved to the door of her parent’s chamber and beckoned to them. “Lay him here on the bed. Minin, bring boiling water. Ota, get my healing herbs, and soft, clean cloths. Knut, I’ll need more warm

furs.”

Minin, Ota and Knut hurried to do her bidding.

Kerstin opened her arms to herd the warriors outside. “You other men go back to the fire so we can have some quiet. You can do nothing here to help.”

Sigurd’s men stared at her with suspicion. They didn’t trust her and she knew there would be hell to pay if Jonas died.

“Don’t worry, I’ll watch over Jonas,” Sigurd told them.

“Come with me, men.” The king placated the warriors and they accompanied him back to the bonfire. True to his word Sigurd stayed, along with Alrik.

Inside the chamber, Kerstin removed Jonas’s shirt. She heard the muted sounds of chatter outside the small window and knew the celebration had ended.

A tense crackling filled the air as Sigurd and Alrik stood against the wall, fondling the hilts of their swords. If Jonas died, there would be war right here, right now, and she would be the first killed.

Sigurd stared at his last surviving son, who lay still as death upon the great box bed. Would he refuse to let her tend Jonas? Sigurd’s forehead crinkled with concern and Kerstin felt a touch of sympathy for this harsh man who loved his son.

Knut entered the room, carrying a bundle of brown, red and black furs in his arms. He deposited them beside Jonas on the bed, then rolled Jonas onto his stomach to give better access to the wound in his shoulder. Minin rushed in with Kerstin’s herb satchel and two thrall women. They all held candles close around the bed so Kerstin could see to work. She leaned over Jonas, her gaze taking in his naked torso.

“Oh! Look at him,” Ota cried with disgust. “Such scars. He is horrid.”

A gasp tore from Minin’s throat; she thrust a hand against her mouth. A croon of dismay slipped from Kerstin’s parted lips. A melee of shiny white and purple scars covered Jonas’s torso and arms. How had he suffered the jagged welts that blemished his body in such a brutal manner?

The other women grimaced and drew back.

"Ohh," Marta exclaimed. "'Tis a horrible sight. No wonder he's called a beast."

Kerstin's head snapped up and she shamed the woman with her eyes. "My husband is *not* a beast and you'll not call him any more names."

Lowering her eyes, Marta nodded but averted her gaze from Jonas. It was obvious she could not abide to look upon him. Even kindhearted Minin turned her face aside.

Glancing toward the doorway, Kerstin saw Sigurd standing there, watching this exchange in silence. His brows drew together in a frown, but she had no time to consider his feelings on the matter.

The women moved away from the bed, edging toward the door.

"Stay where you are," Kerstin said. "Now is not the time for weak stomachs. This man needs our help and I'll slap the first one of you who tries to run away."

The women stared at Kerstin with horror, then returned to the foot of the bed, as far from Jonas as they dared.

Kerstin's gaze flickered over Jonas's scarred body. Sympathy welled inside her for all his suffering. It made her even more determined to save him, if she could. As if she hadn't noticed his blemished flesh, she set to work cleansing the arrow wound.

"It festers," she commented to no one in particular. "Minin, bring me rosemary and as much garlic as you can find. Marta, stoke the embers of the fire so they burn bright and hot. Ota, go and help Minin."

The women scurried out of the room, grateful to have some chore to take them away. Kerstin went to the brazier and placed the cauldron of boiling water over it. As the water started to bubble again, she went to her father and held out her hand.

"May I have your long dagger?"

Without question, he pulled it from its sheath and deposited it in her grasp.

"What do you plan?" Sigurd demanded, stepping toward her.

Kerstin tensed. She needed no suspicious men to fuss with right now.

"My daughter knows what she's doing," Alrik said. "Come, we should join the king."

Alrik tried to clasp Sigurd's arm and lead him outside. Sigurd jerked free, a snarl on his lips. "I'll stay right where I am until I'm assured the witch means not to murder my son."

Kerstin's spine stiffened.

Alrik frowned. "You accuse my daughter falsely. She wouldn't murder her own husband—"

"I'll make certain of it," Sigurd growled. "I wouldn't want her to become a young widow."

The two men stood close together, each with icy glares and hands raised to rest upon their sword hilts. Kerstin hardly believed they would begin a fight here and now. Marta cowered beside the brazier, her eyes wide.

"Let Sigurd stay." Kerstin shrugged and turned back to Jonas. "Let him watch my every move. I'll tend Jonas as well as I would my own child."

"Knut will stay and make certain you don't harm my daughter." Alrik threw a pointed look in Knut's direction and the man stood in the corner of the room, his arms crossed.

Alrik left and, with a heavy glower, Sigurd closed the door. He moved across the floor and sat in the chair in the far corner of the room. As he rested his hands on the smooth wooden armrests, he stared hard at Kerstin.

Because her father's knife still bore the grease and grime from his evening meal, she plunged the blade and her scissors into the boiling pot to cleanse them. She also took the fire poker and placed it within the flames to heat. At her urging, Marta prepared bandages.

Minin returned, pushing the door open with her hip. She and Ota carried baskets of white peeled garlic cloves and rosemary.

"Thank you." Kerstin grabbed up the rosemary and sprinkled the leaves and flowers into a small metal container. Then, she poured water over the whole and left it to boil over the fire.

At her bidding, the women drew near with candles and Kerstin extracted the cleaned dagger from the boiling water and approached the bed. She braced her thigh against Jonas's side as she prepared to remove the

arrowhead. The bed dipped as she leaned her weight upon it.

Drawing his sword, Sigurd came to his feet. "What are you planning to do, witch?"

Kerstin frowned at her husband's father. His menacing gaze showed his loathing as he shifted his feet on the rush-covered floor. Kerstin rolled her eyes. She couldn't work with him standing over her with a sword, questioning her every move.

"Minin," she called to the woman without moving her gaze from Sigurd. "Go and get Knut's dagger and bring it here."

Minin didn't hesitate but hustled over to her husband. Kerstin continued to stare at Sigurd. The air crackled with tension as the fire popped in the brazier. The candles shook in Ota's unsteady hands. When a panting Minin returned, she held out the dagger, but Kerstin didn't take it.

"Give it to Sigurd."

Minin obeyed. The man took it in his left hand and looked dumbfounded. "What do you mean by this?"

"I intend to take the arrowhead out of your son's shoulder. It will hurt him and he may cry out even though he's unconscious. If you wish to interfere, then his death will be upon your head and not mine. If Jonas dies by my hand, you may kill me with the dagger."

Sigurd's mouth dropped open with surprise and Kerstin returned to her chore. Leaning over Jonas, she studied his shoulder, seeing the red and swollen wound as well as the horrible scars of old. Gently, she prodded with her fingers to discover the location of the arrowhead.

Jonas stirred. "I'll kill you if you touch her," he mumbled before he settled back into unconsciousness.

Kerstin showed a grim smile, knowing he must be speaking to Elezer. Even now, he thought he owned her.

She looked at Sigurd. "The steel point is imbedded tight against the collarbone. That's why your men had trouble removing it. The fools broke off the shaft when they tried to push it through the flesh. If they had been patient and worked with it, they could have pushed it through without difficulty. Instead, they've ripped the flesh and made a greater mess for me to clean up."

"Can you get it out, mistress?" Marta asked, no longer appearing repulsed by Jonas's scars. The startling newness had worn off and the women seemed to realize Jonas was near death. His scars didn't matter.

"I'll have to dig it out." Looking up, Kerstin beckoned to Sigurd. "Do you think you dare put away your sword long enough to hold him for me?"

Sigurd nodded his craggy head, sheathed his sword and tossed the dagger on the table. His expression tender, he gently placed his gnarled hands on Jonas's back and held him tight. Sigurd's concern for his son touched Kerstin's heart as nothing else could. She must save Jonas.

What if she failed? If he died—She couldn't think about that now.

The room filled with the bracing odor of rosemary and garlic.

"Marta, remove the steeping herbs from the fire so the liquid will cool. Minin, cut up the garlic cloves and mash them to extract the juice. I'll get the arrowhead out."

The women nodded and set to work.

Taking up the cleaned dagger, Kerstin cut into Jonas's flesh, trying to damage as little of the muscle as possible. Jonas bellowed in rage and tried to knock her hand away. Sigurd leaned his weight against his son, using all his strength to hold him down. Kerstin braced her hand so she wouldn't jar the knife.

"Hold still, Jonas," Kerstin crooned in his ear. "I know it hurts, but you must allow me to help you. It'll be all right. I mean you no harm."

"Witch," he murmured as his eyes opened, rolled, then closed again. "Beautiful witch—you'll kill me." Again, he tried to rise.

"I gave you my pledge," Kerstin said. "I could have left you to die, but I stayed. I'll not harm you. If I do, your father will avenge you by killing me."

His hands clenched, his jaw tight with pain. Sweat rolled down his face, but he lay still while she dug into his poor, battered shoulder. Not even when she saw the metal and used the tip of the dagger to pry against the bone did he move. He trusted her word and Kerstin didn't know if

she should be pleased or dismayed.

The arrowhead lodged tight and unyielding. Jonas's men had broken off what remained of the shaft and driven the steel point deeper in their efforts to extract it. Kerstin applied more pressure. It gave with a scraping sound and she used the scissors to grip it as she pulled it out.

Holding it up for all of them to see, she beamed. "I got it!"

Sigurd exhaled a mighty breath, then held out his hand and she placed the bloody steel on his palm. He returned to his chair.

Kerstin dipped a clean cloth in the rosemary water and proceeded to cleanse the wound. It bled profusely but Kerstin knew that would help flush the poisons. She took the dish of garlic juice from Minin and smeared the noxious stuff on Jonas's shoulder. The pungent scent of garlic hung heavy in the air. Kerstin's eyes watered and her nose burned.

"What will that do?" Sigurd asked as he sat forward.

"It will kill the poisons," she replied without looking up.

The bleeding had almost stopped. Using the bandages, she let Minin help her wrap Jonas's shoulder. Then, she ladled angelica tea into his mouth and massaged his throat until he swallowed. She managed this tiresome chore with patience.

Sigurd came out of his seat but he didn't say anything for several moments. He paced the room as he glowered at Kerstin.

"It will reduce his fever and relieve the pain." To show Sigurd that it would not harm his son, she took a mouthful of the brew and swallowed it. Sigurd quieted and took his seat. When she reached for the garlic juice and mixed a warm tea to feed Jonas, again the man hopped to his feet.

"I've told you it kills the poisons." Kerstin smiled ruefully. "Though it has an unpleasant smell and we won't want to speak with Jonas until the scent wears off. You yourself eat garlic with your meals."

He nodded his shaggy head, but it wasn't until Kerstin swallowed a mouthful of garlic water that Sigurd

calmed once more.

All through the night and next day, Kerstin stayed by Jonas's side. She had no appetite for the food Marta brought her. Her hair became matted, her eyes scratchy from lack of sleep. Her shoulders drooped and she felt tired to her bones. She could not rest when Jonas might die.

Changing his bandage often, she wiped his fevered body with damp cloths and dribbled more teas down his parched throat. He mumbled incoherently and thrashed, but swallowed.

Though the women sought sleep, Sigurd and Knut remained in the room. They took their meals there, dozing only when Kerstin lay beside Jonas and closed her eyes to rest. Sigurd's gray eyes followed her every move until she no longer cared what he thought or that he suspected her motives.

The hall became quiet. The warriors were anxious for news of Jonas and also to meet the Eirikssons in battle. If Jonas hadn't collapsed, they would have already departed. Kerstin alone held the future of peace within her hands, which added to her apprehension.

Early morning on the third day, Kerstin let the fire in the brazier burn low. She opened the window to allow fresh air to cleanse away the strong odor of garlic. Jonas rested more easily, his breathing normal. Even his skin bore a healthy glow. The danger had passed.

"Your son will live," she told Sigurd.

The old warrior's gaze swerved to the bed. He went to feel Jonas's forehead and leaned close to study his son's face. He placed his fingers in front of Jonas's nose to feel his breath, then lifted one eyelid to see Jonas's pupil. Kerstin watched with amusement until he stood straight and nodded his approval.

"Thank you."

She stared, her mouth dropping open. It must be very hard for Sigurd to speak such words. "You're welcome."

Kerstin moved her stiff legs and arched her aching back as she reached for more tea. Sigurd intercepted the cup. Thinking that she would have to defend her motives once again, Kerstin opened her mouth to explain.

"I'll tend him," Sigurd said. "You should rest."

She looked up at his gruff face. He smiled kindly. Another milestone met. She had proven herself by saving his son. In that moment, Kerstin thought she had won herself a friend. She didn't care to remind Sigurd that her arrowhead had caused Jonas's illness in the first place.

Nodding her head, she pulled a warm fur about her to chase away the chill of the early morning air. She had changed out of her wedding clothes the day before and felt more comfortable in a simple ankle-length tunic dyed a cream color and woolen pinafore dyed a vivid gold.

Showing a wide grin, Knut stepped out to see to his own needs. With Sigurd's back to her, Kerstin took a few minutes to comb the tangles from her hair, then braided it down her back. Stifling a yawn, she went to Sigurd's vacated chair and curled up in it. Too tired to sleep, she watched the father tend his son. "He isn't a beast, you know. He's only a man."

Sigurd glanced at her with surprise. The new sunlight of dawn spilled through the open window and she saw the emotion on his face. His mouth worked as if he would speak and his eyes filled with outraged sorrow.

She inclined her head toward Jonas. "How was he burned?"

"How do you know the scars were caused by a fire?" Sigurd asked with some amazement.

She shrugged. "I've seen such scars before. Later today, I'll apply aloe to his skin to see if it might help. The scars are old, so I don't know if it'll do any good. My eldest brother brought my mother the aloe plant when he went trading in Miklagaard years ago. I'll use all I have and keep only enough to grow more plants."

Nodding his head, Sigurd remained silent for some time as he fed Jonas more garlic tea.

"I don't understand why the scars have earned Jonas the title of a beast," Kerstin said, hoping he might tell her how it happened.

With a scoffing sound, Sigurd ran one of his hands over Jonas's back and upper arms. Kerstin knew he could feel the ridges and valleys of the scars, for she felt them many times herself over the past few days. Now she understood why Jonas always wore a tunic with long

sleeves and a high neck. He must be self-conscious of his disfigurement.

A wrenching sigh escaped Sigurd. "As a woman, you can understand the repulsion of the scars. You saw how people react when they see my son's body. No woman wants to be tied to such an ugly man or lie with him beneath the furs on lonely winter nights. They pity him, repulsed by his ugliness. A man such as Jonas cannot accept either."

"But he isn't ugly. I've yet to see a man more handsome—" Kerstin stuttered to a halt. She realized she confided too much and her face heated.

Sigurd laughed at her discomfiture. "Many women disagree. They're drawn to his handsome face, but in the sleeping furs, they're repulsed by him. Until the king ordered that he marry you, Jonas thought to never wed."

Kerstin filled with sympathy for Jonas, but she felt no pity. Not for him. He was a man to be admired, strong and independent. Lonely.

What had his life been like, traveling the world as a mercenary, selling his sword arm because he had no wife and children waiting at home for him?

After her first initial surprise when she touched her husband, she felt the finely honed muscles beneath his flesh and admired his hardened strength. He seemed a man among men and, in her mind, quite whole and worthy of being loved—

She stiffened at her strange thoughts. She loved Elezer. Never would she love Jonas. Not when he believed her to be a witch. "How did it happen?" she asked again.

Sigurd looked away from her, his jaw tight, his face a sudden mask of ice. "It was because of you."

Kerstin gasped. "Me? What did I have to do with it?"

Sigurd set the tea aside and rose from the rumpled bed. He clasped his hands behind his back and stared out the small window as he spoke. In a low, aching whisper, he told Kerstin of a time, years earlier, when she had run away from home.

"Your father believed I held you hostage and he and his men attacked Hawkscliffe to take you back."

Kerstin's mouth dropped open and her heart sank. She remembered the time. She had been only twelve

years old when her father refused to let her accompany her brothers on a trading foray. For the first time she fled to Elezer on her own. Her father had been beside himself with worry.

Sigurd's voice trembled. "It was the eve of Jonas's marriage to Olga of Hedeby. Your father's men set fire to my hall, trapping her inside. Jonas ran in to save her, but Bjorn pulled him from the flames. Jonas barely survived and Bjorn stayed by his side night and day until he was certain Jonas would live."

Little wonder Jonas loved Bjorn. They had been brothers and cared for each other.

Kerstin's hands shook as she listened to the tale and she clasped them together. A lump lodged in her throat as she fought back tears. Now she understood why Jonas hated her. She had indirectly cost him the life of his bride and left him scarred so no woman would have him. Her crimes against him multiplied. She didn't fathom why Jonas hadn't killed her when he had the chance.

"I didn't—" Her voice cracked and she took a steadying breath. "I didn't know he had another wife."

He must have loved the woman dearly. No wonder he called her a witch. Not only did he blame her for Bjorn's death, but he also thought her responsible for killing his first wife. He had so many reasons to detest her.

A tear tumbled down her cheek and she brushed it away. Even if she made him believe she was no witch and hadn't murdered Bjorn, he would still blame her for Olga.

"Now I know why Jonas hates me."

Sigurd snorted. "Your father allows you too much freedom."

Freedom? Kerstin's jaw hardened. Foolish men. They appreciated her healing skills when they needed it, and they thought nothing of forcing her into marriage, but they didn't want her to think for herself. Only when they left their women for months on end while they went trading or pillaging did they want them to be independent, fierce, unafraid, and loyal.

Sigurd leaned against the wall and crossed his ankles. "After the fire, Jonas turned to war to strengthen his body. Afraid he might lose the use of his arms and legs, he became consumed by working with a sword. He

refused to quit even through the excruciating pain. He never liked being a mercenary soldier, but he believed it was all he could do. That was before Bjorn died. Once I'm gone, Jonas will become Earl of Hawkscliffe. He's a natural leader of men and it's his duty to create heirs."

Kerstin didn't reply. She saw Jonas in a different light. As she looked at him, lying still upon the bed, he no longer appeared to be a fire-breathing beast, or an invincible warrior. He embodied a vulnerable, yet strong, sensitive, yet determined, independent, and lonely, man.

A man of vengeance who blamed her for two deaths.

The thought made Kerstin's heart thud. The scars upon his flesh were the least of her concern. What about the scars upon his soul? Never could she heal those.

Leaning her head back, Kerstin closed her eyes. The door opened and closed as Sigurd left. The only sound in the room was Jonas's gentle breathing. Finally, Sigurd trusted her enough to leave her alone with his son.

She sighed and closed her eyes again.

Chapter Eight

Kerstin slept for hours. When she awoke, she sat up in the hard chair and gazed about her parent's room. Jonas still slept peacefully on the box bed, the fur covers thrown aside to expose his scarred chest and the bandage she had wrapped around his injury.

The fire in the brazier had burned itself out. She slid from the chair and built up the fire so Jonas wouldn't become chilled.

Out in the hall, she heard dogs barking and children laughing. Her father must have thought it safe enough to allow the women and children to return from their hiding place high up the mountain. Many of the warriors had already left to meet the Eirikssons in war. Kerstin's father would soon join them, once certain she was safe from Sigurd's wrath.

She paused and stared at the bed. Jonas lay still, yet he had moved his head to the other side and his right hand rested by his face instead of down by his thigh. His mouth softened, his lean cheeks not as harsh. He slept more peacefully.

Bending at the waist, Kerstin felt his brow, finding it cool to the touch. The stench of garlic hung heavy in the air. It would take several days for him to sweat it out of his body.

With quick efficiency, Kerstin removed the soiled bandage and swabbed the wound with more garlic juice. The pungent fumes were quite strong and she tried to hold her breath until she finished the chore.

When done, she picked up a coarse bar of soap she made last summer. Bringing it to her nose, she sniffed its sweet lavender perfume. She picked up a soft woolen cloth, dipped it in the basin of warm water and squeezed it out, intending to wash herself. From behind, she heard the door open. Turning, she expected to greet Minin or Ota.

"Elezer!" She gasped.

Without a word, he closed the door and came to pull her into his arms as she dropped the bar of soap. He held her close to his chest and Kerstin felt the rumble of his happy laughter.

"Oh, how I've missed you," he told her.

Kerstin pulled away and smiled, glancing at the bed, fearing the repercussions if they were found together. "I've—I've missed you, too."

But she didn't feel the same toward him. She tried to tell herself it was because she was now a married woman, yet she knew it for something more. Something she couldn't put her finger on.

Elezer had dressed in a soft, woolen shirt and trousers, his only weapon a long dagger sheathed at his side. "You don't seem happy to see me."

She laughed and stepped over to the wash basin. "Of course I'm happy to see you."

He stood at her back, turned her into his arms and pressed her face against the warmth of his throat. She drew her head away, finding his scent of sweat and wood smoke distasteful. Why couldn't he smell clean like Jonas? She even preferred the scent of garlic to Elezer's odor.

"You shouldn't have come here. I'm married to Jonas now."

He grinned. "I wouldn't have come if Minin hadn't assured me Jonas was still unconscious. I believe we're safe for now."

Casting back her head, she looked up at the man she had loved and tried to smile. "I'm glad to see you."

Elezer's gaze caressed her face and Kerstin adored the way his azure eyes sparkled down at her. Reaching up, she fingered his still-damp hair. He must have just bathed, yet he still smelled. Even so, it felt good to touch him. To be held by someone who loved her. Comfortable and safe.

"Your army is here with you?" she asked.

"Aye." He nodded, finally released her and stepped back. "We leave with your father and Sigurd in the morning. A runner brought word the Eirikssons are approaching York."

Kerstin tensed. Her father could be killed. Many men would die. "They wouldn't dare attack the king's stronghold."

A wry grin spread its way across Elezer's handsome face. "Their army is as large as ours, my love. They dare anything if it means control of York. While you have tended the Beast, the king has left to gather his men at Hawkscliffe. We'll meet them there tomorrow and go on to engage the Eirikssons."

Kerstin didn't like that he called Jonas a beast. "How many ships does our fleet have?"

"At least a hundred. And King Hakon has made a pact with King Athelstan of Wessex to provide fifty more war ships filled with Saxons. But there's rumor that the Eirikssons have gained support from King Harald of Denmark. It'll be a great battle."

He seemed much too happy about this war, unworried about the outcome.

Kerstin turned away. She imagined the blood and gore. She wouldn't be there to tend the wounded and many might die.

Reaching out his hand, Elezer cupped her cheek and lifted her face to him. He smiled with a tenderness she couldn't deny. "Don't worry. Your father is healed from his wound and I'll watch his back."

Jonas's words filtered through her mind. He pitied any man partnered in battle with Elezer, because he was known to desert the field and his partner was often cut down. She must warn her father to partner with Knut.

"Thank you, Elezer. You are truly noble."

Kerstin saw from his delighted expression that her praise pleased him. "I'll return to you safely and we'll find a way for us to be together."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

Elezer chuckled and fingered the end of her long braid. "Come with me. I have no doubt you could blend in. You've dressed as a boy and fought valiantly on more than one occasion. No doubt your healing skills would also benefit the wounded." He cast a wary eye toward the bed. "You'd be free of that scarred giant once and for all."

She shook her head. "I won't betray my people, or my husband. I gave him my pledge."

"Has he consummated the marriage yet?"

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment. "This isn't a proper conversation between us."

"There must be a way for us to be together," he said with thick emotion.

A forlorn tear slid down Kerstin's cheek as she looked up at his dear face. How she longed to confide her feelings, but it would be dishonorable to do so now she belonged to another. If nothing else, Kerstin was loyal to the death and she would never betray Jonas now they were wed. She resigned herself to living a loveless marriage with a man who hated her.

The smile on Elezer's face faded, replaced by a gleam of loathing. He pushed Kerstin away and reached for the thin dagger at his side. Clutching it in his hand, he approached the bed with caution.

Kerstin stared after him. "What are you doing?"

"There is a way for us to be together, Kerstin. Go outside. It'll take only a moment and you'll be free of him. Turn around and go outside now—"

"Nay!" she cried and hurried to grab his arm. "You can't murder Jonas while he sleeps. He's not even able to defend himself."

Jonas's words came back to haunt her. He promised to have his door guarded so Elezer wouldn't try to murder him in his sleep. The fact that Elezer intended to do just that brought a blaze of disbelief to her mind.

Kerstin clutched Elezer's arm and pulled with all her might. Her feet skidded across the floor, her puny weight no hindrance to his strength. Surely this was a jest. Elezer couldn't be serious.

"Nay, Elezer. Think! If you kill Jonas, there'll be nowhere for you to hide. The king, Sigurd, my own father and even I are bound to hunt you down."

Elezer laughed, a low, maniacal sound that stunned her. Never had she seen this side of him and she stared in shock. "I'll claim it was self-defense, Kerstin. If you testify that Jonas attacked me, no one will question us."

Her mouth dropped open. "Sigurd will question it. I won't lie. What about your honor?"

Elezer's eyes filled with a malicious light. Even his face looked shadowed with evil. Kerstin stared aghast. He

behaved as if he were two different men.

"We'll flee to the south, Kerstin. We can go to the Eirikssons. They'll offer us protection." He laughed, the sound diabolical.

A gasp of dismay escaped her lips. "You speak of treason. I'd rather die than do such a thing. The Eirikssons murdered my mother. I'd never seek sanctuary with them."

His head whipped about and he glared at her. His blue eyes, sparkling and merry only moments before, now glittered with disgust. His anger rushed at her and she longed to run and hide. She could not, since she stood between Jonas and death. If she left the room, Elezer would murder her husband while he slept.

As children, Elezer had chased her and stolen kisses even when she tried to shoot him with her toy arrows. After Bjorn's death, he had given her comfort and she loved him for it. Was this the man she came to trust? Did she even know him?

"You'd rather die than be with me?" he demanded.

"You aren't yourself, Elezer. You're upset because Jonas made me his wife and because we go to war."

He laughed. The abrasive sound filled her heart with grief. "He's my enemy, Kerstin. Killing him is the only way to get what I want."

He thrust her aside and Kerstin started to scream. Men crowded the steading. One of them was bound to hear her...and Elezer would be taken away in chains. She stifled the cry. How could she do that to the man she loved?

Drawing herself up, she jutted her chin, her shoulders tensed. Indeed, she felt sickened. She could never live with herself if she allowed him to murder Jonas, but neither could she cause Elezer's death.

"You will do as I tell you, Kerstin," Elezer said.

A whirl of movement caught her eye and she inhaled sharply as Jonas rose from the bed. He moved so fast, Elezer had little time to react. She saw the flash of steel and wondered where Jonas got the knife. The furs covering his body tumbled to the floor as he pressed the gleaming blade against Elezer's throat.

"And you will do as you are told," Jonas growled.

Kerstin's eyes widened and she gaped at her husband. Standing naked beside Elezer, he crouched slightly, a brutal expression on his face as he prepared to slice Elezer's throat. His body gleamed with perspiration caused by his fever and he appeared completely undisturbed by his nakedness.

"Drop it," Jonas ordered in a deadly whisper.

Elezer's eyes bulged as a drop of blood trickled down his throat. His expression became one of horror. He shuddered, dropped his weapon and the dagger clattered to the floor.

Kerstin clasped her arms around her, trying to still her trembling body. She hardly believed this nightmare. She wanted to awaken, safe and secure in her own bed.

Jonas's expression chilled her as he kicked Elezer's dagger aside with his bare foot. It rolled and bumped against the leg of the table. One corner of Jonas's mouth lifted in an icy smile, a conqueror, a savage. He would kill Elezer. Would that be any less painful for Kerstin to bear? She knew Jonas capable of administering a swift death. His muscles bunched as he prepared for the final thrust.

"Nay, Jonas, don't harm him," she said. "He's not thinking right. He knows only that you've taken the woman he was to wed. It's me you should blame. I—I encouraged him. Please, Jonas, don't kill him."

"See how she sweetly begs for your life?" Jonas sneered, his words laced with venom as he spoke in Elezer's ear. "Have you forgotten my warning? I promised to kill you the next time you touched my wife."

Kerstin's throat went dry, her eyes wide with terror.

Jonas stared at Kerstin, the blade poised at Elezer's throat. He longed to thrust the knife deep and end Elezer's life. It was no more than the miserable cur deserved for trying to murder him in his sleep.

Elezer's Adam's apple bobbed as he tried to swallow. His eyes rounded and he breathed in short pants. No longer did he appear fierce or confident. A coward, he reeked of fear.

"Do you wish to challenge me?" Jonas asked.

According to Danelaw, Elezer could challenge Jonas in combat and meet him honorably to win Kerstin's hand.

It would force the king and even Alrik to accept the outcome. When strong and healthy, Jonas would have no trouble defeating Elezer. Now, still weak from illness, he hoped Elezer didn't notice his trembling hands. If the cur accepted combat, Jonas might lose both Kerstin and his life. A gamble, but if he knew enough of Elezer's character, the man would refuse.

Elezer's mouth flopped open. "I yield. I yield."

Jonas's laughter filled the room and he let the other man go, stepping back, prepared to fight if Elezer reached for his dagger. Out of the corner of his eye, Jonas saw Kerstin's ashen face and wide eyes. She gave a shuddering sigh of relief.

She loved Elezer. The knowledge twisted like a knife in Jonas's gut.

Through the open window, he heard the voices of thralls as they returned from the cow byre carrying pails of morning milk. They laughed, oblivious to the horror going on inside this room.

Elezer clasped his bloodied throat and scrambled for the door. Jonas stared after him with contempt, the knife still clutched in his hand, absolutely unconcerned with his nudity. As he watched the man fumble for the door latch, he felt nothing but disgust. He had no respect for Elezer of Lade. Could Kerstin understand why? She had witnessed his cowardice first-hand. How could she love such a man?

Without a word Elezer turned the door handle, threw open the panel, and raced out of the room.

Jonas heard Kerstin's mournful gasp and saw tears hovering on her lashes. Her hair surrounded her like a flaming cloud. Seeing the man she loved brought so low must hurt her deeply. He thought it for the best, to show her Elezer's true nature. She must find out eventually. Better now than later.

Still, Jonas hated injuring her feelings. A look of anguish marred her naivety and beauty. Jonas had torn her from her secure world and forced her to abandon all her innocent girlhood dreams.

Innocent? Bah! She murdered Bjorn, hadn't she? What was innocent about that? The only reason she tried to keep Elezer from stabbing him was out of fear the king

would have her killed.

Rubbing his shoulder, he sought to ease the throbbing ache there. The pain had lessened and he was able to tolerate it now, though his legs trembled with weakness.

"Were you able to remove the arrowhead?" he asked.

Standing still as stone, Kerstin nodded.

He thought to thank her, both for removing the arrowhead and for defending him against Elezer. If not for her, he wouldn't have awakened in time. Her actions confused him. If she wanted him dead, she could have left him when he collapsed, or have stood back and let Elezer stab him. Would a witch save his life just to please the king?

Kneading the nape of his neck, he fought his confusion. He didn't know what to believe. "Close the door, wife. I don't care to expose myself to the entire household."

"Then get back into bed." Kerstin did as he asked, pausing at the door, her back to him. She braced her hands on the solid panel, leaning her forehead against the wood as she visibly trembled.

All at once, he could not stand to have her look at his scarred body. For some reason, he longed for her approval. It almost unmanned him to know that she had seen each and every scar on his torso. He grabbed some furs and covered himself.

"Why did you spare his life?" she asked in a soft voice.

Jonas didn't answer and Kerstin turned to look at him. Though he could not comprehend why, he hated the thought that she might loathe him if he killed Elezer.

He pointed to a brown crockery pitcher of water on the table. She handed it to him and he tilted the brim to his mouth and drank in thirsty gulps. Droplets ran from his lips, down his throat and to the bandage covering his chest. When he satisfied his thirst, he handed it back to her and wiped his mouth with one arm.

Jonas reached for his knife and lay back on the bed, clasping the weapon in his hand, conscious of her watching his every move. He dragged the furs back over himself until he was fully covered, except for one arm,

which lay relaxed above his head. If Elezer returned, he would be prepared. He closed his eyes with a sigh.

"You're not invincible after all. The encounter with Elezer has sapped what little strength you had."

He hated for her to discern his weakness.

"You're weak from loss of blood and in no condition to fight Elezer. I misjudged you, Jonas. I think your greatest strategy lies not only in strength of arms but also in bluffing the enemy into believing you're fiercer, stronger, and more lethal. It certainly worked with Elezer."

True! How he detested that man. "Elezer is a coward. No doubt you mourn your lost love."

She grew quiet for a moment. "Why didn't you kill him? I know you could have done so, even in your weakened state."

She thought so? He wasn't so certain, though he would have fought to the death. Jonas opened one eye and peered at her. "Be grateful I let your lover live."

Kerstin rolled her eyes and walked to the other side of the bed. She no longer seemed frightened as she leaned against the wall and stared at the fire. This pleased him. In time, he hoped they might come to trust one another, though he doubted it.

She shook her head. "Elezer has never been my lover."

His other eye opened and he frowned, though her words caused elation to race to his heart. "Perhaps you only meant to make Bjorn sick with your magic potions." He lifted his brows and watched her squirm. "You've been known to avoid marriage with anyone but Elezer. I'll grant it's possible you didn't mean for Bjorn to die."

"I gave him nothing. Elezer and I were not in love until after Bjorn's death. I had no reason to murder your brother."

Jonas didn't believe her. Her actions in fleeing to Elezer proved she was capable of duplicity. Closing his eyes, he sighed, his chest expanding beneath the heavy furs. "You wear your heart on your sleeve, Kerstin. Be careful not to give your enemy an advantage."

"Are you my enemy?"

"I'm your husband."

"You have spared Elezer's life twice. He'll come to

know your tactics well and it'll give him an advantage."

With his eyes closed, he grinned and arched his neck. "I'm wise enough to know a willing wench is more pleasurable in my bed than an angry one. You love Elezer. If I kill him, it would make a martyr out of him and you'd hate me even more. It's better that I let him live. As time passes, he'll show you what a gutless swine he really is."

She gave a scornful laugh. "Your audacity truly amazes me. You're pompous in your assumptions."

Jonas burrowed deeper into the furs and settled himself to sleep. "It's quite simple, Kerstin. One day, Elezer will force me to kill him, of that I have little doubt. I only hope you've come to your senses first. I don't want your revenge directed at me any more than it already is."

"And what of your vengeance?"

"It will wait."

Jonas's words sent a tremor of foreboding down Kerstin's spine. One day, he would kill her, she was certain of it. Like a spider, he waited until she was caught in his web and he could spring at her. The years yawned before them. Once the king won his war and no longer cared if she lived or died, Jonas would make his move. Then, he would find a more willing woman to give him heirs.

Kerstin stepped away from the bed. She reached for the woolen cloth in the washbasin and wrung it out, choking the cloth as if it were Jonas's neck. Rivulets of water trickled over her fingers and she tried to let the cooling liquid soothe her frayed nerves.

"You shouldn't be so certain of yourself. I might not stop Elezer the next time he finds you vulnerable." She made this hollow threat, to take him off balance. Never could she stand by and watch Elezer murder Jonas.

He smiled, his eyes still closed. "When I'm feeling better, I'll show you just how certain I am."

At a light tapping on the door, Kerstin gave a curt reply. Minin came in carrying a tray of broth, a mug of milk, and brown flatbread spread with yellow butter.

"Place it there." Kerstin nodded at the table beside her.

Barely sparing Jonas a glance, Minin did as ordered

and then scurried for the door, closing it behind her.

The tangy aroma of the broth filled the room. Jonas opened his eyes and sat up, easing his injured shoulder away from the bed. Picking up the mug of fresh milk, Kerstin threw a frosty glare at him as she handed him the cup.

“Elezer is desperate right now and not thinking clearly. I don’t believe he would have tried to murder you if he had been in his right mind.” Yet her trust in Elezer faltered.

Jonas grunted. As he brought the cup to his lips, he peered at her over the brim, his eyes sparkling like blue gems. “I know full well that you saved my life, not because you care for me but because you fear the king’s wrath if I die. I’ve watched you tend your people and learned in the short time I’ve known you that there’s nothing you love more than them.”

As he took a long drink of milk, Kerstin wished to deny his words but they were true.

When Jonas lowered the cup, he wore a white mustache of froth on his upper lip. Hiding a smile of amusement, she handed him a cloth. At his quizzical look, she indicated he should wipe his mouth, which he did.

“If you hate Elezer so much, why haven’t you challenged him in open combat before today?” she asked.

Jonas peered at her, his brow furrowed, his gaze direct. “It would be murder. The man isn’t capable of defending himself in honest battle. Besides, the king needs Elezer’s men to fight. If I killed him now, it would open up another hornet’s nest. Our people don’t need that right now.” He laid back and the box bed creaked as he shifted to get more comfortable. “Don’t worry, Kerstin. I’ll be cautious during the battle so Elezer’s blade doesn’t find my back.”

Kerstin longed to defend Elezer’s honor. After today, she couldn’t. His cowardly actions shook her faith in him as nothing else could. She wanted to change the subject.

“What is it that makes you frown so, my lord? Does your wound pain you?”

“Nay, it mends well enough.”

“Then, perhaps it’s your hunger.” Sitting close beside him on the bed, she picked up the saucer of broth. As she

pressed it to his lips, he drank of the nourishing liquid, his ice blue gaze resting on her.

He lifted a hand and brushed a tendril of hair away from her cheek. "Yes, I'm hungry."

Warmth flooded her and she looked away.

"How long?" he asked.

She gave him a questioning look.

"How long have I been ill?"

"This is the fourth day. You've made an amazing recovery."

Tearing pieces of coarse brown bread with her fingers, she placed a piece of it against his lips. He opened his mouth and bit down gently on her finger, taking both the bread and her finger into his mouth.

She gasped and jerked her hand away. He chuckled, his eyes glowing like hot coals.

Tearing off more bread, she handed him a piece rather than placing it in his mouth. Jonas reached to take it and the furs slipped from his arm and chest. He grabbed for them, his face flushed with color.

Guilt shredded her heart. Words hovered on the tip of her tongue to apologize for the fire that killed his first wife, but she didn't want to remind him of the reasons he hated her.

"Unless you're cold, leave them," Kerstin said. "While I've tended you, I've seen every inch of your body. You have no secrets from me, Jonas Sigurdsson."

She didn't know why she sought to reassure him. As he stared into her eyes, she felt the flush of heat stain her face. Rising from the bed, she grew ill-at-ease. Somehow, their bond had changed, and she didn't understand what or how, nor was she prepared to deal with it—this all happened too fast to suit her.

As she turned her head to look at Jonas, she half-expected him to appear embarrassed. He surprised her yet again. His gaze remained steady on her face as he chewed the bread and swallowed. His naked chest gleamed in front of her, but this time he did nothing to shield the scars from her view. Now it seemed he dared her to show repulsion for his disfigurement. He would be astonished to know that she found nothing revolting about him, except his temper.

His gaze swept her and when he spoke, his tone dry. "My secrets would yet surprise you, Kerstin of Moere." Though he finished the broth and several bites of bread, his appetite appeared weak.

"I will bathe you now." Kerstin brushed crumbs from the furs and brought linens to lie beside him on the bed to dry him afterward.

Picking up the chunk of soap with one hand, she fingered the furs covering Jonas with her other hand. The pelts were rich and soft, a variety of brown bear and red fox. The long hairs tickled her fingers as she moved them away from Jonas's torso. Ignoring his uneasy frown, she lathered his chest. Her fingers glided over his warm flesh as she washed him. She felt no discomfiture for she had become accustomed to his body. Though she would never admit it, she had even come to delight in doing this small service for him.

A slight frown tugged at his brows. He studied her, as if to determine if he could trust her.

With quick movements, she rinsed him. A cry of fright escaped her when Jonas grasped her hands and pulled her close so she leaned across his wet chest. The water soaked her dress, the cloying wetness sticking to her skin.

"Now look what you've done."

His warm breath caressed her face as he looked at her. Their gazes caught and held. As his clear eyes probed into hers, she almost saw his mind working. She longed to ask him what he thought, but her throat went dry and she couldn't speak.

Although he held her firm, his hands remained gentle. He clenched his jaw, his mouth tight, his brows furrowed with thought.

She didn't struggle, but wondered what he wanted. Her nose twitched at the smell of garlic. For once, Jonas didn't smell of mint and cloves. She smiled with amusement, not daring to tell him that he stank. Even so, she preferred his odor to Elezer's.

Her skin burned where it touched his. Her heart pounded with excitement and her arms quivered. She would never admit she hoped he might kiss her.

His gaze lowered to her mouth. "You're lovely. And

you're my wife, Kerstin of Moere. Elezer will never have you."

"I want *no* man." How she wished it were true. Seeing Elezer's gutless character, she realized she no longer wished to be with him. Jonas was the only man who—

Kerstin refused to complete her thought. Marriage to him would hold no satisfaction. Not as long as they had this canyon of hate between them.

"Tis just as well," he replied gruffly. "It'll mean less arguments and fewer entanglements for me."

He kissed her then, and she sighed with delight. Heaven help her, she longed for his touch. As his mouth slanted across hers, she found herself all but lying in his lap. His strong arms cradled her, his hoarse breath hot against her cheek.

Jonas released her and once more lay back on the bed, closing his eyes. He rubbed his shoulder with one hand, breathing heavily.

Kerstin smiled. "I don't think you're in any shape to be chasing after my skirt."

He opened his eyes and grinned. "Give me a few more days, then we shall see."

His charm melted her heart and she felt a blaze of heat fill her body with anticipation. Sultry kisses were one thing, but consummation was another. It could bind them even closer when she longed to run away.

She hurried with his bath. Several times, she thought he might object. She saw him hesitate when she asked that he turn over onto his stomach. He did so, presenting his back to her. He watched her from over his shoulder, as she soaped his scarred shoulder. He focused on her expressions, seeming curious of her reaction to him.

She ignored him and acted like nothing was wrong. With a minimum of movements, Kerstin rinsed the suds away and towed him dry with the clean linens. If he thought his scars repulsed her, he was mistaken.

Now that he was awake, she refused to bathe the lower half of his body. Placing the washbasin aside, she went to the table where she picked up a jar of clear ointment. Removing the lid, she brought it back to the bed

and dipped her fingers into the jellied substance, then set the jar close beside Jonas's head.

"What have you there?" Jonas asked with a frown.

"Aloe." She knelt beside him and rubbed the stuff into the scars covering his back.

Jonas stared at the concoction, then sniffed. "I don't detect any unique aroma. I only smell garlic."

She laughed.

His nose crinkled as he sniffed again. "What does it do?"

She dipped her fingers into the jar. "It will soften your skin and heal the scars."

Moving beneath her stroking fingertips, he scoffed. "My burns are already healed. There's no need to pay them further heed."

She continued to massage the ointment into his skin. "We shall see."

Jonas let the soothing sound of her voice wash over him. Her hands felt gentle but firm and he relaxed beneath her ministering. The pads of her fingertips moved over the contours of his muscles, kneading, massaging, easing the tension from his weary body. Years of hiding his scarred flesh had conditioned him to be embarrassed without his shirt. Yet, she truly seemed not to care about the ugliness of his marred skin. She soothed his soul and he could not bring himself to pull away. Dare he hope she was sincere in her touch?

"Oh," he groaned with delight. "That feels good."

Slowly, his muscles relaxed. His body felt weak as a newborn babe. The encounter with Elezer had left him shaking from the exertion and his endurance ebbed.

She rubbed his shoulders, careful of his wound, her hands gliding over his biceps and forearms. Then, she bandaged the wound and bade him roll to his back. He did so and she dipped her fingers into the jar again. With gentle strokes, she smoothed the balm over his chest and down his abdomen. He grew fully awake now, his body alive with sensation, his blood pounding in his veins.

Opening his eyes, his gaze swept her. Wisps of fiery hair had escaped her braid and framed her angelic face. Her emerald gaze focused on her task, her lips parted as

she breathed. She had small and delicate features, her skin clear and smooth. Her damp dress did little to hide her feminine curves and he realized she was more than beautiful. She certainly didn't look like a witch, but that was part of her deceit, to entice him into her enchantment. He watched her, looking for any sign that his body was abhorrent to her. Nothing but serene beauty graced her features.

As her hands swept past his stomach, he grasped them and held on tight. She looked at him, her gaze one of wonder and innocence. Did she truly not know what she did to him? How much he wanted her? He supposed even a witch could be innocent to a man's touch. Perhaps Elezer had not yet taught her passion.

The uncertainty in her green eyes he knew was not because of his scars. He traced the pad of his thumb over the soft flesh of her fingers and fixed his gaze on her face. He longed to kiss her again but knew that would lead to other things and he was in no condition to see it through.

Kerstin blinked and raised a questioning brow, then withdrew her hands. He wanted to ask her so many questions about her life. To talk of things a husband and wife would speak of. But he didn't know where to begin. Confiding such things required trust, something they had none of.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I—I nothing." He was tongue-tied!

She looked away and his heart wrenched. Would they ever have a comfortable acceptance of each other? Jonas longed to make her smile, to feel her soft, warm and pliant in his arms. When she placed her palms on his shoulders, he blew out his breath in a great sigh. His body simmered with fire, yet he had no stamina.

"Shh," she quieted him with a whisper. "You need rest. Be still and don't be afraid to sleep. I'll watch that Elezer doesn't return. I gave you my pledge."

He almost laughed. She thought he feared sleep. If she only knew. "You also pledged to give me children."

She rose from the bed and put the lid back on the pot of aloe before setting it aside. She didn't speak as she gathered up discarded linens and tidied the room. She picked up the basin of bath water and was about to leave.

“Kerstin, if I hadn’t awakened, would you have left today with Elezer?”

Her back to him, she halted before the door. When she spoke, her voice reached him, clear and strong. “You know the answer already. I would never betray my people by seeking refuge with the Eirikssons. I am no traitor.”

“But what about your brother, Einar? You could seek refuge with him at Orkney.”

“Aye, I could go to Einar at Orkney.” She nodded and turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. To see her eyes glitter with unshed tears surprised him. She left the room without answering his question.

Jonas lay back on the bed and relaxed, pondering on the woman he wed—a curiosity. Would she flee to Einar, or stay with him? He had no doubt her motives for nursing him back to health had been out of fear of the king’s wrath. But she didn’t need to bathe him. Servants could do that well enough, though they wouldn’t like the task. And she had taken the time to rub that ointment on him.

Aloe, she called it. Jonas didn’t believe it would help his scars, but it did have a soothing quality. Already his skin felt softer, less tight. And he enjoyed the feel of Kerstin’s hands moving over him, soft yet firm, easing his tense muscles.

Aye, he wanted her. In time, he would take her to him and give her his child. Gradually, her love for Elezer would fade as she accepted her role as his wife. Though a bit reluctant, she seemed more tolerant of him now, yet he suspected she still longed for her former betrothed.

Jonas hardened his heart. Let her brood over Elezer all she wanted. She was his wife now, and nothing but his death would change that. And he didn’t plan to die anytime soon. He didn’t care if she hated him. He didn’t need her love.

Or did he?

The thought made him grimace. Somehow, he wanted more, but he had long ago learned to live with life’s disappointments.

Chapter Nine

"It's a good day to die," Alrik said as he smiled at Kerstin.

She stood with him in the middle of the yard and came outside to bid him and the other men farewell. "It's an even better day to live," she replied in earnest.

A pleasant breeze teased the air, enough to stir the square sails of the dragon warships and speed them on to battle. Kerstin wrapped her cloak about her shoulders. Though she wasn't cold, trepidation filled her. How many times had she stood like this and watched her father and brothers go off to war or raiding? A normal occurrence, something most Vikings loved, yet Kerstin hated it.

Would she ever see her father again, or would he die in battle? She envisioned his beloved body, mutilated and bloodied, left for the wolves to devour. Who would see to his burial? Her heart pounded at the thought and tears clogged her throat.

"Don't worry," he said. "I always return."

Not worry? Her mother had died just last summer, followed by her brother Tostig. She couldn't stand to lose her father, too.

Then she thought of all Jonas had lost. His wife and brother, his body scarred. No wonder he was so angry.

"You're not immortal." Kerstin didn't want her father to go. Yet, he must. Never would she ask him to shirk his duty to lead his people against oppressors. If they didn't stop the Eirikssons, they could destroy all she held dear.

Dressed in full battle gear, Alrik stood tall and proud. With his shoulders pressed back, he looked younger than his years. The blade of his sword gleamed in the morning dawn.

"How handsome you look, Father."

He returned her smile and patted the coarse woolen scarf covering her head. It hid her red hair from view. Sigurd's superstitious men believed she was a witch. She

needed no accusations to ruin the day.

All around the steading, armed warriors stood talking together or packing provisions and weapons to carry on board the ships. Women bustled about with supplies, bidding their sons and husbands a safe journey while making sure their little ones didn't get trampled. By tomorrow afternoon, the men would be fighting a bloody battle with the Eirikssons.

The air smelled of dust and sweat. Kerstin welcomed a cleansing breeze that blew up from the river. She blinked several times and swallowed, forcing herself to be brave.

"You don't have enough men to fight the Eirikssons." Her voice quavered.

"I've sent a ship to Ulster and then to the Orkneys to fetch Einar and Thorir. Your brothers will bring their men and come with haste when they understand our need."

Kerstin nodded, but her heart felt like a leaden weight in her chest. They all would be at risk and she wished not to lose any of them. "I made certain the blacksmith was meticulous in mending any weak links in your chain mail."

Alrik laughed, holding his conical helmet beneath his left arm. "I have no doubt you stood over his shoulder while he did the work." He brushed his hand over her cheek. Though his face was lined with age, his gray eyes crinkled when he smiled.

"May Odin protect you." Kerstin spoke in a strong voice as she turned her face and pressed a kiss to his palm.

"Aye, daughter, and also you," Alrik whispered.

Kerstin fell into his arms. The links of his mail dug into the soft flesh of her cheek but she hardly noticed. He smelled of leather and wood smoke, for he had sat up most of the night around a fire, making plans with Sigurd.

"God be with you, Father. If He is generous, we will meet again." Her broken whisper was for Alrik's ears alone.

Though her father continued to worship his pagan gods, he had come to tolerate Kerstin's Christian beliefs

and he made no comment about it. "Don't cry, little one. Your mother taught you better. Besides, you don't want our people to think you're weak. They'll need your guidance while I'm gone. You must show your new husband what you are made of."

Kerstin nodded and dried her eyes. Alrik flashed her a self-assured grin. Then, bending down, he picked up his heavy pack and slung it over his shoulder. Turning, he headed toward the quay without a backward glance. It was their way.

As Thorir's wife, it should have been Letta's duty to lead in the absence of their men, but she was in no mental condition to do so. The chore should then fall on Jonas, but Kerstin's people didn't trust him. Awaiting her brother's return, they would look to Kerstin for guidance.

One day soon, Jonas would take her to his home, something she dreaded. No doubt she would be a stranger there, hated and reviled.

Kerstin looked toward the river where it meandered through the valley and out to sea. The azure waters wound around the rolling hills, clear and smooth as glass. She saw the war ships, their sails whipping in the wind. Hundreds of ships filled the river, their square sails striped blood red and vivid green. Their dragon prows led the way to victory or death.

Kerstin heard the beat of a drum, its low, bass tone keeping pace with her heart as the men rowed away from shore. Clenching her jaw, she turned from the river and faced the hall. Her husband stood beside Sigurd as the elder man sheathed his mighty sword and adjusted his gleaming helm upon his head.

Dressed in a loose, woolen shirt and trousers, Jonas wore the knife used to threaten Elezer the day before. His gaze rested on Kerstin but he didn't smile. He looked ashen and gaunt. The illness had taken its toll, but his eyes were still fierce, his jaw harsh. His appetite had returned and she knew it was only matter of days before he was well again, though his wound would take longer to heal completely.

He stood straight and tall, but no doubt he did so to keep from showing weakness before their men. She had washed his long blond hair for him earlier that morning

and it brushed the tops of his shoulders, fine as spun glass. In his eyes, Kerstin saw his regret and damaged pride. Because of the wound, he wouldn't be able to join the other warriors.

Just this morning, Kerstin had entered their room to find him standing naked in the new dawn. Unaware she watched, he had hefted his sword and tried to swing it in a cutting arc, a lunge and thrust. He grimaced with pain and dropped the sword, a vile curse upon his lips. Only she had seen his mighty shoulders slump with fatigue. He swore bitterly, unwilling to admit any weakness.

When he had discovered her watching, he glowered at her. She laughed and changed his bandage. His dark looks didn't scare her. As he sat beneath her ministrations, he stared at her face. When she finished, he pulled her close for a torrid kiss sending tremors of delight down her spine.

She did like kissing him.

Now, in the yard, Kerstin looked away and shifted beneath his gaze. When Knut approached, she welcomed the distraction and breathed a sigh of relief. "Guard Father well, my friend," she told the giant Viking as she placed her hand on his arm and nodded at Alrik's retreating back. "Last time, if not for you, his injuries would have caused his death. I want both of you home safely."

With an obedient nod, Knut's words reached her above the loud voices in the yard. "He has had several close calls and I'll guard him with my life. But I fear to leave you alone. There are dangers here." He inclined his head toward Jonas and Sigurd.

"Sigurd will go with you and Jonas wouldn't dare harm me."

He showed a doubtful frown but nodded. Then, he strode over to where Minin dragged his pack out of the hall. Though heavy for a woman, Knut picked it up as if it were a feather and pulled Minin to him for a hearty kiss. As he walked down the trail leading to the quay, Minin's face showed a moment of uncertainty, then it vanished, replaced by a happy smile.

The women worried for their men, yet they pasted smiles on their faces so they could stand to let them go.

Soon, Kerstin would bid Jonas farewell. She tried to tell herself it would be no great loss if he fell in battle.

So, why did she feel hollow inside when she thought of never seeing him again?

"I'll not be there to guard your back," Jonas said to his father. His gaze shifted from Kerstin, who stood conversing across the yard with several of her father's men.

A scarf covered her burnished hair and he found himself wishing she would pull it free and let him look upon the willful curls.

Sigurd gave a carefree laugh. "You haven't been there to guard my back these past two years while you've been away fighting. Clovis has seen to it."

Jonas stared at his father, his mind troubled. "Clovis is in the enemy camp, spying for us. I only hope he gets word to us soon of the Eirikssons' plans. You'll be alone in battle, Father. Have a care."

"Ah." Sigurd waved his hand. "Don't worry about me, son. You'll have a greater battle to fight here at home." He juttied his chin toward Kerstin.

Jonas didn't smile. "She is a headstrong woman."

"Aye. An unusual woman, difficult to handle. With her temper, I'll wage she's fire in the sleeping furs." Sigurd gave a delighted laugh and held out his hand. A necklace rested on his open palm.

Jonas took the adornment and stared at it with awe. "Is this the arrowhead Kerstin dug out of my shoulder?"

"The same." Sigurd nodded. "Remember the witch put it there. I thought you'd like it to remind you to be wary of her treachery."

Jonas chuckled and closed his fist around it. "I'll remember."

"What will you do about her?" His father asked with an amused grin.

Jonas smiled. "Why, I'll do what any good Viking would do with his woman. Keep her abed until she ripens with my child."

Sigurd hooted with laughter and slapped Jonas on his good shoulder. Jonas grit his teeth to keep from flinching as it still jarred his wound.

"You're a fine son, Jonas. No better could I ask for."

"There was once another."

Their smiles faded.

"Aye, Bjorn was a great man. Pity that he didn't die in battle, a sword in his hand. I can forgive the witch everything but that. She cheated my son out of his birthright. He should have gone to Valhalla, with the other warriors."

Jonas frowned. He believed a Viking warrior could not get into Valhalla unless he died in battle, his sword clenched in his hand. Claspings Sigurd's arm, he stared him in the eye. "I promise you, Father, Bjorn will be in Valhalla with us. If I have to fight the very angels of Hel to drag him in, Bjorn *will* be there."

A half-smile curved Sigurd's mouth. "I believe you, son. If any man could do such a thing for your brother, you could." He paused. "If something should happen to me, you'll see to your mother and lead our people."

Jonas nodded at this statement. "You know I would, but nothing will happen to you."

Satisfied with this, Sigurd turned and went with his men down to the quay, where he boarded a war ship and took his position at the front of the prow. Jonas followed him, raising a hand in farewell as the ship sailed away from the dock.

Though they had not spoken the words, the two men knew one another's hearts. Warriors did not speak of love, but no two men loved one another more. Sigurd could fall in battle, with no one to defend his back. The thought made Jonas's heart pound. How he wished he were strong enough to join his father. Muttering a curse, he prayed Sigurd would be safe.

Turning, Jonas made his way back to the steading. Normally, the trail wasn't difficult for him to climb. Today, when he reached the hall, he huffed for breath, his lungs burning.

Kirsten no longer stood in the main yard and he wondered where she had gone. Dare he admit he missed her? Filled with glum thoughts, he wished to see her, to hear her laughter and see her sparkling eyes as she fed him broth and changed his bandage.

Maybe she would give him another backrub.

He hesitated, craning his neck for some sight of her. Despite his best efforts to resist her, he longed to be near her. Damn the magic spell she had over him.

Ah, there she was, standing by the bathing hut. Her gaze scanned the crowd of men, as if looking for someone. His gut tightened and his eyes narrowed.

Her hands were clasped together, her movements furtive as she stepped back into the shadows. What was she up to?

Moving toward her, Jonas planned to find out.

Now that Alrik bid her farewell, Kerstin was anxious to be by herself. But she couldn't seem to get away from the throng of men. Crowds always made her nervous, ever since her eldest brother, Harald, died in battle when she had been no more than four. Upon hearing the news, she had run out of the hall and into the press of warriors, almost being trampled until Knut swept her into his arms and returned her safely to her mother.

Several of Alrik's warriors bid Kerstin farewell and she gave them her blessing. Some asked her to cast a special spell on them for extra prowess in battle. At least they believed she was a good witch and she whispered words of encouragement. Off they went, acting satisfied her magic would keep them safe.

The fools! Why wouldn't they believe she was no witch?

Making her way across the yard, she headed for the quiet beauty of the fields. A long walk would do her good. Beside the rock wall circling her father's steading she gasped when Elezer rushed up and caught her by the arm. Although far from the hall, anyone could turn and see them. She shot him an annoyed look and tried to pull free.

"Let me go." She pried off his fingers. "Do you want to have us both tied and thrown in the river to drown?"

"I must speak with you before I leave." His whisper sounded urgent as he removed his conical helm.

For the first time, Kerstin noticed the helmet glimmered without a single scratch. Jonas's helmet appeared worn and used, and the blacksmith had pounded dents out of her father's on numerous occasions.

Maybe Elezer's helmet was new.

"Won't you send me into battle with your blessing?" he asked.

Kerstin sighed with exasperation. She could not refuse him.

His tussled hair curled about the nape of his neck and his lopsided smile gave him a boyish charm. Though she had lost respect for him, she couldn't forget his friendship and what they once meant to each other. He had been one of her few friends after Bjorn's death.

"Of course you have my blessing, but you are too reckless, Elezer. My husband will have us drowned for adultery if you persist in this madness."

He showed a lecherous grin. "We haven't committed adultery. Yet."

"Nor will we." Kerstin glared and pressed her palms against the wall to keep from slapping him.

"Jonas can't harm you. The king has decreed it." He flashed a confident smile.

"But what about you, Elezer? You have no such protection."

His mouth curved in a skeptical frown, telling her he hadn't thought about that.

No one had noticed them yet, but they could be seen together at any moment. If she and Jonas were to ever find peace, they must come to trust one another.

"Go with God," she said, then turned to flee.

Clasping her arm, he pulled her back with enough force that her chin bumped his chest.

She pushed away. "Are you insane? Let me go."

"I cannot leave until I have your forgiveness for last night. I wasn't in my right mind, Kerstin." His voice rose, his face flushed. "That scoundrel has taken you from me. I'm crazed with jealousy and consumed with love for you. Have mercy on me. Please."

Surprised, she thought him a little pathetic. Yet, she tightened her mouth with pity. "Shh, don't speak such things. Jonas only waits for a reason to kill you. I cannot return your love."

"Then, say you'll forgive a foolish man." Elezer pulled her to his chest and tried to brush her lips with a kiss. She turned her face away and wedged an arm between

them. She swallowed a scream, knowing it could seal his doom.

He smelled of scorched grease and horse dung and she held her breath. Cringing with disgust, she tried to slap him. "Let me go!"

"I am besotted with you, Kerstin. I should have challenged Jonas last night. Instead, I lost my mind. Forgive me."

Oh, what should she do? Had he let his emotions carry him away, or was he trying to trick her? She didn't know what to believe. "I forgive you, Elezer. Now let me go."

Elezer clasped her hand in his and kissed her open palm. The moistness of his mouth caused her to fight off a shudder of repulsion. Strange how she no longer desired his kiss.

She jerked her hand away.

A loud growl came from behind. Kerstin turned to see Jonas striding toward them like a charging bull. His hands were clenched, his jaw tight, his brows lowered in a brutal scowl. His shoulders tense, he showed none of the weakness Kerstin witnessed earlier that morning. He looked livid with rage.

Without pause, Jonas wrapped his hand about Kerstin's upper arm and pulled her to him. Kerstin gasped in surprise, yet she was grateful to be free of Elezer. To her dismay, she saw they now had the full attention of the entire host of men, women, and children standing in the yard. The people gawked at them, pointing and muttering amongst themselves.

Jonas's glare fixed on Elezer as he kissed her brutally, bending her over his arm in the process. His warriors shouted encouragement, laughing and cheering.

The kiss went on and on, hard and cruel. Gone was the gentle man who filled her with passion. He punished her for being with Elezer. He didn't know she had tried to get away. She doubted it would change anything if she told him.

Filled with outrage, Kerstin couldn't breathe and she struggled against him, her fists hammering on his chest. Her woolen scarf came undone, floating to the ground. Her curls swung about them as he savaged her lips.

When he released her, she stumbled backward. Her people glared at Jonas with loathing while his men grinned in victory. The feud still remained.

Kerstin reached her hand up to touch her swollen lips. She heard the callous snickers from Jonas's men. She was so outraged, so humiliated and angry, she didn't stop to think before she drew back her hand and slapped Jonas across the face.

An audible gasp filled the air. Though Jonas didn't flinch from the blow, he scowled at the insult. Kerstin tensed, realizing what she had done. By her deed, she rejected Jonas and showed their people that she preferred Elezer.

"The battle is here," one man yelled.

"Aye, kill the filthy pigs."

Kerstin glanced at Elezer. He showed an evil grin and she felt betrayed.

The warriors glared at one another, drawing their swords and daggers. The scrape of steel cried through the air.

"Wait!" Jonas called. "There will be no fighting here."

The tension escalated. Kerstin realized war could begin right here, right now. Praise the goddess Freya, her father and Sigurd were not here to witness this scene. Undoubtedly both men would hear of it—and also the king.

"Go to battle for our king. Fight the Eirikssons, not one another," she said in desperation.

"To the Eirikssons!" Jonas roared.

Cheering, the men turned and headed for the ships and Kerstin breathed a sigh of relief.

With a low growl, Jonas picked her up and slung her over his good shoulder. Her breath left her in a quick whoosh. Backing away from Elezer, Jonas strode with her toward the hall. His step was confident, strong, showing no weakness. He was the conqueror, and she the vanquished.

Kerstin didn't fight him. It would do no good. Knowing how he felt about Elezer, she thought the situation could be far worse. She held on for dear life, trying not to jar his wound and break open the stitches. Jonas didn't hesitate until he threw her down upon the

box bed and slammed the door against intrusion.

Kerstin sank deep into the mattress and would have risen up on her elbows but Jonas leaned over her. She brushed hair out of her eyes and found Jonas's face right in front of her nose. She stared into his angry eyes, wishing she could calm him.

His large hands rested on either side of her head. A lean muscle along his jaw started to tick.

"Little fool," he growled, his mouth a scant inch away from hers. "Do you think our people will fight together against the Eirikssons after they've seen how deeply you care for me? Who will your father's men follow if one of my captains gives an order? They can't be successful when they fight each other."

She opened her mouth but he cut her off.

"Your little display of affection could have done more damage than the Eirikssons. Hate me all you want, Kerstin, but I'll not be betrayed with another man."

"Elezer simply asked my forgiveness and my blessing. I've never betrayed you with him. Never!"

His mighty hands snaked about her throat, cupping her jaw. His touch was gentle, but she felt his strength.

"You're a fool, Kerstin. After last night, I would think you had learned what Elezer is capable of. Perhaps you hope we'll kill each another so you can be free and gain our lands."

Kerstin recoiled with outrage. "You're daft if you think I would do such a thing."

He leaned so close she felt the warmth of his breath against her bruised lips. Never before had she seen him so enraged. What began as an innocent meeting with Elezer had turned into a scandal. She tried to get away, but it seemed that he—

She gasped. Had Elezer purposefully stirred up trouble between them?

As she looked into Jonas's chilling eyes, she saw the turnings of his mind. He thought the same thing. His mouth opened several times, as if he wanted to say more but was too angry to speak.

He kissed her, fierce, but not brutal. She felt the weight of his chest crush against hers as he lowered his head. His hands burrowed beneath her, cradling her in

his arms as he pulled her up until she hung suspended in his embrace. Her head fell back, exposing her neck. The scalding heat of his mouth nipped her throat and her eyelids grew heavy. He kept kissing her, breathing her in while trapping her hands between their bodies. She felt his heat, his hardness, his fury. His wound seemed forgotten.

She grew breathless, her head spinning, her throat dry. Her bones felt as if they would crack beneath him. Then, in a subtle change, his hands moved over her body, gentle and caressing. He lowered her back to the bed and eased the bulk of his weight away so he no longer crushed her.

She breathed through her nose, inhaling his scent. No longer did he smell of garlic. He must have bathed earlier that morning. Her senses spiraled out of control. She returned his kiss, wanting more. The furs cupped her, pulling her downward into the soft mattress. His body followed hers.

Suddenly, he let her go and sat on the side of the bed. She gave a cry of dismay and bit down on the inside of her cheek, her body throbbing with desire.

Hanging his head, he reached to rub his injured shoulder. She could tell it still pained him. She wondered if she dared move. "I'll prepare you a cup of angelica tea to ease the ache." She slid her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up.

Jonas leaned his elbows on his knees and glanced at her. "One day you'll run out of time, just as Elezer has already run out of time."

Kerstin brushed strands of hair away from her face. "What do you mean? Elezer is innocent of any crime. He only asked my forgiveness and bid me farewell. It was I that—"

"Cease!" he thundered and she flinched. "I'll no longer listen while you make excuses for that bumbling fool. Elezer knows exactly what he's doing."

She feared that truth. Elezer deliberately planned to make trouble between her and Jonas. Why would he be so cruel to her? She was sick of conniving men who wanted to use her for their own gain.

Tossing a glare at Jonas, she stood up. "When will

you leave to join the battle?"

His head lifted, and he turned to look at her. His eyes had softened but they glittered like chips of ice, his expression ominous. "Are you so eager for me to die?"

"Of course not." She jutted her chin.

He flashed her a morbid smile. "Perhaps I'll be killed in battle and you'll be a wealthy widow, free to marry your beloved Elezer after all."

The thought made her heart stop, then thump madly in her chest. He couldn't die. He was too strong, too vital. Jonas would live forever. She refused to entertain the thought of his death.

Jonas frowned and sighed wearily. "I'll leave in the morning."

"You're in no condition to fight yet."

"I will go nevertheless."

"I...I'd rather you stayed here a few more days. You'll accomplish nothing by getting yourself killed."

He didn't respond, but she sensed that his furious gaze followed her as she walked to the door. She paused there and turned to look at him. "If you're determined to go, I'll see that your things are packed." She opened the door to leave.

"While you pack my things, you may pack your own."

She hesitated, her fingers squeezing hard against the oak door. "I've gone into battle before, to fight and tend the wounded, but now I'm a married woman. You would still take me to the battlefield?"

He shook his head as he lay back on the bed. He propped his good arm beneath his neck so he could better view her. Kerstin no longer heard the robust voices of the men out in the yard. Enough of her father's men would remain behind to keep the steading safe against possible attack. The rest must have gone to their ships. Good riddance!

She shot Jonas a sideways glance. "Then, where do we go?"

He smiled slowly. "To my home at Hawkscliffe."

A shiver of apprehension raced down her spine. She knew she would eventually have to face his people—but not so soon. It was one thing to encounter his warriors every day on her father's steading. Their looks of hatred

couldn't hinder her here in her home, where she felt safe. Once she went to Hawkscliffe, she would be at their mercy. How could she make a life at Hawkscliffe? "I won't go."

"You have no choice." He rose from the bed and walked to her, towering over her as he stood before the door. Looking up at him, Kerstin saw his determination, but she had her own.

She rested a hand over her queasy stomach. "Don't make me go, Jonas. Not yet. I need more time."

He reached out and threaded his fingers through her hair. "You'll go to my home if I have to bind you hand and foot." His harsh and frightening voice belied his gentle movements.

As he walked past her and left the room, Kerstin sagged against the door.

Chapter Ten

Kerstin stared at the swaying sails overhead. The gentle rocking of Jonas's ship made her stomach roll. Frothy waves lapped at the bow as the men dipped their oars in long, united strokes. A mist of water sprayed Kerstin and she licked her lips. Crouched beside the railing, she glared at Jonas as he stood at the tiller.

"Stupid, fool man. I told him not to take me on his ship." Her stomach lurched and she swore beneath her breath. Why could he not listen to her? She had begged him not to make her sail to Hawkscliffe. Insisting it would take too long and they would not be safe traveling by land, he loaded her on board. Although they had only been at sea a short time, Kerstin felt so ill she didn't care if the heavens fell in upon them.

The ship jolted and Kerstin clutched the railing. She watched the low hills along the shore pass by, her vision blurring until she blinked.

With a low moan, she hung her head over the side. When she heard several men chuckling at her distress, she clenched her teeth, wishing she could make them a tea with the bark of yohimbe. Though rare and difficult to obtain, it would teach them a lesson in impotence.

Casting her weary gaze toward her husband, she saw that he watched her from his position on the raised platform in the stern. His steady hand guided the tiller as he beckoned Halfdan to take control of the ship. Jonas walked toward her.

Curse her bad luck. She closed her eyes, hating to show any weakness. Why couldn't she retain any pride with him?

Across the deck, she saw Letta cowering on the other side of the ship. When Jonas made it known he planned to take Kerstin to Hawkscliffe, Letta begged to come along. Dreading the hostility she was sure to meet at Jonas's home, Kerstin agreed. She didn't want to be alone.

Besides, she feared for Letta's sanity and thought it best to keep the woman with her so she might soothe her until Thorir returned. Now, Kerstin wondered if she could render aid to anyone.

Letta watched her, her eyes dim, her face expressionless. Wasn't she aware they traveled to Hawkscliffe? What did Letta think about from one moment to the next? Kerstin didn't like that the woman remained unpredictable.

Sighing deeply, Kerstin wrapped her shaking hands across her abdomen. She heard the soft tread of Jonas's heels striking the planks of the ship as he approached.

"Do you want to lie down?" he asked gruffly.

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Can you take a sip of water?"

Again, she responded in the negative. She wanted to be left alone.

"Woman," he called to Letta. "Can't you do something to ease your sister's discomfort?"

Kerstin opened her eyes. Letta didn't answer and Kerstin knew she retreated within herself again.

Hunkering down, Jonas inspected her, his callused palm stroking her clammy cheek. "You're white and trembling. You'll become parched if you can't keep some water down." He spread a pelt across the deck. "Come, lie here for awhile and you'll feel better. We'll be to my home soon."

"Thank you." She lay upon the soft fur.

"You're welcome. It seems I'm the only one here that can care for you at the moment." He indicated Letta, who wrapped her cloak tighter about her drooping shoulders and stared at the waves with a blank expression. "What is her ailment? She doesn't seem right in the head."

Kerstin sighed and explained about Letta. "You should be careful, Jonas. She blames you for her children's deaths."

His brows drew together in surprise. "Why me?"

Kerstin shrugged. "Your people have killed many of my people. She thinks both the Eirikssons and Sigurdssons are murderers."

Jonas frowned, his penetrating eyes crinkled with disapproval and a bit of dismay as he stared at Letta.

"Why did you bring her?"

Kerstin hesitated. Dare she confide in him? She didn't want him to think evil spirits possessed Letta. He might have her killed, or accuse her of witchcraft. "What else could I do? I couldn't leave her at home alone without Father or Thorir to look after her. Be patient with her, Jonas. She's suffered greatly. Sometimes, she doesn't realize what she's doing. Other than her husband, I am the only person who can calm her."

"Do you think to warn me?"

"Aye, but only because I fear she might say or do something to incur your wrath. I hope you'll be kind to her. I know you're a fair man, when you want to be."

His features softened and he smiled. "You suppose so?"

"I know so. You're not as cruel as you'd like everyone to believe."

He chuckled and she gave him a half-hearted smile.

"Do you think Letta plans some treachery?" His expression turned dour.

"Not that I know of." She hurried to reassure him.

The ship rolled and her stomach shook with spasms. A groan rose in her throat and she bit it back. Why could she not die right here and now?

Now he looked worried. "I appreciate the warning, but at present, it's you who needs care. With all your healing cures, don't you know of a magic enchantment that might ease your discomfort?"

"I don't practice magic, Jonas. I use herbs and plants for healing. We left on this trip in haste. There wasn't time to prepare anything to settle my stomach."

He clenched his jaw. He didn't believe her. He still thought her a witch. "We'll be to my home soon and my mother will tend you."

"You have a mother?" She hid her surprise but tensed. Why hadn't he told her before now?

He gave an abrasive chuckle. "We all have a mother, Kerstin."

"But I didn't know your mother still lived."

"She was hail and hearty the last time I saw her three months ago."

Kerstin's throat tightened. "Is she...is she also

Bjorn's mother?"

Jonas nodded. "Of course."

Heaven help her! What a horrible situation. What would his mother do when she discovered the woman she believed murdered Bjorn had wed Jonas and would be living in the same household with her? Kerstin's blood ran cold. "I doubt she'll be eager to tend any illness of mine."

Shrugging his shoulders, Jonas rose to his feet. "She has never shirked her duty."

Duty. Kerstin tried to put herself in his mother's place. If Bjorn had been her son, how could she stand to have his accused murderer living in her home? This arrangement would never work. She buried her face in the soft fur. The reception she would receive in Jonas's home wouldn't be pleasant. His people hated her people. They hated her.

Cold fear gripped her heart and she reminded herself to breathe. Her temples throbbed as she sat up and looked for her husband, prepared to run to his side and beg him to take her back to Moere.

He had returned to the tiller, his solid back facing her. His muscled shoulders appeared stiff and unapproachable. Kerstin hesitated, knowing he would refuse her request. He was determined to take her to his home. As her husband, he had the right.

She blinked against the bright glare of the sun, knowing she was a victim of fate. She could fight it, but Jonas would win in the end. Prepared to meet her destiny with courage, Kerstin slumped back upon the fur. Chewing her bottom lip, she tried to blot the apprehension from her mind.

By the time they arrived at Hawkscliffe, Kerstin felt limp as a rag doll. As the men jumped onto the dock to secure the rigging, she pulled herself to her feet. The pleasant day showed a bright sun and soft white clouds sat in a sky blue as cornflowers. Kerstin resented it dreadfully. On such a day as this, the weather should at least be dark and chill.

Somewhere high above in the hills bordering the steading, the low, melodic thrum of a bull's horn could be heard. It summoned all who lived there, calling them to

welcome the travelers home.

Wild-eyed, Letta scurried over to Kerstin. Her blonde hair had come free of its braid and stuck up in places. Her face contorted in a lunatic grin and she twisted her hands together. She looked quite mad.

"It's all right, Letta. We're safe here." At least, she hoped they were.

Letta patted Kerstin's shoulder and gave a shrill laugh, then bolted over the side of the ship and raced off into the bushes.

"Letta, come back!" Kerstin would have run after her but her legs trembled beneath her.

Jonas clicked his fingers to get the attention of one of the younger men. "Bring her back—and be gentle."

The man took off at a run.

"He won't hurt her?" Kerstin asked.

Jonas shook his head. "He'll return her safely to the hall."

Bending, he tried to pick her up but she evaded him and stepped back. "Let me walk on my own. I'd rather meet your people standing on my own two feet." She could barely walk but she'd rather die than have him carry her.

Jonas hesitated.

Smoothing strands of her hair in place, Kerstin's gaze darted toward the path leading to the steading. Did he notice how nervous she was about meeting his people? His mother?

He offered her his arm and she placed her hand on his forearm, then walked with him to the edge of the ship. With his aid, she stepped over the side and they started up the rocky slope with his men.

Children and women poured over the hill, racing toward them, squealing with laughter. The warriors' boisterous voices soon joined with the women's' titters as families welcomed their men home.

The people threw inquisitive glances Kerstin's way. She heard whispered gasps as news spread and they became aware of whom she was. They must know Jonas had gone to make an alliance with Alrik. No doubt, they were curious to meet the Witch of Moere.

"Jonas!" A woman raced down the hillside after this shrill call of delight. Her long blond braids flew out

behind her.

An older woman, yet still slim and lovely, she looked no larger than Kerstin. Wisdom lines showed on her otherwise unblemished face and her stride portrayed self-confidence, her bones slender but strong.

Jonas flinched when she jarred his injured shoulder, but clasped her tight in his arms. "Mother."

"Oh, son! You're safe. What news is there of your father?"

Jonas chuckled and squeezed his mother with affection. "Father is well. I bade him farewell yesterday, when he left to join King Hakon."

The woman's brow furrowed with concern and her eyes lost some of their sparkle. The other people quieted by slow degrees and listened to catch news of the battle.

"And what of you? Why aren't you with him?" Her sharp gaze slid over Kerstin, then moved back to Jonas. "I see you aren't standing as straight or moving as easily. Where are you injured?"

How shrewd, thought Kerstin, a mother's knowing eyes missed very little.

Jonas indicated his shoulder.

"Oh," she crooned. "Come up to the hall. I'll tend it for you."

Tugging on Jonas's hand, his mother tried to lead him away, but Jonas pulled her back.

"There's no need to fret, Mother. The wound is healing and I'll join the battle soon. Our army is large and we'll drive the Eirikssons from our shores."

"No doubt." The woman paused and turned to study Kerstin.

With her heart like a lump of lead, Kerstin met her unwavering stare. For some reason, Kerstin wanted her approval, but accusation filled the woman's eyes.

Kerstin looked away, seeing nothing but dark glares and sneers as Jonas's people skirted around her. Their whispered insults filled the air.

Witch! Murderess! Evil!

She almost cringed, feeling their anger rushing at her. How she longed to run back to Moere. Back home, she would be welcomed, pulled along as the women quizzed her for information about her journey. She would

laugh and joke with them and, inside the hall, she'd offer her advice on herbs to sweeten the feast they would share late into the night. In the morning, she would help direct their labors as they cooked, cleaned and sewed. At Moere, her people loved and respected her. Not here. These people would never accept her. How could she stand to live here the rest of her life?

Standing straight and tall, Kerstin raised her head as she prepared for the worst. She was her father's daughter and still had her pride, after all.

Looking askance at Jonas, she noticed he had his mother's eyes, deeply blue, intelligent and intense. Would he protect her, or stand aside and let them torment her? Much depended on his actions. If he allowed such treatment, his people would take their hatred out on her. If not, they might come to respect her.

Jonas indicated the woman. "This is my mother, Tovi of Hawkscliffe. Mother, meet my wife, Kerstin of Moere."

Kerstin nodded her acknowledgement. Tovi folded her arms, her body stiff and unapproachable. Her critical gaze swept Kerstin, taking in every detail of her dirty, travel-stained clothes. Embarrassment heated Kerstin's cheeks as she brushed at her wrinkled skirts. At least she had braided her hair and covered the fiery brightness with a coarse, woolen scarf. It did little to protect her from Tovi's prying eyes.

"So, you're the Witch of Moere." Tovi's voice was strong with censure.

Someone gasped and Kerstin saw a small child's eyes widen with fright. "The Witch of Moere," the little girl said.

Those words alone condemned her.

"I am no witch."

Tovi's mouth tightened with disbelief.

A chill ran down Kerstin's spine. Panic climbed her throat. She felt dizzy and her knees wobbled. The child's mother picked up the girl and cradled her protectively. Did she think Kerstin might cast a spell? What nonsense. Kerstin longed to scream at them all to go away and leave her alone. She dared not. It would only make things worse.

Jonas remained silent, watching her with his deep

blue eyes and a furrowed brow. If only he would say something.

She was so alone, with not one friend amongst them. She meant them no harm, but they would never believe that. Lifting her chin, Kerstin returned Tovi's glare. "I am Kerstin, daughter of Alrik, Earl of Moere, and wife to Jonas of Hawkscliffe."

Silence followed her declaration. She heard the waters ebbing and towing against the shore, the cries of gulls as they soared overhead. Kerstin's head spun and she hoped they wouldn't stand here all day.

Tovi faced Jonas, showing Kerstin her back. "You have married her, then?"

He nodded. "We are wed."

"Then King Hakon should be content."

Without another word, Tovi headed up the path toward the steading. Her step was no longer light, her shoulders slumped in defeat. Kerstin stared after her.

The throng of people followed Tovi, careful not to touch Kerstin as they passed by.

Soon, Kerstin was alone with her husband. "Well, that went quite well," she mumbled in a sarcastic tone.

Jonas didn't answer, but his gaze moved to the top of the hill as he shifted his weight. No doubt, he wanted to go to his mother.

Fuming, she started up the incline. She would show him that she needed no coddling.

When he took her arm to help her climb the steep path, Kerstin tried to pull away. "I don't need your help."

"You will have it anyway."

As his fingers tightened on her arm, the overpowering urge to cry swept her. She felt the scratch of tears but coughed and refused to let them fall. Sometimes she hated this man, yet when all others deserted her, he stayed close to see to her welfare even when he accused her of casting spells and witchcraft. In spite of her words, she found his hand on her arm comforting.

They continued up the hill. When they reached the wide yard of the steading, she moved away. "I can walk on my own, thank you."

He pulled her around to face him. Startled, she reached up and placed her hands against his chest, feeling

his warmth against her palms. His face looked tight, his eyes narrowed.

Jonas gestured at the steading. "My father came here as a young man. He knew this would be a strategic place to build his home. See it is much like your father's hall, difficult to approach from the east and south."

Nodding her head, Kerstin listened, eager to know the history of his people and understand them better—to distract herself from their animosity.

"My father told me he went trading often with your father when they were young men before the feuds between our people began. You are now Kerstin of Hawkscliffe, my wife. This is your home. Our feud has ended and we *must* be at peace. I will tolerate no trouble here."

He let her go and walked inside the hall. She stared after him, dumbfounded, fuming. How dare he insinuate she might cause trouble? Looking about, Kerstin found herself standing alone in the yard. The steading was much like Moere's. Formidable, large and tidy. So different from the chaos and disrepair of Elezer's hall at Lade.

Evening neared, the dusky sky a multitude of pinks and orange as the sun slid behind the shadowed hills. She caught the aroma of roasted pork and steaming vegetables. Sheep bleated as they were brought in from the pastures. The lowing of contented cattle being milked came from the cow byre. Thralls lit the cooking fires and the air soon smelled of baking bread. Just like back at...home. Why, oh, why could she not have stayed at Moere?

Kerstin jerked around as a sudden thought struck her. Had they found Letta? How could she have forgotten her brother's wife? Hopefully she sat inside the hall, safe and eating her evening meal.

Drawing great drafts of cool air into her lungs, Kerstin's stomach settled and the first stirrings of hunger hit her. She hated to go inside, but knew she couldn't stay out here all night.

Jonas spoke of peace. He said this was now her home. The fool. Couldn't he see her misery? She would never be accepted. His mother couldn't stand the sight of her. In a

matter of time, someone would murder her in her sleep. She didn't dare eat anything for fear of poisoning. When Sigurd returned, Tovi could insist Jonas throw her out.

The urge to flee pulsed in Kerstin's veins. It would be so easy to race over the low hills and make her way back to Moere. She would follow the river and find her way, she'd done it before. But she would not go to Elezer. He had closed that path, not Jonas.

Kerstin sighed. She had given her word to Jonas, taking vows she meant to keep. She must stay and make the best of her life here. Trudging to the hall, she went inside and stood within the doorway, allowing her eyes to adjust to the dim interior.

Thrall women lit the wall torches and iron candleholders. The air filled with the scent of dripping wax and wood smoke. Food lined the long tables. The handful of ravenous warriors who had remained with Jonas laughed heartily as the women scurried to fill their platters and drinking horns.

Kerstin stared in rapt attention. These men had never been this relaxed while they stayed at Moere. Now that they were home, they fondled their women, teased their children, joked and laughed with one another, just as her own people did. They seemed human now, no longer menacing warriors who sought her death.

With a wave of relief, Kerstin spied Letta sitting by herself in a corner of the hall, gnawing on a meaty bone. She seemed content enough, oblivious to all around her. Kerstin frowned when she saw Tovi serving Letta, holding out a plate of bread and cheese. Was she being a considerate hostess or something more sinister?

Jonas sat at the head table, elevated on a dais above the rest. Once Letta received her food, Tovi set aside the platter and went to join him there. Taking her seat, she squeezed his arm as she asked him questions and listened to his answers.

No one acknowledged Kerstin. No one offered her a chair, or food. Anger boiled within her veins. As Jonas's wife, she had a right to sit at the head table, to hold a position of honor within his household. Yet, he ignored her.

With determined stride and narrowed eyes, Kerstin

walked toward him. Without glancing Jonas's way, she took the empty seat beside him, opposite his mother. She heard his acknowledging grunt and prayed he didn't order her to leave. He could try, but she was prepared to fight him tooth and nail. She would not be demeaned in her new home.

People stopped eating and stared at her. The hall became quiet, the silence oppressive. Kerstin tensed. She felt Tovi's eyes upon her, boring a hole in her head. Looking up, she met Tovi's gaze. No hatred rested in the woman's expression, only hesitation and suspicion. Now Tovi ignored her and turned back to her conversation with Jonas.

For the most part, Jonas disregarded Kerstin. He seemed to take her presence for granted. Once or twice, he reached out and brushed his knuckles against her arm and even fingered the end of her long braid. His touch made her shiver. He seemed so relaxed that he might have forgotten who she was and how she came to be here. Though Kerstin could never forget.

His attention didn't escape Tovi's regard. Every time Jonas touched Kerstin, Tovi wore a worried frown. The rest of the time, she laughed at his quips and swatted his arm when he said something ribald. She watched her son's face with tenderness glazing her eyes.

She loves him so much. Tovi had lost one son. She wouldn't want to lose another. The woman could be Kerstin's best friend or greatest foe. If only Kerstin could prove she hadn't killed Bjorn.

When thralls brought Kerstin food, she tried to eat, but her stomach tied in knots. Jonas scowled and proceeded to fill her plate with tender beef, crisp vegetables, cheese and bread spread with creamy butter. It remained untouched.

Twice, he reached across her to retrieve her goblet, then frowned when he found it still full of wine. He scowled with disapproval, but his eyes softened with concern. "Are you too upset to eat?"

"Aye." Finally he took notice!

"Tis to be expected. You will feel better tomorrow."

She hoped so. For hours, she sat there, until a dull ache throbbled in her lower back and her head pounded.

The hall rang with loud voices as the warriors told the story of Jonas's forced marriage. They embellished the tale until it made her appear a fool and Jonas a great hero who had sacrificed all by marrying her.

The warriors spared no details. Kerstin bit her tongue as they related how her father finally agreed to the marriage and she had run away to Elezer.

Several women gasped at her audacity and disobedience. Tovi tilted her head and remained silent. Her pale eyes glowed as she looked at Kerstin, seeming to peer into Kerstin's heart, seeking the truth. Did Tovi understand Kerstin's fears? A new bride, living in a new home amongst people who hated her. Torn from the arms of the man she had once loved.

More stories were told, of how Kerstin had attacked the king's party and shot Jonas with her arrow. Sitting silent, fury raced through Kerstin's veins. Her cheeks heated with anger. How dare they make her the brunt of their jibes? Jonas shouldn't allow it. As her husband, he should defend her. But he would not. They hated her, all of them.

When one of the men began the story of her wedding night, Kerstin clenched her fists in her lap and bit the inside of her mouth. Tovi listened with rapt attention as the man described how Jonas had collapsed from his wound and Kerstin cared for him, saving his life.

"She feared the king's wrath," the man remarked. "A blessing from Odin else Jonas would be dead now."

Kerstin felt the blood drain from her face. She started to rise from her seat, to yell at the man and call him a dull-wit. Jonas caught her hand and pulled her back down as his laughter filled the great hall.

Glaring at him, she tugged at her hand, but he wouldn't let go. If they were alone, she would have slapped the smile from his face.

His blue eyes twinkled. "It was my good fortune to wed a wife who can wound me with her arrow one day, yet save my life before the next day."

The hall erupted into laughter. Kerstin bristled. Wound him? She was angry enough to geld him.

Jonas squeezed her hand and she dug her fingernails into his palm. He flinched but otherwise ignored her.

Instead, he laughed harder, seeming to enjoy himself.

"It's not often that a man finds a wife as valiant as mine. She's strong, a warrior-woman, yet all woman, gentle and graceful. Given to beauty and kindness. With time, I believe she'll prove a valuable asset to our people." He looked at her and smiled. "We shall see."

Kerstin swallowed. Was he serious, or did he make another jest? He appeared earnest enough, his eyes glowed with certainty and his mouth showed a warm smile. He relaxed his shoulders as he caressed her wrist with the callused pad of his thumb. Tingles of warmth swept her. He didn't have to say such things, but he had. Oh, she could have thrown her arms around him and kissed him for it.

"Thank you," she whispered.

The room went stone quiet and all gazes rested on her. She saw the doubt in his people's eyes. The distrust.

Kerstin glanced at Tovi. The woman didn't smile, but appeared reserved, her eyes piercing Kerstin's soul. Then, she looked at Jonas. After studying him for several moments, she shook her head and turned back to her cup of wine.

The conversation resumed. Laughter and chatter filled the hall, but something had changed. No longer did his people make Kerstin the brunt of their jokes. They looked at her with more openness, more curiosity and less accusation. Had this been Jonas's goal all along? With his words of praise, he had opened their minds to accept her.

New respect for him burgeoned in her heart. Gratitude filled her for his kindness.

"'Tis an honor to fight on the side of our king," one of the warriors said. "As soon as Jonas is well enough, we'll join the battle and earn victory for our people."

"And finally, there will be peace. I look forward to prosperity and many new grandchildren." Tovi showed her sense of humor and keen wit all evening, but this was her first reference to Kerstin—albeit in a roundabout way.

Jonas's grin widened, but Kerstin stared down at her laden plate.

Although Letta remained by herself, almost invisible to others in the hall, Tovi went to speak with her again. Kerstin watched the two, dumbfounded when Letta sat up

straighter and smiled. She rearranged her mussed clothing and hair, almost appearing to be her old self again.

Kerstin wondered what Tovi had said to make the difference. Whatever it was, the gesture touched Kerstin. Then, she thought better of it. Tovi might try to turn Letta against her.

A twinge of jealousy pricked Kerstin's heart. They had meant so much to each other, ever since Letta married Kerstin's brother nine years earlier. It would hurt Kerstin to lose her as a friend.

Late in the evening, the men and women became drunk. Kerstin's eyelids drooped. She scuffed her feet against the fresh rushes on the floor and longed to leave the hall so she could find a place to sleep. She didn't know where to go. Would she sleep in Jonas's bed, or somewhere else? Right now, she didn't care.

The thralls cleared the meal away but others kept the drinking horns filled to the brim. Kerstin refused more wine, knowing it would result in a vile headache in the morning. She noticed Jonas also refrained from drinking too much.

As Kerstin's shoulders sagged, she rested her elbows on the table, her chin cradled in her palms. Her eyes drifted closed, but she couldn't sleep here and jerked awake.

One-by-one, the men and their women sought their beds. Kerstin watched with envy as they left.

Tovi gave orders to the thralls concerning their work the next morning, then she hugged Jonas. "I'm so glad you're home safe."

With no more than a nod in Kerstin's direction, she went off to seek her rest.

Jonas smiled at Kerstin and she reconsidered. Perhaps she would stay right here and sleep with her head on the table. The fire in the large pit in the center of the room had burned low. The glowing coals winked at her, beckoning her to close her eyes and rest.

As Jonas rose, his shadow lengthened and moved across the walls like a dark demon cavorting around the hall.

Kerstin stiffened. Weariness frayed her nerves, her

throat hoarse with unshed tears. She doubted she could stand any more drama today. If he demanded she consummate their marriage, she might scream.

“Come, wife. You need sleep.”

Standing, she took his hand and prayed silently in her heart.

Chapter Eleven

Jonas led Kerstin from the table. Her hand trembled in his. She'd had a difficult day and a surge of pride filled him at the way she handled herself with his people.

The smell of tallow and extinguished candles hung in the air. Though he refused to show weakness in front of his mother, he felt exhausted and longed to sleep.

"I must see to Letta's welfare," Kerstin said, her eyes clouded with uncertainty.

He searched the shadows for her sister-in-law and nodded at one long bench lining the far wall. "My mother has already seen to her. I believe that is her curled up beneath those furs."

Sure enough, Letta slept, her stomach full of bread and roasted meat, her thin shoulders covered with rich wolf and fox furs. Her face looked relaxed and calm in slumber, completely at peace. His mother had done as he asked and treated Letta with kindness.

Glancing at Kerstin, he noticed her curious expression. "You're surprised that she is asleep?"

Nodding, Kerstin tossed him a sideways glance. "Most nights, I have to prepare a sleeping tisane to help Letta rest. It makes me wonder what Tovi did to achieve this tranquility."

He chuckled. "My mother is a gracious woman, and very kind. No doubt she treated Letta with respect."

Though she didn't respond, her brow crinkled with disbelief. Did she suspect his mother of hidden motives? He prayed the two women got along. He wouldn't be able to choose between them, not with Kerstin's spell over him. His mother was a kind and fair woman, but she still grieved for her dead son. It didn't sit well with her to have Bjorn's accused murderer living beneath her roof.

"You didn't eat much." Jonas took up an iron candleholder and beckoned for her to follow him.

She shrugged. "I wasn't hungry."

Looking at her over his shoulder, he paused. "You did well tonight. I'm pleased with you."

Heat suffused her cheeks and he wondered if she were happy with his praise or angry.

"I don't understand your meaning." She jutted her chin and he recognized the stubborn gesture.

Of course she understood. Why did she pretend?

Clasping her hand, he walked past the fire pit with her following behind. "You kept your silence. For once, your barbed tongue didn't lash out when my people baited you."

"I'm not in the habit of answering foolish chatter."

Her voice broke and so did his heart. It must be difficult for her to live here. Though she showed pride and courage, she must be frightened of his people. They were strangers and had no reason to be kind to her. In fact, just the opposite. He must do what he could to ease her transition in his home or else prepare for constant contention. He preferred peace.

He squeezed her hand and tried to keep his voice calm. "They were testing you, Kerstin. Remember they don't trust you any more than you trust them. I'm glad you had sense enough to hold your tongue. They'll come to accept you with time."

Glancing at her, he saw her frown. They stepped over the prone body of Conall, one of his father's liege-men, where he slept on the floor, his arm wrapped around a large, shaggy dog.

Jonas opened the door to his room and ushered her inside. Her eyes widened when she saw the gigantic bed filling the small chamber. The four posters showed carvings of fierce dragonheads with cruel eyes and sharp teeth. In the shadowed chamber, Kerstin shivered and stared at them.

"I had the bed made to fit my large frame. It's quite comfortable."

He patted the soft pallet covered by thick furs. Kerstin gazed with longing at the fluffy goose down pillows. She looked exhausted enough to throw herself across the bed and sleep in her clothes.

Closing the door, Jonas latched it against intrusion. Someone—Mother, no doubt—had lit a fire in the brazier

and the crackling flames warmed the room. Walking to the trestle table, he set the candleholder down and unbuckled his belt, laying it next to the washbasin and a pitcher of water. Kerstin stood watching him.

"My men brought your things here." He tried to make her feel at home and pointed to her small trunk at the foot of the bed. It rested next to his larger chest of clothes. "You should undress for bed. You'll feel better in the morning."

Because the bed occupied too much space, there were no chairs. The room had no windows. Great shadows flickered off the walls and he blew out the candle. The fire in the brazier offered enough light to undress and he thought Kerstin might be more comfortable in the darkness. He also preferred the dark when he disrobed, so no one would see his scarred body. Only Kerstin seemed impervious to his ugliness, for which he was grateful. He didn't think he could stand to see her recoil with revulsion.

In the smoky scent of tallow, he started to remove his shirt. "You must be tired, Kerstin. Come and rest."

He held out his hand, but she didn't move. She stood beside the door, her arms wrapped around herself. In the vague light, her eyes sparkled with alarm and she looked ready to bolt. For the first time since their marriage, she would be expected to sleep with him. She must be frightened and he felt the need to alleviate her fears.

"Come, you need not fear me tonight. I'm too tired to consummate our marriage."

Jonas spoke the truth, but he was surprised when she released an audible sigh of relief. She couldn't be pretending and his heart swelled with empathy. Again, he wondered how she had worked her way into his heart despite his best efforts to resist her. He didn't want to feel sympathy for her. Yet, he did. He longed to hold her as he fell asleep, but in her current mood, he sensed she would panic if he touched her.

"This is our room," he told her. "Now that you're here, no one else will enter, unless you invite them. You may come here whenever you want to be alone."

A slight smile curved her lips and her features relaxed. He had provided her a sanctuary to hide from the

crush of his people and knew the offering pleased her.

"Why did you tell your people I might be an asset to you?" she asked.

Ah, he hoped she would ask.

He walked to her and lifted his hand to cup her cheek. Her skin felt warm and smooth as flower petals. "I want them to know I've accepted you as my wife and that I'll protect you. Many of my people didn't see our wedding. I spoke for their benefit. I don't want you to run away again because they trouble you. It's best they realize I won't tolerate any cruelty."

Kerstin nodded and walked to the bed, patting the mattress before she sat on the edge. "It's a fine bed, wide enough for two to sleep in comfort."

Looking up, she stared at him, her eyes glittering in the dark.

"Will you?" he questioned in a low tone.

"Will I what?"

"Will you run away again?"

Her gaze lowered to where his gleaming sword rested at his side. "I won't endanger Elezer or his people again. You needn't fear another expedition to Lade."

Endanger Elezer? Jonas longed to decapitate the man and feed his eyeballs to the buzzards, but he didn't think Kerstin would appreciate that. "Will you run home to your father?"

She gave a short laugh. "He would send me packing right back to you."

He laughed, knowing she was right. Alrik was an honorable man, though Sigurd was not convinced.

"Do you need help to undress?" he asked in a husky whisper.

"Of course not."

He stepped behind her and removed his shoes and britches. The quiet rustling of his clothing could be heard as he folded his shirt and laid it neatly on top of his trunk. Jonas lay down. He desired his wife and wished she would accept him willingly.

Kerstin closed her eyes, feeling calm for the first time today. Thanks to Jonas, meeting his people had been tolerable. But what about tomorrow? There might be

many difficulties she would have to cope with as they all went about their mundane chores.

She heard the clink of Jonas's sword as he placed it by the bed and wondered if he slept in the nude. Though she knew every contour, every rippling muscle of his body from tending him while he was sick, sleeping with him was another matter. She couldn't bring herself to remove her clothing.

Doffing her shoes, she pulled the scarf from her hair and climbed into bed. She burrowed under the furs, fully dressed. Staying as close to the edge as possible, she turned on her side and rested her head on a pillow that smelled of Jonas's spicy scent. The pallet dipped as Jonas joined her. She tensed, fearing the unknown.

As she snuggled into the furs, she closed her eyes. She jumped when his hand brushed against her side. Aware of his every movement, she knew he sat up, looking at her.

He leaned over her, his palm cupping the back of her head. His eyes glittered in the dark as his hands caressed her arms and shoulders. "You haven't removed your clothes."

Kerstin stared as Jonas pulled the leather thong free of her braid and undid her hair.

"What do you intend? This isn't sleep," she said.

"I'm helping you get comfortable."

She shook with anticipation. He spread her hair out across the pillows. His legs brushed hers; the fine hair of his calves tickled her toes. She drew her knees up tight to her chest and flinched when he dipped his head and buried his nose in her hair, inhaling deeply.

"You smell of lavender." His voice sounded like a sigh.

"I make the soap myself." Now, why had she said that? What a silly comment, but she couldn't think of anything more intelligent.

"You needn't fear me, Kerstin."

Tugging on her shoulder, he rolled her onto her back and leaned over. In the glowing light of the fire, she gazed at his shadowed face above her. Lifting her hands, she rested them against his chest, pushing to keep some small distance between them. Her fingertips burned where they

touched his warm and supple skin. The ridges of scars and hardness of solid muscle beneath her palms reminded her of all he had endured. A longing filled her, to understand this man, to know every facet of him.

The whiteness of his smile flashed above. His scent engulfed her, masculine and exotic. His vibrant presence, his strength, his smell surrounded her.

She stared into his eyes, unable to blink. As his mouth poised above hers, she centered her gaze there and swallowed hard. His fragrant breath brushed against her cheek. When he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, her eyes widened. The movement enthralled her and she felt an overwhelming urge to taste him.

"You're tired and so am I," he said.

"I am very tired."

His laughter sounded deep and scorching. "We'll sleep tonight, but you should remove your clothes. Do you wish me to help you?"

"No...I'm cold."

"I will warm you." He reached to pull up her over-dress.

Kerstin pushed him aside and bolted from the bed. "I will do it."

She began to undress. He chuckled and the magic of his touch filled her mind. Though she accepted him as her husband, she realized she had not accepted him as a lover.

The bed creaked as he rolled onto his back. In the dark, she saw the flash of his muscular arms as he lifted and rested them beneath his head, a great mountain of a man with the grace of a wild panther.

He stifled a yawn. "Will you be much longer?"

She couldn't answer with her leaden tongue. Spirals of expectancy shot through her and she longed to curl against him. His magnetic presence kept her captive. What was wrong with her?

She stood there, dressed in her short shift. He turned his head and looked at her. Goose bumps dotted her flesh and she shivered, praying he didn't notice.

In the dim light, he relaxed his shoulders and closed his eyes. "Come to bed, Kerstin."

Biting back a sigh of resignation, she crawled

beneath the furs and snuggled against the mattress to get warm. Every one of her senses seemed tightly sprung, ready to burst with energy. He didn't touch her. Within minutes, he slept. His calm breathing deepened, tinged now and then by a soft snore. Lying beside him, she felt oddly at peace and drifted off to sleep.

In the wee hours of the morning, she awakened to find his warm body against hers.

She had curled into him, her head resting on his shoulder, one arm curved around his neck. His chest rose and fell with his breathing but she realized he no longer slept. His body tensed and the muscles beneath her cheek tightened.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I must have been cold."

Jonas rolled toward her and his hands circled her waist. He pulled her close and kissed her and Kerstin felt a tingling deep within. His warm, languid kisses drugged her senses and left her breathless.

His abrasive chin brushed against her cheek, strangely exotic and male. Deep inside, butterflies fluttered in her stomach. He gave her no moment to speak as he kept her mouth busy with his earth-shattering kisses, again and again, her cheeks, her temples, the tip of her nose, her neck and collar bone. As his hands caressed her, she thought she had never known such bliss. His touch left her panting and aching. She pressed closer until his heat fused with hers. His hands drifted across her skin, his fingers brushing over her with infinite gentleness.

"Don't be shy, little one. I won't harm you." His voice sounded low and husky, soothing her sensitive nerves.

She closed her eyes against the exquisite sensations he drew from her body, the pain barely noticeable. When he kissed her again, she ceased to care what recriminations remained unresolved between them. Nothing existed in the world but him.

In the back of her mind, she could not forget what brought her to this point in time. Her heart ached for Elezer, the great man he could have been. How could she have been so wrong about him? How had she ever loved him? By his conniving deeds, he lost her respect and killed her love and it nearly broke her heart thinking

about him.

"Oh, Elezer..."

Jonas jerked, his head lifting as he stared down at her. "What did you say?"

She stilled against him, her heart pounding. What *had* she said? By the goddess Freya, she hadn't spoken Elezer's name aloud! Or had she?

With a gasp of disbelief, she clenched her eyes closed for several moments.

Jonas stiffened, a low growl coming from his throat. "Jonas!" he roared. "Speak my name, Kerstin. Jonas! Say it and remember your husband."

She gasped at his fury, damning her own foolish babbling. She had destroyed this special time and what little peace they might enjoy.

"I know your name, Jonas. How could I ever forget?" Oh, what had she done? She had to make it right. "Jonas, it's a misunderstanding. I was thinking about Elezer and all that he's done to us and how he tried to—"

"Elezer?" He threw himself from the bed. "You were thinking about Elezer?"

"Nay! I mean, I—"

She couldn't look at him, couldn't explain. He would misinterpret anything she said.

Jonas stomped around the room, pacing back and forth like a caged tiger. A dog barked outside in the hall and a man yelled at the mongrel to shut up. Jonas glared at her, his heart filled with confusion. His insides crashed together with so much emotion it left him shaking. His mind roared with rage.

Elezer!

The fire in the brazier burned low, like his desire. He had shared with Kerstin what few husbands and wives ever experienced. A passion he never believed possible. And *she* thought of another man.

Not just any man, but Elezer. The man Jonas had come to hate more than any other.

Again, he had fallen under her spell. He submitted his desire to her, never realizing what power he gave her. He should never forget who this woman was and what she had taken from him.

Jonas sat on the bed, his elbows on his knees, his head resting in his hands. He scrubbed the nape of his neck, tensed and breathing hard. She still longed for Elezer. Even after he had shown himself to be a coward, she still wanted him. How could Jonas fight her magic? How could he win her?

The bandage around his shoulder was too tight and he felt like ripping it off. He raised his head and stared at one wall, seeing nothing, his vision blurred with darkness. His shoulder didn't pain him. The hurt burned in his heart.

"I'll change the bandage for you." Her voice shook as she sat up on the bed.

He shot her a furious look. "Don't move, Kerstin. Stay where you are."

Kerstin froze. Could she not see how he battled within himself? He wanted to pound something with his fists. Elezer's face would do nicely.

With the stillness of a trapped rabbit, she watched as he stood up, walked to his discarded britches and jerked them on. He crunched the fragrant rushes beneath his feet as he fumbled for his shirt. Gritting his teeth, he ground them together. His feelings reminded him of the battle in the forest, just before he had sliced a man through with his sword.

A frenzy of fury. Blood lust. Rage.

How he wished Elezer were here, now. He would teach the man a lesson he would never forget and end his life in an instant.

Walking to the door, Jonas paused and threw Kerstin a savage glare. Her shoulders slumped and tears trembled on her lashes. Uncertainty and regret filled her eyes.

Even now, his heart twisted with compassion for her. He didn't understand why or how Kerstin could have so much power over him. Must he seek out a spae-wife to exorcise her from his soul?

As he released a deep sigh, the fury drained from him. It wasn't fair to blame Kerstin for being foolish enough to love Elezer. Two women he knew had done the same, conceived Elezer's children, then been abandoned by him. Kerstin should see the cur for what he really was.

Jonas's heart clenched. Why couldn't she love *him* the same way? What he wouldn't give to hear his name whispered from her lips with love. Bitterness washed over him, cold and aching.

"I should have killed Elezer when I saw him last. I promise you, I'll not pass up the opportunity again."

Throwing the door wide, he stomped out.

Chapter Twelve

Through the open doorway, Kerstin could see into the outer hall. Light filtered in from the fire pit. Dawn lit the sky with the new day. A young boy called to his dog. Somewhere outside, sheep bleated as he took them out to pasture. The dog barked, urging the sheep on. She didn't need to see them to know the routine. It was much the same back at Moere.

Soon, the occupants of the hall would rise and be about their labors.

Where had Jonas gone? Would he desert her now? How could she face his wrath?

Preferring to stay by herself for the time being, she snuggled into the warm bed, wishing she could remain there all day.

Jonas returned moments later, carrying a lighted candle and a bucket of steaming water.

Kerstin blinked and watched him carefully. He seemed calmer now, but he might still be angry. The hair at the nape of his neck was damp. Droplets of water beaded his shoulders and chest. He must have washed. Placing the candle and bucket on the table, he indicated for her to make use of the water.

How kind of him. She expected cruelty.

Closing the door, he turned to finish dressing, buckling on his sword, pulling on his shoes.

For modesty's sake, Kerstin took several furs with her as she rose from the bed. She hoped Jonas would leave soon so she could bathe in privacy.

"I'll be seeing to my ships most of the day," Jonas spoke in a matter-of-fact tone as he brushed his hair with an antler comb. "My mother will direct you in what needs to be prepared for our departure. My men will need provisions for the trip."

Kerstin stood in the middle of the room, her hands clenched around the soft furs. "But your wound isn't

healed yet. You're leaving now?"

He glanced at her as he headed for the door. "Tomorrow."

And he was gone. Kerstin closed the door and sighed with relief. She had a few minutes to herself, then she would be expected to spend the day with Tovi—her mother-in-law. She must not rouse the woman's ire. No matter what was said, she must remain calm and keep her temper under control. When Jonas left tomorrow, she would be alone.

He was not strong enough to fight. If he died in battle, could she return to her father at Moere, or be forced to remain here with people who hated her?

She could not imagine a vital man like Jonas dead. Though she didn't understand why, the thought of losing him upset her more than she could say.

Freya! Guard him well and bring him safely home.

Kerstin made good use of the water, then dressed and picked up Jonas's comb to tend her hair. She groaned aloud when she remembered how she had cried out Elezer's name. How disgusted Jonas must be with her.

A knock sounded on the door and Kerstin flinched. Jonas never knocked and she didn't want a confrontation with Tovi.

Standing in the middle of the room, she stared at the door, clasping her hands together as she considered possible places to hide. If she ignored them, they might think her asleep and go away. Shaking her head, she realized how foolish her thoughts were. She would face her future with pride and courage.

Pretending a confident stride, Kerstin opened the portal just a crack and peered out. Letta waited there, dressed in fresh clothing, her face washed, her hair combed.

"Good morning, Letta." She opened the door and Letta pushed by her.

With a sigh, Kerstin closed the door and turned to face her sister-in-law. Letta eyed Kerstin, as if inspecting her for damage. "I see you survived the night well enough."

"You look well also," Kerstin replied in a cool tone. She was not about to tell Letta about her privacy with

Jonas.

The bed creaked as Kerstin sat upon the mattress and began to braid her hair. She watched Letta, her gaze searching for any lunacy. But she seemed her normal self. How could this be? Had coming to their enemy's home made Letta whole again? Thank the heavens! Kerstin had enough to worry about without Letta acting crazy.

"How do you find your accommodations?" Kerstin asked.

Letta tilted her head and hunched her shoulders as she squatted over the brazier. "Much the same as it was at our home. Tovi has been kind. 'Tis such a shame she's the mother of that heathen you married. Her needlepoint is beautiful. She takes even smaller stitches than you. It will sadden me to see her grieve for her sons."

Kerstin's hand paused in mid-air. "Sons? What do you mean?"

Letta looked over her shoulder. In her eyes, Kerstin could see the vague, faraway light of insanity. How quickly it returned.

Without warning, Letta gouged her fingernails against her arm, drawing blood. "Jonas must die. It's the only way you'll be free of him."

Kerstin gasped. She knelt beside her sister-in-law, clutching Letta's shoulders with both hands and turned the woman to look at her. "Letta, listen to me. You mustn't say such things. These people won't take your words kindly."

A slow smile spread across Letta's face. "Perhaps Jonas will die in battle and save us the trouble of killing him."

Kerstin shook her. "That's an evil thing to say. Jonas is my husband."

Letta threw back her head and laughed, high and shrill. She thrust Kerstin away as she came to her feet and danced about the room, laughing hysterically. Kerstin cringed at the volume. They would hear her out in the hall.

"Hush, Letta. Keep your voice down," she urged, but Letta ignored her.

Coming to her feet, Kerstin spoke in muted tones, trying to calm her sister-in-law. The tactic had always

worked before.

Letta sang louder, almost a shout, dodging Kerstin's grasping hands.

"That's enough!"

Kerstin turned and found Tovi standing in the doorway, her arms folded. Her eyes were narrowed and angry, her mouth tight with disapproval.

Letta stopped and stared at the woman. All at once, the frightening madness vanished from Letta's eyes, replaced by compliance. She stared at the floor, her face submissive, hands clasped together and shoulders slumped.

Kerstin didn't understand any of this.

"Letta, go direct the women in their sewing. I wish to have a few words with Kerstin." Tovi's voice held an edge of authority.

With a single nod, Letta shuffled away, leaving Kerstin alone with her mother-in-law.

Fearing Tovi might believe Letta meant Jonas harm, Kerstin hurried to plead her cause. "You mustn't pay heed to what she says. She's not herself. She's filled with grief for her children."

"That's apparent. Her husband has been away from home too long. I doubt her heart will ever mend. Losing a child is something a mother never gets over."

Kerstin's muscles tightened. Tovi spoke from experience—from losing Bjorn. She hated the thought that Tovi believed she had caused that grief. "You're very understanding."

Tovi's face tightened. "I'll see to it that my people treat Letta kindly while she's here."

Perhaps Jonas had told Tovi what Letta had been through.

"I realize it's me you distrust, not Letta," Kerstin said.

Tovi's eyebrows arched. "We shall see. Time proves all things. For now, you'll help the thralls with the cleaning. After a night of feasting, there's much to be done."

Kerstin's back stiffened. She wasn't used to being ordered around. She knew what needed to be done and had directed the labors of her father's hall since before her

mother's death, but it would do no good to make trouble with Tovi. "I'm quite good at cooking."

Tovi shook her head. "We don't need your help in the kitchen."

Kerstin nodded and bit her tongue. Back home, she had always supervised the spices and cooking. She was also an excellent seamstress. To be ordered to do menial chores with the thralls insulted her, but Kerstin commanded herself to be patient.

Tovi turned and left the room and Kerstin went to seek out food. She hadn't eaten anything the day before and her stomach growled.

In the hall several people took their meals, but when she appeared, they departed quickly. Kerstin sat alone in a corner. A woman named Gudrid brought her a bowl of porridge, coarse brown bread and mellow cheese.

Heavy with child, Gudrid's blonde hair hung lank about her face, her blue eyes dull and lifeless. She was overly thin and plodded about the hall, her pregnancy an obvious discomfort.

With an experienced eye, Kerstin looked for signs of an abusive husband; bruises, bumps and cuts. She saw none. Gudrid's condition must be due to a difficult pregnancy.

"Will you join me?" Kerstin asked, thinking food might give her more strength.

Gudrid's eyes rounded in horror. She shook her head. "I have little appetite these days." Kerstin smiled at her excuse, but she worried about the woman. She tried to choose her words with care, to ask about Gudrid's condition without offending her or earning her suspicion. "When is your babe due?"

Gudrid threw a wary glance over her shoulder, toward the women working in the kitchen. In a protective gesture, she placed a frail hand over her distended middle. "Not for another month."

Kerstin took a sip of porridge. "Has the babe tried to come early?"

Hesitating, Gudrid nodded her head. "My husband fears I'm tainted to bleed so much while I'm with child."

She was bleeding? Not a good sign.

As Gudrid set a pitcher of milk beside Kerstin's plate,

a little girl of perhaps four years ran into the hall and raced to Gudrid's side. The child tugged at her woolen skirt. "Mama, can I go with Ragnhild?"

"Nay, you must stay here." Gudrid ignored the girl as she picked up dirty dishes and stacked them on a wooden tray.

Kerstin popped a chunk of cheese into her mouth and smiled at the child. She doubted Gudrid would take any medicines that she prepared; but perhaps, if Kerstin told her what to do, Gudrid might make herself some healing teas.

"Have you tried dandelion tea?" Kerstin asked as she broke off a piece of soft bread. "It would help give you an appetite. And a little ergot might help stop the bleeding."

Gudrid's eyes narrowed. She opened her mouth to speak, but the little girl tugged on her skirt again. "Mama, I want to go watch Ragnhild in the kitchen."

"Nay, Ota," Gudrid said in a weary voice. "I told you the kitchen is no place for a child."

"I won't get in her way," Ota whined.

Gudrid shook her head and frowned at her daughter.

Fatigue creased Gudrid's face. No doubt she needed time away from Ota to get her work done. Kerstin longed to offer her assistance, but didn't dare.

"Will Ota stay with me?" Kerstin asked with a smile. "I wouldn't mind watching her and she could help me with the cleaning."

Ota thrust her face against her mother's leg and peered at Kerstin with large, bashful eyes. Gudrid's brows drew together in a disconcerted frown. Kerstin wasn't surprised. She could almost read the other woman's thoughts. She feared Kerstin might cast a spell on her child. "I need her to stay with me." Without a backward glance, Gudrid grabbed Ota by the hand and pulled the girl away. Ota stared back at Kerstin, her mouth puckered in a childish pout.

Kerstin sighed and finished her meal. With no a word to anyone, she found a broom and went about her duties cleaning the hall. She fetched water, scrubbed the tables and swept the floors, laboring as hard as any slave. She worked alone. Even the thrall women wouldn't come near her. Kerstin spent her time isolated—lonesome, wishing

for a friend.

Several times, Kerstin came near the kitchen, a room connected to the main hall. Thralls and other women bustled about the long trestle tables, chopping meat and vegetables or stirring pots simmering over a huge fire pit. Two boys turned a spit holding two haunches of venison.

As Kerstin swept the old rushes from the clay floor, she caught the unpleasant aroma of burning grease. Looking up, she saw Astrid, introduced last night as the blacksmith's wife, snuff out a grease fire with an iron lid.

"You fool, Ragnhild," Astrid admonished a young girl of approximately fifteen years. "You could've burned down the whole house. And you put too much salt on the meat again. You ruin what our men work hard to provide us. If the mistress makes you go without your supper, it wouldn't surprise me."

Tears beaded in Ragnhild's eyes and she wrung her hands. Leaning her broom against the wall, Kerstin thought she might be able to soothe the girl. In her youth, Kerstin had been prone to daydreaming. No doubt Ragnhild was the same. With time, she would mature and needed gentle guidance to be taught what to do.

Kerstin took a few steps closer. As she approached, Astrid turned and stared at her, using her large, matronly body to block the doorway. The thralls and other women gathered behind Astrid and clucked with nervousness. Kerstin caught a few of their whispered words.

"She's a witch. Keep her away from our food or she'll poison us all."

"Don't turn your back on her. She'll cast an evil spell on you."

At that moment, Tovi cleared her throat to get their attention. Looking at Kerstin, she spoke with cool disdain. "Finish the floors."

Kerstin bristled. How dare this woman order her around like a thrall? She opened her mouth to speak but bit her tongue again. She didn't want trouble. If she kept quiet, they might come to accept her.

Taking their cue from Tovi, all the women ordered Kerstin about. To Kerstin's amazement, some of the thrall women even told her what to do. As Jonas's wife, her position in the household was one of honor. She longed

several times to tell them so but thought better of it. Her mother, who had often admonished her for speaking her mind, would have been proud of her for keeping her silence.

By the end of the day, her nerves frayed. Tomorrow, if this continued, the women would force her to put them in their places. She dared not let it go on longer or a precedence would be set and too difficult to break. She didn't intend to be ordered about like this for the rest of her life.

Not once throughout the day did Kerstin see Jonas. She knew he was down at the quay, readying his ships. Men had been in and out of the hall all day as they hauled provisions and weapons down to be loaded for the trip. Kerstin longed to go see their preparations. She had always loved spending time with the warriors, but she didn't want to upset Jonas with her presence.

After stacking furs outside for the men to load on the ships, Kerstin scooped up ashes from the large fire pit and poured them in a bucket to be used for making soap. As she lifted the heavy bucket, she wiped the sweat from her brow. No doubt she had black on her face, her hands, and everywhere, and she planned to enjoy a bath later that evening, whether it was bathing day or not. She would haul the water herself and bask in some privacy.

The repulsive aroma of burned meat filled the air and she crinkled her nose. Smoke billowed out of the kitchen doorway, filling the entire hall, and she shook her head with disgust. Those foolish women would not allow her near the kitchen but would burn the food instead. How could they fear her poisoning their food when they ruined it themselves?

A shrill scream came from the kitchen and Kerstin turned. Astrid bellowed as Ragnhild raced out into the hall. She was followed by little Ota who screeched with pain. The child was soaked from neck to toe. Steam rose from her clothing. She had been doused by boiling water or soup, her arms and neck flaming an angry red.

"Papa! Papa!" Ota screamed, her face contorted with agony as she flailed her tiny arms about.

She ran through the room and out into the sunlight. Gudrid trailed after her daughter, her hands clutched to

her mouth as she cried. "Someone help her."

Kerstin dropped the ash bucket with a clatter and rushed after the child. Outside, she saw Ota rolling around on the ground, her voice raised in an ear-piercing shriek.

The entire household came to see what the commotion was. Men ran from the barns and pastures and up from the quay. Without thinking, Kerstin scooped Ota into her arms. Ota squealed like a stuck pig. Her pale blonde hair and clothes were matted with dirt. She fought Kerstin as she ran with the child toward the watering trough.

"Nay!" Astrid gasped. "The witch means to drown poor Ota. Someone stop her."

Gudrid stared, one hand pressed to her open mouth, the other supporting her large belly.

Plunging the child into the cool water, Kerstin cradled Ota's head so she could breathe. The child's screams ceased as the cooling liquid soothed her trembling body.

"It will take the burn from her," Kerstin said as the crowd gathered around.

Falling to her knees beside the water trough, Kerstin bent over Ota, making certain she submerged every part of the child, except her face. Ota closed her eyes and sobbed pitifully, now clutching Kerstin's arms with her blistered hands.

"The witch has cast a spell on her," Astrid yelled as she turned on Gudrid. "Do you want the witch to steal your child's life? You're already cursed to lose your babe. Do you want to lose *both* your children?"

Something inside Kerstin snapped. She was sick unto death of being ordered around and accused of all sorts evil deeds.

"Enough! You fool." She glared at Astrid. "The water will take away the burn and ease Ota's flesh so I can pull the clothing off her. You're a spiteful, cruel old woman. I've never cast a spell or poisoned anyone. Never! I'm a healer not a witch. And Gudrid is not cursed. She needs bedrest and good food to keep from having the babe early. You give her too much work to do."

Kerstin spied Tovi standing at the doorway of the

hall, watching this exchange with narrowed eyes. Her face stiffened. Kerstin tensed, prepared to defend herself again. Tovi kept her silence, as if to suspend judgment.

"Leave my sister alone." Letta broke from the crowd and came to help Kerstin with the child. Placing her hands at the back of Ota's neck, Letta propped up the girl's head.

Bless Letta. Kerstin could have kissed her. In this moment of terror, she thought Letta would scurry for safety. Instead, she came to Kerstin's aid. Tears of gratitude burned the backs of her eyes but she refused to let them fall.

Leaving Ota in Letta's care, Kerstin stood and faced the crowd. Water dripped from her arms, which trembled from holding the weight of the child. Her knees threatened to buckle beneath her. The mob looked fearsome. If they attacked, she couldn't defend herself for long.

"Take Ota away," one of the women called. "Take her where the witch can't harm her any more."

Kerstin braced herself, knowing if they took Ota, they would lay the child on a sick bed and watch for days while she fought off infection and pain and died a long, horrible death. Kerstin couldn't stand to let the child suffer. Not when she knew of ways to ease Ota's pain and help her recover with minimal scarring.

"Leave Ota where she is," Kerstin cried. "I can help her." She braced to do battle. How she wished she had a weapon. She would fight to the death to protect this child from their stupidity.

The loud arguments muffled her plea. People crowded closer and closer. A woman shoved Kerstin and Kerstin pushed back. Someone pinched her and she smacked the woman's nose with her fist. They flocked all around, trying to dodge her well-aimed punches. They clawed at her, tearing her dress and pulling the scarf from her head. When her fiery curls whipped about her, loose and wild, some of the people stepped back, their eyes showing suspicion and fear.

"Leave her be. She's Jonas's wife," one man said. "We owe her our respect."

"She's a witch! Remember her own people accuse her

of practicing magic.”

“She murdered Bjorn.”

“I murdered no one.” Kerstin crouched, ready to fight. She clenched her hands and locked her jaw. Let them come. They’d beat her, but she’d make sure she hurt some of them, too.

They grew braver and Astrid’s husband pulled a knife. Kerstin swallowed hard but she couldn’t give in. Not with so much at stake.

“Lay one hand on Ota, and I’ll curse you all.” Her voice wobbled.

The people gasped and muttered with shock. Many wore expressions of fear. Others showed hatred in their eyes.

“What is this?” Jonas called as he ran up the path leading from the dock.

Jonas! Her heart gave a joyous leap. How happy she was to see him. Praise Freya! He would do something about this mob. Even when the king would have burned her, he spared her life.

But now he was home. Sudden doubt clouded her mind. Would he come to her aid, or condemn her?

The people began to talk all at once, crowding around, telling him their version of the story.

“Silence!” He raised his hands, his eyes blazing.

They clamped their mouths shut and stared at him. He looked at Tovi. “Mother, what happened?”

“It was an accident,” Tovi said. “Ota was playing in the kitchen and knocked over the cauldron. It spilled boiling water all over her. Your wife has dunked the child in the watering trough to ease the burns. She seems much better.”

As Tovi explained, Kerstin returned to the watering trough. Letta still held Ota. The child whimpered, her eyes closed. Glancing over her shoulder, Kerstin saw Jonas’s heavy gaze resting on her.

Drawn by the shouting, the warriors had come up from the quay until Jonas’s people filled the yard. Others came from the fields above the steading. Their horses neighed and stomped. One pawed the earth and blew dust from its nostrils.

Undoubtedly summoned by one of the men, Haki,

Gudrid's husband, came running from the forest carrying an ax. Gudrid fell into his arms, sobbing hysterically as she told him what had occurred. As Haki listened, he looked furious.

Beata, one of the women, waved an arm to get their attention. "Remember how the witch healed Jonas when he collapsed on their wedding night? Surely she can heal Ota, too."

"Bah! She saved Jonas so the king wouldn't order her death," Orick said.

"She cast a spell to burn Ota," Astrid yelled in a shrill voice.

"Nay!" Ragnhild pushed through the crowd to stand in front of Jonas, tears streaming down her face. "I am at fault. I set the cauldron carelessly and it tipped over."

"The witch caused it," Astrid insisted.

Kerstin's spine stiffened. Why didn't Jonas say something? Now, she would find out if she could trust him.

Jonas hardened his jaw. "My wife will tend Ota. You needn't fear Kerstin will harm the child. My mother will watch to see that all is well."

Kerstin's tensed shoulders relaxed as a ripple of exclamations filled the air. The people didn't like this decree but they accepted Jonas's strong leadership.

"What should we believe?" Haki asked him. "Was Ragnhild's foolishness to blame or did the witch put a curse on my child?"

Kerstin pursed her lips and shook her head.

"Why does everything bad have to be someone's fault?" she asked. "It was an accident. It happened. It's too easy to blame me for everything. I was nowhere near Ota when this occurred."

Jonas's brow furrowed with doubt. Did he also suspect her of casting a spell on the child? He had accused her of casting a spell on him also. What hogwash! Foolish, suspicious man.

He gazed at Ota and pointed to the watering trough. "She's right. See how the water soothes Ota. It takes the pain from her burns."

Kerstin breathed with relief.

Haki looked at his daughter. The child had calmed

and gave a weak smile. With a firm set to his mouth, Haki nodded. After several moments passed, he turned his wife over to the care of Tovi and lifted little Ota from the water. The little girl closed her eyes, her breathing calm and even, her sodden dress molded to her thin body.

Haki carried Ota to a hut at the forest's edge. As Kerstin followed, Jonas walked by her side, his presence something she could feel without knowing he was there.

The people trailed behind Kerstin, whispering amongst themselves. She wished they would leave. This was none of their affair.

At the hut, they stopped and watched Haki carry Ota inside. Jonas lit candles in the dim room as Haki laid Ota on a cot. Gudrid joined her child there, crying softly as she cradled the girl in her arms.

Glaring from one corner, Astrid mumbled about devils and witches and curses. "I don't want the witch in my home."

"Mother, please let her help." Gudrid's bottom lip trembled.

Kerstin froze. Astrid was Gudrid's mother and Ota's grandmother. How could Astrid treat her own family so cruelly?

Haki turned to look at Jonas. He was a tall, solid-built man with light blue eyes and a blunt nose. At that moment, his expression looked wilted. "I'm one of your oath-men, Jonas, but I don't want the witch to tend my daughter."

Jonas glanced at Kerstin. "I give you my word no harm will befall Ota. Tovi will stay close by to see that all is well."

Haki's brows drew together in a troubled frown. "The witch killed Bjorn. You have more reason than I to hate her, yet you seem to trust her."

Doubt filled Jonas's eyes and then, Kerstin knew. He didn't trust her at all. He tolerated her. Because of the king.

Sadness enveloped her, bringing a rush of stinging tears. She swallowed them back, unwilling to let him see how deep he hurt her.

"I trust her healing powers," Jonas finally said. "We'll watch her carefully to ensure she casts no spells."

Spells! Kerstin longed to scream at him. How she wished she knew a spell to make his man parts fall off. That would teach him a good lesson.

"So be it." With a nod, Haki stood aside and allowed Kerstin to go to Ota.

With a sigh of disgust, Kerstin spoke to no one in particular. "I'll need my herb satchel."

Jonas stepped outside the hut and she heard him tell someone to go and retrieve her bag from her trunk.

While she waited for the herbs, Kerstin stirred up the fire, added more fuel, set a cauldron of water to boil then washed her hands.

Minutes passed and Ota began to cry from the pain. Kerstin soothed her. How long could it take to run to the hall and get her satchel? She gnashed her teeth with impatience and breathed with relief when Letta returned with the herbs. Grabbing up the satchel, Kerstin opened it and pulled out a variety of carefully wrapped packages.

First, she administered an infinitely small dose of deadly nightshade to relieve Ota's pain. The child soon slept and Kerstin cleansed her burns with the leaves and flowers of the rosemary plant before she applied a poultice of comfrey.

Tovi assisted Kerstin without comment, handing her bandages, scissors, whatever Kerstin asked for. Kerstin paid her little mind as she labored over Ota. She had Jonas send a boy out to the pastures to collect dandelion. Then, she made a tea for Gudrid. The air filled with the pungent scent of herbs. Sweat poured off Kerstin from the heat of the fire. Tendrils of hair plastered to her cheeks and forehead until she tied the mass out of her way with a strip of leather.

"Will you use the aloe on Ota's burns?" Jonas asked from the doorway.

Kerstin heard the sympathy in his tone and looked up from her chore. He of all people understood how painful Ota's burns were.

"I don't have enough," Kerstin said. "I'll have to use arnica instead."

Jonas frowned, but accepted Kerstin's words without comment. Leaning against the wall, he crossed his ankles

and watched as she tended Ota. She knew what was best for the child and he prayed she didn't fail. Kerstin had no reason to help girl, other than kindness. His people waited for word of Ota's recovery. If she died or became crippled while in Kerstin's care, Jonas would lose all credibility and didn't know what his people might do to Kerstin.

When he'd come up from the quay and found his people surrounding her, he thought they had killed her. A lance of fear had tied his gut into knots. He didn't want her dead. The thought of not seeing her again pierced his heart like a dagger. Yet, he mulled over how to protect her from them.

When he found her defending Ota like a she-bear protecting her cub, he almost laughed. How could he protect *them* from *her*?

He must leave soon, to join his father in battle. If Ota died, would his people demand Kerstin be burned? He could never order the death of his wife. Not Kerstin. The idea made his thoughts stumble. By Odin's toes, he prayed Kerstin made Ota well again.

Why did he care? She was just a woman, after all. A bride forced on him by his king.

Yet, he felt empty inside when he thought of losing her. Sharp talons of jealousy had raked his heart when he heard her speak Elezer's name.

Aye, he was cursed to care for a woman who hated him and brooded for another man. Her spell wheedled into his heart until he could no longer fight it. When she looked at his scarred body, he expected to see loathing and disgust. Instead, her eyes filled with compassion or desire. He could almost believe her passion was real. For so many years, he had longed for a woman—any woman—to see beyond his scars and look deep within his soul at the man dwelling inside. If only he could believe her lack of horror was real.

If only she loved him instead of Elezer.

Chapter Thirteen

Throughout the remainder of the day and night, Kerstin stayed by Ota's side, caring for her and Gudrid. By early morning, Gudrid seemed rested, her appetite returned, her color less pale. Ota awakened and complained of pain. Kerstin gave her a single drop of nightshade mixed with water to ease the discomfort.

Gudrid cried with bitterness. "Who will marry my daughter? No one will want her. She'll be a scarred monster."

A vision of Jonas's muscled body flitted through Kerstin's mind. People called him a beast, yet she could never think of him as anything other than a strong and capable man.

"Hush, don't say such things." Kerstin placed a gentle hand on Gudrid's arm. "It's only the front of her chest that's badly burned. Her pretty face is still lovely and she can bear children. Jonas will find her a good man to wed."

She hoped what she said was true.

Gudrid reached out and clutched Kerstin's hand in her own. With tears of gratitude, she thanked Kerstin for saving her daughter's life. "You've also saved my unborn babe. I feel better today than I have in months. Thank you."

Joy pierced Kerstin's heart. She hadn't planned on such praise. She glanced at Tovi, who sat at the table slicing carrots. Her eyes widened at Gudrid's words, her lips pursed tight. When she looked away, Kerstin wondered if she disapproved of Gudrid's gratitude.

Kerstin couldn't help feeling as though she had made some small progress in finding a friend. She urged Gudrid to rest.

Later that day, Astrid returned and grabbed Gudrid's arm, shaking her awake. "Get out of that bed now and stop being lazy. There's work to be done."

Kerstin's mouth dropped open and fury pounded in

her blood. "Get out! Get out of here and stay out until I say Gudrid and Ota are well again."

Kerstin advanced and Astrid backed out of the hut, her eyes round with terror. Kerstin closed the door in the woman's face and secured the latch. Then, she returned to the fire where she stirred the broth she had set to simmer over the coals. Her strokes were so angry and brisk, the broth threatened to slosh over the rim of the cauldron and she calmed her movements.

How could Astrid be so harsh with her own daughter? These people called Kerstin a witch when Astrid acted so terrible with her own family.

"I should help with the chores. My mother will be furious if she has to do my chores, too." Gudrid sat up next to her slumbering daughter and fingered the woolen blanket covering them both.

Kerstin's gaze rested on Tovi, who sat before the fire mending holey socks. Tovi didn't speak but watched them, as if waiting to see what Kerstin would do. It unnerved her, having the woman scrutinize her every move.

Patting Gudrid's shoulder, Kerstin pressed her back on the pallet and smiled. "You'll lose your babe if you get up. Lie down and rest. There'll be plenty of time to work once the babe is born healthy. For now, your job is to take care of your two children."

Gudrid looked at Tovi, as if seeking her approval. It was obvious Gudrid was timid and used to taking orders. With an overbearing mother like Astrid, Kerstin understood why.

"Do as Kerstin says," Tovi said. "You must stay in bed until the birth of your babe. Perhaps you'll give Haki a son this time."

Kerstin stilled. Tovi's support and kind words left her speechless. The woman could make her life miserable, yet she seemed to suspend judgment. As Gudrid laid back and closed her eyes, Kerstin felt a sudden desire to please Tovi. To prove she hadn't killed Bjorn.

How could she prove her innocence? No ideas came to her and frustration clogged Kerstin's mind.

"Will she walk again?" Jonas asked Tovi a short while later when he came to check on Ota. The child and

her mother slept side-by-side in the small cot set along one wall. They seemed completely content.

"Aye, she is better." Tovi's eyes crinkled with thought as she glanced at Kerstin, who was slumped in a hard chair.

Jonas smiled at the tendrils of red hair that escaped Kerstin's braid. Her brow furrowed even in sleep, her hands resting in her lap. Her wrinkled clothes needed cleaning and a smear of soot ran the length of her chin. Purple smudges colored the skin under her eyes and she slept like she might never awaken.

For three days, she had stayed and nurtured Gudrid and Ota without tending to her own needs. Her efforts impressed him, but he missed her warmth beside him each night when he went to his lonely bed.

He chaffed at this delay in joining his father, but he couldn't leave until he knew Kerstin would be safe. With Tovi's confirmation that Ota would be all right, he breathed with relief.

Finally, he could go. Just that morning, he had lifted his sword again and again in a cutting arc, a stab and a thrust. His shoulder was strong enough to wield the blade.

Tovi gestured toward the door, indicating Jonas should follow her outside. Perhaps she feared Kerstin might be feigning sleep and overhear their conversation.

Together, they stepped out into the warm sunshine. The thunk of Haki's ax as he chopped firewood behind the hut could be heard. Jonas took a deep breath of spring air. Fragrant and pleasant, it held a promise of warm weather and a rich summer harvest.

From the door of the hut, he caught a whiff of the healing herbs Kerstin had used on Gudrid and Ota. He sighed and folded his arms, pleased with his wife's skills. Aye, she was an asset to his people, if they would only accept her.

Tovi's brows creased. "I've watched Kerstin tend Ota's marred flesh, yet I'm still concerned about her loyalties. You and I have more reason than most not to trust her. She could be tending Ota to take us off guard. What if she poisons you or one of our people?"

"She wouldn't dare," Jonas said. "She knows our

people would condemn her if we found proof of such crimes.”

Though he spoke with assurance, doubt rose like a fog within his mind. As a man of war, he had learned trust was often followed by disaster. Kerstin could dupe them all, lulling them into trusting her. Then, she could strike with catastrophe.

Tovi’s gaze lingered on the hut. “I agree, yet it is hard to believe her capable of murder. If not for her swift actions, I fear Ota would have suffered much worse. Did you know the girl has already been up once to relieve herself?”

“Is the child in much pain?”

Tovi shook her head with amazement. “Not a bit. Kerstin gives her nightshade for the pain and Ota seems hardly to feel any discomfort at all. I’ve learned a lot more about herbs and their uses by watching Kerstin.”

He tensed. “Isn’t nightshade a poison?”

Tovi chuckled and put a hand on his arm. “Don’t worry. It can kill if people take too much of it, but Kerstin has studied the plant and knows precisely how much to administer. Not an hour ago, the child smiled and ate a bit of broth to nourish her. Her recovery is truly amazing. Kerstin does seem more of a healer than a witch.”

Jonas breathed easier. At least for now Kerstin behaved herself. He had more important matters on his mind, such as fighting the Eirikssons.

Turning, he walked down the narrow path leading to the quay and Tovi joined him. Jonas stared at the river, anxious to seek news of his father, yet dreading the thought of leaving Kerstin behind.

“Do you trust her?” Tovi asked.

He shrugged. “I have never seen her courage falter, and yet—” He couldn’t bring himself to confide to his mother that his heart and mind had fallen under Kerstin’s spell. A strong man should be able to fight off the hold of a woman, even one as beautiful as Kerstin.

Tovi shifted her feet on the graveled path. “She betrayed you by running to Elezer.”

Fresh pain lanced his heart and he tightened his jaw. “Even that was courageous. The journey to Lade couldn’t have been easy for her. It was before we were formally

wed, when she believed I wished her death. She loves Elezer and he was her betrothed. She was loyal to him."

Why did he defend her? She was obviously still in love with the man. Yet, Jonas admired her. If only he could rely on her. If *he* could win her love, he would be a happy man.

"If someone tried to take me from your father, I would do the same." Tovi's mouth quirked on one side and she spoke in a wry voice. "And yet, I've seen that she is a clever girl. She may be deceiving us, waiting to strike when we least expect it."

"She won't kill me." He shook his head. "Too much time has passed. I would have seen her true nature by now." No, she wouldn't kill him. She seemed more intent on playing with his emotions. How else could he explain the turmoil he felt over her?

"How can you be so sure she won't kill you?" Tovi asked.

"She saved my life when Elezer came to slay me while I slept. I don't believe she knew I was awake."

Tovi gasped and angry color flooded her face. "That swine! How dare he try such a thing?"

Jonas raked his fingers through his hair. "He would have succeeded if Kerstin hadn't interceded. I awoke as she was trying to stop him."

Tapping a finger against her cheek, Tovi pursed her lips. Jonas watched his mother. The years had been good to her but he noticed deep lines around her eyes and mouth. When had she gotten older? The desire to protect her rose up within his chest.

Jonas glanced at the hut. The structure was set back in the shelter of the forest. A sliver of smoke rose from the shallow smoke hole in the roof's center. No doubt Kerstin had banked the fire. She was fastidious in everything she did.

Tovi lifted her hands to her hips. "Perhaps you're right. Kerstin has given no thought to her own wounds and she hasn't been eating—"

"Wounds? What wounds?"

Tovi's jaw flexed. "Kerstin was burned as she held Ota close to her own body when she ran to put the child in the watering trough. They are mild burns but red and

sore.”

With a low growl, Jonas whirled about and sprinted up the trail leading back to the hut. Inside, he stared at his slumbering wife. A flaming curl lay against her smooth cheek. Her lips were slightly parted, her face serene. She looked like a sleeping angel, not a witch.

He moved closer and cursed under his breath. As his mother had described, her forearms showed angry red swells.

Entering the hut, Tovi wheezed from her labors to keep up with him. Drawing near, she whispered, “You see?”

“Care for Ota and Gudrid,” Jonas ordered.

Bending, he lifted his wife in his arms. She awoke and cried out, her arms flailing until she grasped him by the neck. Her green eyes centered on Jonas’s face as he carried her from the hut.

“What have I done now?” Kerstin asked with amazement.

Jonas didn’t respond as he headed toward the hall.

Jonas carried Kerstin with ease as he brushed past snatching tree limbs and bushes. The trail leading back to the steading was thin and not wide enough to accommodate a man of his size. Kerstin pressed her cheek against his neck to avoid being hit in the head by branches.

“What are you doing?” she murmured against his warm skin. “To be awakened from a deep sleep and hauled out of the hut like a sack of grain isn’t healthy. You nearly scared the wits out of me.”

He grunted, his stride purposeful and strong. His shoulder had healed nicely and she admired his profile.

“Well?” she insisted with a mixture of irritation and dismay. “Are you going to tell me what crime I’m accused of?”

Jonas looked straight ahead but she felt his hands tighten across her back and buttocks. “You’ve neglected yourself.”

“What?”

They reached the edge of the forest and he carried her across the yard. People stood about, sharpening tools,

chatting together. The stopped and stared as Jonas swept Kerstin inside the hall. Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment. Because they were newly married, no doubt they would think Jonas—

Kerstin shook her head. She could hardly believe he wanted her after she had cried Elezer's name.

Inside, he walked straight to their room where he laid her on their bed. With little fanfare, he slammed the door and bent over her to open the bodice of her dress.

Kerstin screeched with indignation and struggled to maintain her modesty. "Stop that!"

"We are married. Lie still!" He thundered so loud she quieted and lay pliant beneath his searching hands.

"At least tell me what you're doing."

His fingers caressed the red burns dotting her flesh, her chest, stomach and arms. Despite the stinging, a hot gush of pleasure filled her.

"The burns aren't serious, Jonas. They hardly pain me."

Jonas's brows lowered as he raised his gaze to lock with hers. "You didn't tell me you had been hurt."

Kerstin laughed.

"What's so amusing about injuring yourself, wife?"

"Nothing." She pushed her clothes back into place and sank deeper into the furs covering the bed. "But you look so serious, Jonas. You ought to try and smile once in awhile. You're so somber all the time, I fear your face will harden and crack. How will you frighten little children and women without a face to glower at them with?"

He glared harder.

"Truly I'm fine, Jonas. I've put salve on the burns and they'll heal fine."

Placing his hands on his hips, Jonas narrowed his eyes, his mouth tight with disapproval. She didn't know why he made such a fuss. Maybe he cared for her just a little. Had he forgiven her for calling out Elezer's name? Oh, she hoped so.

With a flick of his wrist, he threw open the lid to her trunk and rummaged through her possessions. Clothing and trinkets flew about the room as he dug deeper.

As her precious packets of herbs hit the wall, she sat up on the bed. "Stop that! What are you looking for?"

“Your aloe.” His muffled voice came from within the trunk. “Where is it?”

“I don’t have much of the ointment left and I don’t want to waste it on me.”

Having failed to find the aloe, he slammed the trunk lid and stood scowling at Kerstin. His hair was mussed, his mouth stern. Kerstin scowled right back. She sprang from the bed and began to gather up her things.

“What are you saving it for?” he asked.

Kerstin looked down at the red silk she held in her hands. Her wedding dress. Somehow she no longer regretted marrying Jonas. Guilt lodged deep inside her heart when she thought of his first wife. If not for her, the woman would be alive and Jonas would belong to another. How could she ever bridge the gap of pain caused by Bjorn and Olga’s deaths? It seemed impossible.

“I was saving the aloe for you,” she said.

Jonas snorted. “Where is it?” His stormy brow showed he had lost patience.

She gave a deep sigh. The man would not stop until he got what he wanted. She pointed at the table on his side of the bed. “Right there.”

He snatched the pot up before she could blink and returned to her, where he took her hand and pulled her back to the bed. She thought of fighting him but knew it wouldn’t do any good. Somehow, it didn’t matter anymore.

Pushing her down on the furs, he smoothed the cooling ointment over her chest and arms. The creamy substance soothed her. Kerstin sighed, watching his grave expression.

“You’re too used to getting your way,” she whispered as she laid her head back on his pillow and closed her eyes.

Jonas’s hands moved with a gentle touch. “I’ll get you some more aloe. Perhaps this summer, I’ll take you with me to Birka and we’ll see if we can find the plant there.”

“Uh-huh,” she sighed, her eyes still closed. She was weary and in no mood to argue or make plans.

Jonas watched her sleep for some time. She must be worn out. A pang of longing tore at his heart. He wanted to hold her in his arms. Just hold and kiss her. And if

something more came of it, that would be nice, too.

He couldn't stay long. He had his duties. Already Astrid's shrill voice called for Ifor to come chop more wood for the cook fire. He heard his men's laughter outside. Jonas should be with them, helping prepare for their departure tomorrow morning.

His fingers traced Kerstin's soft face one last time before he left her. Outside in the hall, the low thrum of the bull's horn announced new arrivals.

His heart leapt. Perhaps a messenger had come to bring news of his father and the battle.

Closing the door behind him, Jonas walked out of the hall and across the yard. As he made his way down the gentle slope leading to the quay, he caught the sharp scent of the river and damp earth.

The square sails of one of his father's war ships waved from the dock. Sigurd! Could they have defeated the Eirikssons so soon?

As the men secured the vessel, Halfdan jumped off the ship and brushed sweaty hair back from his eyes. He clasped Jonas's forearm, his expression dour. Without asking, Jonas knew Sigurd wasn't with him.

"What news do you bring?" Jonas asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tovi race down the hill to welcome the warriors. By Odin's toenails, why couldn't she delay long enough for him to find out if there was bad news? She skidded to a halt by his side. Other people gathered as well, eager to hear word of Sigurd and the king.

Halfdan didn't smile. His blue gaze darted to Tovi before he spoke to Jonas in a grave tone. "There are many dead. The battle has been bloody, but we've held the Eirikssons off."

Jonas didn't blink. Something was wrong; he felt it in his bones. Halfdan had yet to speak of Sigurd. A heavy foreboding weighted Jonas's heart. Maybe he should speak with Halfdan in privacy. He discarded that thought. He longed to spare his mother and the other women, but they had earned the right to know the truth.

"And my father? What news is there of him and the king?"

Halfdan accepted the drinking horn Beata handed

him and swallowed the ale in greedy gulps. He wiped his dripping beard before he answered. "Alrik was victorious, as was King Hakon. Alrik's sons, Einar and Thorir, have joined the fight and their armies gave us the advantage. But Sigurd—he was wounded. It's bad, Jonas. He keeps asking for you. I've come to bring you to him."

Jonas's heart pounded. His blood ran cold. Grief clogged his mind. His father. Wounded, possibly dying. *Please Odin, don't let him die!*

Halfdan swallowed and cast a nervous glance at Tovi, who turned pale and quiet. "Jonas, Sigurd asks that you bring the Witch of Moere. He believes if the gods are willing, she can heal him when none other can."

Halfdan turned to Tovi. "Sigurd knows you can't make the journey since your guidance is needed here, but he sends his heart to you and bids you a safe and happy life until you both meet again."

Tears beaded in Tovi's eyes and she pressed a fist against her mouth as she bit back a sob. Jonas's heart broke in two. Sigurd would only send such a message if he were bidding farewell to his wife. He wouldn't be coming home, unless—

Kerstin.

"We will depart at once," Jonas called as he waved to his men.

Several people heard Halfdan's words. They clustered together, whispering amongst themselves. From their wide eyes and crinkled noses, they seemed stunned by Sigurd's request to have Kerstin tend him.

"She's almost made Ota well," one murmured.

"And Gudrid is feeling better, too. It looks like she won't lose her babe after all."

"But have you forgotten the witch murdered Bjorn?" Astrid exclaimed. "How can you forget the years of bloodshed between our people?"

"My wife is no witch. She's not to be harmed or you'll deal with me, do you understand?" Jonas stepped toward her, his voice chilling.

Astrid blinked at his fury and ducked her head in submission. "Aye, my lord."

As word spread of other warriors they had lost in battle, the mournful wails of women and children filled

the air. Husbands, fathers and sons would not be coming home. The price of freedom was paid with blood, but it didn't make it easier to lose a loved one.

Jonas walked to his mother and cupped her cheek with his palm. No words were spoken between them as he stared into her damp eyes. How he wished he could ease her pain.

Gulls screamed overhead and still they didn't move, locked in grief, knowing one another's hearts.

Tovi closed her eyes and tears washed her cheeks as she spoke at last. "Bring him home to me."

Jonas nodded. Whether Sigurd lived or died, he would return him to his wife. "I will."

Turning, he ran up the hill, eager to reach the hall so he could gather up his wife and take her to Sigurd. Blood pumped through his veins, his heart pounding with urgency.

If they hurried, Kerstin might be able to save his father's life.

Chapter Fourteen

When Jonas awakened Kerstin and explained about Sigurd, she didn't hesitate to say she would go to the battlefield. Knowing Ota was out of danger, she explained to Tovi how to care for Gudrid and the child. "Gudrid is *not* to work and must remain abed if her babe is to survive. Please don't let her get up."

"It will be as you say." Tovi's agreement, and her helping to pack herbs and bandages for the journey, eased Kerstin's tension.

Loaded with healing supplies, Kerstin turned to leave but Tovi laid a hand on her arm, holding her back. Kerstin looked at her mother-in-law, surprised to see tears sparkling in the woman's eyes. "Sigurd is my husband. Help him if you can. *Please.*"

Hope burgeoned in Kerstin's heart. If Tovi could trust her, perhaps Jonas might also come to believe in her.

"I'll do all I can for Sigurd," Kerstin said. "I give you my word."

Tovi showed a wan smile and nodded her head, then moved aside to let Kerstin pass.

Astrid glowered with hate. Kerstin ignored the woman as she hurried for the ship.

A ship. How she hated the rivers and seas. The minute she stepped on board, she would be sick as a child who had eaten a basket of crab apples. Her stomach would cramp, her head spin. There was no help for it now. They must make haste.

Down at the dock, Jonas helped her climb on board. The men gathered in the mooring lines, raised the sails, and they departed. As the vessel rocked to and fro amongst the waves, Kerstin's stomach heaved and frolicked within. Oh, she wanted to die.

Three of Jonas's ships accompanied them to the battlefield, led by Halfdan who guided the way. One ship remained at home, along with a crew of men to guard

Hawkscliffe.

As she hung her head over the railing, Jonas rubbed Kerstin's back in soothing circles. Later, he wrapped her in warm furs and offered her shallow sips of water. Though they had gotten a late start and night approached, the journey would take only one day, if they didn't encounter bad weather or enemies.

"Prepare to land. My wife must rest," Jonas told his men as the sun sank below the horizon.

Shaking her head, Kerstin tried to swallow. "There isn't time. We must go on."

Jonas peered at the blackened sky. "Your face is pale. I'll not jeopardize your life."

Kerstin gave a shaky laugh. "I'm stronger than you think, Jonas. A ride on your ship won't be the end of me, I promise. Your father needs me."

Frowning, Jonas nodded at Halfdan, and they went on, sailing through the night and a lashing storm. By the time they reached Scarborough, the sun peeked through the clouds sitting low over the eastern hills. Looking at Kerstin's pale face, Jonas wondered if she was too ill to tend Sigurd. Standing at the tiller, he studied the forest along the shore. The enemy could be hidden within the trees, ready to ambush them.

"Ready yourselves."

The men pulled on their helmets and docked the ship against the beach. They cast wary glances at the shore, brandishing their swords.

Jonas knelt down beside Kerstin. "Are you all right?"

She threw him a glare that could have melted his woolen socks. "Get me off this damned ship and then I'll be fine."

He hid a smile, grateful to see some fire in her. She would be all right. He picked her up and carried her ashore. Followed by his warriors, Jonas moved quietly in the early dawn. They traveled in silence so as not to alert the enemy if they were near.

The majority of Jonas's men remained behind to guard their war ships until he could return with Sigurd.

Halfdan led them through the fields, now burned and laid waste by the Eirikssons. It would be a hungry winter

for the inhabitants of this valley, unless they could plant new crops. Dead bodies and spears lay about, flocked by black crows picking at the corpses. Jonas gave Kerstin a cloth to cover her nose from the great stench before he did the same.

Kerstin gazed at the fields and slaughter. With a low moan, she pressed her face against his chest and he held her closer. He hated bringing her to this place of death and he felt suddenly protective of her. His throat closed. No longer could he fight her magic hold over him.

As they left the battlefield, Jonas breathed easier. The air smelled of loamy soil and ash. Rain began to fall, a soft spring storm to bring new life to the earth. He hunched over Kerstin to protect her face.

"You'll feel better now we're on solid land," he whispered. "We'll rest soon and you will eat."

He focused on the chore at hand. Find Sigurd, nurse his wounds, and get him and Kerstin back home. That was all that mattered right now.

Leaving the fields, they came to the edge of a sparse forest. He had carried Kerstin for some time and she must have felt his arms trembling around her.

"I feel better. Let me walk, now." She pressed her feet to the ground, forcing him to let her go.

Jonas breathed deeply, realizing he was not fully recovered from his wound. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he helped support her as they trudged on.

The sky darkened, with little light to show the way along the narrow path winding through the forest. Blackened clouds shimmered over the dripping trees as they walked single-file in the rain. Halfdan led the way, followed by most of Jonas's men. He walked near the back with Kerstin, the safest spot from an attack.

Now and then, Jonas caught sight of the shadowed mountains through the trees. No longer could he hear the ocean. There were no sounds but the soft tread of feet as they moved through the night.

When they arrived at Sigurd's camp, Jonas saw tents where men huddled together to keep warm. They had lit few fires. Smoke would draw the attention of the Eirikssons. The men looked up, their eyes and faces drooping in sullen misery. To have their leader cut down

stole their morale.

As they crowded before their paltry campfires, their eyes appeared hollow, faces ashen. Many wore bloodied cloths about their heads, arms and legs. Their shields were dented, the chain mail torn. The battle must have been fierce. No one spoke. No sounds except the crackling of a fire and a muted cough.

A gush of achy remorse washed over Jonas. He should have been here to fight with them. Now, his father might die.

When they saw Jonas, they smiled and a few waved at him. He hoped his presence raised their spirits a little.

Halfdan took Jonas and Kerstin to a poor farmer's hut. It appeared drafty and cold, offering questionable protection from the elements as the wind blew through wide cracks in the walls.

"Thank Odin you've arrived in time." Ivar, Sigurd's second-in-command, came out of the hut and welcomed Jonas by clasping his arm. "It's been four days since they cut Sigurd down. Each day, he grows weaker. I don't know how he's survived this long, except he wants to see you before he goes to Valhalla."

The words bludgeoned Jonas's heart. His father was still alive, but who knew for how long? They may have arrived too late to help him.

"We've sustained heavy losses." Ivar led Jonas and Kerstin inside the hut. "It's as if the Eirikssons know exactly what we plan. I suspect a traitor is giving away our position."

Jonas stiffened with outrage. A traitor! By Odin's beard, he'd kill the dirty scoundrel when he discovered who it was.

Ducking into the hut, Jonas blinked in the darkness. A meager fire surrounded by stones burned in the middle of the room but offered little warmth or light. The floor beneath his feet was nothing more than damp earth.

Sigurd lay on a soft bed constructed of grass and animal furs. His eyes were closed, his craggy face white and creased with pain. One hand lay folded across his chest, the other rested on the hilt of his sword, which lay beside him. Bless the men for letting Sigurd clasp his sword. If the worst happened and he died, he would be

welcomed into Valhalla.

Jonas swallowed hard. He had prepared himself for the worst, but nothing could take away the flush of fear pulsing in his veins now that he saw his father. Jonas felt helpless, like a puling boy who could not yet lift his father's sword to defend his mother's life. As he approached Sigurd's bed, he had to stifle the sob rising in his throat. A lump formed there and he couldn't swallow.

Sweat beaded Sigurd's brow and upper lip. His breath sounded raspy and shallow. Jonas moved to one side of the makeshift bed while Kerstin knelt by Sigurd's other side and placed her hand upon his brow. Opening his eyes, Sigurd looked up at his son.

"You came." His hoarse whisper filled the hut as he raised one arm to clasp Jonas's hand.

Jonas knelt beside Sigurd. "Nothing could keep me from your side, Father."

Sigurd licked his cracked lips. "Your mother is well?"

"She is well and sends you all her love."

Heaving a weary sigh, Sigurd closed his eyes, then opened them again. "You'll see to her welfare. You'll lead our people."

As Kerstin drew back the furs to see the wound in Sigurd's abdomen, Jonas tried to smile. Halfdan said Sigurd had whirled about in time to meet the thrust of a sword. If Jonas had been at his back protecting him...

He glanced at Kerstin, praying she could repair the damage.

Her gaze met his and she shook her head once. His throat closed. Knots of emotion lodged in his chest and he couldn't breathe. He recognized the severity of his father's wound, yet he couldn't accept it. Kerstin had to do something. She could use her magic to heal Sigurd. She must!

"Father, you'll return home with me to lead our people, just as you've done these many years. Mother told me to bring you home and you know she always gets her way."

Sigurd gave a bleak smile but he didn't try to argue. "Give me your pledge."

His pledge! Please, no! Jonas didn't want to be Earl of Hawkscliffe. That had been Bjorn's birthright. For Jonas

to be earl, it would mean Sigurd was—

“Speak it!” Sigurd rasped, his gray eyes filled with an urgent gleam.

Meeting Sigurd's gaze, Jonas hardened his jaw. “I swear to lead our people and give my life for their protection. I give you my pledge.”

Sigurd's mouth curved in a weak smile. His shoulders relaxed and he seemed at peace now he had passed his responsibility on to his son.

Jonas looked away, blinking against the burn of tears. What was he, a foundling boy? He was a man, a leader of fierce warriors. He mustn't fail his father now.

Rising to her feet, Kerstin moved to the other side of the hut to prepare her remedies, leaving Jonas and his father alone. As she rummaged in her packs, she glanced at Halfdan and whispered for his ears alone. “Was there no one to tend Sigurd until I could arrive?”

Halfdan shrugged. “We packed his wound but we didn't know what else to do for it. We are warriors. We live and die by the sword.”

Kerstin cringed. “Couldn't you at least stop the bleeding? He's weak from loss of blood.”

His mouth tightened, his expression dark. “To die in battle is an honor.”

“And a waste of a good man's life.”

If she had been here when Sigurd fell, she might have been able to save him. Now, the wound festered and he had lost too much blood. She didn't know how he had survived this long.

“Had he not been a great earl, would you have left him behind to die?” she asked.

Halfdan's gaze dropped away. “We never leave a fallen man behind if we can help it.”

Nor had they done anything to help him. Kerstin sighed. It did no good to argue, but she was determined to speak with Jonas about teaching the men to care for wounds on the battlefield.

Halfdan's jaw hardened. “If you're a witch, you can heal him.”

“I'm no witch, but I'll do all I can.”

A scowl drew his bushy brows together, as if he

doubted her words.

She glanced at him. "Can you bring me boiling water and a torch so I might see the wound better?"

With a nod, Halfdan left the hut. While she waited for his return, Kerstin opened her packets of herbs and laid out clean bandages. Looking up, she saw Jonas gazing at his father, their hands clasped. The older man's eyes were closed, his face glowing white in the dark room, and she hurried to mix her potions.

Halfdan entered the hut with two torches. He was followed by another man hauling buckets of fresh water. Halfdan placed more wood on the fire and set a cauldron over it to boil water. When the water was ready, Kerstin scooped some into a pottery bowl. She sprinkled dried leaves over it and stirred until a pungent aroma filled the interior of the hut.

"When we were young," Sigurd's raspy voice startled her, "I loved Alrik like a brother."

Kerstin froze, staring at him. He watched her, his eyes glazed with pain and keen intelligence.

"I didn't know you cared for my father. I thought you hated each other." She saw no reason to pretend otherwise.

"Before you were born, we went on a raiding party to Eire. My pride almost destroyed us when we fought over Iona, your mother. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I was a fool. Tovi waited at home, loving me. She'd given me two strong sons, but I let my man's lust for Iona drive a wedge between Alrik and I."

Stunned by his words, Kerstin continued to stir. Her mother had told her she had been taken captive by Alrik, but she came to love him dearly. Had she known Sigurd also wanted her? If Tovi knew, Kerstin's heart ached for her.

"I love Tovi more than my life." Sigurd's voice grew weaker. "She's my heart's desire, but I can never mend the wrong done to her and Alrik. I've hurt them enough. I have but one request of you, Kerstin of Moere."

Taking the pottery dish with her, she went to kneel beside Sigurd, looking down on his ashen face. "What is it?"

He grimaced with pain and inhaled a sharp breath,

then coughed, a dry, hacking sound. She knew his lungs were filled with fluid. Still, he seemed determined to speak. Jonas held one of Sigurd's hands. When Sigurd reached for Kerstin, she set the pottery dish aside and clasped his fingers with her own. She blinked as Sigurd joined her hand with Jonas's and squeezed them with what little strength he had left. Her gaze locked with her husband's.

"This war for Hakon's throne will eventually end," Sigurd whispered. "Odin willing, Hakon will be king and the Eirikssons will be killed or sent into exile." Sigurd shuddered. He grit his teeth and continued to speak in a rasping voice, drawing on his last reserves. "You must return to Hawkscliffe and continue to live. Together, you'll lead our people. Let there be happiness between you. Give our people a child. Let there be peace in the north."

Kerstin's breath froze. Peace? She longed for it with every fiber of her being.

Sigurd dropped their hands and closed his eyes. Kerstin drew back, clasping her hands together. She trembled and prayed Jonas didn't notice.

"Has he died?" Jonas's voice was hoarse with emotion and Kerstin's heart shredded.

She placed her fingers beneath Sigurd's nose to check his breathing. "Nay, he's sleeping. I'll give him something for the pain."

Jonas sighed with relief and scrubbed a hand against the day's worth of stubble on his face. Standing back, he watched as she cleansed the wound, his gaze like a leaden weight on her shoulders. He paced the confines of the hut like a nervous tiger, his gaze moving between her and Sigurd. She pretended he wasn't there as she tried to mend Sigurd's raw and bloodied flesh. After she gave the man a small dose of nightshade, she bathed his fevered brow, cleansing the dirt and sweat away. When he thrashed in delirium, she spoke soothing words to him.

Time passed and she found herself alone with Jonas and the injured man. He never left his father's side, reaching to hold Sigurd's limp hand.

"He almost had you burned as a witch," Jonas said in a whisper.

His words startled her and she looked up.

"He hated you, yet you tend him so gently."

"Wouldn't you do the same for my father?" she asked with some amazement.

Jonas nodded. "I would do what I could."

Halfdan and Ivar returned to check on Sigurd but soon left again. It was a solemn time to sit beside a great earl as he struggled for life. Jonas remained quiet as he listened to Sigurd's rasping breath. The death rattle. Kerstin had heard it before and a heavy foreboding filled her, knowing it was just a matter of time.

What would Jonas tell his mother? It would be hard for him to take Sigurd's body back to her. Bjorn was gone. They both had lost so much.

Kerstin's heart went out to them.

She jumped when Jonas took her arm and pulled her to the doorway. Several bandages fluttered to the ground unheeded.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Save him, Kerstin. If you save him, I'll give you your freedom. I swear it."

Stunned by his request, her mouth dropped open. Her surprise turned to outrage. "I'm a healer, Jonas. I'm not God to choose who should live or die. I help them all and pray for life."

The sound of raindrops drumming against the meager roof reached her ears. It mimicked the beating of her heart.

"Can you save him?" His voice cracked and so did her heart.

She looked away and spoke in a gentle whisper. "The wound has festered and he's not a young man. If only your men had done something to help him, but he has lain here for days without aid. I've done my best, but I can't offer hope, Jonas."

Jonas stared at Kerstein, his stomach churning with anguish. Her words tore at him. He refused to accept that his father might die. They all depended on him. Sigurd's strength, his robust laugh, his chilling command when they were under attack. He'd been a formidable presence at Hawkscliffe, leading his people through every peril.

Jonas couldn't imagine life without him. If he died...

Kerstin tried to turn back to her work, but Jonas pulled her around to face him. The muffled tone of deep, voices could be heard outside by the campfire and Jonas knew the warriors awaited word of their earl. An occasional snore mingled with the thrum of crickets.

"Save him, Kerstin. Save him and you'll be free to go to Elezer. I promise you this."

"I don't want Elezer."

He snorted. He didn't believe her, nor did he understand why she would lie. "Save my father. That's all that matters now."

She jutted her chin, her mouth tight with anger. He saw hurt in her expressive eyes. He thought she would be pleased by his offer of freedom. He couldn't stop now to consider her feelings. His father was dying and he could hardly stand it.

"All right." Her voice sounded hard as granite. "It's agreed. If I save Sigurd, I'll be free of you once and for all."

Throughout the night, Kerstin tended Sigurd. He struggled for life most of the next day but never regained consciousness. Jonas paced the confines of the small hut, repeatedly asking her why Sigurd wouldn't wake up. She had no answers for him.

On the second day of their arrival, as evening darkened the western sky, Sigurd died. As he breathed his last, Kerstin cried, her forehead bent to rest upon Sigurd's limp shoulder.

She looked up and saw Jonas approach the bed, his eyes unblinking. His hands trembled as he reached out and touched his father's rough cheek. She ached for his loss and longed to comfort him. She had lost her mother and understood his grief.

Brushing the tears from her eyes, she tried to offer him words of condolence. How she wished she could have saved Sigurd. "I'm so sorry, Jonas. He rests now. He's at peace." She coughed, her voice raspy.

"Peace!" Jonas snarled. "Aye, my father is at rest. But you and I, we will never know peace between us."

Turning, he stormed out of the hut. As Kerstin

watched his stiff back and shoulders disappear through the doorway, she wondered what she could say to ease his anguish. She longed to soothe the ache in his heart. After a year, the wound of her mother's death was still raw and brought her great pain.

Jonas needed time to heal.

A shrill cry filled the night air and Kerstin hopped to her feet. A bitter cry of pain, the howl of a lone timber wolf. The hair rose on the back of her neck and her flesh dotted with goose bumps. Twice more the anguished howl pierced the air, more poignant than before.

Silence followed, cold and wrenching.

Though a host of men crowded the camp, not a single noise disturbed the night. No birds or crickets. No wind, no rattling of treetops, no snuffling of horses. Nothing. Just the empty, eerie loss.

Sigurd, Earl of Hawkscliffe, had died and left them alone.

Kerstin tidied Sigurd's shelter and cleansed and prepared his body for the return trip to Hawkscliffe. His proud face showed wisdom as well as age. Peace smoothed his features and he appeared to be asleep. Kerstin placed his once strong hand about the hilt of his sword. If Valhalla existed, Sigurd resided there now.

Kerstin felt lightheaded and feverish, her throat sore. The journey here and the cold, damp weather had taken their toll on her body. She coughed and blew her runny nose. She hadn't eaten a decent meal in days. Seeking nourishment, she left the hut.

A few twinkling fires were banked and burned low. The cool night air blanketed the earth and the air smelled of rain. Tethered horses stood close by. Kerstin guessed the animals had been stolen from nearby farms. They swished their tails and nickered as she passed.

Ignoring the stares of Sigurd's men, Kerstin crouched before a fire. Without a word, Halfdan slopped venison stew in a wooden bowl and handed it to her, but loathing filled his eyes.

Looking up, Kerstin saw numerous men watching her. As the fire crackled before them, night shadows played off their faces, accenting the accusation in their eyes.

Inwardly, she groaned, knowing their thoughts. They blamed her for Sigurd's death. What could she do to win their respect if not their trust? She longed to scream at them all. How did they think she felt to lose someone she fought so hard to save?

Brushing tears of frustration away, she forced herself to eat a few bites. The meat had a gamy flavor and she had little appetite. After she drank her fill of water, she wandered off into the darkness to be alone for a few minutes.

As she passed by, one of Sigurd's men spoke to his companion. "I hope the Eirikssons find her and slice the black heart from her body."

Kerstin stiffened but gave no reply. Biting back tears, she stumbled behind the trees. She wasn't about to tell them how much she came to care for Sigurd or how hard she tried to save him.

She had walked a short way when she heard a slight noise. Muffled and lonely, a sad cry, as if someone struggled to keep from being overheard.

Peeking around a spruce tree, Kerstin saw Jonas kneeling on the damp earth. He rested back on his heels, his hands clasped in his lap. He bowed his head low as his great shoulders quaked with misery. His conical helm and sword lay next to him on the ground.

Watery moonlight trickled through the trees, resting upon his head. It highlighted his golden hair and glinted off the metal of his chain mail. As he raised his face to the heavens, tears shimmered on his cheeks. It was the most poignant sight she ever saw.

Compassion coiled around her heart. It clogged her throat and brought tears to her eyes. She loved her own father. How great would be her sorrow if Alrik were cut down in battle.

With a hesitant step, she went to her husband's side, longing to comfort him if she could.

Whirling about, Jonas jumped to his feet so fast she gasped in surprise. He towered over her, sword in hand, a snarl on his lips. When had he pulled the blade? He'd moved like lightning, giving her no warning.

"What do you want?" he growled low, sheathing his sword.

"I-I wanted to tell you how sorry I am, Jonas." Her voice quavered. "I'm so sorry about your father."

"Sorry?" He slashed his hand before her face. "You couldn't be half as sorry as I am. I wish we had never met."

She felt the blood drain from her face. After all that had happened between them, his words left her cold.

They stared at one another, their gazes locked. Time spun away. Somewhere in the forest, she heard the chirp of crickets, the skittering of an animal. And still they didn't move. His eyes burned like an inferno; fury, hunger and doubt.

When Jonas reached for her, she flinched. He pulled her to his chest, his mouth crushing hers. She felt his pain. There was so much between them. Too much. Never could they forgive and forget.

Again and again he kissed her, until she hung limp in his grasp and gave up the hope of ever breathing again.

He let her go and the ground swayed beneath her feet.

Stepping back, Kerstin clasped a hand to her mouth, her lips moist from his kisses. She still tasted him on her tongue. She longed to kiss him again, to feel the security of his strong arms wrapped around her. He stared at her, his eyes blazing, his expression fierce and closed.

"Remove your magic spell. You've taken enough from me," he growled. "It is cruel for you to keep me enthralled when I am nothing more than a beast."

"There is no magic spell on you, Jonas. There never was. Not from me."

"I don't believe you."

She gave an abrasive laugh. "Remember our agreement? If I hate you so much, don't you think I would have done everything, if I *had* such power, to save Sigurd? I wish I were a witch, Jonas. Then I could have saved him and gone home, free of you."

Chapter Fifteen

Thor, the god of weather, raised his mighty hammer and the sound of thunder filled the blackened sky. The cold wind cruelly beat against the hall. Inside the room she shared with her husband at Hawkscliffe, Kerstin stared at the dancing flames in the brazier and ignored the host of people gathered outside in the hall. The solemn crowd gave no laughter or cheer. They would hold Sigurd's funeral this afternoon. In the morning, Jonas and his men would leave to join the king.

"Are you well?" Letta asked from the doorway.

Looking up, Kerstin nodded.

Letta came near, wringing her thin hands. "I worried for your safety while you were gone."

"There was no need. Jonas tended me well enough."

With a scoff of disgust, Letta glanced toward the open door. "He hardly takes his eyes off you. It makes it difficult for me to hate him when he cares so much for you."

Hah! Jonas cared for her? Kerstin doubted it. He blamed her for Sigurd's death and kept her alive so he wouldn't earn the king's wrath. Since their return to Hawkscliffe yesterday with Sigurd's body, he had spoken no more than a few words to her. Last night, she slept alone in his great bed. The sound of Tovi's heart-wrenching sobs filled her ears. How she longed to comfort the woman, but she didn't dare. No doubt Tovi blamed her for Sigurd's death, too. She could hardly stand it.

Now, Kerstin felt the burn of tears and wondered why she should care. But she did. She cared for these people even though they hated her. And she didn't understand it one bit.

Taking up her satchel of healing herbs, she left the hall, grateful no one seemed to notice. Walking through the fields of grass, she headed for Haki's cottage near the forest.

“Come in.” Gudrid greeted her with a smile when she arrived. “Come see how well Ota’s burns are healing.”

Kerstin entered the cottage, glancing at Gudrid’s distended pregnancy and the healthy glow in her cheeks. “You look well. How are you feeling?”

Gudrid smiled. “Wonderful. I’ve been resting and drinking the teas you gave me. I believe I’ve carried this babe long enough for him to arrive safely now. He moves often and even my mother remarked that you’re a great healer.”

A healer! Not a witch. Spirals of happiness sprang through Kerstin’s heart. Finally. Finally someone recognized her for what she really was. But it amazed her that Astrid would admit such a thing. As Kerstin leaned over Ota’s bedside, she couldn’t help smiling.

“Kerstin!” Little Ota exclaimed when she opened her eyes.

Laying her packet of herbs on the rough-hewn table, Kerstin sat beside the girl and felt her forehead. Astrid entered the room carrying a wooden bucket of eggs. In the past, Astrid would have flown into a tirade at seeing her here. Not this time. The woman smiled and Kerstin marveled at the change in her behavior.

Astrid set the bucket aside and came to stand near. “We’re so glad you’ve returned. It’s too bad about Lord Sigurd, though. We know you did all you could to save him.”

Her words meant so much to Kerstin. She nodded her thanks, wishing everyone felt that way. Especially Jonas.

“You look so pretty today.” Kerstin smiled as she examined Ota’s arms and lifted her shirt to look at the healing wounds. “Who braided your hair and put the pretty ribbon in it?”

Kerstin couldn’t help wonder at how well the burns had healed. Ota had been blessed. As she grew into a woman, there would be little scarring.

“Grandmother did it for me because she knew you were coming.”

“Oh?” Kerstin’s gaze lifted to Astrid and the older woman flushed crimson.

“I-I was wrong about you and I...I’m grateful you helped my family,” she stammered.

Stepping to the door, the woman left before Kerstin could speak. Kerstin stared, knowing what it cost Astrid to declare these things.

Bemused, Kerstin handed more packets of herbs to Gudrid so she could make the healing teas. Perhaps she had found a few friends here at Hawkscliffe after all. As she returned to the hall, she wished she could enjoy this turn of events, but she dreaded what was to come.

Tovi caressed Sigurd's cheek with loving fingers. As Kerstin watched, Astrid helped Tovi wash his hands and face. Tovi closed his eyes and mouth and sealed his nostrils with bits of cloth. They dressed him in his best apparel, a blue tunic which Tovi herself had embroidered with golden thread brought back by Jonas from his travels to Miklagaard.

They placed jewelry around his neck, blue beads and silver. With tenderness, Tovi slid silver rings upon his fingers and bands about his mighty biceps. Astrid put his best leather boots upon his feet. With tears running down her cheeks, Tovi combed his long hair and beard.

The scent of mint soap filled the air. Kerstin had prepared it for the ceremonial bathing. It stunned and pleased her when Tovi asked her to make it, but she had not invited Kerstin to participate in the bathing.

They were alone in the hall, the people waiting outside. Jonas and his men had laid Sigurd's body on a plank table, the fire in the pit built up high to heat plenty of water for their task. As Tovi and Beata rinsed his body of the scented soap, Kerstin ran to the cauldron and dipped out fresh water for them to use.

"Thank you," Tovi muttered as Kerstin placed the buckets beside her.

Kerstin was again surprised by her mother-in-law's regard. In her grief, Tovi must have forgotten who Kerstin was and why she was here. How she wished Jonas could do the same.

When they had prepared Sigurd's body for the funeral, Astrid walked to the door. "He is ready."

Jonas came to stand at the doorway, wearing a gray woolen tunic and soft leather leggings, a thin knife sheathed at his side. His somber expression caused a

tightening in Kerstin's chest. As he stood before the door, his large form cast shadows in the dim room. His blue eyes shimmered as he gazed at his father. He seemed reluctant to enter.

"Dear friend," he murmured.

The anguish on Jonas's face tore at her. His brows lowered and his lips contorted in a brief grimace of despair. He blinked, as if to clear his vision, and his jaw hardened.

He renewed his resolve. Kerstin expected no less.

Serene and handsome in his finery, Sigurd appeared to be asleep. He would wake up at any moment and bluster and yell at them all. He couldn't be dead. Not really.

Bending low, Jonas eased his arms beneath Sigurd's back and legs and picked up his father. Halfdan came inside, prepared to lend assistance. Even though Sigurd was a big man, Jonas was larger and able to carry him without aid.

Kerstin and the other women followed as Jonas left the hall and walked out into the chilly day. He moved slow and steady, his head held high, his gaze raised to face the River Tyne. Sigurd's people already congregated in the yard, waiting to pay their last respects. Had he not been at war, King Hakon himself would have been present.

The wind howled, whipping against them as they gathered around the man that had led them for forty years. As one body, they moved together down to the quay, following behind Jonas. The crunch of their feet on pebbles and an occasional whisper or tearful cough were the only sounds.

At the shore, they stood before Sigurd's war ship, *Wind Raven*, and waited with patience. The ship rocked on the choppy waves and pulled at its tethers. Some people chanted soothing prayers to the gods, others sniffed and cried as they watched Jonas carry Sigurd on board. He placed him on a beautifully carved bed the men had set there earlier, lined by the women with warm furs. Sigurd's head rested upon a red goose-down pillow with black tassels tied at each corner.

Jonas lingered over his father, staring down at the

man who had taught him so much in life. Kerstin saw Jonas blink several times, as if to clear his eyes. He was a strong man and hid his emotions well but she knew his despair.

She walked to the large flat stones Jonas and his men had brought down from the mountain and picked up her chisel and hammer. As thralls finished loading the ship with supplies, she carved the last few decorative designs and Rune symbols into the stones. Jonas had said he wanted the stones to mark this site for a thousand years. Kerstin couldn't imagine such a long time, but she knew Jonas's love for his father went far beyond.

They laid weapons of war and tools upon the ship and prepared slaughtered horses, dogs and a single peacock for Sigurd's use. Food, including potted jugs with Sigurd's favorite ale and his intricately carved drinking horn rested close by. His bow and arrows and ivory chess game lay at his feet. His war shield, freshly painted with vivid yellow, rested beside his chain mail and conical helmet. Everything he needed to be comfortable in his eternal life.

Finished with the last symbol, Kerstin blew the dust from the stone and arched her back. She clutched her shawl close about her throat. Holding her head high, she went to stand beside Jonas and her mother-in-law, as was proper.

Jonas wrapped his arm around Tovi's trembling shoulders. The widow's silent weeping was so sad, Kerstin could hardly bear it and she wiped tears from her own eyes.

The air vibrated with wails of torment as Sigurd's people mourned their leader. Kerstin shivered, the memory of burying her own mother haunting her.

Halfdan stood nearby, his sneer of hate as black as the angry sky. Kerstin looked away. The air smelled of rain and she longed to be lost within the storm. Oh, how she longed to return to Moere where she would be welcomed and loved.

"Look how she pretends to cry. Does she think we don't know she let Sigurd die?" Halfdan snarled to the man next to him.

She felt the burn of tears and blinked her eyes. It

was so unfair of him to blame her.

Kerstin heard several cruel barbs from other men and women, as they intended her to, and she tried to ignore them. Why should she care what they thought of her? They were in no position to judge her.

Jonas left his mother. Head held high, he walked with pride as he passed the crowd. He moved with the grace of a panther. In his hand, he gripped the silver hilt of Sigurd's sword.

As the eldest male relative of Sigurd, it was Jonas's honor to officiate at his funeral. Kerstin noticed the subtle tensing of his shoulders. A sense of pride filled her as she gazed at her battle-hardened, scarred husband. He had earned every nick, every wound through valor and courage. Kerstin could not fault his flawed body when she knew the price he paid for his loved ones.

And he blamed her for the loss of every one.

His face was harsh, intent on his mission. Without a word, he stepped onto the funeral ship. His long hair blew back from his shoulders as the brisk wind swept past him. Lifting his head, he stared at the distant horizon.

The waves chopped at the hull, relentless in their quest to pull the ship away. Jonas balanced himself against the buffeting. He had been born to the sea and was at home. He looked at the frothy billows, his gaze filled with such longing. As if he wished he could go away anywhere but here. To be with Sigurd, Bjorn and Olga once more.

Kerstin's throat closed. He didn't want her.

Turning, he stared at his beloved father and his expression became all at once tender and pained.

Hefting the weighty sword with one hand, he knelt beside Sigurd's funeral bed. The long muscles of his thighs flexed as he laid the sword upon his father's chest. With reverence, he lifted Sigurd's hands and wrapped the dead man's cold fingers about the silver hilt. He leaned close to whisper against Sigurd's ear and Kerstin could just make out his words.

"Rest well, Father, and know that I will keep my pledge to you. God willing, we will meet again in Valhalla."

For several moments, Jonas rested his chiseled cheek

against his father's bearded one. Drawing back, Jonas stood, his gaze fixed on the far horizon where the river meandered across the valley. He stepped off the ship and reached to accept the flaming torch Halfdan placed in his hand. Lifting it high, Jonas threw back his head and his shrill war cry shattered the air.

A tremor ran through Kerstin's body. She remembered his cry from the night Sigurd had died—the cry of a lone timber wolf.

The bleak sky mirrored the heaviness in her heart. No rain fell to desecrate this sacred time. Odin must be pleased with this new offering.

When Jonas had vented his woes until his throat sounded hoarse, he stepped near the ship and touched the torch to dried kindling stacked along the sides until it caught flame. Haki and Halfdan cut the moorings and the lapping waves pulled at the vessel. It leapt free and sped out onto the river. With the high winds to fan them, the blaze ate hungrily at the war ship, a giant bonfire to celebrate Sigurd's glorious life—and death.

This was the last honor they could give Sigurd. To send him to Valhalla in fiery glory, as a great earl deserved. As the ship moved away, Kerstin made out Sigurd's body, lying still within the licking flames, silent and unmoving in a mass of fire and water. Almost magical. The red blaze, the dark billows of smoke, and the golden glow of the distant horizon.

Jonas looked down upon his mother and opened an arm for her to cuddle in against his side. With her arms wrapped around his waist, she stood beside him, watching the fading ship, as their people left to find their warm beds.

This was a personal moment between mother and son. Kerstin should return to the hall, yet something kept her there.

Guilt. Regret. Perhaps both.

The ship was no more than a fiery speck in the distance.

"He was a good man and we'll never forget him." Tovi smiled tearfully at her son.

Jonas squeezed her close. Tovi pulled free of his embrace and headed toward the path leading up to the

hall. She caught sight of Kerstin, standing alone, her teeth chattering. Kerstin longed to say something. Anything. But there was nothing that could take the pain from Tovi's heart.

Tovi walked to her and Kerstin tensed. For several moments, the woman looked at Kerstin, her eyes red with tears. Her mouth opened, as if she wished to say something. Then, she closed it without saying a word and trudged up the path.

Left alone with Jonas, Kerstin watched Tovi go. A feeling of helplessness blanketed her. She wished she dared follow the woman rather than stay here and face her husband. Something kept her rooted where she stood. When she tried to comfort Jonas after Sigurd died, he spurned her. Dare she try once more? Jonas accused her of casting a spell over him. Now, she wondered if she was the one spellbound.

She looked at him, standing beside the quay, large and towering, solemn and quiet. Minutes passed and neither one of them spoke. Kerstin felt Jonas's gaze upon her, probing deep into her soul.

He hated her. She was a burden forced on him by their king.

Jonas approached, stopping an arm's reach away. Kerstin met his gaze. His face was tight and forbidding, his blue eyes sharp with suspicion.

"Why are you still here?" he asked in a harsh tone.

Kerstin swallowed hard and squirmed beneath Jonas's glare. Standing on the dock, she shivered as the wind changed directions and buffeted them. His shoulder-length hair danced about his shoulders. Her gaze centered on the hollow at the base of his throat. The urge was strong to look away, but she resisted.

She glanced up to see his dark scowl became a perplexed frown. "What do you want?"

"Nothing. I-I wanted only to say I...I'm sorry."

He snorted. "You don't have to pretend you care."

His words speared her.

"I'm not pretending, Jonas. I know what Sigurd meant to you and Tovi—to all our people."

Cocking his head to one side, Jonas's mouth curved in a mocking smile. "*Our* people? Do you really expect me

to believe you're sad he's dead?"

His words stung her more than his pounding fist could have done. He knew so little about who she was. Jutting her chin, she glared at him. "Jonas Sigurdsson. You—are—an—ass."

She turned to stomp away, but he snaked his hand out and grasped her arm. Panic struck her. The memory of that night in the forest after Sigurd died flashed through her mind. Jonas had been angry enough to kill.

"Nay!" She swung her arm in self-defense.

He ducked to the side; she had forgotten how quick his reflexes were. Without his chest to stop the blow, she lost her balance and fell off the dock into the River Tyne.

Kerstin gasped. She plunged deep in the icy water but resurfaced, choking, wheezing for breath. Terror clawed at her throat. She couldn't swim! She thrashed in the waves as she tried to propel herself to the dock.

She gulped great drafts of water into her lungs and coughed. Where was Jonas? Where was the dock? Her hair blinded her.

Under she went, again and again. She kicked her legs but they became tangled in her long skirt. She sank deeper and deeper, the chill surrounding her. Her mouth opened in a silent scream that filled with water. She made a strangled hiss.

Her arms went numb. Blood pounded in her ears. She would drown. That damned heathen they'd forced her to wed would now see her dead. He would stand there on the dock and watch her drown without lifting a finger to help her. Damn him! Damn him for killing her.

Strong arms lifted her, pulling her upward.

Jonas! He had come for her after all. Would he save her or push her under?

She didn't want to die. She wouldn't let him kill her without a fight.

Wrapping her arms about his head, she almost dunked him under.

"Fool woman," he shouted. "Hold still or you'll drown us both."

Fear and water choked her and she kicked, smacking her shoe against his shin.

Jonas yelped. He wasn't gentle as he pushed her

under. She let go of him, clawing for a hold on something solid. She couldn't fight him. He would kill her.

When her head bobbed up, Jonas turned her and forced her arms to her body. She fought him, certain he meant her death. Except to kick her feet, she couldn't move. He was so annoyingly strong. They moved farther out into the river. Terror widened her eyes and she blinked her spiked lashes, trying to see clearly so she could get her bearings.

"Hold still," he commanded in a hoarse voice against her ear.

Her teeth chattering, her legs and arms felt like heavy tree trunks. He pulled her under. Would he leave her there and let the river push her out to sea? She wouldn't be missed. Not until morning and then her body would never be found. Jonas would be free of her. She would be free of him—and dead.

"Nay!" she cried.

"Stop fighting. You're taking us out into the current."

She didn't understand. Maybe he dunked her merely to get her to cease struggling. To test his motives, she quieted for just a moment. It took every bit of will power she possessed to trust him. Her heart thumped madly, her veins near to bursting.

"Good. Now, put your arms around my neck," he ordered.

She did and he swam for shore. Relief enveloped her. She coughed and her lungs burned as Jonas pulled her out of the water. Lying sodden on the pebbled beach, she sobbed with release. Her long hair clung to her shivering body. She dug her fingers into the gravel. She coughed and wheezed. The wind blew past, chilling her even more.

Jonas lay beside her. His ragged breath attested to how hard he had worked to get them to shore. Her gaze moved over his chest and arms. Goose bumps dotted his forearms. Sharp rocks dug into his skin. They both needed dry clothing.

"Little fool. Why didn't you swim for shore?"

Kerstin glared at him, her teeth clenched against the shudders that swept her. She didn't want to answer him.

"Why?" he persisted.

"Because I can't," she snapped.

"What do you mean, you can't?"

Turning her head away, she felt mortification heat her face. "I can't swim."

Silence.

She looked at him, out of curiosity and nothing more.

His eyes were wide with disbelief, his mouth rounded. "How can this be? Your people live by the sea."

"Ohh," she groaned. Above all her flaws, there were three that always caused her much regret. First, she became ill whenever she sailed on a ship. Second, she couldn't swim. Her irascible temper was her third. Her father reminded her of these flaws many times. What manner of Viking maiden was she? Other than that, her father told her she was nigh unto perfect.

Kerstin had her doubts.

She sat up, avoiding Jonas's gaze as she brushed her drenched clothes. She couldn't confide in him that water horrified her. Because of the near drowning when she was a wee child, she had never overcome her fear. Perhaps that was why she became so ill when forced to ride a ship.

She loved the lonely beauty of the river when she gazed at it upon an evening as the sun went down, but only when she stood safely on dry ground. With a sigh, she got to her feet and started up the twining path leading to the hall. She didn't look back but knew he followed. She heard his quiet tread behind her, the crunch of gravel as it rolled beneath his feet.

The skirts of her dress clung to her body, molding every inch of her. She folded her arms across her chest, shivering. Staring straight ahead, she kept her gaze from wandering over Jonas. It was not every day a maiden found herself tromping about the yard with a tall, wet warrior. She glanced at him, finding him magnificent.

They arrived at the steading. In the yard, Jonas's men lit several bright fires. She longed to crouch before one and warm herself. The low humm of men's voices welcomed them, but those men stared as she and Jonas passed by.

She rubbed her arms briskly. Turning about, she looked at Jonas, who strode close on her heels. Without a word, he brushed past her and went inside the hall. Kerstin watched him go, keenly aware of him.

Her teeth chattered. She must get warm, but to do so, she would need to join Jonas in their room and disrobe. And that could lead to other things. Knowing how he felt about her, she didn't want to expose herself any more than she had to.

Oh, she hoped he dressed quickly. She hopped up and down to get warm, trying to give him time to pull on his clothes. Within minutes, she was colder than an icicle. She thought her hands and arms looked the color of blue cornflowers.

The breeze swept her. *Burr!* She could stand no more and stumbled into the warmth of the house and hurried to her room.

Jonas sat upon the bed, dressed and rubbing his sword with a smooth, oiled cloth. He glanced up as she walked in, then turned his attention back to what he was doing and paid her little heed.

Praise Freya, he had lit a fire in the brazier. She grabbed a fur from the bed. Throwing it over her shoulders, she went to crouch before the tantalizing flames. She shivered.

"Do you plan to stay in those wet clothes?" Jonas asked without looking up.

Kerstin winced. "If you'll turn your back, I'll change."

"I've seen all you have to offer. Change your clothes."

Though his head remained bowed, his gaze lifted and locked with hers. She dared not refuse.

With a huff, Kerstin stood and threw off the fur. She rummaged through her trunk and found dry clothing. Then, with her back to him, she undressed. Her hair hung down her body in sodden strands. As she reached for her dress, she saw she had his full attention. His eyes gleamed, his jaw locked.

She knew he would watch her. He was a man, after all. What more could one expect? But his expression was so intense, so...exotic.

"You're staring." She pulled her dress over her head and jerked it down into place.

"Aye," he said without remorse.

"It's rude."

He didn't reply. Now clothed, she gathered up her comb and began to work the snarls from her hair, a

painstaking chore.

Glancing at him, she saw he wore a frown. She took little notice of his mood as she again wrapped a fur about her shoulders and crouched before the fire to dry her curls. Tremors shook her, her fingers felt like sticks of ice.

Jonas appeared by her side and she tensed. He took the comb from her hands and sat beside her on the floor. With nimble care, he began to comb out her hair.

Kerstin sat with her back stiff. She hated his cold aloofness. If only she could say something that might ease the tension between them. Nothing came to mind.

A chill caused her to tremble. He worked fast and it felt good as he ran his warm hands through her hair. She closed her eyes and leaned back, enjoying his service. Few men would do such a thing for a woman and she told him so.

He snorted. His hands moved down her neck, kneading the tired muscles of her shoulders.

She tingled with expectancy. When she remembered all they had been through together, she felt like she had known him a thousand years. The way his mouth quirked up on the right side when he smiled, the flash of his eyes when he was angry or amused. His gentleness with her when he had no reason to be kind.

He kissed the nape of her neck and tremors ran down her spine. Turning her in his arms, he kissed her lips and she gasped with delight. She was lost. She couldn't refuse him.

She skimmed her fingers beneath his shirt, to caress the flesh of his solid back. He flinched and pulled her hands away, twining his fingers with hers as he brought her hands to his chest. He kissed her again and she forgot about the barrier of cloth between them.

Their passion turned bittersweet. She tried to push away the doubts niggling at her, but they remained like a cloudy day. Jonas still blamed her for Bjorn, Olga and Sigurd's deaths. And what about Elezer? Would they just pretend he had never happened?

Love was a luxury she would never know. They could never resolve their problems and have peace. Too many barriers stood between them.

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, just before dawn, Jonas lifted himself on one elbow and gazed at his sleeping wife. Lying on her stomach, her head was turned toward him, her arms burrowed beneath his pillow. Her reddish gold hair swept back across her naked shoulders. She had awoken him when she crowded his side of the bed, seeking warmth. She was decidedly a cover hog and he lifted a warm bear fur over her.

Thick lashes fringed her eyes, her breath teasing the furs. Her impudent nose that crinkled whenever she laughed or grew angry was thrust against his pillow, inhaling deeply. She stretched, her mouth curving in a sated smile. As she opened her eyes, she gazed up at his face and stifled a yawn. His naked chest was open to her view and she brushed her fingers against him. Tingles of pleasure covered his skin. He stared at her eyes, so intensely green, their beauty almost stole his breath. He marveled that his scarred body seemed to hold no repugnance for her. Truly, it was a miracle, yet he still could not help feeling self-conscious about the ugly scars.

Reaching up, she twined her fingers in the damp hair framing his face. She brushed her hand across his cheek, a lover's caress. As if no harsh words had ever passed between them.

Shivers of delight swept him and he pressed a kiss to her open palm. All anger and recriminations seemed gone. Yet, his heart felt heavy with regret. First Bjorn, now Sigurd. He'd give anything if Kerstin's magic spells could bring them back.

Did she practice black magic? He didn't know what to believe. He only knew what he felt. Loss. Deep and wrenching.

"You shaved." She breathed the words.

He chuckled. "Not all of us laze about when there's work to be done."

She gazed about the dark room. "It's not even dawn yet."

Though he longed to remain beneath the warm covers with her, there was a matter of business they must attend to before he left with his men. "Get up, lazy girl. We have a chore to do ere I depart."

"Chore? What do you have in mind?" she asked, her voice a silky purr.

He gritted his teeth and groaned. Moving away from her clinging hands, he stood and pulled her out of bed. Her lips opened in surprise and he almost kissed her. Knowing if he did so, it would steal what little time they had left together, he moved away and left the room while she dressed.

When he returned for her, Kerstin had combed her hair and sat on the bed, waiting.

"Come with me." He held out his hand.

An uncertain frown furrowed her brow when she saw the thick bathing cloths he had folded beneath his arm.

"What are those for? Where are you taking me?" She grasped his hand and stepped with him outside the hall.

"You will see."

In the crisp darkness, he led her across the shadowed fields and over the hill to a secluded spot along the river where the water was deep enough to swim but not so deep she couldn't stand in it. By the time they arrived, the sun peeked over the low hills surrounding them, splaying enough light to see what they were doing.

There, he taught her to swim. At first, she acted skittish. Gradually, she came to trust him and, within a most pleasurable hour, she learned to float and paddle like a dog. Satisfied with these results, he promised to teach her more after his return from battle. Then, he guided her from the water. He wrapped her chilly body in the bathing cloths and carried her to a tall oak tree. There, he lay with her in the sweet grass. She threw her head back, her long hair spilling over them. Her hands cradled his head and her fingers threaded through his damp hair.

His infinite gentleness appeared to amaze her. She quivered against him and he pulled her into his arms, kissing her. Deep, soul-wrenching kisses that tasted of

their passion.

He rested beside her and she spread the bathing cloth over them. Her moist lips felt swollen from his kisses, her limbs weak from their exertions.

Jonas squeezed her hand. She moved nearer, into the crook of his arm, pliant and welcoming. He took advantage of the invitation to kiss her again. The temptation to delay his journey one more day caused him to tighten his hold around her. He longed to remain here with her in the shade where they could forget about war. For now, he could almost pretend no troubles existed between them.

He drew back with a reluctant sigh and returned her contented smile. She looked away, her eyes filling with a wistful sadness. She also knew the time had come for them to part.

A morose silence settled over them.

"Did you love her?" Kerstin asked.

Caught off-guard, he rose up on his elbow. He rested his chin in one hand while he stretched the other across her stomach. "Who?"

"Your first wife."

His stomach tightened. "You know about Olga?"

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes as she chewed her bottom lip. "Yes, when you were ill, Sigurd told me how she died."

He tilted his head back and gazed at the river. The sting of that day would be imprinted on his mind forever. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"But did you love her?"

He threw off the cloth and came to his feet. The memory of the fire, the haze of smoke and flames, flashed through his brain. And the shrieking pain.

For months after it happened, he wished Bjorn hadn't pulled him from the burning hall. He'd prayed for death. Olga was gone and he would be crippled for life. But Bjorn wouldn't let him die. Once his wounds were healed well enough, Bjorn carried him to the river and forced him to swim, to strengthen his arms and legs so he wouldn't lose their use. Jonas screamed to be left alone, but Bjorn refused. Even when Jonas swung a fist at his brother's jaw, Bjorn taunted him and stepped away,

forcing Jonas to follow so he could hit him again. Bjorn egged him on, anything to get Jonas to move. By the time Jonas realized Bjorn's ploy, he was walking without support. With Bjorn by his side, Jonas worked his body until he grew strong again. He owed everything to Bjorn. His respect, his love, his life.

And Kerstin may have caused his death.

Now jealousy and hurt pounded his heart. Kerstin craved Elezer, yet she wanted to know if he had loved Olga. What right did she have to question him about his dead wife when she longed for another man?

He watched as she plucked a blade of grass, shredding it with her slender fingers. She seemed caught up in her thoughts. "I'm sorry you've lost so much, Jonas. I never meant to distress you."

He wanted to believe her. He really did. But too much stood between them. Hate and distrust. He couldn't seem to find a way to breach the distance.

"And what about Elezer?" she asked.

He cringed, feeling as though she had doused him with a bucket of icy water. To throw Elezer at him now was almost more than he could stand. His throat tightened. "What about him?"

"I don't love him, Jonas. I haven't loved him for some time. Will you believe me?"

No, he didn't. He couldn't. Not when she had made it clear how much she cared for the man. Not when she had run to Elezer to avoid marriage and cried out his name in a moment of passion.

Why would she dredge all of this up right now? It stole the tranquil moment, grinding his heart to a pulp.

Raking a hand through his hair, Jonas reached for his clothes and pulled them on with stiff jerks. He longed to erase Elezer's memory from her mind. Would killing the man do the trick? He'd love to find out. Nothing would bring him greater pleasure.

"Jonas?" she called and he heard the hesitation in her voice.

She wanted answers he was unable to give. At first, he thought she had murdered his brother. Now, he didn't know what to believe. If she didn't kill Bjorn, who did? Regardless, Jonas could not make her forget Elezer.

Anger pulsed over Jonas and he tried to calm himself. He shook his head, not daring to speak. He feared what he might say, what he might do.

Finally, he took a deep breath. "Leave it alone, Kerstin. Just leave it alone."

She bit her bottom lip and dressed slowly. A deafening silence settled between them. How he longed to take her in his arms again, to kiss her until she breathed *his* name in ecstasy. How he wished he could win her love.

It would never be, and his heart felt like a hollow shell. Empty and forlorn.

He led her back across the hill, taking her arm when she stumbled over a clump of grass. He gazed at the golden fields, realizing it all belonged to him now, and he ached to have his father beside him again.

As they reached the pasture where his sheep grazed, he heard the low thrum of a bullhorn heralding an approaching ship. He quickened his pace, eager to hear news of the battle, wondering who could be here this early in the morning. Another hour and he would be gone, racing toward York with his own ships.

When they reached the steading, it hummed with activity. Boys gathered firewood and fetched water from the well. Warriors milled about the yard having just returned from battle, their hair matted with sweat, blood and dirt.

Turning his head, Jonas caught sight of Elezer standing by the stable. Fury tightened his gut. Elezer was more than daring to come here of all places. Jonas would kill him now, and free the world of a vile curse.

Leaving Kerstin's side, Jonas strode toward the crowd of men and women gathered around the man. Elezer's voice sounded loud and clear as he told them how he had nearly been killed in battle, but his greater skill saved him at the last moment. Always eager to hear a good tale, the people "ooed" and "awed" as they listened.

The fools. Several warriors standing close by snorted and rolled their eyes with disgust, then moved away so they wouldn't have to listen to Elezer's nonsense. They knew firsthand of his cowardice in battle.

Jonas locked his jaw, his gaze raking Elezer. No blood stains, bruises, scrapes or cuts covered him like the

other warriors who had been at war. Not a single dent or scratch marred Elezer's shield and helm. Except for his wrinkled clothing, the man looked unharmed and unflustered.

The liar. Rage blazed inside Jonas, until his ears roared with it. Clenching his hands, he plowed through the gathering to get at the other man.

Elezer turned and saw Kerstin. Jonas saw Elezer's gaze take in her damp clothing and hair, her flushed cheeks and bright eyes. She looked like she had just come from a lover's tryst, which she had.

Elezer smiled suggestively, his eyes all over her. Jonas saw a red haze of fury.

His wife!

When she saw Elezer, Kerstin came up short, her mouth dropping open in surprise. Jonas paused in stride, waiting for her shriek of delight at finding Elezer here. He waited for tears of joy to trickle down her cheeks.

Jonas's gut tightened again. He couldn't stand it. With a low growl, he drew his dagger. Where was his sword when he needed it?

The moment Elezer spotted him, the lewd smile dropped from his face, replaced by a look of terror. He backed away, holding out his hands, his eyes wide with fear. "Wa—wait, Jonas! I'm here on the king's business. Wait!"

Jonas paused, breathing hard, his feet crunching kernels of corn spread upon the ground for the chickens. "Why have you come here?" he snarled.

Swallowing convulsively, Elezer could barely get the words out. "The king—he sent me to bring you his location and bids you come to him with haste. I—I've also come to fetch more supplies." His eyes almost bulged from his head as he stared at the dagger gripped in Jonas's hand.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jonas saw Kerstin's face go pale and a cruel laugh sprang from his chest. Did she fear he might kill her precious Elezer? Oh, how badly he wanted to.

Elezer's uncertain gaze swiveled back to Jonas and he inclined his head toward Kerstin. "It seems marriage agrees with her."

The people around them grew silent at the jest. Kerstin's cheeks flushed with color and her spine stiffened. She glanced at Jonas, her face contorted in a glare of disgust. His heart wrenched as she turned and walked toward the hall.

Jonas didn't know what she wanted from him. Kill Elezer for insulting her, or pat him on the back? Either way, she still didn't want her true husband. Even after the passion they had shared, she turned away from him in the presence of her lover. As he watched her go, Jonas squeezed his fingers around the hilt of his dagger, longing to plunge it deep in the other man's chest. But that would be murder and the king would have him put to death for the deed. And if his life was spared, the act would win him Kerstin's undying hatred.

It was almost worth it, to be rid of Elezer, but he had his mother to consider, and his honor. Jonas also couldn't stand the thought of Kerstin shedding tears of grief over Elezer.

Facing the other man, Jonas sheathed his dagger, his hands trembling with reluctance. He soothed his nerves by promising there would come a day when he would *not* put the blade aside. Someday soon—

Although hungry for news of her father and brothers, Kerstin was more than disgusted by Elezer's vulgar grin and ribald comments at her expense. She would not stand here and listen to his nonsense a moment longer and forced herself to turn her back and walk inside the hall.

As she stepped through the open doorway, she looked up and froze at what she saw.

Screaming with delight, she raced toward the large fire pit. "Einar! Oh, Einar."

Her brother sat in a chair beside the fire. Tovi knelt upon the floor at his feet, bending over his left leg while Letta offered him a cup of ale. Kerstin embraced him, cognizant that he didn't rise to meet her.

"Sister." He spoke in a fond whisper as he caressed her cheek.

She drew back to look at him—and saw the gash in his pant leg and a fair amount of blood covering his lower thigh. "You're injured."

Tovi moved aside to let Kerstin look at the ax wound. She prodded the gash. "It's not too bad, I think. The man's aim was poor, and for that, you were lucky."

He gave a chilling laugh. "I remedied the oversight by placing my sword point through his gullet."

Kerstin grimaced at his blunt jest. War was so ugly and cruel.

As she worked over him, Tovi left and returned soon with Kerstin's bag of healing herbs. Letta ran to fetch clean linen for bandages. They seemed to know exactly what she needed. Soon, they would be adept healers.

Kerstin nodded her thanks.

Tovi left them and Kerstin realized the woman treated her with new respect. Everyone else blamed her for Sigurd's death. Yet, his widow seemed to understand. Tovi had the power to make her life miserable and Kerstin was grateful for her deference.

Letta stayed close by, offering Einar a juicy slab of roast boar laid upon a thick slice of bread. He ate ravenously, gulping wine to deaden the pain of his wound.

The fire in the pit was hot. A side of venison broiled over the flames on a giant spit. Sweat rolled off Einar and Kerstin thought he had a fever, yet he shook with chills.

They were alone, with only Letta sitting close by on a bench. All the people had gone outside to welcome the warriors.

Kerstin cut away the cloth of his pant leg and peeled it back from the wound. It hadn't putrefied and she would cleanse it well.

"Have you seen Father recently? And Thorir?" she asked as she worked.

"I left both of them early this morning. Both are well. They send you and Letta their regards."

Releasing a sigh of relief, Kerstin wrapped her skirt around her hand and lifted a cauldron of water off the hook hanging over the fire. She poured a liberal amount of the liquid into a dish and sprinkled chamomile into it to steep. The pungent aroma filled the air around them.

"And what of the king? Is he well?"

"Aye, but he is worried."

Glancing up, Kerstin frowned. "Why? He'll defeat the Eirikssons, won't he?"

Einar closed his eyes and leaned his head back to rest against the high top of his chair. Kerstin noticed his eyes had dark circles beneath them. His beard was unkempt, his face lean. She shook her head. "You look weary. You haven't taken care of yourself. When have you eaten last?"

"This is a time of war." He spoke without opening his eyes.

She didn't argue as she cleansed the wound with a soft, damp cloth dipped in chamomile water. "Why is the king so worried?"

"We have a traitor in our midst. Father has suspected it for some time. The Eirikssons always seem to know our position. Though we have more men, we've sustained heavy losses."

"You can't discover who it is?" Kerstin paused in her chore and stared at her brother's drawn features. She shifted her knees on the hard floor as Letta leaned nearer to catch every word.

Einar rolled his head against the hard back of the chair. "We've tried to find out. The bastard deserves to die. Hundreds of our men have been slaughtered because of him."

Letta's forehead crinkled with thought. "It could be a woman."

"I don't think so." Einar shook his head and opened his eyes, their normal sparkle dulled by pain. "It must be a man. Someone privy to our battle plans." He looked at Kerstin. "You're the only woman I know of that fights alongside the men. The traitor must be someone who's been at the battle front and knows our every move."

"I was there recently, when I tried—" Kerstin's voice broke. "When I tried to save Sigurd's life. But I was never privy to any battle plans."

Dread clouded her mind. Someone might blame her for being the traitor. Surely they could not suspect her. And yet, she seemed to be blamed for many things that weren't her fault, merely because people believed her a witch.

Shrugging, Einar heaved a great sigh. "We'll discover the truth, but you and Letta could help."

A grim smile curved Letta's mouth, her eyes clear,

without a trace of lunacy in them. Einar's presence seemed to give her confidence and perhaps hope. "What can we do?"

Kerstin tilted her head as she dipped the cloth into the dish of chamomile and wrung it out again. Drops of water tickled her fingers and she wiped them away. "Yes, tell us. I'd do almost anything to end this war."

He smiled with fondness. "You're intelligent and alert. You both can watch and listen."

"But who can we trust, Einar?"

His gaze dropped to the floor and he stared at Kerstin's ankles peeking from beneath her skirt. "Your husband."

"Jonas? You trust my husband?"

"More importantly, Father trusts him, and that's good enough for me."

Kerstin wasn't so certain. Jonas blamed her for so much. She couldn't stand to be married to a man who believed her a witch. It was obvious he still loved his dead wife, and even if she proved she hadn't killed Bjorn, Jonas would never forgive her for Olga and Sigurd's deaths. She felt alone, cast adrift in a sea of suspicion and heartache. He wanted her body, but nothing else. Under these conditions, their marriage couldn't last.

Kerstin offered Einar an herb to ease the pain. He sipped the bitter concoction and his Adam's apple bobbed when he coughed. After she completed her work on his leg, he fell asleep. Two men carried him to a quiet place where he could rest. When certain he was comfortable, she went to her room and changed her clothes and brushed her damp hair.

By the time she returned to the hall, the warriors sat at the long table, feasting and drinking as if this were their last meal. No doubt they had delayed Jonas's departure while they gathered more supplies to take to the king's army.

Thralls raced back and forth to the kitchen, packing great platters of meat, porridge, cheese, breads and vegetables to feed the ravenous men their morning meal. Others filled the drinking horns with honey mead, ale, and fresh milk.

Jonas sat at the head table. In one hand, he held his

gold drinking horn full of frothy white milk. His choice of drink amused Kerstin, yet in the short time she had known him, she learned he wasn't given to drunkenness. He kept his wits clear.

His face darkened ominously as he chewed a piece of meat. Elezer sat on his right and Jonas listened with ill-concealed irritation as the man gave him more instructions from the king. Kerstin could tell by Jonas's fierce expression he barely tolerated Elezer's presence.

Hiding a smile, Kerstin admired Jonas's forbearance. She would have sat beside him, but decided to stay as far away as possible in case Elezer decided to incite more trouble.

Loud laughter filled the hall. Hounds barked and snapped as they fought over scraps tossed on the floor. Tovi directed the thralls, ordering extra flatbread be made for the men to pack on the ships. Kerstin saw Letta at the back of the hall, sitting beside Einar, staring at his sleeping face. God willing, Thorir would soon return and Letta and her husband would leave for Moere.

Remaining at the back of the hall, Kerstin helped serve the men. As she poured ale into their drinking horns, she glanced up and saw Elezer looking at her, his eyes narrowed and glittering with warmth.

Her skin crawled and she felt repulsion. She looked away, praying Jonas hadn't noticed. She didn't want to encourage Elezer and start a fight between the two men.

"I understand you were at the battle front two days ago," Elezer said loudly to Jonas. "Did you by chance hear any news of the traitor?"

A hush fell over the hall. Jonas's men glared at Elezer and stiffened in their seats. Kerstin swallowed and her eyes widened. Did Elezer insinuate that Jonas was the traitor?

Jonas took his time to respond. He reclined in his tall-backed chair and rested a hand upon the dragon carved armrest. But his eyes! They gleamed like specks of fine flint. Kerstin knew her husband well enough to understand he was anything but calm. His shoulders tensed, ready to spring into action with the speed of a cat.

"I believe someone mentioned it to me, but we returned with haste for my father's funeral," Jonas

replied in an even tone.

"I can understand why you left rather than staying to fight with the men." Elezer's gaze rested on Kerstin, his voice tinged with resentment and accusation. Did he now intimate that Jonas was a coward? He had never seen Jonas in battle if he thought such a foolish thing.

Kerstin picked up another pitcher of ale and continued to serve the men. As soon as she was able, she would steal away to her room and stay there until Elezer left.

"Kerstin." Jonas called to her from across the hall.

She flinched, every nerve in her body tingling.

"Come join me, wife." He beckoned to her.

The sharp glint in his eyes belied his easy manner. If Elezer stepped out of line, Jonas would kill him. Why would he allow Kerstin near the other man? It was the last thing she wanted.

Kerstin stammered in confusion. Sudden doubt filled her. Jonas wouldn't make her a spectacle, would he? Surely he wouldn't embarrass her here, in front of their people.

Their people. Yes, this was now her home. She belonged here with Jonas, yet they couldn't seem to make it work. Not without trust. Regardless, she wouldn't tolerate any cruel games.

Walking to her husband, she set the pitcher of ale on the table and took a seat beside him. He gave her a stiff smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. She purposefully kept her gaze away from Elezer, her mind broiling with turmoil.

A thrall filled her plate with meat, cheese, bread, and blueberries. She leaned against the wooden table as Jonas engaged her in conversation.

He dipped his head close to hers and she felt his warm breath against the nape of her neck. He pressed a languid kiss against her lips. It seemed Jonas baited Elezer, and a shiver of apprehension swept her.

"Your brother Einar is well?" he asked her as he placed another kiss against her temple.

She nodded, her throat too dry to speak.

"And your father? Did Einar bring you news of him, too?"

"Both my father and Thorir are well," she croaked.

Satisfied with her words, he squeezed her hand and sat back in his chair. His consideration warmed her heart. Perhaps he had no ill motives but was simply thoughtful of her.

She caught Elezer's angry glare and thanked her lucky stars she had never married him. How had she ever loved him?

Within the hour, a man with gout asked Kerstin for a remedy. Another complained of a toothache and sought her advice. Many of Jonas's people still did not trust her, but others did and, more and more, she became one of them.

Elezer stepped away from the table and only then did Jonas leave Kerstin while he walked about the hall and mingled with his men. Letta trailed close beside him, listening intently to his conversations. Soon, she wandered over to where Kerstin sat alone.

"Can you believe the good news? My Thorir is alive. He'll come for me soon." Letta's tone sounded merry as she spoke of her husband.

"I'm so glad." A lance of joy speared Kerstin's heart. She loved her brothers and was overjoyed to see Letta so happy. Kerstin offered a silent prayer they all remained safe.

"If only you could be as joyful as me." Letta frowned as her gaze moved to rest on Jonas.

Kerstin wished the same.

She watched the new Earl of Hawkscliffe as he paused in his conversation with his captains. Kerstin felt his gaze like a leaden weight as he watched her in return. Elezer stood beside Jonas, his eyes and mouth scrunched in a sullen frown, his ears and face a reddish hue. Had Jonas threatened him again?

Anskar, a young man who served as Jonas's runner, sat beside the door, waiting patiently. Dressed in lightweight clothing that would not hinder him, he held a rawhide sack draped over his left shoulder filled with food and water. He wore an ax and dagger sheathed on his hip. Jonas must be preparing to send him on a mission.

Jonas nodded his head. Anskar hopped to his feet and took off out the door. The errand must be important

for Jonas to send him at this time of day. Perhaps Anskar went to the king with a message. Jonas would be leaving soon. Why didn't he take the message himself?

Anskar would go by land, racing over hill and dale, forging streams and trails. He would never stop until he reached his goal or dropped dead. It would be much easier and quicker to travel by ship. It didn't make sense.

Jonas stared after the lad, his brow creased with worry. Perhaps Anskar carried news of the traitor. Jonas showed a thoughtful frown, seeming not to hear what Elezer said to him. If she got the chance, Kerstin would ask Jonas about it later on.

She made her way to the fire pit where she left her bag of healing herbs. The flap was open and several packets of dried herbs had been scattered on the floor. Someone must have knocked it over, perhaps one of the hounds.

With a shrug, she picked up the packets and placed them back inside the satchel, then took it to her room where it would be safe.

She returned to the hall. Sitting at the table, Kerstin watched Thor, one of Jonas's men, saunter to the other side of the hall where Beata, his wife, ladled cream from a bucket of milk. With his hand placed on her round bottom, Thor leaned near and whispered in Beata's ear. Beata snuggled close to the big man and dropped the ladle. It clattered into the bucket as she whirled about to embrace him and squealed with delight.

Kerstin envied them as she watched their kiss of love. They spoke quietly, their gazes locked, their noses touching. Again, they kissed, their fingers twined together.

"When your eyes look like that, you make me think of taking you back to our special swimming pool so we can be alone again."

Kerstin jerked as she turned to discover Jonas sitting close by her side. He had caught her daydreaming of their passion. Embarrassment heated her cheeks.

Jonas glanced at Thor in time to see him caress Beata brazenly. Jonas looked back at Kerstin and his gaze dropped to her lips. Did he see desire shining in her eyes? If he asked it of her, she would return with him to the

pool this very moment. But she knew he must leave. Because of Elezer's arrival, the morning grew late and they must soon depart.

Jonas leaned close and she saw dark specks in his translucent eyes and felt his warm breath against her lips.

Kerstin shivered and fumbled with her goblet, more than nervous. Was Jonas trying to bait Elezer into a fight? Oh, why couldn't Elezer leave? Why had he ever come? King Hakon should have sent someone else here to Hawkscliffe.

Surveying the room, her gaze sought Elezer. He was nowhere to be seen. Hopefully he had returned to his ship, preparing for departure.

"Your thoughts wander. Do you look for Elezer?" Jonas's voice rumbled with raw fury. She felt the touch of his long fingers against her wrist and her gaze met his. She opened her mouth to respond.

A shrill scream filled the air.

Jonas jumped to his feet, followed by Kerstin. She saw Orm, one of Jonas's men, lying on the floor, his body convulsing in pain.

"Help him!" someone yelled.

Pushing her way through the crowd, Kerstin ran to Orm and hunkered down on her knees beside him. He clutched his throat as he gasped for breath. His foot caught the edge of a tall sewing loom and it almost toppled over before Thor caught it and set it right.

Kerstin tried to calm Orm as she felt his forehead. Jonas stood by her side. Orm shook her hand off, his eyes wide, his pupils dilated. He gurgled as if his throat constricted.

"Orm, what did you eat?" she asked. "Can you tell me?"

He choked and thrashed, unable to answer.

"How long has he been ill?" She queried the men standing around him.

"He's been odd for several minutes, now," one responded. "A moment ago, he thought there were spiders crawling all over him, and he claimed he saw a giant bird flying about the hall when we all know it wasn't so."

Hallucinations!

Orm shook his head, his eyes rolling back in his head. He made sickening gurgling sounds as he thrashed about. Then, he went still. He lay in the fragrant rushes, his eyes wide open, staring and glazed.

Kerstin murmured with despair. "Oh, it's too late. Why didn't you call me sooner?" She leaned close and smelled his breath, then drew back with a gasp. "Deadly nightshade."

"What is it?" Jonas asked.

Kerstin scrambled for her healing bag. If she hurried, there might be a chance.

People scurried out of her path. Her hands fumbled with the bag, spilling the contents all over the floor. She grabbed the atropine and hurried back to Orm's side.

He appeared dead. His body relaxed and his hands fell away from his throat to flop back onto the hard-packed floor and lay there limp and lifeless. His open eyes stared. Kerstin winced and placed her hand on his chest. He had no breath.

Mixing the potion, she poured it into his mouth, massaging his throat to get it down. She beat on his chest, rubbing his arms and hands briskly. "Live! Please, live."

He didn't move. Tears poured down her face and she pounded his chest in frustration. She hoped they would not blame her. "Please, don't die. Please!"

A hush fell over the room. No one moved. Everyone stared at the dead man. Gone was the happy chatter. No longer were jokes bantered back and forth or food eaten or women fondled.

"He is dead?" Jonas asked in amazement as he placed a hand on Kerstin's shoulder.

Kerstin tilted her head and wiped the tears from her cheeks. Lying on the floor beside Orm's hand lay Jonas's gold drinking horn.

She picked it up and studied it. Bringing it to her nose, she sniffed the contents, then ran a finger along the brim and carefully tasted it with the tip of her tongue. She immediately spat it out.

Jonas hunkered beside her. "What is it?"

Kerstin lifted her gaze to his. "Why did Orm drink from your cup?"

"I wanted to speak with you. Someone filled my cup

with ale and I didn't want it, so I offered it to Orm—" Jonas's eyes narrowed, his jaw hard. Taking the horn from her hand, he also sniffed the contents, then wrinkled his nose. "It smells odd."

He came to his feet, whirling about as he looked at the crowd. "Who filled my drinking horn?"

No one answered.

"Who filled my drinking horn?" he roared.

The people stared, their faces filled with helpless fear. Kerstin heard the words "poison" and "witch." The women turned their frightened gazes toward their men, who shrugged and backed away. Suspicion glinted in their eyes.

No, not again. Please no!

Jonas turned and looked at her. His gaze hardened, his mouth curved in a disbelieving frown. "Kerstin?"

She shook her head and stood up. To see the accusation in his stare was more than she could stand. "Nay, Jonas. I didn't do this."

"You would poison me after what we have shared? You would murder me even now?"

She backed away as he advanced, tears running down her face. "Nay, I didn't do it. I've been across the room. When could I have poisoned your cup?"

Tovi and Letta crowded close, their eyes crinkled with disbelief.

"It's true." Thor stepped forward. "I saw her across the room. She couldn't have done this, my lord."

Halfdan stood by Jonas's side. "But what about earlier? Who knows when she placed the poison in Jonas's cup? She could have done it."

He spoke true. For Orm to die so swiftly, he must have swallowed the poison earlier. He had been having hallucinations for some time and no one told her. If she had known, she might have saved him.

Elezer appeared out of nowhere and came to stand beside Jonas. Where had he been? He frowned in disappointment. "Kerstin? Is this true? Did you try to poison Jonas?"

"Of course not." She trembled. Her blood ran cold.

Witch! Murderer! She heard the words whispered amongst the crowd. The accusations vibrated in her ears

like a shout.

"I'm not a murderer!" she yelled. "I'm a healer, not a witch. You have to believe me. Please."

Tovi's face whitened and her lips thinned. Letta whimpered and wrung her hands.

"See she holds her magic bag in her hands." Halfdan pointed to where she clutched her leather satchel with whitened knuckles.

Kerstin stared at him and her mouth tightened. "It's been lying on the hearth for several hours. *Any* of you could have gone through its contents and obtained the nightshade."

Of course. No wonder she'd found the packets spilled on the floor. Someone had gone through her bag in search of the poison. But how would they know what to look for?

Her gaze moved about the room and she stared at each person. One of them was a murderer. One of them wanted Jonas dead. They knew she would be blamed for the deed. How convenient for them.

"No one knows how to use the poison better than you," Halfdan said.

"Even *you* could have poisoned him, Halfdan," she said.

His jaw clenched. "You're the witch, not me. You murdered Bjorn. You let Sigurd die."

A sob wrenched from her throat. She shuddered so hard she could hardly stand as she backed away from them. She shook her head vehemently. "Nay, I tried to save them. I wouldn't harm anyone."

Halfdan had never liked her, everyone knew that. Hatred simmered in his dark eyes. "You've killed many of our men with your bow and arrows."

Prickles of heat dotted her flesh. "That was during battle. You've also killed my people during battle."

She looked from one person to the next. Was there not one who believed her?

"Jonas," she whispered, reaching a hand toward him. He stared at her, unmoving, his face white with anger.

"Take her," Halfdan ordered. "We'll burn her at the stake."

A blaze of terror tore through her and she strangled the satchel with her hands. Would Jonas let Halfdan kill

her? How could Jonas believe her guilty of this heinous crime?

"Get away." Brandishing a kitchen knife, Letta charged the advancing horde. She stood in front of Kerstin. A wild light flashed in her eyes.

The people backed away and Halfdan gestured at Kerstin. "See, the witch has even hexed Letta to make her insane."

Jonas continued to stare at Kerstin. Why didn't he say something? He had interceded before when Sigurd tried to have her burned. Would he help her again?

"Stay out of this, woman." Halfdan sneered at Letta. "We'll kill the witch and you'll be free of the hex she's put on you."

Letta locked her jaw. "I'm only crazed with grief from losing my children. Kerstin has never done anything to me except show me kindness. You'll not harm her, do you understand me? Now, get back!"

Kerstin touched Letta's shoulder. "Letta, you'll be hurt."

"Hurt?" The woman repeated as she glared at Halfdan. "I don't matter, Kerstin. You're so good and kind. All you do is help people and they repay you this way. You mustn't be blamed for something you didn't do."

Why was she so certain Kerstin hadn't tried to poison Jonas? Had Letta done the deed?

Dread thudded in Kerstin's heart. When would this end?

Moving fast as lightning, Jonas disarmed Letta in one, swift move. She screeched, clawed and bit as two men took her arms and pulled her away. "Don't believe it, Jonas. You're Kerstin's husband. You owe her your loyalty."

"Please don't hurt her," Kerstin called to the men as they dragged Letta from the hall.

Jonas dropped Letta's knife to the floor. His expression was remote. Closed. His eyes hardened, his mouth tight. Kerstin had seen him look this way when he fought in battle. Determined and resolved.

Chilling.

Elezer stepped forward. "Jonas, Kerstin wouldn't do this. I could have as easily done it."

A lump clogged her throat. Now Elezer defended her, but it was too late. They had lost so much.

"Yes, you could have done it." Jonas's gaze held the brutal calm before a storm.

Elezer backed away.

Kerstin could see Tovi standing beside the fire pit. Her eyes were somber, her mouth stern. As always, she awaited her son's judgment.

Haki stepped forward. "Jonas, I don't believe Kerstin did this. She's been good to my family. I've watched her tend little Ota and Gudrid until she nearly fell over from lack of sleep and food."

"You don't want to condemn the wrong person," Astrid exclaimed. "If we have a murderer amongst us, don't be hasty."

Halfdan made a rude sound in the back of his throat. From his expression, it was easy to tell what he thought of these statements.

Bless Haki and Astrid for defending her. Gudrid stood beside them, nodding in agreement. They believed in her.

Tears burned Kerstin's eyes and she blinked them away. Finally. Finally, she had friends here. But what of her husband?

Jonas didn't move as he looked at his wife. His insides boiled with emotion. He tensed his shoulders, his jaw stiff. Kerstin pined for Elezer, but Jonas never believed she would try to murder him now that they were married. All his old uncertainties sprang up inside him like a rattling giant. Those closest to him had suffered and he couldn't get Kerstin out of his mind. She must have cast an evil spell on him to cause such destruction in his life. He had no other explanation. He didn't know what to believe anymore.

"Go to our room." His words no more than a harsh whisper, the sharp edge of fury remained in his tone.

Did only Kerstin know how to administer the poison? Who else could have done this? How he wished he could blame Elezer for the deed, but that man had left the hall some time ago and returned after Orm fell.

Jonas watched her turn and walk to their chamber,

her head held high, her shoulders pressed back.

How he loved her. In that moment, he realized how much he cared for her. And she loathed him.

When had it happened? In the beginning he hated her, and yet, that first night at Moere, when he watched her bathe, he began to love her. Yet he couldn't trust her. Now he understood why he was so jealous of Elezer. Because he *loved* Kerstin—and he would never win her love in return.

The poison hadn't been meant for Orm. It had been meant for *him*.

Jonas thought of something he hadn't considered. The pieces fit so well. Of course! He must be a fool not to have realized it before.

Turning, he left the room, determined to be patient. He would watch and wait and let his plan catch the culprit and root out the traitor in the process.

Chapter Seventeen

Kerstin rose from the bed and paced the confines of her chamber. She wrung her hands as the hours passed. Why didn't Jonas come for her? Surely he wouldn't leave for York without bidding her farewell.

What would he do when he returned? Would he kill her or send her into exile? How could she live without him?

Pressing her fingers to her lips, she trembled with the knowledge that she loved him. Somehow, in all their tribulations, she had come to care for him more than her own life. Her body shuddered with the revelation. She loved him only to lose him.

Closing her eyes, she imagined the intense passion of his kiss, her fierce pleasure when he touched her. Her emotions left her breathless and aching. He was her heart's warrior, the one man in the world she could ever love.

Fear clogged her throat. She couldn't protect him from the evil forces working against them. She might never get the opportunity to tell him of her love.

In a quick rush, she opened the door and peeked out, expecting to see guards. No one stood there and she thanked heaven for her good fortune.

Dashing outside, she looked about. The sun rose high, showing the trampled ground in the empty yard. The warriors had left, taking Orm's body to bury at sea.

If only Jonas still prepared his ship down at the quay.

In a panic, Kerstin tore across the yard, frantic to reach her husband before he sailed. Chickens squawked and flapped their wings as she raced past. She hadn't noticed her feet were bare until a sharp stone rolled beneath her heel. She cried out, checked her balance, then hurried on.

Down at the quay, the empty dock showed not one

ship remained. She arrived too late. The men had sailed.

Pain clenched her heart. She couldn't lose him now. Not when she recognized what he meant to her. Somehow, she had to make things right between them. She had to make him believe the truth.

With Sigurd dead, who would watch Jonas's back in battle? If he thought she tried to poison him, he might not be cautious of the real killer.

She stared at the rippling waves of the river, then returned to the steading. She didn't know what to say to Tovi, or how the people would receive her.

To her surprise the hall stood empty.

She retrieved her shoes and followed the path to the secret pool Jonas had taken her to earlier that morning. She wanted to be alone, to plan for his return. Somehow, she must win him back.

Halfway across the fields, Letta trampled after her. The woman gasped for breath as she clutched Kerstin's arm.

"Letta, why have you brought my satchel of herbs?" Kerstin asked.

Letta also carried several packs of food and a skin of water. Slung on her back were Kerstin's bow and arrows, and warm furs tied with strips of leather.

Kerstin tensed. "I won't run away. I love Jonas. I'm staying."

Glancing over her shoulder, Letta drew Kerstin into the shelter of spruce trees. She seemed to fear someone might see them. Why wouldn't she say something? Maybe she had completely lost her wits this time. Kerstin didn't have time for this nonsense.

"We're alone, Letta. What is it you plan?"

"I don't want you to run away, Kerstin."

As Kerstin looked into the woman's eyes, she found them clear of insanity, her expression anxious as they huddled amongst the protective trees.

"Did you flee Jonas's men and they're searching for you?"

The cracking of a twig came from behind them and Letta whirled in that direction. A squirrel raced past, disappearing into a hollow.

A hand to her chest, Letta seemed to relax, yet looked

about as if to make certain no one watched them. "Come with me. I've found someone in the forest. Please, trust me."

Kerstin frowned. "Who? Who have you found?"

"Shh, lower your voice. I broke away from those men who dragged me from the hall and ran as fast as I could. They chased me but I hid. That's when I found him."

Butterflies fluttered in Kerstin's stomach as she followed Letta toward a thick patch of trees. They left the main path and headed down hill. The scent of damp soil filled the air along with the sounds of birds twittering in the branches.

Lifting her arm, Letta pointed. "He's there, but he's badly injured and might be dead. I hid him so he wouldn't be found until I could bring you or Jonas. I was too late to find Jonas. He had already sailed."

Kerstin squinted her eyes. Her heart thudded when she saw a man lying partially concealed amongst leaves and branches. Hurrying to his side, she knelt down and brushed twigs away from his face. She gasped.

Anskar! Jonas's runner.

She pressed her fingers to his throat, seeking a pulse. He still lived—but barely.

Searching him, she discovered a stab wound in his back. She opened his shirt and her eyes widened. "Just like Tostig. So much blood. How have you survived this long?"

Now, Kerstin understood why Letta had brought packets of food, healing herbs, and the thick furs. They were to be used on the injured man. With deft fingers, she poured water on a cloth and cleansed the blood from the gaping hole. She packed the wound to stop the bleeding but knew he was near death.

Letta peered down at him. "He's still alive?"

"Aye, but he's unconscious. I must get him back to the steading." She tore strips of cloth.

"You can't take him there." Letta shook her head. "Think, sister. They've accused you of murdering Orm. They'll believe you've done this to Anskar. If he dies, they'll burn you this time. Jonas will never trust you again."

Kerstin hesitated. Letta was right, but where else

could she take Anskar? She shook her head. "I can't jeopardize his life to save myself. Do you think you can help me carry him?"

Letta snorted. "Listen to me, Kerstin. You must help him and find out who has done this. Someone amongst us is a murderer. They'll kill you and Jonas if they're not stopped. I fear for my husband's life also. Evil lurks amongst us. We must be careful to discover what it is."

Kerstin frowned. Was it possible Letta had stabbed Anskar? Her suspicions must have shown on her face, for Letta shook her head again.

"Nay, Kerstin, this isn't my work. I hated Jonas at first, but not anymore. The Sigurdssons are my friends, now. And I didn't poison Bjorn either. I'm no murderer, merely a grieving mother."

Conviction filled her tone and Kerstin couldn't doubt her. What horrible force was at work here? Einar said there was a traitor amongst them. The promise of wealth could turn any man's heart. One of Jonas's men could have easily betrayed them. Several of his people came for the wedding feast and were there the day Bjorn died.

Anskar's eyes fluttered and Kerstin leaned over him. He grimaced with pain and tried to swallow.

"Danger..." His voice was a hoarse whisper. "Ambush...for Jonas and the king."

Again he swallowed and then he cried out with pain. He coughed and bloody spittle ran from his mouth. He bled inside and there wasn't much she could do for him.

"Where?" Kerstin almost shouted. "Where will they ambush Jonas?"

Anskar shuddered. "On the moors...Durham...the river's mouth."

He jerked and his eyes stared. He said no more.

Her fingers curled around his shoulders and she gave him a shake. His head rolled, a lock of matted hair fell across his brow.

"Who? Who is the traitor?"

He couldn't answer. Anskar was dead.

Kerstin trembled as she stood on her feet. Her gaze scanned the hills, letting herself take in any furtive movements that might indicate an assassin hiding there.

Nothing moved, except the buzz of flies and the

whisper of a breeze.

Durham wasn't far, if she sailed by ship. Last June, Kerstin had joined her father and brothers as they met there for the yearly gathering to discuss laws and settle disputes between the various earldoms. A beautiful place, it bordered by the River Wear, with rugged moors and magnificent waterfalls. Fields of grass offered grazing for herds of animals and crops for the winter's cold. Located not far inland—an ideal place for an ambush.

"Jonas is in danger. I must go to him."

Letta nodded her head. "Aye, this evil must end."

Kerstin blanched. She could lose everything. Jonas and all those dearest to her heart. Her own life.

Letta picked up a heavy packet and handed it to Kerstin. When Kerstin opened it, she discovered a pair of men's pants, a thick, woolen shirt, her small helmet and chain mail. She looked at Letta and her eyes widened with wonder.

"You knew I would go after Jonas?"

Letta smiled. "You love him. I've seen it in your eyes. One day Jonas will know it, too. He's a fool to believe you could ever harm him."

Kerstin hugged Letta. Tears filled her eyes and she kissed her sister-in-law's cheek.

"I also knew you loved my son."

Kerstin and Letta turned and found Tovi standing beside the shelter of trees.

"Tovi!" Letta gasped with fear.

"Don't be frightened. I wasn't followed. I saw Kerstin leave the hall and wanted to know where she was going. I wished to know the truth about Orm—whether or not Kerstin tried to poison my son. I know now she's innocent."

Kerstin's mouth dropped open with surprise. Tovi's admission meant so much to her. It gave her the confidence to face what lay ahead. "Thank you for your trust."

"Go and warn my son," Tovi said, her voice urgent. "I'll care for your brother while you're gone."

It took only moments for Kerstin to dress in her men's garb and braid her hair. As she picked up her bow and arrows and slung them on her back, she looked at the

two women. "If the gods are kind, we will meet again."

Tovi nodded her head. "Jonas told me they plan to enter battle with the Eirikssons early in the morning. There's time for you to find him if you sail down river."

Kerstin clenched her hands, knowing she must do it. But she became so ill when she sailed. How could she row if she became sick? And if she capsized, her new skill might not be enough for her to swim to shore. She could drown.

Considering her options made her body quake with trepidation. The call of her loved ones pulled at her. Her father, brother and king. Jonas and all their men. She must succeed. It was their only chance.

"Don't be frightened," Tovi soothed as she placed a hand on Kerstin's shoulder. "I know you can do this."

Buoyed by the woman's confidence, Kerstin showed a wan smile. "I will."

The women waved as Kerstin took off at a lope, heading for the river. In her heart, she knew such fear that she was almost overcome with it. Her entire family—all she loved in the world was at stake. And Elezer. Poor betrayed Elezer, who had loved her only to lose her. She must be in time to warn them all.

Blood pounded in Kerstin's head as she ran. Her feet carried her swiftly and she seemed to fly over rocks and tree trunks lying in her path.

When she reached the quay, she took one of the small boats Jonas's men used for fishing. Tossing her bow and arrows and other supplies into it, she grasped the oars. As she stepped into the vessel, it rocked wildly and fear clutched her throat. She plopped down on the wooden bench and clung to the sides, holding perfectly still, steadying the craft. Her pulse hammered against her temple. Her skin prickled, awaiting the cold splash of the water.

It didn't come. The boat calmed to a gentle rocking. The river tugged at the craft and she dipped the oars into the water as she had watched the men do.

The boat moved away from shore. Water surrounded her. Her body trembled with fear, her heart in her throat. If the boat tipped over—

Nay! She refused to entertain that thought. Everything was all right. She glided evenly, not too much rocking. The flow of the river pulled her along and she sped past the steading. She could do this.

But what about the falls?

Tension throbbed within her. She couldn't navigate the falls, nor swim through them. She wouldn't survive!

Nay, she would bypass the falls. She knew the way. She must think about Jonas, his gentle touch upon her cheek. His lazy smiles as she rubbed aloe into his skin. His torrid kisses in the early morning light.

For several hours, she rowed. Her shoulders cramped and she had to rest, and then she rowed again.

By nightfall, she neared the mouth of the river and banked the boat against the shore. A smile of victory curved her lips. She had overcome her fear of water and reached Durham.

Stepping out of the vessel, she sloshed through the water as she pulled the boat to dry land, hiding it in the thick sedges on shore. She gathered her bow and arrows. From here on, she would travel on foot. If only she would be in time.

Racing up the incline, she headed into the concealing brush and hurried east. Under cover of darkness, she ran across the wild moors until her foot sank deep into a hole, wrenching her ankle. Down she went, falling heavily to the ground. She groaned and panted. Dirt clung to her hair and clothing. Pain washed over her and she clenched her teeth. Sitting up, she brushed leaves out of her hair and rubbed her injured ankle until the pain eased. As she stood, she put weight on her leg, testing it. Had she broken something? She didn't think so, but it throbbed.

Kerstin took several hobbling steps. She went on, ignoring the ache, ignoring the stitch in her side and catch in her lungs, ignoring every thought but one. She must warn Jonas!

The moon rose above her, casting its eerie light over all the earth so she had no trouble seeing. It was a blessing and a curse. Using the skills her father taught her, she navigated by the stars. She should be nearing the River Wear. That meant danger. She must use caution.

If she were found by the enemy, they would believe

her nothing more than a boy—at first. Soon, they would discover she was a woman. She might be brutalized, raped, and murdered before she could even utter her name. And if they discovered who she was, they'd use her to destroy her father and Jonas.

Doubt filled her. Jonas wouldn't try to ransom her. He would be grateful to have her out of his life, his vengeance complete. Only the king's order kept Jonas from ridding himself of her.

And what of Elezer? Would he come for her? She shook her head, doubting him. She had learned he was a coward. He'd never jeopardize himself to save her.

Although darkness shrouded her, it wasn't cold. Her movements kept her warm. Kerstin bit back tears of pain as she sat on a felled tree and prodded her ankle with her fingers.

Her nose twitched as she caught the scent of wood smoke. A campfire nearby!

Her head came up and her gaze searched the forest. Crouching low, she forgot her ankle and crept along a line of birch trees, careful to make no sound. She heard them, the echoing voices of numerous men camped a short way off. She bellied down on the ground and used her elbows to crawl through the brush.

Oh, please let it be the king's men. Please let it be my father or Jonas.

Peeking over a large, gray boulder, she saw their standard. The royal crest of Vestfold waved in the breeze, but it bore the colors red and black.

The Eirikssons!

Eirik Bloodaxe stood in the clearing, facing her as he rubbed his hands together before a small campfire. She recognized him from the cloak he wore, a deep charcoal gray with sleeves stitched with golden thread and a miniature of the royal crest sewn over his right breast.

The vile wretch! He schemed to oust Hakon and make himself king over York. His men had attacked Moere last summer, killing her mother in the process. Oh, how she loathed him.

He had thrown one side of his cloak back over his shoulder to reveal his famous war ax sheathed at his side. A huge weapon, it looked too heavy for Kerstin to lift. The

Bloodaxe had earned his horrific name by hacking to death any man or woman who stood in his way to the throne.

He stood at average height, with a sparse beard and rather large, bulbous nose. His small, beady eyes and pock-marked face appeared cruel. A brutal, vicious man. Because she knew his horrible deeds, Kirsten shivered. She must be careful not to fall into his hands.

Exhilaration thrummed in her blood. If she could locate Jonas or her father, she could give them the exact location to Eirik's camp. Her people could destroy this threat once and for all and discover the identity of the traitor.

Her gaze swept the camp, memorizing how many men the Bloodaxe had, how many horses, what their weapons were, if they appeared starved and tired, or strong and able to fight. She tried to hear their conversation but it was unclear and she doubted she could get closer without being discovered. Her dangerous predicament did not bode well.

With utmost care, she moved back the way she came. Detouring around the camp, she headed toward the west, intent on finding Jonas's ships. Tovi had told her where they would be hidden.

She heard a movement ahead and ducked behind some bushes. Two of the Bloodaxe's watchmen approached and her heart pounded in her ears. She breathed with relief when they passed.

They were so certain of victory. Certain of the traitor.

Soon, she saw the River Wear through the stand of timber. The dark waters sparkled in the orange lit night. Jonas's ships bobbed in the inlet, tethered by strong mooring lines. An open field of green grass stood between her and Jonas.

Kerstin broke from the sheltering trees. Across the wide field, she saw the shadows of her husband's men standing watch along the shore. Where had the bulk of his army gone? They may have already fought in battle. Or they could be scouring the woods in search of the Bloodaxe's camp.

As she limped across the field, she felt safe.

Several men rushed her from the forest's cover. She

cried for help, loud and shrill. A call came from the direction of the ships. Jonas's men heard her too late.

She screamed again before a solid hand clamped across her face. Three men picked her up and carried her back into the dense trees. She kicked and clawed, twisting to be free. They held her tight.

She bit the hand covering her mouth. The man yelped with pain and Kerstin screamed again. Someone stuffed a gag between her lips. She fought to spit it out but a hand clapped over her mouth again and she breathed through her nose in desperate inhales.

She shook her head furiously and they knocked her helmet off. Her long braid swung free. In the dark, she saw their eyes glitter with surprise when they realized she was a woman.

Her bow fell to the ground and her arrows spilled across the earth. One man bent to scoop the arrows up. Another man pulled a woolen sack over her head.

They tied her hands in front of her, the rough hemp digging into the tender flesh of her wrists. Kerstin tried to scream against the gag and musty smell of the sack, but it came out as a dry, hacking sound.

Through the forest they moved fast, carrying her. She hung limp in their solid grasp, unable to see anything. She envied them their strength and endurance. How she wished she were strong like a man, then she would slice them through with a sword.

Frustration congealed her blood. She had failed. The thought made her kick harder and her foot struck one of the men in the groin.

"You evil witch! I'll teach you—"

"Don't strike her. You'll mar her beauty. The Bloodaxe will want her unharmed."

She recoiled, anticipating a blow. It didn't come. She didn't recognize any voices as they tightened their hold on her arms and legs. They walked for some time, carrying her, cursing when she kicked and bucked and made their chore as difficult as possible.

They slowed their pace and Kerstin heard other voices. They must be close to the Eiriksson camp. They deposited her on the ground and jerked the sack off her head.

She blinked, sat up and found herself face-to-face with Eirik Bloodaxe.

A scream froze in her throat. It did no good to panic, especially with a gag in her mouth. Glancing about, she found herself surrounded by a multitude of men. Eiriksson warriors. There would be no escape.

For now.

"Ah, what a prize!" The Bloodaxe grinned, showing yellowed teeth. "A woman, no less."

He clapped Kerstin's captors on the back. "Well done, men. Very well done."

Kerstin glared at the Bloodaxe. She twisted her hands, trying to pull free of their binding. A sharp stone dug into her hip and she shifted her weight. She longed to spit out the gag so she could tell this man what she thought of him.

Eirik walked to her, circling around, looking her over like a piece of chattel. Her gaze followed him and she glared her hatred. He reached to lift her heavy braid and feel the texture of her hair. Kerstin jerked her head away and whirled on him. If she had her bow and arrows, she'd teach him a barbed lesson.

Laughter shook his chest. "I believe you've captured a spitting cat."

The Bloodaxe gestured to her mouth and a man removed her gag. She worked her jaw to relieve the ache, dragging deep breaths of air into her lungs as she struggled to stand.

Eirik's voice boomed through the camp. "So, we've captured the Witch of Moere. No doubt Alrik will be concerned to know we have his daughter. And I suspect Jonas of Hawkscliffe will be interested also."

Kerstin's eyes widened. He knew her name. Dare she deny it? "I am no witch," she told him fiercely.

Eirik chuckled as he tugged at his sparse beard. "We were expecting you, my dear." His gaze moved past her to where a lone man stood back amongst the trees. "You were right. She did come—and she is beautiful."

Kerstin turned, squinting her eyes to see through the shadows. The man stood tall and slim but she couldn't make out his features. When he came forward into the light, she gasped.

“Elezer!”

An amused smile curved his handsome mouth. “Ah, Kerstin, my love. What a joy to find you here. I knew you wouldn’t wait at home with the other women. You always did chase around the hills like a man. I warned Eirik you might show up at the battle front.”

As he stood before her, his eyes held a feral gleam; cruel eyes that made her stare with shock. The moon bathed him in orange light, his face dark and obscure. In that moment, Kerstin thought him as evil as Ragnarok, god of the final doom.

He showed a nasty grin. “Once we’re wed, I’ll see that you no longer make excursions into the hills. You’ll remain at home, where you belong.”

Elezer here. A blaze of dawning flooded her mind, sickening her as she understood what his presence meant. “You’re the traitor.”

He chortled, a wicked, evil sound that sent shivers up her spine. She had loved him and would have married him. When she thought of how hard she fought for him. She shuddered. Jonas had saved her from a terrible fate.

“Aye, little witch. I’m a spy for Eirik Bloodaxe.”

“But why? Why would you do such a thing?”

His mouth curled. “Many reasons. Mostly wealth and power. But also because I hate your father and Jonas.”

“And me?”

His gaze roamed over her body, his eyes filled with lust. “You have your uses.”

Her skin prickled with revulsion. “But you were there when Orm died. You left with Jonas. How have you come to be here?”

Elezer swaggered past her as he went to stand beside Eirik. “Jonas believes I took my army to an appointed place to cut off the Bloodaxe’s advance on the morrow. Instead, I came here to warn my friends of the king’s plans.”

Kerstin threw a look of disgust at Eirik. “The Bloodaxe is no friend, Elezer. He’s our enemy.”

The fool! Didn’t he know how Eirik used people for his own gain? The same way Elezer used her. The thought brought an ache to her chest, so intense that she gasped.

“The Bloodaxe will take your earldom from you,

Elezer. You've betrayed your own people. You betrayed me." Her stomach twisted in knots when she thought of how Elezer duped her. She had wanted to believe in him. Jonas warned her, but never would she have thought Elezer a traitor.

Elezer shook his head. "Eirik doesn't care who holds the northern lands, so long as I pay homage to him. Once we defeat King Hakon, I'll be lord over Lade, Hawkscliffe and Moere."

The blow of his deception cut deep and she clenched her eyes shut. "You murdered Anskar. I remember you left the hall before Orm died. You stabbed poor Anskar, then returned to the hall. You appeared so innocent."

Elezer gave a deep laugh. "I couldn't let Anskar reach the king. I slipped out of the hall and caught up to him—just after I put the poison in Jonas's drink. If he hadn't given his cup to that bumbling Orm, Jonas would be dead now."

"You tried to kill Jonas?" A wave of emotional pain pulsed over her. "And Bjorn? You were there at the wedding feast when Bjorn fell ill. Did you poison him too?"

She needed to know. For so long, she had wondered who killed Bjorn, frustrated because she couldn't discover the truth and suffered the blame for his death.

"Of course I killed him." He snickered. "I had to keep you from marrying him. He would have destroyed my plans. One by one, I would have done away with your father and brothers. With them gone, Moere would have gone to your husband. I wanted it. So, you see, Bjorn had to die, so you could marry me."

"But how could you do that to me? Everyone accused me of his death. They never suspected you. When I think of how you acted so concerned as Bjorn lay dying, and afterward, how you defended me when everyone called me a witch and a murderer. You were my only source of comfort. My only friend. I fell in love with you. And it was all a lie." Kerstin looked away, unable to stand the sight of him. He never loved her. He used her, nothing more. She grit her teeth. Tears beaded in her eyes. Her voice trembled. "I felt sorry for you, Elezer. I felt horrible and guilty for hurting you when they forced me to marry Jonas. Now, I realize how unworthy you are."

Elezer shrugged and crossed his arms. "I don't need your pity, Kerstin. I'll rule all the northern lands very soon. You'd do well to seek my favor."

"I will seek your death."

He froze, his gaze locked with hers. In his eyes, Kerstin saw uncertainty. What a pathetic creature. A coward.

She curved her mouth into a sneer. "Jonas will kill you if I don't do it first."

Doubt clouded his eyes. Then, he chuckled. "I don't think so. The Bloodaxe's army will defeat Jonas. There's nothing you can do to stop it now."

A lance of fear pierced her. The ambush! She hadn't warned Jonas, but Elezer didn't know that. "Anskar didn't die immediately. He told me of your plans to ambush the king and I've already warned Jonas."

Elezer hooted with laughter. "You always were a poor liar, Kerstin. I know our men captured you before you could reach Jonas. He knows nothing of our plans."

He challenged her bluff. The ramifications left her shaking.

Eirik snickered. Sweeping back his cape, he rested his hands on his hips and watched this exchange with amusement. The heartless monster.

More dread nibbled at her mind, compelling her to ask: "Did you murder Tostig?"

A wide grin split Elezer's face. "Of course. It was quite easy. He was young and inexperienced in battle and I slid my dagger deep into his back, just as I did Anskar. Everyone believed one of Sigurd's men killed him during the skirmish."

"Ohh!" Kerstin squeezed her eyes shut as she lowered her head, unable to absorb the renewed pain. Her dear youngest brother, Tostig. No one saw who killed him in such a gutless fashion. Too much confusion during the battle masked the murderer. Elezer had been there, fighting for Alrik's cause. Instead, he murdered Alrik's youngest son, then ran to safety.

"My father was wounded that same day Tostig died. Were you responsible for that as well?" she asked.

Elezer showed his nasty grin and the Bloodaxe cackled with glee. She detested them both.

With a nod, Elezer propped his foot against a fallen tree trunk. "I tried to finish Alrik then, but that hulking Knut was there to guard his back. My aim missed its mark and I barely escaped with my life. Luckily I was wearing a helmet and Knut didn't recognize me."

Inhaling deeply, Kerstin resolved herself to be strong. She realized now that Elezer's sins were many. He was a fiend and deserved to die.

"How unfortunate that Jonas spared your life." Cold fury swept her and she resolved then to have her revenge. Somehow, someday, she would kill Elezer. "What other crimes against our people have you committed?"

The Bloodaxe snorted with laughter and slapped his right thigh. "What a delight, Elezer. You didn't tell me what a bloodthirsty woman she is.

"I told you she's a witch," Elezer quipped.

With a shrill cry, Kerstin lunged for Elezer, trying to gouge out his eyes with her bound hands. Her injured ankle made her clumsy. He sidestepped her and she sprawled in the dirt. The fall knocked the wind from her and she suffered many scrapes as her body struck the ground.

She lay there, panting, hurting, almost overcome by her anger. Think! She mustn't let her hatred swallow her reasoning. She had time, if only she could escape.

"Now, Kerstin, you must behave yourself or I'll be forced to beat you." Elezer's voice sounded patronizing. "I don't want to scar your lovely flesh, but I'll do what I must to control you."

With a glare, she spat into the dirt at his feet. "I'll watch you die before this is finished, traitor."

He and the other men in camp laughed. How soon they forgot her deadly aim with a bow and arrow.

"Once we're married—"

"I already have a husband."

Elezer's brows lifted. "Not for long. You're about to become a widow."

"You and I will *never* wed," she spoke low. "I'll die before I give you that honor. I'd rather marry a slobbering, three-eyed pig."

Elezer hardened his jaw and his lips thinned. His breathing came in harsh huffs, his nostrils flared, his eyes

crazed with rage. Stepping near, he drew back his arm and Kerstin lifted her bound hands, prepared to deflect his heavy fists.

Eirik grasped Elezer's arm. "Don't be foolish. One blow to the head could kill her, and we need her...for now."

Elezer paused, running a shaking hand through his greasy hair. Slowly, he gained control, then shook a finger at her. "Do *not* make me angry, Kerstin. You'll not like me much."

"Why, Elezer," she jibed in a sugary sweet tone, "I don't like you now."

His eyes hardened. Why did she bait him? If not for the Bloodaxe, Elezer would beat her, possibly kill her.

She struggled to her feet, swiping at the dirt covering her clothes.

Eirik snickered. Kerstin glared at him and he waved a hand at a large, burly man who stood close by. The left side of his face looked horribly scarred, from a fire or battle mace, she couldn't tell.

"Clovis, make her comfortable, but don't let her escape," Eirik said.

Nodding his head, Clovis came to clasp Kerstin's arm with his meaty hand. His shoulders spread wider than Jonas's and she stared at his cruel face. He pulled her to a log that lay before the fire and pushed her down to sit on it. "You've injured your leg." His voice sounded like rolling thunder deep inside his chest. "Rest here."

He disappeared for several moments. Elezer and the Bloodaxe joined her before the fire. As they talked of inconsequential things, Elezer picked up a twig and peeled the bark from it, then tossed it into the flames. Kerstin glared at both men, looking about for a way to escape.

Clovis returned with plates of venison stew and brown bread. At first, he offered her no eating utensil and Kerstin refused the plate. On the pretense of handing her a crust of bread, he leaned close and whispered for her ears alone. "Eat it all, mistress. You'll need your strength."

He then slipped her a knife. Her eyes widened, but she hid the weapon in the wide sleeve of her shirt with

haste.

She didn't know Clovis or why he would help her. This could be a trap, but she longed to trust him. She remembered Jonas saying his father had a spy in the Eiriksson camp. It could be Clovis. If so, why hadn't he warned Jonas of the ambush?

She tried not to stare at him as he served the other men. Using her fingers and the crust of bread, Kerstin scooped up mouthfuls of stew and ate all she could. The cold, thin blade of the knife gave her comfort and she silently praised Einar for teaching her how to use it in self-defense.

Elezer and the Bloodaxe paid her little heed while they gobbled their food. Several times, a servant filled their drinking horns with sweet wine or ale. They guzzled it down, wiping their dripping beards on their sleeves. Elezer's lips were mottled with grease as he chewed with open mouth. She looked away with repulsion. How had she ever found him attractive?

The Bloodaxe set his drinking horn aside and turned to pick up a stick. With swift strokes, he etched his battle plan in the dirt. Kerstin pretended disinterest. Out of the corner of her eye, she studied the drawing, trying not to appear obvious.

"My bastard brother's army sits here beside the river." Eirik tapped the ground. "Alrik's men are there, and Jonas Sigurdsson is here. Our armies are there, here, and here." Again he tapped the ground with the stick, drawing a circle to indicate their position.

Kerstin inwardly cringed. They'd surrounded Hakon's armies, an excellent strategy. They would destroy their enemy by cutting them off from retreat and any hope of reinforcements. Her cheeks burned. They were doomed—because Elezer betrayed them and gave Eirik their exact location.

Eirik smiled with satisfaction. "In three hours, just before dawn, we'll attack. You should get some rest, Elezer. I think you might find the battle interesting. You can watch from a safe distance on the hill. I know how squeamish you are of fighting."

Kerstin detected a note of disdain in Eirik's voice. She glanced at Elezer and smirked. "Most cowards are

squeamish. Elezer the Traitor is no different.”

Elezer narrowed his eyes on her. The fire popped and a geyser of flame sprayed into the air. “Be careful, Kerstin. Once you’re my wife, I’ll make you very sorry.”

His words brought a blaze of trepidation to her heart, but she couldn’t let him know she feared him. Tilting her head, she smiled and answered in a sweet voice. “You’ve already made me sorry, Traitor. Sorry I ever met you. Sorry for the stench of you. Sorry you were ever born.”

He leaped to his feet with a roar. “Witch!”

His eyes blazed, his hands raised as if he would throttle her. She scooted back, her hand fondling the hilt of the knife tucked within her sleeve.

“Sit down!” Eirik called with impatience. “You’ll have plenty of time to beat her later. Right now, we have more important matters to attend to. I need her alive should we fail to defeat her husband. I can use her as bait.”

Kerstin shook her head as sadness engulfed her. “It won’t work. Jonas hates me. He would be glad to be rid of me.”

“I’m afraid it’s true,” Elezer said.

Eirik stared at her, his eyes narrowed as he considered her words. “We shall see. If Jonas is the man I think he is, I believe he’ll come for his wife—especially a woman as beautiful as you.”

Kerstin doubted it but kept her silence.

Eirik called for one of his captains, then glanced at Elezer. “I’m going to get what rest I can before we move out. I suggest you do the same.”

With a smile, Eirik stepped up to Kerstin and grasped her hand. He pressed a moist kiss below her wrist. She jerked back and his eyes twinkled with amusement and he spoke low. “It’s a shame I promised to give you to Elezer. I may change my mind. I’d leave you in his care tonight, but I suspect you’re more cunning than he is and I can’t allow you to escape. Too much depends upon me winning the day. Clovis will watch so you stay where you should for tonight.”

Eirik bowed before her. His gray eyes seemed so cold. “I’ll admit your beauty is enchanting, but don’t misunderstand, my dear. If you give me cause, I’ll have you killed.”

His vow sent shivers down her spine. She heard the call of a screech owl as it flew off in search of prey. It was late, the deepest part of cold night, but Kerstin felt enough hot anger to keep her warm.

Eirik turned and walked away, his gray cloak sweeping out behind him like giant wings of a malevolent creature. He disappeared into the stand of timber and Clovis took her arm to lead her away.

"Wait!" Elezer called, reaching for her.

She jerked free, unable to stand his touch. "Let me go, Traitor. I can't abide you."

Elezer's face mottled red with fury as he spoke to Clovis. "Don't trouble yourself with her. I can manage."

He tried to pull her toward him, but Clovis interceded. "The Bloodaxe said she's to stay with me."

The dear man. Kerstin didn't trust Clovis. His loyalties seemed to rest with the Bloodaxe, yet he had given her a knife. She didn't understand, but she preferred him to Elezer.

Clovis stood taller than Elezer, built with ham-sized arms that could rip a man apart. Shaking his head, he wrenched the traitor's hand away from Kerstin and led her off into the trees.

Chapter Eighteen

Over her shoulder, Kerstin saw that Elezer watched them with loathing as they moved through the forest. She hobbled after Clovis and breathed in relief, trying not to trip over rocks and tree roots as she picked her way through the dark. Soon, it would be morning and these hills would clang with the sounds of battle.

Clovis led her to a secluded spot where he made a soft bed out of leaves and grass. He tied her hands to a long rope and wrapped the end of it around his left hand. "Lie down, mistress. You must rest."

Kerstin frowned. "But I thought—?"

He gave a jerk of his head, his expression warning her to be silent. Perhaps it was the subtle way his eyes flared, or the slight inclination of his chin. Kerstin looked past his shoulders to where Elezer had stood. She saw no one, but the traitor could be close by, listening.

Clamping her mouth shut, she lay down on the makeshift bed and squirmed about until comfortable. She closed her eyes but couldn't sleep. She rested, hoping the swelling in her ankle would go down enough for her to run if she got the chance.

Clovis sat on the ground and leaned back against the sturdy trunk of a birch tree. He crossed his arms over his chest but his eyes never seemed to close. He remained so still that Kerstin knew a man would have to be close by to see he wasn't asleep.

With a sigh of resignation, she felt the smooth hilt of the knife against her palm. Why had Clovis given it to her? For protection? Little good it would do her.

He lifted a finger to his lips. She remained silent as he stood quietly and waved to her. Her heart sped up and she got to her feet. Clovis took the knife from her and sliced through the rope binding her hands. Relief filled her when he returned the knife and she clasped it tight.

He looked into the darkness, listening, searching.

Eirik's men were huddled down for the night, with animal furs thrown over them to keep them warm. Soft snores filled the air; none of them moved. Within the hour, they would awaken and ready themselves to ambush Jonas and the king.

Clovis nodded at her and turned. As she followed, she had difficulty moving her stiff body. When she put weight on her injured ankle, she almost cried out. But she vowed to ignore the pain and run.

He must have read the urgency in her wide eyes for he shook his head. Taking her hand, he led her deeper into the forest. She stumbled behind Clovis as they snuck away. A rustling sounded behind her and she glanced over her shoulder.

"Jonas!"

He pulled her into his arms and clasped her to his chest. His chain mail pressed against her. In his eyes, she saw relief. Where had he come from? How happy she was to see him.

"You're safe. I feared for you." His confession sounded hoarse with emotion and he kissed her brow, then her lips, his hand cupping her head as he pulled her close.

"Jonas, I—"

"Go with Clovis. He'll keep you safe." Jonas pushed her toward the giant man.

She clung to Jonas's arm. "But I want to stay with you."

"There isn't time," he whispered harshly. "Go now. I can't fight when I'm worried about you."

"Elezer—he's the traitor," she told him, rippling with disgust.

Jonas's brow darkened, his eyes hooded with fury. "I suspected as much, yet I couldn't prove it."

Clovis took her by the arm and pulled her away. She longed for more time with Jonas. She might never get the chance to tell him she loved him. Jonas turned away and she saw the dark shapes of his men advancing through the trees.

There would be an ambush. On the Bloodaxe and his men!

"Come," Clovis spoke low.

She followed, hobbling fast on her injured ankle.

Dawn hadn't yet broken the new day. Soon, it would be light.

A man's form loomed in front of her and she saw the glint of metal as a sword lifted high, ready to stab Clovis in the back.

Kerstin lunged, knocking the man's arm so the blow fell harmlessly to the side. The assailant grunted and turned on her. Kerstin saw the flash of his cruel smile and her breath froze in her throat.

Elezer!

Clovis whirled and struck Elezer in the face with his mighty fist. Elezer screamed as he crashed to the ground. He fell into her path and Kerstin tried to jump over him. He grasped her leg, toppling her off balance. She went sprawling, dirt sprayed her face and she coughed.

"Attack!" Elezer hollered as he gained his feet. "Wake up, you fools. We're under attack."

The night burst alive and a mighty roar vibrated in Kerstin's ears. Hordes of Jonas's men engulfed the forest. Their swords and two-headed battle axes flashed as they fell upon the groggy camp. Screams of pain filled the air as sleeping men died swiftly. Curses and yells mingled with the clash of steel.

Glancing around, Kerstin sought some sight of her husband in the melee. A wonderful, chilling sound met her ears. She couldn't see him, but she heard Jonas's war cry vibrating in the early morning air.

She stared at the slaughter until Clovis grasped her arm. "Come with me!"

He gave her no choice, lifting and carrying her as he ran. The sounds of battle faded behind them as they neared the River Wear. Kerstin stared over his shoulder at the horrific scene. The air filled with the stench of blood. Hundreds of men swarmed over the hills and through the trees. Death screams rang in Kerstin's ears until the sound sickened her. Even in the battles she had fought, never had she seen so much gore.

Jonas! She should have told him of her love. If he was killed she'd be devastated.

She buried her face against Clovis's shoulder and tears burned her eyes. She mumbled against him, spilling her story for his ears alone. How she found Anskar in the

forest, how she came all this way to warn Jonas of the ambush only to be captured by Eirik's men.

Clovis grunted. "I know, mistress. They watched me too closely and I couldn't get away to warn the king that Elezer betrayed us. I heard him confess his crimes and know he murdered Bjorn."

Finally! Finally someone knew the truth. She wasn't a witch or a murderer. Yet if Jonas died, the truth didn't matter.

Clovis took her to Jonas's ship and placed her in a secure corner where she folded in a cocoon of rich bear robes. Sounds of the battle reached her even here and she covered her ears, reliving the horror of her mother and brother's deaths, and poor Letta's children. She prayed for it to end and she prayed for the safety of her men.

Kerstin woke with a start. Her eyes opened but she remained still, listening. All was quiet. No sounds of battle, no screams, no yells. The ship rocked gently beneath her. The air smelled of tangy wood smoke. As she stared upward, she saw from the position of the sun it was well past noon, the brightest part of day.

Hearing voices, she tensed. Footsteps pounded across the planks of the ship and she sat up, startled. The furs fell away from her and she clutched her dagger, prepared to fight. Her eyes widened as she looked about.

Warships filled the inlet, at least fifty, perhaps more. Great, elegant ships built for speed, with tall dragon prows and bright sails bearing the vivid colors red and green.

King Hakon's ships.

Kerstin stared, dumbfounded.

A host of men stood upon the shore, the number of which she had never seen before. At least a thousand warriors tromped the beach. Battle weary, they still wore chain mail, swords and shields. Their clothes and weapons looked tattered and dented. Wounded men wore bloodied cloths wrapped about their heads, arms and legs. They would need a healer, but she could not tend them all. How she wished Letta and Tovi were here to help her.

When they saw her, the men quieted by slow degrees, gesturing and staring at her.

Turning her head, she looked for Jonas and saw her father and Thorir standing on the ship, not six paces away. They watched her with a mixture of pride and amazement. Dropping the dagger, she scrambled to her feet and raced into their arms.

“Father! Thorir! Oh, I feared you might be dead.” But where was Jonas? Her gaze scanned the beach for some sign of him.

Alrik held her close, his chain mail digging into her cheek as she pressed her face to his chest. His sword clanked against his side. It reminded her of the last time they parted. It had been much the same, except now he looked lean and weary.

As he released her, she stood back, ignoring the tears running down her cheeks. Her father wore no helm, his flaxen hair matted with sweat and dirt. Smatters of blood covered his clothing. He bore a small cut above his left eye and a dried trickle of blood ran down his left temple. Thorir looked much the same, but her healer’s eye told her they were mostly unharmed.

“The gods have been kind to return you to me.” Her voice came out thick with emotion.

Alrik grinned. “Aye, we have won the day. And I thank the gods for you. I’m the luckiest of men. I don’t deserve such a fine daughter.”

Kerstin’s heart squeezed. His words touched her deeply.

He turned, indicating the shore. As she gaped at the mass of men, each of the warriors removed his helmet and clutched it to his breast. They saluted her!

She spied King Hakon, standing on a rocky promontory overlooking the river. He too had removed his helm and he lifted it high, his deep voice filling the air. “Hail Kerstin of Hawkscliffe! Hail the White Witch of Moere!”

The warriors joined in, repeating the litany over and over until the sound deafened her ears. They called her a white witch. Good, not evil. Fresh tears welled in her eyes. “I am pleased, but why are they honoring me this way?”

Her father chuckled. “Jonas left men to guard his ships. Last night, they heard a woman scream in the

forest and went to search. They found one of your arrows. Jonas recognized the fletchings and knew it belonged to you. It was simple to follow the trail your captors left and we discovered Eirik Bloodaxe's camp. Clovis has told us how you tried to warn Jonas. He told us Elezer is the traitor. Because of you, the king was victorious."

Victory? Her legs wobbled and she reached out and clutched the railing for support.

She hadn't failed! They had won the war.

"But Elezer—"

Her father lifted a hand. "If he's still alive, he'll be punished for his crimes."

Her mouth dropped open. "You mean he might be alive?"

"Our men looked for him amongst the fallen, to make certain he was dead. We never found him. His body has been lost in the carnage."

Kerstin's eyes widened. "Do you think he got away? He's been known to flee from battle, the coward."

Thorir shook his head. "Even if he fled, there's nowhere for him to hide. No one would dare shelter him."

"But where is my husband? Where is Jonas?"

Alrik lifted an arm and pointed to where the king stood. Below the rocks, standing beside Knut, was Jonas.

He lived! Oh, her beloved was alive and well. Her heart swelled with joy.

Kerstin took a faltering step toward him. Blast her injured ankle, she could barely walk. Her hands shook and her father held her arm so she wouldn't collapse upon the deck. Her heart thudded within her chest and she felt a melting within her limbs. She wanted Jonas. She could hardly wait to feel her arms around him.

Jonas stared at her, looking ashen and drawn like the other warriors. Pride tightened his jaw. He pressed his shoulders back, his feet planted firmly beneath him. His mighty hand rested upon the hilt of his sword, his battle shield leaned against his right leg. The front of it looked torn and scarred, splotted with blood. No doubt he had used it fiercely to defend his life. She offered a silent prayer of gratitude.

As she watched, he lifted his helmet and saluted her. His face softened. Did she imagine it or did she see

sadness in his expressive eyes?

His shoulders slumped. He turned his back and walked away, disappearing into the mass of men.

"Jonas, wait!"

He must not have heard and vanished from view. If she could walk, she would go after him. Why didn't he come to her?

The men moved apart, going about their business, preparing their ships for departure.

Thorir carried her off the ship and took her to the king. Hakon offered her his hand and she knelt before him. He helped her to her feet. "You are a heroine to our people. I owe you everything."

She thanked him with a smile. "You killed Eirik Bloodaxe?"

Hakon scowled and he answered with an angry grumble. "Nay, he escaped with a host of his men, but we defeated his army. The Bloodaxe sustained heavy losses. He'll think twice before he returns to our shores. I've given Elezer's earldom to Jonas. If we find the traitor alive, I've ordered his death."

Kerstin swallowed tears of relief and regret. Finally, there would be peace, but at what price? Elezer had caused them much pain, but now they were free of him. And Jonas waited.

The king heaved a great sigh. "For your service to me, I have agreed to dissolve your marriage to Jonas of Hawkscliffe. You are free to marry whom you will."

A sharp pain struck her chest. She tried to breathe but couldn't inhale. "Why would you do that?"

"We no longer need your marriage for us to have peace."

Kerstin gaped at the king in shock. "But Jonas is my husband. I would keep him whether or not you need our union."

"Hmm." Hakon frowned. "He thinks a divorce would be best for both of you."

She couldn't speak. Confusion filled her. Just before the battle, Jonas clutched her to him and kissed her. He told her he feared for her life. He had sent her to safety with Clovis. Now he asked for a divorce.

Her heart wrenched. She might carry his child.

The answer came like a thrust of steel. Olga! Jonas must still love his first wife. He blamed Kerstin for her death. Kerstin could not fight his memory of a dead woman.

"I don't want a divorce."

Hakon frowned. "I don't understand."

Shaking her head, Kerstin gave a cynical laugh. "I know. Neither do I."

A smirk curved Hakon's mouth. "So it's like that, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

He laughed. "You love him."

She didn't answer. It did no good to deny the truth.

"Very well." He inclined his head. "I'll leave it to you and Jonas to resolve this misunderstanding. Go and find your husband."

The king turned and strode down the beach, laughing heartily, waving at his men, bidding them a job well done.

Kerstin hobbled toward the river, her gaze searching for Jonas's ship. It was gone! He had left her here, no doubt thinking she would return to Moere with her father.

Her eyes narrowed as she gazed at the swift current. Jonas would *not* get rid of her so easily.

Chapter Nineteen

By early evening, Kerstin caught sight of the cook fires rising from the hall at Hawkscliffe. Thorir had welcomed her aboard his vessel, planning to stop at Hawkscliffe so he could fetch Letta and Einar before returning to Moere.

Kerstin sat silent in the ship, her face tilted toward the wind as they sailed up river. The warmth of the sun beat down on them as she watched the men pull at the oars, their rhythmic movements strangely comforting.

How odd that her stomach didn't feel the least bit queasy. Nor did she fear the water. In its place, a stubborn will settled and she was determined to find a way to win Jonas back. She had to try. Her entire happiness depended on her success.

As they docked at the quay, the low thrum of the lookout's horns filled the air. While Thorir and his men secured the ship, Kerstin stepped over the prow, limping on her injured ankle. Still dressed in her man's garb, her feet tapped the planks of the dock as she headed straight for Jonas's ship. On board, she searched and found her forgotten dagger where she had dropped it earlier that morning. Sheathing the dagger in her belt, she walked up the path toward the hall.

Trepidation rumbled within her as she climbed the steep trail. Her heart pounded and she locked her jaw with resolve. She didn't know what her reception might be or what she would do if Jonas insisted on a divorce. Most of his people had never accepted her. How could she ever make this her home?

Her love for Jonas pushed her onward. As she crested the hill, several people recognized her and came running to greet her.

"Oh, mistress, we heard what happened." Astrid touched her sleeve. "Because of you, we've won the war. I never did like Elezer of Lade. He was such a lazy man.

And to think he murdered Bjorn. I'm so sorry for ever doubting you."

Kerstin showed a wooden smile. Word of her innocence had spread quickly. Though it brought her tremendous satisfaction, she didn't stop to converse. She would see her mission through. Find Jonas and plead for his affection.

What might follow, she dared not consider. She knew only that she must touch him, breathe in the spice of his warm skin, see his dear face and hear his low voice once more.

When she arrived in the yard of the steading, Tovi waited there. Dear Tovi, who had earned Kerstin's undying respect.

They embraced and Tovi brushed tears from her face. "I hoped you would come. When Jonas returned without you, I didn't know what to think. He refuses to talk about it."

"Where is he?" Kerstin asked.

"He's gone to Kielder Forest. He's in a black mood and no one can offer him solace. I think he's crazed with grief because he believes he's lost you. Go to him, Kerstin. Bring him home. It's time to put aside the past and seek some happiness."

Crazed with grief over her? Nay, he mourned Olga and their lost love. "His grief isn't for me."

Tovi gave her a confused look, but Kerstin turned her gaze toward the path leading over the hills. Days earlier, she walked this trail with Jonas when he taught her to swim. So much had happened since then. Everything numbed inside her except finding her husband and caressing his heart with her love.

Her thoughts added fuel to her step and she climbed the steep path, not pausing to look back at the steading nor listen to the happy trill of birds high overhead. She had no difficulty finding the secluded spot. When she broke from the shelter of trees and saw Jonas, a pang of elation speared her. Just seeing him brought her joy, lighting her soul from within.

Sitting on a gray bolder, he dangled his legs over the edge, his eyes downcast as he stared into the shining pool of water. Dressed in a baggy woolen shirt, the ties were

open and hung loose at his throat, revealing the scarred and muscled flesh of his wide chest. His burnished hair was unruly and slightly wet. Splotches of moisture dampened his shirt. He must have taken a swim.

His hunting knife lay beside him on the rock. One elbow rested upon his knee and he cupped his chin in his palm as he threw shredded pieces of green leaves into the water with his other hand. He looked like a dejected boy, lost and lonely.

As she stepped into the glade, a twig snapped beneath her foot. In one fluid movement, Jonas clasped his knife and came to a springing crouch before her, his blue eyes fierce. When he realized it was her, his face flushed with color. "What are you doing here?"

"This is my home. Don't I belong here?"

He relaxed and sheathed his knife, avoiding her gaze. "I didn't expect you to return." His tone sounded distant and cold.

"I suppose not, when you told the king you want to put me aside." Kerstin longed to melt into his arms. Seeing him so handsome, so wonderful and alive, she felt overwhelmed with relief. It took all her self-control not to throw herself at his feet and tell him how much she loved him.

Stiffening her resolve, she pulled the dagger free of her waistband and clutched it in her grasp. She crouched before him and still he would not meet her eyes.

"You can't avoid me any longer, Jonas."

That got his attention. He glared at her, his brows lowered in a quizzical frown. "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

Her gaze met his in an unwavering stare. "I want what is my due as your wife."

"You want half my holdings?"

"According to Danelaw, that is what I'm entitled to if we divorce."

A flash of pain filled his eyes, then vanished. "If I didn't have my mother and people to consider, I'd give everything to you. But I gave Father my pledge to care for them and I mean to keep my vow."

"But what about your vow to me? Half isn't enough. I want it all, Jonas. Everything and more."

Disbelief marred his expression. "Have you lost your senses, woman? The king would never order such a thing."

"I've spoken to King Hakon. He told me you wished to divorce me. But I tell you now, Jonas, I will *not* be put aside without a fight." She rocked her weight in a fighting stance, resisting the urge to cringe at the pain it caused her bad ankle.

His azure eyes widened with amusement. "You would fight me? I didn't know possessions meant so much to you."

Jonas thought she wanted his holdings, not their marriage. Not him. "You know so little about me. Aye, I'll fight to keep what is mine. What if I carry your babe? What would Sigurd say to you divorcing the mother of your child?"

His mouth rounded and his brows lowered. For a man who claimed he wanted heirs, she could tell he hadn't considered the possibility of a child. Emotion covered his face, as if he thought of the promise of what might be if they remained together. A family. Happiness and love. Belonging.

"A babe?" He scrutinized her flat stomach.

"It is a possibility."

One of his eyebrows shot up. "I thought you wanted to leave and return to Moere."

Kerstin shook her head, her braid weaving back and forth. "I'm not leaving Hawkescliffe. You can't make me go."

He clasped her wrist and she didn't fight him as he pulled her tight against his chest. She felt his strength, knowing he could kill her so easily.

A laugh broke from her lips. She smelled him, a mixture of mountain breeze and mint. He had won her heart, her warrior.

Throwing her free arm around his neck, she kissed him hard. Jonas clasped her to him and returned her kiss with a passion that matched hers. His low groan of satisfaction mingled with her breathless sighs. She tasted him with her tongue and he growled deeply and laid her upon the grass beside the water's edge. He poised over her, surrounding her, holding her to him. For the first

time in months, she felt safe.

He broke their kiss, long enough for them both to catch their breath. "I can't believe you wish to stay."

She gave a nervous laugh. "I love you, but I know you blame me for Olga's death. Is there any way you can ever forgive me?"

Confusion creased his forehead. "Why would you think that?"

She stilled. "Sigurd told me."

He snorted. "No doubt Father told you what *he* thought, not what was in my heart. I never loved Olga. I barely knew her, though I tried to save her life. Father arranged the marriage and we met at our wedding, the same day she died."

"Then, you don't...you don't blame me?"

"Of course not. You were only a child at the time."

A husky laugh trembled from her throat. Relief rushed over her in waves, a cleansing tide to wash away the guilt. "Then, why did you ask King Hakon for a divorce?"

Pain filled his eyes. "Because I thought you didn't want me. I couldn't stand to have you by my side, being with you every day, if you didn't love me."

Lightness warmed her heart, but she frowned. "I must set some things aright. Please, let me tell you everything." She took a deep breath. "When I called Elezer's name, it was out of pity and shame, not passion. But you wouldn't let me explain. I haven't loved him since he tried to murder you while you slept. Truly, Jonas, I hate him. He murdered Tostig and almost killed my father. He confessed to killing Orm and Bjorn. He planned to marry me and kill off my family so he could take Moere. I don't doubt he would have eventually killed me."

"I know. Clovis told me. I'm sorry for ever doubting you, Kerstin. Can you forgive me for blaming you for Bjorn's death? When I think of all the accusations I threw at you, it's a wonder you—"

She tightened her arms around him. "There's nothing to forgive."

Jonas heaved a sigh of relief. "When Orm died, blaming you seemed too easy. Elezer looked too smug and suddenly the pieces all fit together. I suspected him of

being the traitor, but I needed proof. I sent Anskar on a false errand to the king, intending to draw Elezer out. It worked. My men saw Elezer go into the forest, but I didn't plan on Anskar being killed. He was fleet of foot and I gave him a head start, but Elezer caught him."

"Why didn't you tell me your plan, or that you suspected Elezer? I could have helped you."

"Would you have believed me?"

She hesitated. "Perhaps. Elezer showed what kind of man he was when he tried to murder you in your bed."

Jonas pressed a slow kiss to her lips. "Elezer wasn't yet revealed as a traitor and I feared you might still harbor feelings for the man and warn him. Also, I didn't want to endanger your life if he turned on you."

She released a deep sigh. "Oh, if only I had known. I was beside myself with worry, thinking you blamed me for everything."

"Nay, I love you, Kerstin. I've loved you all my life, even before I met you. We are soul mates, as if we always knew each other, before this life ever began."

She stilled, letting his words sink deep into her heart. She laughed, her fingers twining through his hair. "And I love you, Jonas. You'll never be free of me."

He tightened his arms around her and kissed her.

"Jonas," she breathed his name lovingly.

He sighed with obvious pleasure. "Do you know how I've longed to hear you say my name like that?"

She drank in the sight of his smiling face, her finger tracing his brow, his chiseled cheekbone, his full mouth. "You love me?"

"Aye, sweeting. I love you more than I can say. When you told me you loved Elezer, I became blind with hate and jealousy. You said you didn't murder Bjorn, but the evidence seemed so damning against you. And the more I resisted loving you, the more I fell under your magic spell."

"I'm no witch, Jonas."

"I know that now. You're a healer and I'm most happy to be under your 'spell'."

To hear him say these wonderful words brought tears to her eyes. She hugged him, elated to finally win his trust and love.

He drew back and took her hand in his, kissing it before gently nipping her knuckles with his teeth. She laughed without reservation. He kissed her throat, the edge of her jaw, her cheek and finally, her lips. Their kisses became hungry and she murmured her desire. She reached to pull his shirt over his shoulders, his warm skin tingling up her fingertips. As she opened her eyes and stared at the blue sky overhead, she felt drugged with happiness.

A shadow fell over them. Clouds. She hated it to rain on such a fine day.

She gasped.

Poised above them with a knife, Elezer swung up his arm to plunge the blade into Jonas's back.

Kerstin screamed, thrusting Jonas aside. He turned in time to see the glint of steel as Elezer struck a glancing blow. The deadly blade sank deep into the earth. Elezer pulled the blade free; it sliced Kerstin's shoulder. She screamed in pain.

"Nay!" Jonas yelled and knocked Elezer off balance.

Jonas jumped to his feet, scooped up Kerstin's fallen dagger and whirled to face Elezer. The traitor yelped and turned to run.

Jonas jerked him back, brandishing the knife. "Come on, you coward. For once in your life, draw your sword and fight like a man."

Elezer's lip curled in a sneer as he lifted his sword from its sheath. His gaze darted to the small dagger in Jonas's hand and he gave a wicked laugh. "That puny blade is no match against this sword."

"We shall see."

With a roar of rage, Elezer charged. In one lithe movement, Jonas dodged and knocked Elezer's thrust aside with a blow from his fist. Elezer yelped and dropped the sword before he launched himself at Jonas, his hands outstretched. Jonas stabbed him through the heart.

The traitor gave one short screech before he slumped to his knees. Lifting an arm toward Kerstin, his eyes widened with amazement. "Kerstin, he's killed me." Elezer's head dropped, his chin resting on his breast. He grasped the dagger's hilt and pulled the blade from his chest. Blood gushed from the wound, soaking his

shirtfront. As he toppled to the ground, he gurgled and his breath left him in a long hiss.

He lay still.

"Ohh!" Kerstin buried her face beneath her arm, unable to look upon the man she had once loved with adoration.

When she glanced up, Jonas stood over Elezer, breathing hard. He picked up the dagger and poised it at Elezer's throat while he checked for signs of life.

Kerstin lay upon the ground, trembling and bleeding. The wound on her shoulder stung like hellfire. "Jonas, is he—?"

"Yes, he's dead. He won't bother us again."

Tears filled her eyes. "I thought he loved me. It's such a waste. He could have been a great man, but greed and jealousy seduced him."

She sat up with some difficulty, feeling dizzy and nauseous. Jonas knelt to lend her aid. Examining her injury, he ripped a strip of cloth from his shirt to staunch the flow of blood. "I don't think the wound is deep but we need to get you home."

Jonas picked Kerstin up and carried her down the hill. With his own body, he protected her from the sharp branches and dense foliage. When he broke from the forest, he called for help. A boy herding sheep saw them and ran toward the steading to give the alarm, his dog racing ahead of him.

Kerstin felt woozy. Her shoulder burned like glowing embers and she resisted the urge to cry.

Men came running across the field of grass, armed with pitch forks, spears, knives and swords.

"What happened?" Halfdan peered critically at Kerstin.

"What have you done to my sister?" Thorir demanded, his hand resting on his sword hilt.

Before another fight broke out, Jonas explained about Elezer. "Never fear. The traitor is dead. I killed him."

"You're sure he's dead this time?" Halfdan asked.

Jonas's eyes gleamed, but he didn't break stride as he hurried toward the longhouse. "I'm sure."

When he brushed past Tovi in the hall, she looked dismayed. "Jonas, what have you done?"

She followed him into the bedroom and again, he was forced to explain about Elezer. Tovi gasped with outrage. "The king should hear of this."

"Come with me, men. We'll go retrieve the traitor's body and send a message to the king." Thorir gestured to several of his warriors who now crowded the hall.

"We'll accompany you," Halfdan boomed. A handful of his men followed as they hurried out the door.

The din of voices immediately died down and Kerstin breathed a sigh of relief. She felt a deep, unsettling melancholy. Elezer had betrayed them all and was now dead. She could hardly believe her childhood friend deceived them so cruelly.

Jonas laid Kerstin on their bed as a bevy of women bustled into the room. Letta stirred up the fire while Gudrid went to fetch Kerstin's healing bag of herbs. Kerstin flinched when Tovi examined her wound, then hurried to get bandages and water.

"Do something for her," Jonas said.

"Be patient, son," Tovi insisted.

Kerstin closed her eyes against the pain. Someone laid warm furs over her body and a weight settled beside her on the box bed. She opened her eyes and found Jonas leaning over her, his brow knitted with worry. With the point of his knife, he gently slit the sleeve of her shirt and pulled it from her arm before he pressed a folded cloth against her wound.

Cupping his cheek with her good hand, she tilted his face so he looked at her. "I thought I was the healer."

He smiled tenderly. "You are. You've healed my broken heart. Promise you won't leave me."

She tried to swallow against the lump in her throat. His request meant everything to her. "I promise."

Love radiated from his face and she stared into his eyes. They mesmerized her and she found herself lost in their depths. Concern filled them and—tears.

"I love you so much. I can hardly believe you love the Beast." He spoke with disbelief and awe.

Kerstin slipped her good arm around him, hardly feeling the pain in her shoulder. What was a little pain

when the man you loved said something like that?

He gave her a lingering kiss. As he drew away, a smile of contentment curved his mouth.

"Come away, son. I'll take care of her." Tovi tugged on Jonas's shoulder. He stood and Tovi drew him across the room and out the door, securing the portal against further intrusion.

The room bustled with activity as Tovi mashed herbs to steep in a cauldron over the fire. Gudrid cleansed the blood from Kerstin's shoulder before Astrid applied her sewing skills to stitch the cut. Tovi pressed a healing poultice to the wound while Letta wrapped Kerstin's shoulder with a clean bandage. Then, Tovi brought Kerstin a tasty broth and a miniscule dose of nightshade to ease the pain.

Their attention warmed Kerstin's heart and she gazed at them each with fondness. "If you're not careful, our people will soon start calling each of you a witch."

Tovi lifted her head and smiled. "I would be honored."

The statement left Kerstin feeling stunned and grateful. Dear Tovi, who had been so hurt by losing her son Bjorn, but had withheld her judgment of Kerstin until she learned the truth.

Several hours later, Kerstin refused to be treated like an invalid and the women helped her dress in a soft gown and a short tunic. Wearing a makeshift sling to cradle her injured arm, she let Gudrid brush her hair. A low humm of voices emanated from the main hall and Kerstin opened the door and stepped into the outer room. Surprise caused her to catch her breath. People crowded the hall, warriors and farmers, men and women alike.

At first sight of her, a hush fell over the room. Then, the people cheered. Kerstin saw Jonas, standing on the dais, watching her with a mixture of pride and tenderness.

Halfdan stepped forward, a penitent expression on his gruff face. Kerstin met his eyes, finding friendship instead of censure. "Mistress, I am glad you are well. We found Elezer and have sent the Traitor's body to the king. I beg your forgiveness for treating you badly."

Emotion speared Kerstin's heart. Halfdan asked her

mercy. Could it be true?

She placed her good hand on his shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile. "There is nothing to forgive, Halfdan. I thank you for your loyalty to my husband."

The man bowed before her, then offered his arm. He escorted her to the dais. As she passed the long tables where Jonas's people stood, little Ota waved and smiled from the security of her father's arms.

Gudrid reached out and hugged Kerstin, her belly clearing the way. "Odin has blessed us to have a healer such as you. Soon you will deliver my new babe. Haki says if the child is a girl, we will name her after you."

Stunned by this admission, Kerstin had no chance to reply. Halfdan drew Kerstin away. Smiling faces surrounded her. Gone was the suspicion and hatred. As Halfdan handed her up to Jonas, Kerstin heard happy chatter and laughter filling the hall. It seemed she had always belonged here. As if Hawkescliffe had always been her home and she forever accepted.

Thralls began to serve platters of cheese, bread, and rich haunches of meat cooking over the open fire pit. Kerstin wiped tears of happiness from her eyes. Never did she expect such a show of welcome from Jonas's people.

"A toast!" Jonas took her good hand and lifted his drinking horn high. "To Kerstin of Hawkescliffe. My lady."

The cheer that rang throughout the hall almost deafened her. Jonas's eyes crinkled as he studied her bandaged shoulder and spoke to his mother sitting close by. "Did you use garlic? Kerstin says it draws the poisons and heals the wound."

Tovi gave him a tolerant look. "Of course. My new daughter has taught me well. I'm glad to hear you also listen to her...at least some of the time."

Einar grinned, hobbled over on a walking stick and clapped Jonas on the back. "You'll hear that more often now you're a married man, brother."

Brother! Had Kerstin heard him correctly?

"We'll expect you to take good care of our little sister from now on," Thorir said.

Letta cuddled against her husband's side and laughed, a sweet sound that warmed Kerstin's heart. "And you must visit us often at Moere."

Jonas chuckled as he leaned his head down and kissed Kerstin tenderly on the lips. As he drew away, he whispered for her ears alone. "Welcome home, sweeting. I love you."

"I love you." All other words evaded her mind.

Kerstin gazed at her husband and then her brothers and the rest of the crowd, awed by the camaraderie between them. Never did she believe this possible. Finally, peace reigned between their people.

And Jonas was hers...the greatest gift of all. Truly, their love had healed all wounds.

A word about the author...

Leigh Bale has been writing all her life. In 2006, she won the prestigious Golden Heart Contest and sold her first full-length book, which was released in December 2007. Leigh is delighted to announce her second sale titled *THE HEART'S WARRIOR* to The Wild Rose Press. Leigh is a member of Romance Writers of America, the Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society, and the American Christian Fiction Writers. Leigh also belongs to various chapters of RWA, including the Sacramento Valley Rose, the Faith, Hope and Love Chapter, the Hearts through History Romance Writers, and the Golden Network. Leigh has two children and lives in Nevada with her professor husband of twenty-six years. When she's not working at her full-time job or writing more books, Leigh loves playing with her beautiful granddaughter and taking another history class.

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