

Dark Pool

Banners of Ultha Sequel



Jen Black

Dark Pool [Sequel to Banners of Alba]
by Jen Black

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Chapter 1

Eba ignored her mother's careful training, pressed her cheek against the rough oak grain of the door and was just in time to catch her brother's aggrieved voice.

"Oh, he'll make his name, alright. A handsome young devil who'll get all his own way now he's got the crown of Alba and the strong arm of Thorfinn of Orkney behind him."

"There's more to him than that, and you know it!" That was Leod's voice, with its usual blend of laughter and logic.

"He'd better not shove his nose where it's not wanted," her brother growled.

Eba glanced over her shoulder; even if she behaved like an eavesdropper she didn't want to gain a reputation as one. Sunlight streamed in through the big open doors of the empty hearth-hall, and the serving women laughed and gossiped outside in the yard.

"Perhaps he won't." Eba pressed her ear back to the door when Leod spoke again. "But families up and down the loch will run out of grain soon. We cannot support his visit."

Eba recoiled and glared at the door. She had been told nothing of a king's visit.

Someone's fist, probably her brother's, thumped the table. It was certainly Domnall who said, "We don't need him here."

"But you may as well accept it, Domnall. He has said he will visit every main hall this season." Leod hesitated, and then added, "You know he's going to come eventually."

An older, deeper voice joined the argument. "We'll not have a scrap of food in a week or two and it's our families will

suffer. You're our thane, and should speak with the King on our behalf. He'll come, and he'll bring grain from Caithness. He's a fair man. You've but to ask."

Eba bit her lip as other voices clamored to be heard, for she knew her brother's views on thanes who begged grain from the King. Domnall hated to admit any kind of failure, least of all to the new King. In a sudden lull, a quiet voice spoke up. "We should take some cattle one dark night, from up near the Moray lands."

Domnall's "Yes!" clashed with Leod's "No!" and then everyone shouted at once, and stools scraped on the planked floor. Eba retreated, turned and ran across the hall to the ale barrel in the shadowy corner. She lifted the lid as much by feel as by sight, dipped several wooden beakers, dumped them onto a battered tray and stared at them without seeing them.

Raiding livestock was not uncommon in Alba when times were hard, but it was against the law, and punishable by death. Eba took a deep, unsteady breath, and carried the heavy tray back across the hall. She juggled with the door latch and the tray, shoved the door open with her hip and bustled in.

The uproar ceased and the hot reek of fish oil from the fat bellied lamp hit the back of her throat. Her brother jerked round, frowning. Stocky, belligerent and volatile, he seized a beaker of ale from her tray. Eba stared round the ring of angry faces, and her smile faded. No one would meet her eye. She looked again at Leod, who glanced up, blew out his cheeks and winked from behind her brother's back.

Restored by the warmth in Leod's dark eyes, Eba dumped the tray on the table and turned to her brother. "I have brought ale for you and your friends before your throats run dry with all this talk." She smiled, handed out beakers and received brief, awkward nods in return. They were men she had known all her life, who worked the land up and down the loch and out beyond Ardelve but she saw they were not going to let her listen, let alone join in their talk. She looked at Leod, a question in her raised brows.

He shook his head. Eba sighed, abandoned the tray with a clatter and exaggerated the sway of her hips just in case they ignored her altogether as she returned to the door. A soft, high-pitched whistle appreciated her progress, a stool squealed across the floor and she swung round, a relieved smile on her face. For the length of a heartbeat, she thought she might be allowed to stay.

"Go on, out you go!" It was her brother, his shaggy fawn curls bouncing on his brow, who grinned, slapped her rump and rattled the door shut behind her.

"Ohhh!" Eba groaned in vexation, spun round and strode by the empty sleeping alcoves and the long fire pit. At the open doors she hesitated, ignored the servants chattering in the yard and turned towards the open meadows. A group of lambs clustered round the gate sprang apart at the violence of her approach. Jaunty catkin tails bouncing, each lamb fled to the comfort of its mother, and then peered at the intruder from the safety of the ewe's solid bulk.

Eba reached the burn, flopped down on a favorite shelf of rock with her long skirts bunched beneath her and poked a

tentative toe into the strong brown current. The water was still shockingly cold, for the mountains behind Bundalloch still held snow in shadowed nooks and crannies. She gritted her teeth, watched her toes turn white in the water and thought about the proposed cattle raid. In all likelihood she would wake one night to find her brother dead somewhere out on the hill and her home in flames around her ears.

A little while later a shadow stretched across the rock and blocked out the sun's warmth. Eba guessed who it would be. She tucked her wet feet beneath her long grey skirts and turned to enjoy the admiration in Leod's brown eyes.

"So this is where you hide." Leod was Domnall's closest friend, and ten years older than Eba; he had been married once already. Folk said his wife had had fair hair and blue eyes, too.

"I come here when I want some peace and quiet." She squinted up at him. "Domnall wants to go raiding?"

"Yes." He sank to his haunches at her side.

"When?"

The smile faded from his lean, sun browned face and his long lashed dark eyes visited her eyes and mouth in turn. "You know I can't tell you. Domnall would never forgive me. You needn't worry; we'll be gone only a day or two at the most."

"We are not so short of food we must steal," Eba said grumpily. "The Moray men will raid us in their turn, and we'll be worse off in the end."

"Your brother feels his responsibility. Families up and down the glen look to him."

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Eba leaned back and placed one palm flat on the grass behind her, aware that the action displayed the curve of her body and her long gold plait pooled on the stone. Leod's lids flickered and he glanced across the loch. The cool breeze ruffled the short dark hair on his brow.

Eba squinted against the sun and gazed over the meadows surrounding the hearth-hall. She knew only too well the crop of lambs had been small this year, for she had tried and failed to revive some of the cold, wet bodies by the hearth fire. Now the men said the spring-sown seed had rotted in the ground, and she knew how little grain remained in the store pits from the last harvest. "Couldn't we buy grain somewhere?"

"Two problems," Leod said. "Lack of silver and a seaworthy boat."

"Mend the boat, then!" She shook her head in exasperation. "Why does Domnall dislike the new King of Alba so?"

Leod's mouth turned down. "Because he's so much younger, I think."

"He doesn't sound the kind of man to let raids go unpunished."

"I tried to persuade Domnall against it."

"Moray belongs to the King, doesn't it?"

"No, Hareth mac Enna has it now," Leod said. "He married the widowed Lady of Moray last year just after the crowning."

"You and Domnall could both be hurt in a raid." Eba turned sorrowful blue eyes towards Leod.

"Ha!" Leod wasn't fooled by her doleful expression. "You don't care if I get hurt or not, so stop trying to make me think you do."

"But I do care!" She stared up at him, but he turned away from her. As usual, he wasn't taking her seriously. "What would I do if Domnall were hurt, or killed? There are no uncles or aunts to speak for me. I might become a ward of the court and have to serve some fat lordling's wife for my keep, or marry some old man with sons already grown."

"Someone would look after you," Leod said comfortably.

He knew what she feared. Eba sat up swiftly, and brought her hands together in her lap "Oh, someone would, no doubt."

She watched him pluck a blade of grass and bite down on it. She knew that if Domnall died violently in some skirmish, Leod would very likely be dead alongside him. Eba chose to disregard that, dipped her chin and glanced at him sideways beneath her lashes. "But it might not be the person I would want. It might even be someone I hated."

"Eba, stop fluttering your eyelashes at me. It's your brother you must speak to, not me. Ask him for a husband to take care of you. You're old enough to marry now."

"Do you think so?" Eba began to smile. "I turned fourteen last week. Will he give me a list of potential suitors, do you think? I could rate them in order of preference." Her eyes sparkled and her smile grew. "I might even find your name on it, Leod."

The grass stalk jerked upwards, but he refused to look at her.

She placed her palm delicately on the smooth, warm skin of his arm. "Would I find it there, Leod?"

He spat the grass blade at her, grinned and rose to his full height in one easy movement. Without another word, he turned to cross the meadow in a swift, loping stride.

* * * *

Reports of cattle raids in Moray reached the Mormaer a week or so later, and Hareth mac Enna, unused to a Mormaer's duties and responsibilities, took the problem to the King.

A vigorous, active man with chestnut hair and light eyes, Hareth found it difficult to remember his boyhood companion was now the King of Alba and should be addressed with some formality, but supposed he would grow used to it in time. Since the interview was in the King's private room, Hareth spoke as he always had. "So, what do you think? Should I go over there? Beat some sense into them?"

Finlay of Alba sat on a rough wooden stool. Taller, darker and altogether more handsome than Hareth, he gripped a strip of leather between his teeth, used his thumbs to press two pieces of leather to the hilt of the sword braced between his knees and continued to apply pressure. He spat the spare strip onto his arm and looked up. "It's what I would have done, when I was Mormaer."

Finlay mac Ruaidhri, King of Alba, was in his mid twenties. His glossy black hair curled over the collar of his sleeveless brown tunic, and the width of his shoulders and solidity of his arms suggested he was more accustomed to a soldier's life

than making decisions about lawbreaking vassals. He examined the sword and applied more glue from the pot at his feet. "Did the messenger say who they were?"

"They came from the west and took the cattle west. It's probably Domnall of Kintail, though they can't be sure. What do you want me to do when I get there?"

Finlay twirled the sword in his strong, capable hands to check the glue was taking hold, and the silver tracery on his leather wrist guards twinkled faintly in the firelight. "If you can catch him at it, I would be delighted." He looked up, and smiled. "If not, find the beasts. Moray men used to mark their cattle, so if you know the markings, you can prove who owns them. We'll just visit Kintail a little earlier than planned. I'll take the *Shadow Wolf* and meet you in Bundalloch."

* * * *

Eba watched Domnall's familiar sturdy figure stride into his hearth-hall after several days in the saddle and guessed the thought of a hot meal would be uppermost in his mind. She saw him frown at Bundalloch men who should have been out at work in the fields and barns, and the frown deepened when he registered strangers in the hall. He wiped a dirty palm down his tunic, continued forward and then saw his own chair was already occupied. Her brother came to an abrupt halt and stared at the dark haired, well-dressed occupant.

"Your Grace!"

Eba's hands gripped together beneath her breast. She had done her best when the women had run into the dairy with word of the attractive man who had stalked onto the

Bundalloch jetty and despatched his huge Viking longship off-shore somewhere to wait for him. She had met him on his way to the hall. The gold circlet binding his brow, his dark good looks, his self-confidence and the size of his entourage had unnerved her, but she had stuttered a welcome.

Her pride had come to the rescue. Her gown might be plain and her hair unadorned, but she was the lady of Bundalloch and knew her duties. She hung on his every word when he dispersed his men around Bundalloch, smiled at her and headed straight for the hearth-hall. She thought him the handsomest man she had ever seen.

Now she stood at his side as he relaxed in thethane of Bundalloch's chair. The white linen and gold stuff at his neck enhanced his clear profile, and the rich fabrics, clean leather boots and the elegant fur-lined cloak flung over the back of the chair contrasted sharply with her brother's dishevelled and mud-spattered appearance.

Domnall seemed quite bereft of speech and simply stared at the King. Then he collected himself, took a quick breath, bent his head and forced out a sentence of stilted politeness. "I trust my sister has offered food and drink, Your Grace?"

The King's dark brooding gaze flicked over Domnall. "You were absent when we arrived." His brows lifted. "Away on business, we were told."

Eba willed her brother to relax and make sensible answers, but Domnall stood stiff as a board, his fists clenched hard against his thighs. His men, their expressions guarded and wary, filtered into place behind him.

A servant approached and, with the greatest respect, offered a wooden goblet of wine to the King. Domnall's sharp aquamarine gaze swung to her at once, his displeasure clear, and Eba knew what had angered him. A wooden cup! Perhaps her instructions had not been as clear as they should have been, but she had assumed the servant would offer the silver goblet to the King.

To her relief, the King did not seem to mind. He waved the man away and stared at Domnall. "Business to do with cattle, I believe?"

"The beasts wander too far. We must bring them back."

The hall doors burst open and admitted a flood of sunlight and a vibrant young man with chestnut hair, glowing eyes and a bright smile. He strode across the rough earthen floor and his men filed through the doorway behind him. "You've been raiding, Domnall," the young man called out cheerfully. "We've seen the beasts. We watched you at work."

The King showed no surprise, but raised his brows and waited for Domnall's answer to the charge. Eba saw color rise and deepen across her brother's face.

"We've been working with the beasts for the last couple of days," Domnall said. "It's hard work, mac Enna." He glanced around, impatient for ale, and looked relieved as a servant hurried over with several frothing wooden beakers on a tray.

Hareth mac Enna, according to Leod, was Mormaer of Moray and the King's oldest friend. Eba watched him exchange triumphant glances with the King, and her heart sank. They knew her brother had been raiding cattle.

Mac Enna calmly intercepted the servant and, with a hand on the man's shoulder, steered him to the men behind him, leaving Domnall thirsty in his own hall. Eba guessed it had been deliberately done, for the light eyes turned mockingly to her brother. "They're not your beasts. They come from the western edge of Moray. We've checked the markings."

The servants were listening open-mouthed, and her brother was still waiting for ale. Eba caught a servant's eye. The man started guiltily, grabbed a full tray and hurried forward. Domnall snatched a beaker before it too vanished into other fists, raised it to his mouth and took a huge gulp. "They're our beasts, mac Enna."

Eba stared in fascination as the two young men faced each other. They had obviously met before. Domnall wiped his moustache with the back of one hand, and his shaggy brown curls trembled over his nose with the violence of the gesture. He glanced from mac Enna to the King and back again.

The King, however, seemed content to observe. Hareth mac Enna shook his head. "We've had men watching the hill passes for days and we can tell to a head how many beasts you've stolen."

"You can count them all you like," Domnall growled, "but they're mine! Every man here will agree with me!"

The line of Bundalloch men surged forward, a snarl rising in their throats, eager to support their lord and their livelihood. Eba's hand flew to her mouth. Hareth's men closed the main door, and stood in front of it. Women caught hold of their children and backed away into the dim recesses of the hall, for their men were hill farmers, well muscled through a

lifetime of hard work, and not of a disposition to take insults lightly.

Eba checked over her shoulder. The half concealed exit used by servants and children had been overlooked. She caught her brother's eye and indicated the door with a jerk of her head. His bright, angry gaze roamed past her, and lingered at the rear of the hall.

"And every man with me over the last few days will swear we watched you steal them!" Mac Enna's grin widened. "We have a copy of the marks the Moray farmers use." He pulled a scrap of fine leather from his belt-purse, dangled it at arm's length and let it unroll so Domnall could see the dark squiggles and circles burned into the leather. "All we have to do is check this against the exhausted beasts you left in the Glennan valley and we'll know for certain that you have stolen their cattle, and left one of their men dead."

The King of Alba straightened at the last half dozen words, and Eba saw her brother scowl. Her heart sank. If a man had died, it was worse than she had feared. Domnall spun on his heel, raced to the rear of the hall and vanished through the overlooked door. The men of Bundalloch met the king's men chest to chest in a growling roar of aggression.

Eba yelped as a strong hand grasped her elbow. The King yanked her to his side but his attention was on the *melée* in front of him. "Stay there!"

She bit her lip. The King, of course, had the forty men from his longship, every one of them fit, fresh and eager for action. The encounter was short and sharp, but Eba took

comfort from the fact no one was killed, and above all, no one had attempted to chase her brother.

Finlay mac Ruairidh, King of Alba, detached his impersonal grip on her arm and rose to his feet. Hareth mac Enna stood at the King's side, waiting. Eba saw his men quieten immediately and even the Bundalloch men fell silent. Eba gazed up at the lean planes and curves of the King's face.

"Your lord has raided cattle from Moray, which cannot be tolerated."

Eba shivered at the rich, resonant sound of his voice, and told herself she was glad her brother was free out on the hill somewhere. The folk in the cotts and cabins would feed him till he could come home.

"A Moray man died in the raid. For this, your lord will be fined, and must return the animals to their rightful owners." The King surveyed each dirty, unkempt Bundalloch face in turn. "Some of you will help, and in doing so will avoid fines yourselves."

"Listen to me, and listen well, for thievery will not be tolerated under my rule. There are fish in the sea and deer on the hills and birds in the air. Grain will be delivered to you from my stores, if and when you need it. No man need starve, for the sake of a little effort."

He looked at the sullen, battered faces around him. "If an offence of this kind happens again, whatever the provocation, the penalty will be death." The even, level tone did not change, but no man there doubted he meant what he said. Eba had a sudden intimation that Domnall may have escaped,

but all was definitely not well. Her knees trembled unseen beneath her long skirts.

"Domnall of Bundalloch should come to us at Inverness and pay his fine within the month of June. To ensure he regards us well in this, we shall take the Lady Eba as our hostage against his good behavior and swift appearance."

Eba gasped aloud. A wave of color burst into her face, and she felt hot and dizzy. The King turned, saw her alarm and smiled. Eba snapped her mouth shut and stared at him.

"That's hardly fair on the lady."

It was Leod's voice. Gratitude filled her but she could not tear her gaze away from the King who sought and found the speaker in the dense pack in the hall. "Life is never fair," he said simply.

He turned back to Eba, surveyed her from the crown of her golden head to her workaday shoes and faced the crowd once more.

"The lady's brother was less than fair with the folk of Moray." The gold at his brow gleamed in the torchlight. "When the Lord Domnall pays his dues, the lady goes free. Make sure he receives word soon."

Chapter 2

In Inverness, the rooks woke Ratagan with their squawking. Twenty three years old and still growing used to her role as Queen of Alba, she pushed aside the feather quilt and dragged wayward strands of dark hair from her face. Memory awoke, and she opened her eyes and rolled over towards the warmth of her husband. He had been absent for a week or more, and their reunion last night had been passionate. She extended a tentative fingertip, trailed it over the smooth rounded curve of his shoulder and then hesitated; her gaze lifted.

His dark eyes were open, and watching her.

Her breath caught on a smile as Finlay of Alba grasped her fingers, pressed them to his mouth and kissed them. "Your trip to Kintail went well?"

"It went well," he agreed, his voice husky with sleep. A swathe of dark glossy hair shadowed his brow and the straight line of his nose. "I have brought you a new maid to train." He rolled onto his back, and stretched until his spine cracked. "Her name is Eba: fair hair, blue eyes and slender as a sapling. Domnall of Kintail's sister."

"Is she young?"

"Old enough to marry. About fifteen, I should think." He muffled a yawn with his fist.

Ratagan's brows rose. "And Domnall?"

"He ran for the hills." Ratagan curled her fingers around his arm as he spoke. "He raided Moray cattle and a Moray shepherd was killed. I brought his sister back for surety until

he pays his fine. She's intelligent and pretty, and she knows it. I expect he'll soon arrive to redeem her."

"She will not think well of you, or me, then, if her brother is disgraced."

"She's an odd girl." Finlay stifled another yawn, shifted to face her and propped his head on one hand. "She was shocked and angry, to start with; but on the journey over I could swear she looked forward to coming here."

"What did her parents have to say?"

"They're dead. She has only her brother."

"Can she do whatever she wants and go wherever she pleases?"

Beneath the quilt, his hand found and caressed the slope of her hip. "Better if she doesn't ride out on her own." His mouth curved in a smile. "Use your own judgement. She's bound to cause a stir among the young hotheads we have here, so you might need to be strict with her. I'll ask Hareth to keep an eye on the lads." The bed ropes creaked and straw rustled as he edged closer. "If you tried," he said, burying his nose beside her ear, "I feel sure you could charm her into being your devoted slave."

Ratagan's clear green eyes surveyed the ribs of the roof. "I don't need a devoted slave. What I need at this precise moment is a devoted husband."

His fingers continued the slow, easy movement he had begun. "Then come here and let me do what I can to please you."

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Eba settled ungraciously in the sleeping loft with the other well-born girls who attended the Queen. She memorized names and held her quick tongue for fear one overbold remark would undermine her already uncertain status in the King's hearth-hall. She found her way around the main hall-house and its domestic offices on her first day, and located the stables and the blacksmith's forge the same evening. Next day she prowled round the barns, found the bone carver's bench and the carpenter's cabins. Inverness was so much bigger than Bundalloch, and even had its own shoemaker.

She escaped her duties again and again to wander around the bustling fort and dawdled on the way back across the yard a day or two later. Slowing to a halt, Eba inhaled the flowery green scents on the light, warm wind and lifted her face to the sun. Her eyes closed. Without warning, the hair lifted on the back of her neck and she jerked round, certain she was being watched.

Her swift glance passed over the King's hearth-hall, the living quarters for his hyrd away to her left and the jumble of cabins and workrooms attached to the tall timber palisade that surrounded the settlement. Men with ropes and tools in their hands walked across the yard; others greeted one another as they trundled barrels and bales to the stables or the forge. Stable lads led ponies from the fields, and kennel lads trotted hounds awaiting their owners. Boys carried water from the well and tipped it into the huge clay water jar by the kitchen door. No one was taking any notice of her. But there!

Something snagged her attention, and she glanced back at the eastern gateway.

The sun lit his glorious copper hair and even from a distance of twenty paces she could see that his eyes were a dense, devastating blue. She registered his broad shoulders, long thighs and the casual arrogance of his stance, and when he smiled, her heartbeat tripled and tingling warmth spread over her skin.

One of the maids called. Eba muttered a rude word under her breath and hurried indoors. She ached for further glimpses of the young man all through that long, warm day, and went into the hall that evening still seeking him. She hesitated by one of the hall posts, her fingers moving restlessly over the smoothing marks of the adze on the wood, and did not see him. She joined the Queen's women and dutifully wound wool, but her attention was on the hall door and a mixture of excitement and dread churned her stomach.

The hall was built of split tree trunks, smoothed on the inward surface and dropped into an oaken sill at floor level. Someone had carved snarling, entwined beasts along the sill; from there, they rioted up the door posts and across the lintels. Eba watched the door with such intensity the carved beasts were locked into her memory when, between one breath and the next, he walked through them. Her blood thudded through her veins and almost deafened her.

He cast only a haughty glance in her direction as he sauntered towards a group of youths beneath the gable end of the wooden hall. The embroidered cloths that ran round the other walls from waist height to carved sills were absent

there, for the wall held shelves of varying widths and small, intricately shaped cupboards built into the triangular shaped space that rose into the smoky gloom beneath the roof. Round painted shields hung in the high, unreachable space and grew stiff and old in the smoke.

Eba had never been ignored in Bundalloch, and her cheeks burned at the imagined slight. He, of course, would be well used to such a mixed and changing society; many well-born young girls came to serve the Queen, learn polite ways and possibly find a husband. Eba heaved a sigh and carried on winding wool.

"He got another lecture from mac Enna yesterday." Mairi caught Eba's eye. "Did you notice the redhead who just came into the hall? You should avoid him."

Eba nodded and hoped her flush had faded. "Who is he? Why should I avoid him?"

"Because he is seventeen, and behaves like a six year old if something displeases him. His name is Sorchand," Mairi added, "and he inherited the Mormaership of Angus last year, after his father was killed in the battle."

"Oh." Eba affected disinterest, but soaked up every scrap of information.

"He was stupid enough to try and fight the King last summer, before the crowning," Mairi added. "The King said he wouldn't fight a grieving boy, and I think that annoyed Sorchand even more."

"I'm surprised he's still alive," Eba said dryly.

Mairi looked at her. "Sorchand or the King?"

* * * *

Thunder rumbled up and down the valleys and lightning jagged across the sky during the last week of June. Darkness came early and brought with it a mighty wind that uprooted young trees, snapped mature trees in half and drove the high tides inland to meet the burns, streams and torrents pouring off the hills. The waters met, foamed and spread over the soft level lands of the valley.

Safe and snug in the warmth of the big thatched hall Eba sat at one end of the long fire pit, lost in thoughts of her brother and home. Beyond the shimmer of heat above the fire, movement caught her attention and she sat up with a jerk. Sorchand of Angus waved, smiled across the entire width of the hall and patted the space on the wooden bench beside him.

It was an invitation. Eba glanced around. The hall was crowded tonight. Families from the flooded cabins by the river had begged admittance, and been made welcome with ale and food. Extra rushlights in the iron wall brackets lit the huge beams that soared up into the darkness of the roof, and people milled about, drinking, talking and eating. No one watched her. She walked slowly around the end of the long fire pit and threaded her way through chattering groups towards the young men.

She perched hesitantly on the edge of the bench beside Sorchand.

He swayed towards her, his blue eyes gleaming in his pale, freckled face. "You are from the west coast?"

Eba recoiled from the blast of ale fumes as he spoke, and found herself jammed against the shoulder of a dark handsome youth. With a swift, apologetic smile, she turned back to her original quarry and asked the first thing that came into her head. "Who are you?"

"You must've heard of me. I'm Sorchand, Mormaer of Angus." He ignored the muffled snorts of laughter from his companions.

Eba shook her head and glanced up from beneath her lashes. "Are you important?"

"Are you making sport of me?"

"Why would I do such a thing?"

"Girls do damned strange things at times."

"I assure you I don't."

"Why are you here?"

Eba stretched her eyes innocently wide. "I'm here because it is raining."

The explosions of laughter were not smothered this time. Sorchand drew a deep breath and enunciated each word clearly, as if to an idiot. "Why are you here, in Inverness, rather than the west coast?" Firelight glowed through the red gold of his hair, glinted on the fine new beard and showed up the freckles across his nose.

Eba moistened her lips. She didn't really want to admit the truth. "I am hostage for my brother."

The laughter quietened at her words, and Sorchand's eyes narrowed. "What has he done?"

"I don't know." Eba shrugged off the question. She wasn't going to tell the world of her brother's lawbreaking. "The King gave Domnall till the end of the month to redeem me."

Sorchand's arm snaked behind her and his hand dropped on her shoulder. "It's only days away now."

The dark-haired youth leaned towards her.

"Go away, Comgell." Sorchand's belligerent face thrust past her. "I saw her first."

"Doesn't mean she's yours!"

Sorchand jabbed a fist against Comgell's shoulder. "Go away!"

Eba flinched. "Don't—"

Comgell knocked Sorchand's hand aside. Sorchand thrust Comgell off the bench and jumped on him. Eba sprang to her feet, both palms clapped to her face as the two youths crashed about in a tangle of arms and legs at her feet. All around the hall, heads lifted and turned towards the uproar.

Eba slipped through the ring of shouting, cheering young men and retreated to the fire pit as older men broke up the scuffle.

* * * *

"You won't want to talk to us now?"

Eba brightened at the sound of Comgell's voice and looked up from her place by the hearth. "Of course I'll talk to you." Eba winced at the darkening bruise on Comgell's cheekbone. "But is it safe? Where is your friend?"

"He'll be around somewhere."

Comgell's dark curling hair and kind brown eyes reminded her of Leod. "Do you two always fight like that?"

"We all do, especially over a girl as pretty as you."

Delighted with the compliment, Eba swung her feet to and fro under the bench and could not prevent a slight smile.

"Well, you must spend an awful lot of time fighting. Don't you get tired of it?"

"Not many girls are as pretty as you."

"Oh." She realized she was swinging her feet, and stopped.

"We fight out of boredom most of the time. It's the weather—we've been cooped up in here for days when we expected to go hunting."

Comgell's expression darkened and Eba flinched as heavy hands dropped onto her shoulder. She twisted round.

Sorchand stood close behind her, his fine skin patchily red where Comgell's fists had found their mark. "We missed you," Sorchand said. "Why did you run away?"

"I, er ... I didn't ... run." Color rose across her face. "But I didn't want to be found in the middle of a fist fight. I can't afford to make mistakes while I'm here."

"I suppose not." His blue eyes narrowed. "You're not in favor, are you? Well, your brother isn't, so I suppose neither are you."

Comgell stirred. "You were about to tell us why your brother must redeem you."

"I told you, I don't know." The denial was out before she thought about it.

"There is a rumor that your brother raided Moray cattle." Comgell sounded sympathetic. "I don't suppose the King was pleased about that."

Sorchand's long fingers kneaded her shoulder; and from the way Comgell frowned and glared at Sorchand over her head, he did not approve of the action. "If your brother escaped," Sorchand said, his mouth close to her ear, "the King would bring you here as a hostage. It makes sense."

His hands sent Eba's blood fizzing along her veins.

"Come and talk." He offered his hand. Eba hesitated, then laid her fingers in his palm and, giddy with excitement, walked with him across the hall. Nothing like this had ever happened in Bundalloch. Not even Leod had stirred this kind of feeling. "We can talk here in peace and quiet."

They stood in a storage alcove formed between two of the slanting beams that ran from floor to roof. When Sorchand released the tie, a heavy leather flap shut off the rest of the hall. Eba turned at the sudden lack of light and noise, found herself almost in Sorchand's arms and hastily stepped back. Her spine collided with the rough timbers of the wall. She looked up, apprehensive, and caught a brief glimpse of light on the highpoints of his face before his mouth found hers. He smelled of warm grain, horses and stables and he tasted of ale.

Eba forgot Mairi's warning, forgot she was in the hall-house of the King and stretched up to reach him. Sorchand's mouth opened wide, the weight of his head descended and Eba moaned under the pressure.

His fingers wormed beneath the straps of her gown, parted the soft linen of her shift and plucked at the tender, engorged flesh beneath. Her heart pounded in her throat, shivers ran over her hungry skin and her mind reeled. She pressed against him.

The curtain rattled back on iron rings. Light splashed across the alcove, and the sounds of conversation rushed into their small, enclosed world. Sorchand ignored it until Eba made frantic noises in her throat and beat at his chest. He drew away and looked round.

Hareth stood there, one hand gripping the flap of leather, his pale cold stare raking over them both.

Sorchand followed Hareth's gaze, grinned nastily and adjusted her tunic to conceal one small round breast. His fingers set up lines of fire that quivered through her body. She looked up into his face, but Sorchand glared at Hareth mac Enna.

Eba blinked, and wiped away wetness from her mouth with the back of her hand. She heard the open laughter and high color swept into her skin. She stumbled forward when Hareth beckoned, and fought the desire to weep as he put his palm across the back of her neck and pushed her in the direction of the Queen and her giggling maids.

* * * *

Curtly dismissed and ordered to wait upon the Queen next morning, apprehension cost Eba a night's sleep. She rose tired and heavy eyed, dressed, pinned her hair back and

splashed her face with cold water. Then there was nothing to do but sit and worry until one of the maids came for her.

The men had gone about their duties, and the women and children clustered at the other end of the hall when Eba walked slowly forward and stood before the Queen. A stand of candles flickered behind the Queen's painted chair, for the hall door and shutters were still closed and the fire was nothing but ash and red embers. Eba stiffened her shoulders and waited. There was bound to be a punishment of some kind. Whatever it was, she would withstand it.

On the shallow dais, the Queen sat in her carved and gilded chair, her hands loosely clasped in her lap. Candlelight winked on the gold mesh that confined her dark hair and the gold embroidery at the neck of her gown. Her cool green eyes were without sympathy and her words, brisk and precise, dropped like pebbles into the quiet, motionless pool of the almost empty hall.

"Well brought up young girls do not disappear into curtained alcoves with men, Eba. They certainly do not allow young men to fondle them. Such behavior is fit only for slatterns and weak headed kitchen maids."

No one had chastised Eba since her mother died. Indeed, Eba had chastised the women at Bundalloch when they skimped tasks in her brother's household. She stared resentfully at the Queen. Anger flared when a smothered giggle from the Queen's maids betrayed that they could hear everything that was said.

She remembered Sorchand's hand on her breast. A pang shot through Eba. Nothing in her life had prepared her for

that joyous rush of feeling. She had experienced nothing more than the sometimes unsettling grasp of a young man's hand in the dance at Bundalloch.

"Sorchand of Angus still grieves for his father," the Queen said. "His behaviour is often irresponsible and it would be a pity if you compounded the error your brother has made by allowing Sorchand to lead you astray. You damaged your reputation last night, Eba. It is fortunate indeed that Hareth found you when he did."

The giggles from the maids were hastily choked off as the Queen's chilly glance turned in their direction. Eba's mortification increased.

"Your mother would have said the same," the Queen added, "had you behaved in this way."

Eba gasped, jolted by the mention of her mother. Her thoughts flew in every direction even as she gazed helplessly at the Queen. It was quite true. Mother would have said exactly the same things. I'm in as much trouble as my brother now. Her stomach rolled in distress, and her anger began to drain away.

She swallowed, and lifted her chin. "I am so sorry, Your Grace."

The Queen waved the maids away, and went on staring down at Eba for what seemed a long time. "I should perhaps have warned you," she said, so softly that Eba had to strain to hear her. "I should have warned you about Sorchand. Eba, you must be careful. This young man will take from you what he can without thought and without thanks. He will know the reason you are here, and will view you as fair prey. If your

brother were at court, and in favor, then Sorchand would not dare approach you in this way."

Eba stared up at the Queen. "I shall remember your words, and I thank you."

The Queen sighed. Her head tilted to one side, and the hint of a smile stretched her mouth. "If I were you, I should prefer Comgell. He is much kinder than Sorchand."

"Oh, I like him, too," Eba said, surprised. "But Sorchand..." Her small teeth fastened on her lower lip as she shook her head. "He makes me feel ... I can't ... it happened the first time I saw him." She took a deep breath and got control of her tongue again. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"In the morning, you shall ride with me to the riverside to see what we can do to help those caught in the floods. You can advise me, for I am sure you will have experienced floods in Bundalloch," the Queen said, and brought the interview swiftly to an end.

Eba stuttered her thanks and withdrew, puzzling over what possible advice a fourteen year old girl might offer a Queen about anything at all.

* * * *

The river had thundered down the valley with unbelievable force. It swept away homes and left others choked with matted tangles of branches, twigs, roots, and the occasional bloated carcass. When the flood waters receded, they left behind a thick layer of mud and the entire neighborhood spent several days repairing the damage and making homes habitable once more.

The work left Eba little time for worry, but once it was finished and the end of June nudged closer, her worries returned. Her appreciation of her brother's sense of fairness wavered back and forth over the warm days like a sapling in a breeze. When the last day drew to a close with no sign of her brother, Eba sat among a group of young people, picked up a small harp and wondered what would happen to her now. A cold hand clutched her innards and to hide her fear and her longing for the security and safety of her life back in boring Bundalloch, she sang, slowly at first, a rude little song Leod had taught her long ago. When people turned to listen, she sang a little louder, and their laughter warmed her.

"He will ride in any day now," Comgell said afterwards.

Eba glanced at him. He spoke as if he understood her fears. "And if he doesn't?" The harp twanged discordantly under her fingers.

Comgell shrugged. "The storms and floods in the mountains might well have delayed him. Don't worry, Eba. He'll be here."

"We could go to him, I suppose," Sorchand said suddenly.

Eba looked up. She was wary of Sorchand after the Queen's warning, but his idea could be the way forward. "Why didn't I think of it?" she said, her excitement growing. "Will you guide me? I might get lost on my own. It's a long way."

Comgell laughed. "Sorchand doesn't know the way, either. You'd both get lost."

She turned to him, her face alight with excitement. "But together, the three of us could find our way, I'm sure. It's west all the way, and if we keep the sun on our left, we can't

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go wrong!"

Chapter 3

Eba's powers of persuasion overrode Comgell's doubts about setting off for Bundalloch, and permission for a day's hunting was duly sought and received from Hareth mac Enna. It was July, the days were long, the weather was warm and the three young people regarded it as an adventure.

They took food and water for the day, strapped rolled cloaks behind their saddles and merrily exchanged insults and snatches of song as they rode, free from restraint at last, beside the turbulent waters of the Beaully River.

Bulging hillsides crowded in on them further up the valley, and the first flicker of doubt niggled at Eba soon after the sun disappeared behind a cloud. By mid afternoon it occurred to her that both young men had stopped laughing some time ago and now looked concerned. She nudged her pony forward. "What's wrong?"

"We have to decide which valley to follow." Eba followed Comgell's gesture and saw the river divided not far ahead; one stream hurtled south and the other to the west.

"Strathglass will be nothing but bog after all the rain."

Eba heard the arrogance in Sorchand's tone and looked at Comgell. "I have heard my brother say ... he favors the route through Cannich. Do you know it?"

He nodded. "It's the Strathglass route, but perhaps Sorchand is right. All the rain we've had will make a difference."

"So we'll go west, then." Sorchand smiled, and set off.

Eba pulled a face at his back but nudged her pony after him. Cloud drifted down from the mountains and before they had travelled far, fingers of mist chilled her face and muted the sound of the river. Eba sighed and pinned her cloak tight about her throat. It was going to be a miserable journey.

They sheltered overnight in a dry cave and rode westwards next day, avoiding swollen streams and flooded meadows until Eba had a strong suspicion neither youth knew where they were or which way to go. She watched them from under the hood of her cloak when her pony suddenly sank up to its belly in the spongy ground.

Eba squawked "Sorchand!" and sat frozen in the saddle, terrified the pony was about to sink into the black mud. Sorchand ignored her and guided his heavier mount to drier ground. It was Comgell who dismounted and took hold of the pony's slick bridle in one hand. Urged by Eba's voice and Comgell's strength, the pony plunged free and ambled towards Sorchand, who sat and watched from his own horse. "Why didn't you look where you were going?"

"Shut up, Sorchand." Comgell helped Eba mount. His back to Sorchand, he gave her a quick smile. "Take no notice of him."

"I shan't." She scowled at Sorchand.

They sheltered beneath a rock overhang that night and kept their horses close by for they were in wild country, and had seen wolf and deer tracks more than once in the moist earth. In the dark hours of the night something woke Eba; something that snuffled and grunted through the bracken and heather nearby. She held her breath and checked the fire; it

was very low, but Comgell had already stretched out a hand to the woodpile. She looked across to the still black, unstimulating lump that was Sorchand, and sighed.

They climbed a stony ridge next day, circled two lochans and looked down on the mist as it licked along the tree line. The low sweeping arms of a pine forest reached out, gathered them in and then sprawled twisted roots across the earth to trip them. The horses' hooves rattled and clicked against stubs of rock that broke through the pine needles like old, splintered teeth. The vague, fleeting smell of the sea came now and then on a breath of wind, and their spirits lifted a little. They found shelter in an abandoned shepherd's hut, and because it had a roof and a door, Eba felt safer than at any time since they had left Inverness.

* * * *

Domnall's journey across the wet, water soaked spine of Alba had been thoroughly unpleasant and taken him far longer than he had anticipated. He was tired, hungry and irritable when he rode into Inverness in the late afternoon, threw the reins of his exhausted pony to the stable boy and headed straight for the King's hearth-hall.

Finlay of Alba heard the door crash back against the wall, glanced up and broke off his lazy conversation with his wife. He recognized the man striding towards him and rose smoothly to his feet, one hand close by the hilt of his jewelled dagger. His personal banner shivered in the smoky air above his dark head, and his battle shields decorated the wall

behind him. "You are welcome in my hearth-hall, Domnall of Bundalloch."

The companions saw the thundercloud of Domnall's face and drew closer to hear the exchange. Domnall came to a sudden halt at the foot of the shallow dais and glared at the King of Alba. Displaced air rolled on over the dais, laden with the offensive odors of sweat, bog water and mud. Finlay's nostril's flared and the Queen coughed, raised a scrap of fabric to her nose and kept it there.

Domnall snapped the thong of a small leather bag at his neck and flung it to the wooden step by the King's foot.

Finlay of Alba did not move. Tall, wide-shouldered and full of repressed energy, he stared down at the man two steps below him, and waited. In the sudden silence, one of the companions stepped forward, retrieved the bag and placed it, clinking, in the King's palm.

"That's your fine!" Domnall sneered, aquamarine eyes bright as gem chips in his florid, bearded face. "You'll find it's all there, down to the last quarter ounce." He glanced around the hall. "Where's the lass? You'll not stop us. We'll ride out at first light."

Finlay of Alba studied the small, scuffed leather bag in his palm for a moment and then looked up, his black head tilted to one side. "Your sister has anticipated you," he said mildly. He tossed the bag to a nearby table, and turned back to Domnall. "She has been riding as she pleases for two days now. She had permission to hunt with friends and none of them have returned. We now believe they planned to head for the west coast."

No one spoke. Color surged through Domnall's face and a fat vein throbbed at his temple. He half turned to leave and then swung back, sending another wave of sour odors over the dais. "By the blood of Christ! You mean I've come all this way for *nothing*?"

The Queen's brows lifted, and the companions, anticipating trouble, shuffled restlessly but the King spoke mildly. "The fact you've kept your word, and paid your fine is worth something, surely?"

"And my sister's safety?" Domnall's eyes narrowed to pinpoints of blue in his scarlet face. "*You'll* be paying *me* if she comes to harm?"

"Eba was not kept under lock and key." A hint of irritation could be heard in the King's voice. "She has been well treated and we have come to like her, my wife especially so."

Ratagan removed the handkerchief from her face. "She settled very well, Domnall. She made friends with some of the young people here, and I thought very well of her. She is intelligent, and amusing."

"Then why did she leave," Domnall snarled, "if she was so happy?"

"I believe," the Queen said, her green eyes unflinching beneath black, arched brows, "it may have something to do with you being two days late."

The King's mouth twitched briefly as he turned back to Domnall. "She may have doubted you would redeem her. I can think of nothing else to make her leave."

Domnall sucked in his cheeks, and his stare shifted from the King to the Queen and back again. "So it's my fault, is it?"

I doubt it. I doubt it very much indeed!" His moustache quivered with indignation. "And it wasn't me who removed her to Inverness in the first place!"

The King's brows dived towards the bridge of his aristocratic nose. "And it was done for a purpose, if you remember."

"Aye, it was. And if you hadn't proposed a visit to Bundalloch, we wouldn't have had to raid the damned cattle at all."

"Your own pride made you raid cattle," the King said bitingly. "You, like every man in Alba, owe us tithes of grain and meat. Most are proud to offer hospitality, but if the times were hard for you, you had only to speak, and we would have brought supplies to tide you through till harvest."

Domnall snorted. "So it's my pride and temper that got me into this, is it?"

"You acted without thought, Domnall."

The blue eyes opened wide. "I acted—!" Domnall sagged suddenly, as if he had heard the accusation before.

"Why did you run at Bundalloch? There was no need."

For a long time, Domnall said nothing. "It would have been better if I had stayed," he acknowledged at last.

"You have paid your fine," Finlay said quietly. "The cattle are returned to Moray and reparation has been made to the dead man's family. We know the floods delayed your journey and we will ignore this display of ill temper. Your sister is a headstrong young girl who has done something quite unexpected. Now," he added, glancing at the companions, "we had already planned a party to ride out at first light to

follow the trail of these young people. We know they got as far as Beaully. Do you prefer to ride back to your home and await her there? We will, of course, keep you posted with whatever news we have of her whereabouts."

Domnall ground one fist into the other as he struggled to sort out his feelings. "It would be best," he said eventually, "if I rode with the party at first light."

* * * *

Half awake in the cool of early morning, Eba crouched beside the ancient stone hearth and focussed on the clumsily made spit and the roasting fowl. Sorchand stood over her, frowning. "We must be near Bundalloch by now?"

The flames lit their faces and threw flickering shadows on the rough, lichen spotted walls of the hut. Comgell, one shoulder slouched against the stone, frowned at Sorchand's peevish tone. Eba shrugged and did not answer. Outside, a crossbill called, and one of the horses nickered to its neighbor.

"Well?"

"I don't know, Sorchand." She refused to look at him.

"You said last night you could smell the sea," Sorchand persisted. "Surely that bird must be cooked by now?"

"Once I see the place in daylight, I might well recognize where we—" Eba broke off, eyes unfocussed, listening.

Sorchand leaned forward and prodded the roasting bird just as a spear shot by his shoulder and thudded into the soft earthen floor beyond. Outside, the horses jostled and snorted. The rickety plank door burst open on a rush of big, burly men

and the owner of the spear vaulted through the window after it. Someone swung an axe at Sorchand's head.

Eba sucked in air, choked and scrabbled backwards away from the bearded, bright-eyed giant who stepped across the fire, clapped a large hand across her face and dragged her into his embrace. There was a brief scuffle, full of thuds and gasps. Comgell reeled away from a blow, collided with the wall and slid to the ground. Sorchand stumbled and fell backwards, arms out flung.

The man holding Eba tossed her in a corner. Fear gathered thick in her throat, she crouched motionless and watched one of the men seize the carcass from the spit and divide it amongst his cronies. She heard her own uneven, shallow gasps, clamped her mouth shut and peered at the two youths flat and silent on the dark earthen floor. The flames flickered on Sorchand's red curls and closed eyes, but someone's boots blocked her sight of Comgell's face.

In a very short time the attackers threw down the bones, licked greasy hands and looked at her over in the same way she had seen her brother assess cattle. Big, and armed with long daggers and swords, they spoke in a language she could not understand.

She pressed back into the cold stone, her heartbeat thudding in her throat. One man stooped to grasp her arm. He dragged her to the door. Once in the open, he slung her across his shoulder and set off downhill.

She hadn't enough breath to scream, even if there had been anyone to hear, and his grasp of her thighs was too tight for her to wriggle free. She bounced horribly on his

shoulder as he hurtled down a steep and stony path, and fought to brace her palms against his spine. She couldn't think beyond gritting her teeth to stop them banging together, caught only a glimpse of Comgell and Sorchand, both belly down across horses. Her pony trotted free, anxious not to be left behind.

The forest thinned out, sand appeared through the grass and she could smell the damp, salty tang of the sea. Fine sand stung her face as he ploughed through sand dunes. Eba shut her eyes, heard the harshness of his breathing and then the echo like a muffled drum as he reached flat, damp sand. At last he halted, hauled her off his shoulder and dropped her at his feet.

She landed with a thump in wet sand, the flat calm sea before her and a dark, threatening shape to her right. Bruised and breathless, Eba looked beyond her captor and let out a squawk of fright. In the cool milky light of morning the graceful bulk of a Viking longship reared above her head.

* * * *

A thick twisted rope ran from the ship to an anchor buried in the sand, and the ship sidled against the shallow waves like a live creature. Thrown up and over the gunwale, Eba sprawled on the half deck, and scrambled to her feet. A heavy hand between her shoulder blades sent her scuttling towards what she thought must be the steering oar, and from there she could only retreat into the small space where the end of the ship curled up in a smaller version of the prow. With the thick curving oaken post hard against her spine, she sank to

her haunches, all complaints about rough handling dead in her throat.

They dragged Sorchand and Comgell aboard and from the sound of hooves drumming on sand she guessed the horses had been turned loose. Sorchand stirred and muttered, but tears sprang to Eba's eyes when she saw Comgell, for he lay motionless with a wash of blood on one side of his face.

The crew went about their business and ignored the captives. With her teeth sunk in her lip, Eba crawled over and shook Sorchand's arm. "Sorchand! Wake up!" Her first dizzy infatuation for him had died in the last few days but right now he was her only friend. "Sorchand!"

A large leather boot appeared at her side, prodded Comgell and followed it up with a hefty kick. Her heart bounded erratically in her chest, but she forced herself to look up.

Mature, padded with muscle, this man stood on the tilted wooden planking like a rooted oak. Light shone through the halo of silvery fair hair as he spoke over his shoulder. Two seamen arrived, grabbed Comgell, heaved him against the covered shields and rolled him over the side.

"No!" Eba shouted, darting forward. "He'll drown!"

A rough hand caught her arm. The leader yanked her back and studied her. "We go. Dublin. Sell you."

"No! We are not slaves! My brother..." Two seamen dragged Sorchand by his feet and she wheeled round to watch in case they threw him over the side too. She flung out her arm. "He's a Mormaer, from Angus. And—"

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The golden moustaches lifted to reveal strong square teeth. "Brother young, strong. Good price. You..." He shrugged magnificent shoulders. "You, maybe sell, maybe keep."

He shoved her back towards the sternpost and issued a string of incomprehensible orders. Eba tripped over Sorchand's feet, sat down abruptly and clapped both palms across her mouth. Behind the fierce grip of her hands, she inhaled deeply, over and over, and watched the crew take two pale new oars on board and settle them in the line of weather-beaten sweeps.

The tide lifted the ship, and Eba's stomach rippled. The crew eased the vessel off the strand, the oars bit into the pale green water and the ship moved across the bay.

Chapter 4

It was cold, out on the open sea. Shock and fright had made her vomit over the side before they left the shelter of the bay, and she huddled nervously against Sorchand to find warmth. Full of his own misery, he offered little comfort. "I can't see properly," he muttered briefly, shut his eyes and appeared to fall asleep. She eyed the round, bruised lump expanding slowly on his forehead with some dismay. But at least he was alive; when she thought of Comgell, her eyes stung and a lump formed at the back of her throat.

The sickness did not abate. After the third rush to the ship's side, Eba wrapped her arms tight about her knees, hid her face and sobbed. Weeping helped vent some of her terror, and because her stomach was empty, the sickness subsided to queasiness. She dozed a little, and her thoughts wandered uncertainly towards the future.

That awful man had said he would take her to Dublin. She had heard bards and travelling saga men tell many stories of Dublin over the years. Surely there had been a Princess Dubhlina who drowned in the black pool of some river and needed the prayers of a saint to revive her? The name of the saint remained elusive, which was a pity; Eba felt it might have proved useful, given her present predicament.

The tales said the Vikings took the city from the Irish by snaring a number of swallows and releasing them with a lighted twig bound under their wings. The swallows set fire to the thatched roofs of the town and reduced it to ashes. Poor swallows. Eba swallowed and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

There had also been Nose money. The head of each Irish household was required to pay many ounces of silver in tax to his Viking overlord. If the unlucky householder could not pay, he lost his nose to a Viking knife. Hardly a jolly and caring society, she thought miserably.

Her gaze roamed over the hardy, muscular men sailing the ship. They had shown no compassion for Comgell. A stray tear escaped and slid down her sore cheek. She wriggled closer to Sorchand. He wasn't good company, but at least he was warm.

Sometime later, the ship's cook found space on the ballast stones, lit a small brazier and passed skewers of smoking hot meat round the crew. Eba refused, but Sorchand woke sniffing the air and chomped through both his and her portion with evident appreciation. He licked his fingers clean and looked at her pallid face. "You should eat."

"I couldn't. I'd be ill again."

"Well, drink, then." He shifted his shoulders back against the hull strakes and relapsed into silence. Sorchand knew about Comgell; during one of his brief, waking moments he had queried Comgell's whereabouts, and she had told him. She had thought him uncaring because he had closed his eyes and lapsed back into blank silence. Now she looked again at his bloodless face, saw the dark shadows around his eyes and thought she might have been wrong. There was blood on his lip where he had bitten it and he still refused to meet her glance.

She did drink a little water when it was offered, and it helped. Sorchand yanked a piece of sail cloth from between

the bales and boxes at their feet, and bundled the fabric over them both when the longship pulled inshore and anchored for the night. Eba slid into a troubled sleep in the shelter of his arm. The dreadful journey continued at first light. Eba sank into the same hopeless blur of sickness and it was midday when she realized that Sorchand had scrambled to his knees near the gunwale. He looked back, and saw she was awake.

"I can see the coast line. The noise is the roar of breakers pounding the shore."

Listlessly, Eba rolled her head against the stern post, and listened. There in the distance she could hear a low, growling roar. "What kind of land is it?"

"Low-lying, with hills to the south and some hazel and oak woods to the north. The buildings are just a blur of wattle, clay and thatched roofs."

Eba thought of the swallows, desperate to out fly the flames, and bit her lip.

"The Vikings came to raid but decided to stay," he said. "They built their longphort on the black pool where the Poddle meets the Liffey and traded with Bristol and Chester and the French ports. It made Dublin important. They fought with one another and the Kings of Ireland until Brian Boru called an accounting at Clontarf."

"They decimated each other. Peace didn't last long. Within a few years the Vikings were back in Dublin, and they're still here today. Their King is called Sitric. I don't suppose we'll meet him."

Eba let the words roll over her. He must feel better this morning. Certainly there seemed to be nothing wrong with his

eyesight. Braced in the angle of the stern, her head lolling against the sternpost with the movement of the ship, it took some time before she noticed how pale he was; the pinched look was still there and his large bony hands gripped the gunwale so hard his knuckles were white. Sorchand is nervous, she thought, and trying to hide it behind all this talk.

Eba stopped listening. Talk of woollens, hides, linen and furs held went over her head. She roused a little when he mentioned silks from Baghdad, silver from the Middle East and broken glass from Germany. "They make bracelet stones from it," he said.

The ship left the hollow boom of the waves behind. Once into the river, Eba welcomed the smoother water. Sorchand scrambled for a better viewpoint, and announced he could see the settlement ahead. "There's a palisade right round it," he added.

The big, burly steersman stepped back, both fists hauling on the large wooden steering oar, grunted and kicked Sorchand out of his way. The ship headed gently towards the shore. Men ran and heaved on ropes, the sail rattled down and the crew nudged the longship into her mooring below the ridge on which Dublin was built.

Eba risked a swift glance over the gunwale. The landing place was thronged with people, most of them men, all moving in different directions. A heavy wooden palisade reared above an earthen embankment, and here and there she caught a glimpse of a roof tree peeking above it.

A heavy coil of rope thumped down nearby and Eba felt the impact through the deck boards. She jerked round and

met the energetic blue stare of her captor. He yanked her to her feet and looked her over. Eba shut her eyes. She could imagine what he saw: an unkempt, lacklustre girl dressed in soiled leather overtunic and breeches, her eyes red rimmed from weeping, hair tangled and matted with salt and with the sour odor of vomit clinging about her.

"You, with me." His vivid blue glance flicked to Sorchand, and the golden moustaches moved in a half-smile. "You, slave market."

Eba saw her own horror reflected in Sorchand's face. The Viking strode across the deck and stepped onto the narrow, ribbed wooden board that led to the jetty. Halfway over, he turned and gestured Eba to follow. Three burly sailors backed Sorchand into a corner.

"Eba!" Sorchand's voice rang with the now familiar mixture of impatience and arrogance.

She hesitated, and looked back at Sorchand. The Viking strode impatiently back on deck, grasped her arm, and jerked her across the walkway and off the ship. He kept his grip of her arm and steered her, at a pace that made her trot to keep up, through a maze of stacked timber, barrels that leaned at odd angles and sacks with their corners tied off like lop eared donkeys.

Eba had a fleeting impression of strong men working stripped to the waist, and rats scampering about beneath the wheels of stationary carts. Roped bundles passed from hand to hand between ship and shore, and an empty flagon of wine rolled lazily on its own axis in a hollow of the quay. The smell

of grain and rotten vegetables hit her nostrils, and eddying beneath it all was the smell of fish and tidal waters.

Eba's stout cow hide boots rattled and echoed on a split log walkway through a wide gateway into the settlement. She gasped, stared and skidded on a damp patch. Inverness had been large enough to make her think of Bundalloch as a farm; but in comparison to this, Inverness was small indeed.

Buildings surrounded her, their reed, rush and straw roof thatch sweeping down level with a man's ears. The street between the houses was so narrow she could almost reach out and touch a wall on either side. Woven fences ran between the houses, and from the smell Eba guessed a midden, a pig or a goat and often all three, resided behind the fence.

The Viking jerked her forward through narrow, curving streets towards a heavy wooden door set within intricately carved posts. He lifted the sneck, ducked under the lintel and pulled Eba in after him. She breathed the familiar odors of peat and wood smoke, saw the long firepit in the centre of the shadowy hall and caught a glimpse of wide wooden wall benches overlaid with brown and white skins. At the familiarity of it all, some of her courage returned.

"Torquil!" A small, plump woman in blue hurried forward with white, dimpled arms outstretched. She embraced him, smiling, and drew back almost at once. She peered at Eba, frowned, looked back at Torquil and rattled off a question.

The sense of it seemed plain enough to Eba. She straightened her spine and took a deep breath. "My name is Eba. My brother is Domnall of Bundalloch and Kintail in Alba."

The woman's brows lifted in surprise above mild blue eyes. "This is Torquil mac Leod of Lewis. My name is Annikki. He is my brother."

Delighted at a greeting she could understand, Eba smiled. They were alike, she thought; both with fair hair and blue eyes, the same square jaw and short, straight nose. The bulk that was muscle in the man was a pretty, feminine plumpness in the woman. Eba decided on boldness, but her voice let her down and the last word came out like the squawk of a frightened chicken. "Why have I been brought here?"

The woman turned to her brother. "Yes, Torquil. Why is the girl here?"

"She pretty." He spat in the general direction of the fire pit. "Well born. Whey-faced on ship. I decide tomorrow." He added a sentence in the foreign tongue.

Annikki gave a small snort of laughter. "You'll pick up any waif just because she's pretty and give her to your son?"

Eba's stomach lurched, and only then realized the dreadful seaboard sickness had vanished, gone the moment she set foot on dry land. "I am no waif, lady." Eba lifted her chin and cleared her throat as they both stared at her. "I am from the court of the King of Alba. Your brother should return me to Inverness at once." To her satisfaction, it all came out in a much firmer tone.

Torquil spoke in rapid, foreign sentences and then turned, scowled at Eba and stalked to the door. Eba half turned to follow him and then hesitated. "No. You stay with me," Annikki said. "My brother will return tomorrow. He wants you presentable by then."

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* * * *

Eba stood in the early morning sunshine among the rank grass and weeds of the yard and watched Annikki empty a bowl of scraps into the pig's trough.

The woman had chivvied her into a full scale bath and hair wash the moment her brother had left. Nervous as she had been, Eba felt better for it. Her vomit stained riding clothes were replaced with an unbleached linen shift and a long brown overtunic. She devoured a big bowl of warm stew and when Annikki directed her to a sleeping cubicle she crept in and fell asleep within moments of her head touching the straw mattress. She slept through the entire evening and the night.

Her waking thoughts had circled around what might happen next. The slave market, perhaps? It was something of a relief to hear Torquil's voice.

He strode into the yard, nodded to his sister and turned his bright blue stare on Eba. Her stomach rolled and growled with fright beneath the smooth brown linen. The fates seemed to have decreed that the whims of this man would direct her life, but in a small, secret compartment of her mind, there was wild urge to break out in giggles.

The urge soon disappeared. Torquil walked behind her and swept his palm down the glistening fall of her golden hair. He gazed with growing satisfaction at her budding breasts and slender waist, so neatly displayed by the fitted bodice and simple braided cloth belt. He grasped her hips with both palms, and shook her, as if judging her solidity. Eba's skin

turned scarlet, and she clamped her lips together to keep from speaking out of turn.

"Well?" Annikki was amused.

Torquil grinned at his sister. "Better. She do."

"Do? Do! The girl is a beauty, and you know it!"

Her brother laughed, showing good white teeth. "Very pretty." He reached out, fingered a tress of the hip length golden hair and let it slide across his scarred, callused palm. "I give her to Kimi."

Annikki looked less than pleased. "To Kimi? As a toy?"

Eba's throat closed. She took a deep breath and the words were out before she could stop them. "Do you mean I will be your—your son's *slave*?"

Torquil scowled at her. Annikki bit her lip, and shook her head. Eba remembered the man's trouble with language and thought perhaps he had not understood her.

"If he want. Yes."

It seemed Torquil had no trouble understanding her. "And if I don't agree?"

Torquil flung back his head and laughed. "You—no choice."

The pig snuffled and grunted unseen behind the wall of the sty. In the cloud-blown sunlight Eba stared straight at Torquil and allowed her eyes to fill with tears. It had never failed with Domnall or Leod. "I am just fourteen years old," she said. "How old is your son?"

Torquil formed the words with care. "Kimi fourteen summers. Has many women."

Annikki moved towards the girl and reached out a sympathetic hand. "You will meet him tonight," she said gently.

* * * *

The incoming tide achieved what the toe end of a Viking boot had failed to do. Each successive wave nudged Comgell closer to the shore, and he stirred, snorted and choked. There was salt on his tongue and sand grated between his teeth. He bumped gently along the shallows and opened his eyes on a glistening strap of seaweed coiled around one wrist.

The wave retreated without him. A spasm shook him and he spewed a prodigious amount of salt water, shivered and crawled out of reach of the waves. His memory returned in brief, frightening snatches: a dark hut, a roasting grouse and then the utter surprise of a spear flashing by Sorchand's head. He remembered a crashing noise, a rush of men, and pain followed by darkness.

He probed his scalp and found a finger-long wound beneath his hair. That would account for the pain in his head. He rolled to his knees and waited for the world to steady again. He looked inland and then out to sea, surprised to see a ship in the bay. He watched the red and white sail jerk up the length of the mast. Seawater touched his knees.

He got dizzily to his feet and studied the human tracks that led straight down to the sea. Three sets of hoof prints wove an uneven pattern across the sand, and headed for the gentle green slopes at the curve of the bay. Comgell gritted his jaws against the pain and tottered after the hoof prints. The tracks

told the story of abduction, and he had to tell someone; he had to save Eba.

Thatched with old reeds and overshadowed by trees, the small dismal dwelling was cobbled together from rounded stones taken off the beach, and a ragged leather curtain flapped where the door should have been. He urged his horse forward.

The man of the house was absent, but his wife and a large brood of dirty, amiable children tumbled out at his call and watched wide-eyed when Comgell climbed gingerly out of the saddle and sat down rather suddenly on the grass. He flinched when the woman knelt at his side and pressed a pad of damp moss against the ugly lump at the side of his head. "T'll cool the ache, laddie." Her face was lined and not very clean, but her eyes were kind.

The children grinned behind their fists, and Comgell smiled weakly back. One of the boys, older and bolder than the rest, took a step closer. "Who're ye?"

The lad was perhaps twelve, and obviously felt his responsibility as the eldest male. Comgell told him, and the boy nodded though Comgell doubted he knew anything of a place called Inverness. His mother, however, had heard of Domnall and Eba. She indicated a vague track over the hill, and assured him it was not far to Bundalloch.

"It's no' hard," she said briskly. "Keep yersel' t' the easy face of the hill t'the big rock of Craigvhor, up through the bit o' birch wood and o'er t' Glen Ling and ye canna go wrong. Ach, m' youngest would de it in a day." She offered the last comment with an engaging gap-toothed grin.

Slowly, Comgell surveyed the group. Her youngest was about five, and offered a grin very like his mother's. One of the older lads, with a shock of fair hair and freckles across his snub nose, lifted a filthy hand. "I'll guide ye, for gold, ifn' y' lemme ride the garron."

Comgell glanced at the lad's mother. She made no objection. "He can have the pony to keep," he said, and then smiled into her blue eyes. "And some silver for you. It's all I have."

The army of birches ran all the way to the summit, and once there, the boy waited for Comgell. He pointed out where two faint paths crossed not far ahead. "Follow yon track and ye'll find Bundalloch. It's there, look, down yonder. It's no' far, now. I have t' be home afore dark."

Comgell smiled. "You've earned your fee. Remember what I told you about the pony. And take it gently till you are used to each other."

He watched the pair turn and head back along the stony ridge and then eased his buttocks in the saddle and faced south. The dark water snaked inland between bright green shores far below. There was a thin, pale strand by the water, and a little way back stood a hall-house, tiny at this distance, with the clump of dark trees at its back. Sunlight glittered off the loch and the wind lifted his hair. He looked to the west, and set off, for he knew, like the boy, he must get down off the hill before dark.

Comgell composed and discarded phrases in his head, for he wanted to convey urgency without causing more alarm than necessary. The hush of twilight met him as he rode onto

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the flat green lands at the head of the loch and a young man scything hay in a meadow directed him to Domnall of Bundalloch; but it was Leod who came forward, hand extended in friendship, to meet the stranger.

Comgell forgot all the precise phrases he had practiced. "Eba's been kidnapped," he blurted. "Vikings have taken her!"

Chapter 5

Eba performed her allotted tasks with grim determination and inwardly bemoaned the misfortune that had brought her to Dublin. She tried to keep her mind away from the coming evening, but apprehension made her palms sweat and wavering concentration made her clumsy. A newly washed tunic fell under the pig's feet because she hadn't pegged it firmly, her elbow knocked a jug of milk over fresh baked bread and when two eggs smashed on the flagged floor, Annikki abandoned her loom, grasped Eba's arm and led her out into the fresh air.

"Eba, you puzzle me," Annikki announced as she guided Eba towards Dame Gate. "My other maids came from the slave market and on the whole they are young, biddable and need to be told what to do. You have already demonstrated that you know how to run a household and instruct servants. Your posture, bearing, attitude and most of all the assumption you may talk to me on equal terms all give credence to your claim to have lived at the court of the Alban King." She studied the girl as they walked beneath the gate, and then added, "You seem calmer now."

"Fresh air and movement always soothes me," Eba said.

In a few paces they stood beneath the ridge that supported Lord Sitric's fort and Annikki turned away from the Liffey. Eba saw the small bright Poddle as it chattered around the foot of the ridge towards the big river, and a wide pool of still, brackish water beyond the barrier of tall reeds and mud where a few small boats floated at the end of long lines.

"That is the original black pool; the *linn dubh* in the Irish language," Annikki said.

A faint path through the reeds joined the bank of the Poddle, led to stepping stones and up the incline to an old battered gate in the palisade behind them.

"It's where the longphort was built to protect ourselves and our ships. With us the name became Dyflinn." Annikki smiled. "Somehow it has become Dublin. Tell me how you got here, Eba."

"Torquil stole me," Eba said. The question had been unexpected, and she had answered spontaneously; but once the words were out she wondered uneasily how Annikki would view her answer. The man was her brother, after all.

"Tell me how it happened," Annikki said, and Eba did, from the moment Finlay of Alba had stalked onto the jetty at Bundalloch to her arrival in Annikki's home. It was a relief to tell someone.

Annikki listened without interruption. "So you blame Finlay of Alba?"

"Of course!"

The kind eyes surveyed her. "You don't think your brother acted rashly? You don't think your own actions in bolting from Inverness with two young men were most unwise?"

"I couldn't stay! Heaven knows what he might have made me do!"

"He might have arranged a marriage for you, given time. It seems to me your brother precipitated your action by not redeeming you and you made it worse. Eba, I have a son, and I know how much young men are ruled by their bodies.

Have you any idea of the risks you took traipsing across Alba with them on your own?"

"They wouldn't..." Eba hesitated. Comgell wouldn't have done anything to harm her, but Sorchand ... was different.

"Rashness seems to be a family trait," Annikki said with a gentle smile.

Eba scowled. "So you think it was entirely my own fault. I may have made mistakes," she said tartly, "but it doesn't give men like your brother the right to seize me."

"It is the way of the world, unfortunately." Annikki glanced at the girl's flushed face. "Eba, rules are made for good reason, most of the time. You have lost the protection of your brother and your countrymen through your own actions. I know this is not what you want to hear, but you need to hear it. I will do what I can to make your life more comfortable, but there is only so much I can do. My family is tied to my brother and his fortunes; and he works hard to please Lord Sitric."

Anger and guilt warred in Eba's mind. "So my future depends on Lord Sitric now! Is that what you are telling me?"

The older woman nodded, and she considered the girl as if making up her mind about something. "As a good Viking woman," Annikki said slowly, taking Eba's arm and turning her towards the Liffey, "I shouldn't tell you this, but it's a story you may not have heard. Did you know that the good Lord Sitric stayed right here in this fortress and watched the battle of Clontarf? He stood on that tower up there," she indicated the ridge behind them, "and made his wife stand with him. The Lady Emer, she who was Boru's daughter. 'Well

do the foreigners reap the field,' he said to his wife, daughter of the man he should have been fighting. The lady replied, 'It will be at the end of the day that it will be seen.'"

"It got to the end of that long, dreadful day and the lady saw her father's Irish forces were beating the Vikings. It made her bold. 'It appears to me that the foreigners have gained their inheritance,' she said to her husband. Lord Sitric dealt her such a blow she lost a tooth from it. Now, perhaps you see why I must caution you? It doesn't do to annoy the Lord Sitric."

"But it can't be the same Lord Sitric today, surely?"

"Clontarf was fought twenty two years ago, lass, when I was about your age, and almost as slender! It is indeed the same Lord Sitric who rules us now and his temper has grown a good deal worse with the years."

"I shall remember it well, this story of yours," Eba said slowly. "Though I don't expect I shall ever meet Lord Sitric. What is he like?"

Annikki pursed her lips. "Oh, if you saw him in the street you'd think him a well set up man. He was one of the handsomest young men of his day." Her eyes twinkled. "Why do you think he was nicknamed Silkenbeard? He used to have it washed and combed every single day, so it looked and felt like silk. There were a lot of bawdy remarks ... But it's his temper that's his downfall; it reverses all the good he does."

She indicated the slipway and quayside in front of them. "This used to be nothing but mud and stones and stank to high heaven in the summer, but Lord Sitric saw to it that the river was moved back. Few believed it would work, but it did."

There is deep water here now, and ships don't go into the Poddle to unload." Annikki looked over her shoulder. "And after Clontarf he made very sure that the walls were rebuilt, stronger than before."

The two women strolled down the waterfront, avoiding boys with laden donkeys and dodging around heaps of wool and canvas sails spread about the stools and boxes of old men who mended rents and tears with bone needles and waxed yarn. "The slave yard is behind that fence," Annikki said. "Fit young men and women fetch the highest prices."

Eba's stomach turned over. Her brother kept a small number of slaves to do the heavy work at Bundalloch; it was a normal part of life all over Europe but the thought of herself being a slave was shocking. Yet the slave market was where she might have ended, had Torquil not wanted her for his son. It was where she might still end, if she annoyed Lord Sitric. The solid timber fence was the height of two men. It ran parallel with the quayside, and guards sauntered the walkway above the entrance gate. Nothing of the interior could be seen. The girl's teeth fastened on her lower lip. "Oh, Sorchand!"

Annikki clicked her tongue in annoyance. "I wish I had not pointed it out," she said. "I forgot it would remind you of your friend. Tell me about him, and this brother of yours, Eba. Tell me about Bundalloch as we walk."

As a distraction, it worked well. Eba's face brightened and once she started, couldn't stop talking about her brother, her home and her place in it.

* * * *

Her fears returned in a rush when they got back to the house in Fishamble Street. She begged off her duties and retreated to a shadowy corner where she might not be noticed. While Annikki calmly stirred the simmering stew in the black cauldron suspended over the hearth, Eba sat and picked at her finger nails.

Eba jumped when the door to the street burst open. Several men and a pair of wolfhounds swept in on a great gale of good humor and ale fumes, with Annikki's brother Torquil in the lead. First one dog and then the other swerved towards Eba. Eyeball to eyeball with the shaggy creatures, Eba let them sniff all they wanted and hoped they would abandon her before their owner noticed them.

The men made themselves comfortable on the benches either side of the fire pit, accepted beakers of ale and produced a great deal of noisy banter. One man, brown haired, thickset and of middle years, greeted Annikki with a familiar cuddle. Her husband Arne, Eba thought; and knew she was right when Annikki responded with a contented smile. Generous portions of stew in thick wooden bowls sent meaty aromas around the warm glowing fire. Horn spoons clicked and wedges of bread soaked up the juices, and for a few moments there was quiet in the hall.

The youngest maid brought ale and a small bowl of stew to Eba. She consumed the ale in rapid swallows, but her gaze never left the good humored group in the orange yellow glow of the hearth fire. There were two youths who resembled Torquil. Both had fair hair and blue eyes; and one looked so

familiar that Eba wondered if she had not caught a glimpse of him with his father Arne this morning. Both youths displayed the same athletic build, though one had not yet finished his growing and his voice wobbled alarmingly between soprano and tenor.

As if drawn by her gaze, the older of the two youths glanced over his shoulder. His broad boned face displayed mild curiosity when he saw her in the gloom, and he gave her a quick grin. Eba's throat closed and she couldn't swallow. She put aside her half finished bowl of food. One of the shaggy wolfhounds levered itself up on its front legs, trotted over, devoured the contents in one slurp and then licked the bowl until it overturned. Eba made no effort to stop it.

The conversation was loud and jovial, sometimes in the curious language she had heard between Torquil and Annikki and sometimes in the common language used between Gaels, which she understood. Annikki and Arne whispered together, and Arne immediately glanced over his shoulder and studied Eba in a quiet, considering way. It wasn't long before everyone realized there was a stranger in the room, and Annikki beckoned.

Eba's heart thudded uncomfortably against her ribs and she thought she might choke. She steeled herself, got up and used all her self control to walk slowly and gracefully out of the shadows and into the firelight. The men ran their eyes over her figure, the fall of pale gold hair and a growing hum of compliments made Torquil smile.

Blood burned in Eba's cheeks as she was left to stand there before the elder of the two youths got to his feet, thrust

a lock of fair hair out of his eyes with a careless hand and lightly cuffed the nearest man till everyone moved up on the bench. He bowed Eba into the empty place beside Annikki and immediately offered his half full drinking bowl.

Eba thanked him and took the bowl, her thoughts in turmoil. She had a jumbled impression of kind blue eyes, wide shoulders and well shaped hands. If this was Kimi, she thought, then life might not be so terrible after all. Annikki whispered in her ear. "This is my son, Conn. His cousin Kimi is on the other bench."

Conn sat down, a warm, very solid presence beside her. Eba's gaze flew to the youngest man of all. With the darkness of the hall behind him, Kimi's pale hair shone silver and rose in the firelight as he laughed at some joke. He is only a boy, Eba thought. He still had the prettiness of childhood, though faint glints and sparkles around his chin announced the beginnings of a new beard. He turned, his gaze slapped into her face and Eba flinched at the contempt in his hard blue eyes.

Conn stirred at her side. "Kimi doesn't want to be married, after all!" Kimi scowled at his cousin, but Conn was not cowed. "You won't find a girl prettier than this, Kimi. Better grab her fast."

Kimi's smile became a sneer. "I don't want her. If you do, you can have her."

Eba's blood thudded in her ears. Nervousness, fright and ale combined into sudden overwhelming anger. She banged her bowl down on the hearthstones and sprang to her feet.

"Good," she snapped. "I'll leave first thing in the morning, then."

Speechless, startled faces all around the fire pit stared up at her. Eba swallowed with difficulty and the thought she might have just consigned herself to the slave market flitted across her mind.

Torquil grunted, slapped his palm across his knee and began to laugh. One by one the men relaxed and laughed with him. Only Kimi was not amused. He got to his feet and glared at her across the hearth. "You'll go nowhere. You're not pretty enough to marry me." His glance slid over her from head to foot. "But you can be my bed slave, for as long as I please."

His high tones grated on Eba's already lacerated nerves. "I'd rather die!" She glared at him. "Why, you're still a child whose voice hasn't broken! I won't be here for very long at all, I assure you. My brother will come for me."

The fire hummed in the silence and one of the wolfhounds opened its mouth and yawned. Kimi snorted in derision. "I'll look forward to it," he said. "And I'll sharpen my sword."

Annikki pulled Eba gently but firmly back to her seat. Kimi flung himself back on his bench, and scowled at her across the fire while Eba sat and stared down at her locked, trembling hands. It would never do to show fear in front of that nasty young man. She forced herself calm, swallowed around the lump in her throat, noticed she was swaying back and forth and made herself stop. A bowl of ale swam into her line of vision and she looked up into Conn's relaxed, easy smile.

She drank half of it at once. Conn's broad shoulder was both warm and a comfort. "Take no notice of Kimi," he said softly. "He's all talk."

Eba clutched the bowl in both palms so tightly the surface of the ale quivered. "I hope you're right."

"Conn, you talk with Ragnall of Waterford today?" Torquil's voice claimed Conn's attention.

"He put in from Waterford two, maybe three days ago, Uncle."

"He related to Waterford Ivarr?"

"Ragnall is his youngest grandson. He has lands of his own over Tramor way."

The discussion went on but Eba disregarded it and instead stole sideways looks the young man at her side. There was a hint of maturity in Conn's broad cheekbones and firm jaw that suggested he must be two or three years older than Kimi. He had scraped his face free of the covering of hair preferred by so many of the older men and his hair, almost the color of honey, fell straight and fine to his shoulders. As she watched, he flicked it back out of his eyes.

"He's here to buy grain for Waterford." Conn's voice had a richness Eba found comforting and her panicky breathing slowed as she listened. "His ship is down on the quayside—the *Wanderer*, berthed not far from the tavern on Bridge Street. He's here for as long as it takes to get the grain loaded."

Torquil frowned. "He wants grain?"

Men on either side of Torquil growled. Conn frowned. "He knows he is taking a risk. We all know Lord Sitric and Lord

Ivarr have been unfriends since Patrick mac Ivarr's death so many years ago."

"Unfriends, is it? That feud has gone on for generations." Annikki's husband Arne turned concerned eyes to his son.

Conn's head wagged from side to side. "Enemies, then."

Torquil leaned forward. "You speak with him?"

Conn nodded and the lock of hair flopped over his brow. "He seems genuine to me, Uncle; but I can keep an eye on him if you wish."

A voice from Eba's left joined in. "It seems you like the young Prince from Waterford." The speaker had small brown eyes and a ragged brown beard.

Conn hesitated. "Is that so bad, Ragnar? He is young, presentable, speaks well to all he meets. What is there to dislike?"

Ragnar drained what was left of his ale, paused and belched. "When Lord Sitric dislikes a man, you'd do better to have nothing to do with him. Lord Sitric won't like your friendship with him."

Several voices muttered agreement and Annikki nodded her head. Conn lifted both hands in acceptance of their criticism. "I'll not seek him out, either in friendship or anything else. But if I meet him in the street, I will speak with him."

His father nodded. "Aye. But make sure Lord Sitric doesn't get to hear you've befriended him."

* * * *

A messenger arrived back in Bundalloch in the half dark familiar throughout the northern lands in summer, and told Leod what he had found. "The boy saw the ship call ashore to replace two broken oars. He's seen it before, and his father says they hail from Lewis. Seems we have just the right trees hereabouts," he added dryly.

"So they are Vikings," Leod said uneasily. "Did he know where they're heading?"

The messenger shrugged. "The boat looked heavy in the water; they said; might have cargo to unload and they sailed south out of the bay."

The faint but unmistakable sound of hooves grew louder, and Leod met the newcomers at the hall doors. "My Lord King, Domnall! This is most fortunate."

Domnall bawled for stable boys, swept into the hall, opened his mouth and yelled for ale and food. Then he turned to Leod, a hand braced on either hip. "Well? Have you heard our young lady has vanished from Inverness and persuaded two youths along with her? Is she here?" He glared around as if expecting to see Eba hiding in a corner.

Leod glanced at the King, who had unpinning his cloak and dropped it over a stool. At his nod, Leod took a deep breath and gave them a brief account. "They sailed this morning," he ended. "We have been trying to find out where they may have gone, with very little success."

"Vikings!" Astonishment filled Domnall's florid face.

The King spoke quietly. "You know all this because...?"

"Because Sorchand was taken on board along with Eba, but Comgell was left for dead on the beach," Leod said. "He is

here now, sleeping, and with a lump the size of a child's fist on his head."

"Get him, man! He must tell us what he knows!" Domnall was ready to force Comgell awake on the instant.

The King overrode him. "Let him be, Domnall. The facts seem to be already known. Let us sit, and talk while we eat." Leod, with instinctive courtesy, gestured to the benches and stools and invited the King to choose his place.

Domnall roved backwards and forwards along the hearth while Leod recounted every detail they had learned, and then rapped out a question. "Would the ship be heading for Dublin? Is it worth going there at once?"

The King turned to one of his companions. "Hareth? What do you know of Dublin?"

Hareth chewed, swallowed and shook his chestnut head. "Trading centre of some importance, ruled by Sitric Silkenbeard. Dublin has one of the biggest slave markets there is."

The silence grew. Leod looked sideways at Domnall, who seemed so stunned at the idea of his sister in a slave market that he stopped eating. Hareth glanced around the circle of intent faces. "The slave market is not what it was a hundred years ago. But it exists, and anyone sold there could end his or her days in North Africa, or the Baltic."

Finlay looked at the shocked faces of the men from Bundalloch. Such a possibility had never crossed their minds. If they let the trail go cold now, he suspected they would never find her. As King, he felt some responsibility for the girl's situation; after all, he had forced her to Inverness in the

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first place. But how valuable was her life when balanced against the need for him be in Alba, defending Alba, stabilizing Alba and strengthening the bonds now forging among the thanes and mormaers? Logic suggested he should stay and let the men go without him.

"We should move before the possibility becomes real," he said. "Afterwards, it will be impossible to trace her. We must sail for Dublin at first light."

Chapter 6

Eba stared up into brilliant blue sky and dragged in a lungful of fresh, clean air. Though it was still early, the sun had already burned the dew off the wispy grass and weeds, and Eba sauntered across to the pigsty without getting her feet wet. The beast reared up to meet her, trotters on the wall and snout quivering in anticipation. Eba tipped the scraps into the trough and stayed there, elbows on the sun-warmed stone as the pig buried its snout in the food.

A pair of hands gripped her waist. Eba squeaked in fright and turned so fast the empty tin bowl flew through the air and landed in a patch of thistles. She got both palms against Kimi's chest and shoved him off. "Stop that!"

Kimi staggered back a pace, then grabbed for her again. The force of his lunge rammed her back against the rough stones of the sty and drove the breath from her lungs. She caught a vivid glimpse of his silver hair and bright blue eyes as his knee plunged between her thighs. The stones ground into her spine and her heavy plait swung across the sow's back as she strained backwards to avoid his mouth.

"Kimi! Leave the girl alone!" The angry screech announced Annikki's presence.

Kimi straightened reluctantly. Eba dodged aside, snatched up the fallen bowl and fled to the safety of the house. She stood inside the kitchen door with her breath rattling fast and uneven in her lungs, and hid a smile as Kimi received a well deserved tongue lashing from his aunt.

He hung around the house all morning. He could do nothing but glare at Eba because his aunt was there, but the hall-house grew silent in the atmosphere he created. When a cheerful Conn strode in from some business of his own, his mother drew him to one side and spoke softly; a little later he invited Eba to visit the booths, and she went gladly, and with Annikki's blessing.

Eba trusted Conn. Partly because of his mother, she supposed, and also because he proved to be a good humored guide through the lanes, a guide who laughed when she covered her nose at the overripe odors from the middens. "The smell will be even worse over where the animals were butchered and their hides cured. Don't you have middens where you come from?" he chided.

"Of course we do, but not so many, and the wind off the loch disperses the smell and keeps the air sweet." She glanced round. "Here, it seems the palisade keeps the wind out and the smells trapped within."

"M'mmm. But we sleep safe at nights because of those walls. Is your home like this?"

Eba laughed. "No!" She looked around. "Our halls are thatched and the doorway is always in the gable end, just as yours are, but we use wood instead of..." She waved a hand at the closest mud wall.

"It's wattle and daub," Conn said. "We use stone foundations, and close packed straw and reeds for the roof thatch."

"We use heather, and last year's thatches will have been thrown onto the fields as manure by now and a new thatch

completed. You've got daisies and dandelions growing on top of yours!" It made her smile to see them, but it was poor housekeeping, and she wondered how many vermin lived undisturbed in the warmth and smoke above everyone's heads.

"Oh! Look!" At the end of the street mounds of bright colored, checkered and patterned cloth tumbled across the weavers' booths. Darting forward, Eba fingered the heavy wool, and crooned over the colors until a cloth of bright multi colored squares caught her eye. She moved to the finer weaves, and the softer linens. She exclaimed over the rolls of silk, some dyed softest blue, and fingered the few coins in her purse.

Conn took her elbow and sauntered further down the High Street. "We sell more than cloth in Dublin," he said. "There's everything you need if you've a mind to buy. What about leather work? Look."

Eba stared round eyed at the vast selection of leather and fabric shoes, sandals and boots, and bent to pick up a woman's shoe. "Why, they've stitched a stiff leather sole on the bottom, just as they do for boots. What a good idea! It'll last so much longer."

"They stuff them with wool so it's comfortable, too."

Plain and decorative belts hung from rails, and scabbards, sheaths and purses lay on the bare wood of the booth. Her comments flew faster and faster until finally she fell silent before the delicate artistry of the silversmiths. Glass beads of every color and hue rolled and clinked together in bowls. Necklaces, bracelets and copper finger rings, pendants and

silver armlets littered the table surface. Eba lingered over a pair of amber earrings, glowing in the sun, and bent to examine the array of pins, discs, brooches and polished bone combs.

Behind her back, Conn bought the earrings and gave them to her as they moved away from the stall. Stunned with delight, she hooked them through her ears and faced him.

"Do they suit me? How do they look? Tell me!"

"They look very good indeed."

She laughed in delight, moved her head from side to side so he might enjoy the full effect and passers by smiled at her obvious pleasure. A high pitched voice behind them snapped, "Remember she is my property, Conn."

Eba swung round, her pleasure gone. Kimi stood there, his blue eyes alive with malice. Conn seemed unperturbed. "Go away, Kimi. She isn't yours yet."

Kimi scowled, but turned on his heel and stalked off. Eba looked up at Conn, and saw that he was untroubled. "He must have been following us all the time! I know he is your cousin," she said, "but I don't like him at all. He is very—well, odd."

"I know." Conn nudged her into a walk in the opposite direction to Kimi.

"What's wrong with him?"

Conn shrugged. "Who knows? His mother thinks he can do no wrong, and gives him anything he wants. It isn't a good upbringing."

"But doesn't his father see how odd he is?"

"He is often away, and to be truthful, he doesn't seem to see it, either." He reached out, touched the gleaming lozenge

of amber hanging from her earlobe and smiled. "Don't let it spoil the day for you. I think they look very fine indeed. Let's go and show them off."

Everything she saw was new and fascinating. She dragged at Conn's arm to make him stop as they walked by the woodworkers' and wall maker's workshops just so she could stare at the men weaving fences, pathways, floor mats, screens and door panels and bed bases out of plaited twigs. "I never knew woven wattle had so many uses. In Bundalloch we use timber to make the hall partitions, and fences. Why, these must be so light I could lift one without effort!"

"We use what the land provides, and some things because they are easy," Conn said. "Wickerwork is common here."

He strolled on through the damp shade beneath the palisade walls, and out through the big gate. There was no challenge of any kind and Eba looked back over her shoulder with a puzzled frown. "There are no guards at the gate, Conn."

"Why would there be?" He halted, and looked back. "We'd stay inside if we were attacked, shut the gates and shoot arrows and spears from the walkway round the top of the walls."

Eba thought about it. "There's no attack, so no guards and the gates are left open. I see. But what if someone's army is lurking over there behind high ground? What if they're just waiting till dark to attack?"

Conn shrugged. "We shut the gates at night; everyone stays in till first light and Lord Sitric's scouts are checking the countryside for just such war bands even as we speak."

"*Would* anyone attack?"

His calm blue eyes surveyed her. "Dublin is rich. Think of all you've seen today. Do you have anything like it in Alba? No, I thought not. All the kings of Ireland and Northumbria want Dublin so they can be rich, too."

"Northumbria?"

Conn stuck his thumbs in his belt. "York," he said. "The precursor of Dublin, you might say. You'll have heard of the Kings of York, surely?"

The breeze off the Liffey ruffled her hair. "Of course I have," she said, her gaze following two small boys who ran, shrieking with laughter, down the narrow wharf beside the Poddle.

"Then you know the Kings of York were often Kings of Dublin, too. York used to be the bigger prize, but now Dublin is richer. Do you really want to know more?"

"I need to know more, don't you think?" Eba said dryly. "When did it all start?"

"Let's keep walking," Conn said. "Stop me when you've heard enough. Folks say the first Vikings wintered over in Dublin near enough two hundred years ago, and it wasn't long before there was a Viking King of Dublin. The Dublin longphort became a large—"

"What's a longphort?" She had heard both Sorchand and Annikki use the word, but she still wasn't sure exactly what it meant.

"A longphort is a fortress built to protect not only the settlement, but the ships as well. Ships are important to Vikings. Shall I go on? Right. Kings of Dublin often fought to

be Kings of York. After all, the coast of England is just across there," Conn said, and pointed east. "Wales is even closer. If the battle was won, the king would rule York and leave a younger brother to guard Dublin in his absence. Things would go on happily until the brother in York ran into an English king who forced his return to Dublin; then he would have to fight his younger brother to get Dublin back. So it went on. From time to time things would be stable for a while and during one of those peaceful times, links were made with the Leinstermen away to the south. Are you bored yet?"

"No, it's fascinating. The Irishmen let you stay? They didn't try to throw you out?"

Conn took her fingers and guided her across a rickety plank bridge over the channel of the Poddle.

"Trade in Dublin grew fast," Conn said. "Sitric ordered his own coins minted, though he neglected to tell the coin master how to spell the name of the town, so we've got various spellings stamped into the silver. You've realized the name Dublin comes from *linn dubh*, which means dark pool, I suppose?" He grinned at her nod. "Bright girl. And yes, the Irish fought back against the invaders, of course they did. There was a big battle at Tara, the first of many where the Irish King captured Dublin. Treaties were signed, and Viking Kings of Dublin married Irish princesses as evidence of good faith. Some learned to speak Irish. Their sons were half Irish, with full Irish uncles and cousins who accepted the Vikings as rulers of Dublin for the sake of trade."

Conn gestured towards the far bank of the Liffey. "The big battle of course, was Clontarf."

"Annikki told me it was over there." Eba glanced at the peaceful green fields and scrub oak in the sun beyond the dark brown ribbon of the Liffey. "Everyone knows about Clontarf."

Conn's brow fretted as he stared across the river. "Who could forget it? Ghosts still walk that bloody soil. Twenty thousand men fought and died on the day, so they say; and all because the Vikings thought themselves insulted in some argument or other. I wasn't born then, but I'm told we had big voices. We shouted for help and men arrived from the Orkneys and Man. The King of Meath, they say, stood and watched from one side, and Sitric watched from inside Dublin. Brian Boru died that day but absolute Viking power in Ireland was broken. The King of Meath became High King of Ireland, for a day or so."

Eba hesitated and glanced at the young man at her side. He seemed to feel it had all happened yesterday. "Well, you are still here," she said at last. "And you seem quite powerful to me."

Conn's head wagged. "Yes, we're still here. Sitric fought back and regained Dublin, but it is not quite the same. Both sides learned something about culture and trade and war. Nobody had to teach the Irish about murder and mayhem, for they knew it already. Alliances are constantly made between the Vikings and the Irish, and constantly broken, sometimes within weeks, sometimes even days. In a way, it's fortunate for us the Irish have always been four separate kingdoms, and always at war with each other. We just made a fifth group." He glanced down at the girl's troubled face. "You

should know," he added, "that Torquil is Lord Sitric's good friend."

Eba met his straight blue gaze unflinchingly. "You mean whatever Torquil wants, he will get?"

Conn stared at the undulating meadowland ahead. "Last October Torquil somehow failed to inform Lord Sitric he had negotiated a marriage treaty for Kimi with a daughter of the King of Meath. Both Sitric and his son Goffraid were furious. They said Torquil had climbed above his station, and I suspect it tangled up some intrigue of their own. They made him break the negotiation, and it cost him a vast amount of gold to keep the King of Meath and his daughter sweet. Worst of all, they will not allow Kimi to marry without their permission."

Eba frowned. "So Kimi can't marry anyone of consequence in Ireland?"

Conn nodded, and then, with a nod of his head, flicked away the lock of honey brown hair from his brow.

"But he has found me," Eba said slowly. "Lord Sitric will take no exception to me? I'm of no consequence in Dublin, but I somehow fit Torquil's requirements?"

"You match Kimi's demands as if born for the purpose. He always demanded a beautiful wife with the family coloring, and considered a rough merchant's daughter beneath him."

"But he says he will treat me as his ... as his slave."

Conn shrugged. "It's early days," he said soberly. "I just wanted to warn you how things stand. Marriage to him might be better than being his slave, but it's up to you." He gave her a lopsided smile, and nodded towards a huge grassy

mound rearing above their heads. "Let's forget him. What do you think of that?"

Eba glanced at the earthen mound with the flattened top, her mind still on Conn's words. "It's a hill," she said. "It's not very big."

"It's the Thingmote. All the free men meet here at least once a year. Marriages are arranged, disputes settled, property and goods exchanged. And just over there by the river is the Long Stone, which marks the very first Viking landfall. We've pushed the river back and built new wharves since then. We have improved the place since we came."

Eba smiled at the almost apologetic note in his voice. "It is sad everyone seems so aggressive. Did the intermarriages not help?" Natural curiosity and an instinct of self-preservation pushed her to learn about Dublin and its war-like rulers; but she also thought the knowledge might somehow help return her to Alba.

Conn shook his head. "There's Viking, Irish and English blood in Sitric, but it hasn't stopped the blinding and killing."

Eba shuddered. "That's horrible."

"Blinding? It's practical," Conn said. "It's an ancient custom. If an heir is blemished, then he cannot rule. Harold Harefoot blinded Alfred this year and Alfred died because of it. His brother returned to Normandy, which was probably a wise move. So the method is still used in England, and I believe in Alba, too?"

Eba evaded the question. "What is a Thingmote?"

"The mote is the hill, where the laws are recited. The Thing is the Assembly, and every free man from miles around will

arrive on Midsummer Day. If you look around you will see the foundations for booths where groups gather, eat and sleep while they are here. It lasts for days, and there is music and dancing. Fighting is forbidden, though scuffles break out when men have too much to drink, but only a fool," he added, "would fight in front of Lord Sitric."

Low stone and turf walls, some with wooden uprights, dotted the grassy area and Eba imagined them tented over with gaily-colored cloths during the Assembly. It would be bright and attractive, with fires and food and happy gatherings of people.

Conn veered towards the exposed mud of the river and Eba stared at the Long Stone, walked round it and viewed it from all angles. It stood the height of two tall men and would be visible from both the river and the shore. Someone had carved rough faces into the four faces of the stone, and there was a message in runes she could not translate. A quick movement on the top of the Mound caught her eye and she drew in a sharp breath.

Conn followed her glance. Kimi stood there like some foreshortened and malevolent dwarf. Conn grunted, scowled and made a rude gesture. His cousin turned and vanished over the far side of the hill. Conn's head tilted back towards her and he smiled the easy smile that lit up his face. "Forget him."

"It would be nice if I could," Eba said tartly. Conn seemed oblivious to his cousin's odd behaviour. "He is your cousin, and perhaps you are used to his strange ways. I am not, and

your uncle plans to make me his slave. How can I forget him?"

Conn took her arm and turned her back towards Dublin. "It may never happen. So why worry until it does?"

She stared towards the settlement, but the small fair-haired figure of Kimi had disappeared. Off to her left she could hear the low rumble of the watermill, and not far away a pair of dilapidated wooden cabins belched smoke, the taint of unwashed bodies and ale. The soft air from the river brought with it the tang of the sea and the damp, sour odor of the low, marshy land along the river's edge. To the south, a ring of hills stood faint and misty in the distance and made her long for the hills of home.

They ambled across Hoggen Green back towards Dame Gate, and Eba felt Conn was right. She would worry about Kimi when she had to, and not before. Conn nudged her arm and nodded in the direction of the quayside. "Do you remember we talked about Raghnaill of Waterford last night? Well, there he is."

Eba squinted against the afternoon sunlight. "The man in green?" He was young, with pale skin and sandy hair. Eba watched him shake hands with one of the shipmasters, then turn and vanish into the flow of folk disappearing through the gate into the settlement. The shipmaster hurried on towards the quayside.

"He seems ordinary," Eba said. "Why is your uncle so interested in him?"

"It's typical of the feuds in Ireland. Long ago one of Sitric's forbears killed one of Ivarr's sons, and the families have been

at loggerheads ever since. Sitric and Ivarr keep it going. Ragnall isn't a great deal older than me, and we have agreed the quarrel is senseless and nothing to do with either of us."

"Is it safe? What will happen," Eba asked, "if Lord Sitric and Ragnall meet?"

Conn gave her his hand across the dark stream of the Poddle. "Ragnall says he will try and avoid a confrontation."

"But if they do meet, what then?"

"I have no idea." His blue eyes were troubled. "But I think it would be worth keeping them apart."

* * * *

Eba crossed Annikki's wild garden with a dish of scraps for the sow, and stopped to throw a handful of grain into the tiny wattle and daub round house with its conical straw thatch. The ducks and geese hurried in after it, and Eba shut the door behind them. The evening was still warm, and she delayed her return to the long fire in order to enjoy the only time she had been alone all that day. She leaned across the sty wall and scratched the bristly back as the sow dug her nose into the trough.

The sound of male voices and good humored conversation floated out on the warm air and reminded her of Leod, Domnall and Bundalloch. An intense wave of home sickness swamped her, and she had to swallow hard and concentrate on the sow's cool, bristled back. You have to fend for yourself, girl, she thought. Just like the sow. There's no one here to do it for you.

She turned at the faint whisper of feet through grass, but it wasn't Conn. It was Kimi, coming from the alley along the side of the house, his delicate skin flushed, and his eyes bloodshot. No doubt he had spent the better part of the afternoon drinking ale in some smoke-filled hall, or the cabins on Hoggen Green. "Stay away from Conn!" he hissed. "Or I'll think you're a whore!"

"And you're drunk!" Eba snapped. "Let go of me!"

He kept hold of her arm and his other hand fastened on the back of her neck. Eba shifted sideways along the wall of the sty. "Such a small neck," Kimi said softly. "So very small and so easy to snap."

Eba slammed the tin bowl against the side of his head and jerked one knee up between them. Kimi caught her knee and shoved the whole limb sideways against the wall. Eba cried out, Kimi surged forward and wriggled suggestively between her thighs.

Eba dropped her head back and yelled with all the power of her lungs. "Conn! *Conn!*"

Kimi grasped her jaw and squeezed hard. "Quiet!"

The metal dish echoed like a gong as she beat him about the head and shoulders but he was too close for her to get any force into the blows. It must have hurt, however, for Kimi raised his fist and her heart froze in her chest just as Conn's voice roared over the garden. A look of uncertainty crossed Kimi's blotched, drunken face and the threatening fist stayed where it was.

Conn's fingers closed on the upraised wrist and the back of his cousin's tunic and tossed him over the pigsty wall. Kimi landed in the slurry, his blank gaze on the sow's backside.

Conn ignored him, grabbed the girl's arm and helped her limp into the house. "There are guests in the hall."

She understood. "I shan't make a fuss." She shook out her skirts and ran both hands across her face. "Do I look presentable?"

Conn hesitated in the doorway, and looked down at her. A slow smile began, spread across his face, and at the warmth in his eyes, Eba blushed. Conn smoothed a strand of her hair back into place, and nodded. "You look just as you should. But I should stop feeding the pig, if I were you. Let one of the other girls do it. Kimi never bothers them."

Chapter 7

The *Shadow Wolf* slipped quietly into Dublin at twilight. Hareth announced their identity to the officials who demanded their business and gave assurances that they would call on Lord Sitric the very next day.

After the long, fast run down from Bundalloch the *Wolf's* crew were tired enough to see the logic of Finlay's order to stay aboard and swiftly rigged awnings along the vessel. The quayside was quiet; the traders had gone home to fish pie and nettle soup, and only the men who guarded neighboring ships against theft and mischief were still aboard.

Finlay and Hareth sat on boxes and ate in privacy afforded by cleverly hung canvas sheets. Domnall and Leod entered the dim space, and as soon as Domnall found somewhere to sit, he broached the question that loomed large in everyone's mind. "What will you say tomorrow when you meet Lord Sitric?"

Finlay tossed the skewer of meat back into the metal dish and leaned a shoulder against the mast. "I'll say we're testing a new ship, which is true, and looking for slaves to take back home, which is also true." At his gesture, Domnall and Leod helped themselves to food; Domnall grabbed a skewer, bit into it and yelped as smoking hot meat burnt his tongue.

The boat moved a little on the water. The lamp hooked above them sent flickering yellow light across the four faces turned swarthy under the brown awning.

"If we wait," Domnall said shortly, "we might be too late. Shouldn't we say straight out what we want?"

Finlay selected another skewer from the dish and bit into it carefully. Leod stirred and said quietly, "You are concerned for Eba, I know; but if we spend a morning finding out what kind of man Lord Sitric is, it will be time well spent."

Hareth nodded and stripped the final shred of mutton from his skewer. "We need to be careful." He shook his head and tossed the skewer back into the dish. "If I were to tell you what I know of Ireland and its rulers tonight, by the morning things will have changed. Sitric has blood ties everywhere. His father was Norse, his mother Irish, one grandparent English and he is married Boru's daughter, Emer. They say his mother Gormflaith was the real cause of the Battle of Clontarf but she died six years ago, and that's another story."

The lamplight shifted, and a silver brooch winked now and then with a man's breathing. Finlay turned to Hareth. "Go on," he said. "They need to know what we face here."

Hareth swallowed his ale, and thought for a moment, the empty beaker rolling between his palms. "Two hundred years ago Norwegian and Danish Vikings overran Dublin and York, and settled in both places. If the Viking ruler lost York, he sailed back to Dublin, and fought whichever relative he had left in charge to regain it. It was not unusual for brothers to fight to the death."

Domnall stopped chewing long enough to say, "Tell us about Gormflaith."

Hareth's eyes flickered in the lamplight. "Gormflaith was sister to Maelmordha, King of Leinster. Married young to Olaf Cuaran, the King of Dublin, she had a son, Sitric, who later earned the nickname Silkenbeard. Olaf repudiated Sitric's

mother, married another Irish princess and had more sons. Gormflaith married an Irish King, bore another son and was again repudiated. She finally married Brian mac Cennetig, King of Munster, known as Boru. Brian's talent was war, and he put Sitric's Vikings out of Dublin. It is said that Gormflaith spoke up for Sitric and after tempers had settled, Boru allowed Sitric back in to rule Dublin. He married Brian's daughter Emer in an attempt to forge stronger bonds."

"But—Sitric's mother was married to Emer's father." Domnall looked puzzled. "Sitric married his stepsister?"

"Stepsister by marriage only. Her mother was not Gormflaith." A smile curved Hareth's mouth. "Family life in Ireland is complex. The story doesn't end there. Gormflaith harangued her brother Maelmordha until he argued with one of Brian's sons and stormed out of Brian's court without permission. Brian sent to detain him, but Maelmordha struck the messenger with a horsewhip and broke all the bones of his head. From then on Leinster was in revolt."

"Sitric sided with his uncle Maelmordha, Gormflaith turned against her own husband and joined them. She badgered Sitric to get help from Sigurd of Orkney and you know the rest. The repercussions of Clontarf reached far beyond Dublin. They say Gormflaith had promised to marry Sigurd if he fought for Sitric."

They all remembered Sigurd of Orkney; once married to Finlay's mother, he had died under his own raven banner at Clontarf. "Sitric had five sons with the Lady Emer, and the eldest died at Clontarf along with Sitric's brother. Since then three other sons have died, which leaves just one surviving

son, Goffraid. I expect we'll meet him tomorrow. Sitric's only daughter became a nun, his sister married Olaf Tryggvasson and her son Tryggr was killed three or four years ago. Sitric's whole dynasty is now dependent on one man—his son, Goffraid."

Finlay stirred and straightened. "Lord Sitric must be in his sixties now. His hold on Dublin has always been precarious and he has survived by cunning. Since he went to Rome about seven years ago he considers himself a paragon of Christian virtue, yet he had the two heirs of Leinster blinded, even though the King of Leinster is his uncle; one lad died for the loss of his eyes. About five years ago Leinstermen captured one of Sitric's sons, and it cost Sitric two hundred cows, eighty British horses, three ounces of gold and someone's famous sword to redeem him. Sitric was so furious he plundered Ardbreccan, burned a crowd of people in the stone church and took hundreds more captive to sell as slaves."

Leod and Domnall exchanged wary glances. "Sitric always survives when greater men fall and die," Finlay said gravely. "He will stop at nothing to get what he wants and preserve his own skin."

* * * *

Hareth and Finlay climbed the ridge and looked out over the timbered walls of Dublin. In the sharp light the massive green bulk of Howth, Dalkey Head and the mountains to the south lay clear; in the west the misty, cloud-dappled glimmering green plain stretched to the horizon. The Liffey

flashed silver in the sun, accepted the discolored water from the polluted streams, drains and ditches beneath the ridge on which they stood, and flowed on to meet the sea. Over on the north bank a neat grey monastery slumbered in the warmth, and a vast number of beasts grazed the green lands around it. Finlay nodded towards the cattle. "The walking gold of Ireland?" Hareth nodded, and shrugged.

They crossed the stone paving to Lord Sitric's hearth-hall, announced themselves to the watchman and were allowed through the iron-studded door. A young man hurried across the hall, whispered in the ear of a heavy shouldered man who rose, flung out an arm and bellowed in welcome. "Greetings, Finlay of Alba!"

Fully aware of the many curious eyes, Finlay and Hareth walked slowly forward and halted a pace or two short of Lord Sitric where Finlay returned formal greetings.

Lord Sitric's pale, cold eyes flicked once to Hareth, ignored him and returned to Finlay of Alba. He asked after Thorfinn Sigurdarson.

Thus released, Hareth had leisure to observe the layer of fat that blurred the muscular development of Sitric's shoulder and thigh and bloated his jaw and throat. Pale skin folded and pouched beneath pale blue eyes and drooped towards the famed golden beard, now cobwebbed with silver. A thin grey plait sat limply between Sitric's shoulder blades.

In contrast, the hyrd, his bodyguard and chosen companions, were young, bold eyed and muscular men who patronized the strangers with smiles. Hareth let his gaze wander.

The hall was old, bigger than Inverness and richly decorated. The lower part of each wall was stone, the upper constructed of smooth timber planks darkened by years of smoke. The long fire pit, so characteristic of Viking households, smouldered between stone slabs, and sheepskins and multicolored blankets made the benches more comfortable. Painted shields and tasselled weapons decorated the walls, and the shy gleam of silver and gold winked and glimmered in the dim light. Countless silver bowls, trays, goblets, candlestands, chalices and jugs decorated every flat surface. The profits from the trade through Dublin's wharves and jetties must be vast, Hareth thought.

In the far corner, where the open shutters let in daylight, women worked with heaps of bright colored wool.

"Thorfinn is well," he heard Finlay say. Hareth brought his attention back to the exchange taking place before him. "My ship was a gift from him, to mark my Kingship. We sailed together for several weeks this spring. Had he known I was to travel this far, he would certainly have sent you greeting."

Lord Sitric's cold blue stare ran over Finlay from the slender gold circlet at his brow to his fine leather boots. "Your ship has brought you far down the whale's road from Alba."

"It is an excellent ship." Finlay smiled. "Now I understand Thorfinn's constant longing for the sea."

"Well do I know the seagull's rest," Lord Sitric said. "So does my son. He thinks his life should be spent at sea."

"Then we would have much in common. Perhaps he is here?"

Lord Sitric's smile did not reveal his teeth. "Tonight, you will meet him when you join our feast. He is of your years, perhaps a little older."

"I look forward to meeting him. You must wonder at our arrival and our business here, Lord Sitric. It is mundane, but necessary; I hope to buy slaves."

Sitric flung his heavy arms wide. "Excellent! You must see Dublin, and enjoy our hospitality while you conduct your business."

Hareth wondered if the welcome would change once the real purpose of their visit became known.

Sitric laid a heavy hand on the shoulder of the attentive young man at his side. "Guthrum will guide you to the old slave house on the quayside."

Guthrum had met them at the door. His thin boned delicate face, overshadowed by an abundance of dark curls, showed momentary displeasure, but he could not avoid the task. Once the formal welcome drew to a close, he led them down through the streets of Dublin to the slave yard on the quayside. Men, women, youths, girls and even children filled the place, herded together like sheep in the bare dusty yard. Most were dirty, with ragged hair and lacklustre expressions. Chains clanked as they moved.

Finlay gazed round. "They are all here?"

"They must always be visible to buyers, my lord King," Guthrum murmured. "They are allowed inside to sleep."

Hareth coughed, caught Finlay's eye and nodded to one corner of the yard where a youth sat alone, his eyes shut, his

shoulders wedged into a corner of the palisade. Fresh bruises marred his face and blood had dried and crusted at his lip.

The King of Alba stiffened. "Tell me your charges."

Guthrum ran through the figures. Hareth snorted in surprise. "I could buy a good horse for that!" His exclamation carried and the redhead in the corner twitched and opened one eye. Hareth grinned, and the redhead opened both eyes.

Guthrum rolled his eyes in disdain.

Finlay ignored the rudeness. "Line the men up for me. I'm not interested in women or children"

Guthrum looked as if he would object. The nostrils of his thin, high-bridged nose went white as he glared at Finlay. Fortunately the overseer knew better than to offend his betters and immediately chivvied the men into line. Sorchand frowned, but scrambled to his feet without protest.

Finlay strode down the line, a frown etched deep between his brows. He rejected the oldest, the undersized and some who looked unhealthy and whittled the line down to three men. He turned to Guthrum. "These three interest me. Tell them to remove their tunics. What are their names? Where are they from?"

Guthrum shrugged. Finlay laid his palm gently across Guthrum's narrow shoulder, and curled his long fingers under the man's collarbone. "Ask for me."

Guthrum winced, tried to shrug free and found he couldn't quite do it. Out of necessity, he asked questions of each slave and Finlay listened to the responses. Sorchand, of course, refused to speak. He stood there and glowered, his wide shoulders white against his red hair. Bruises, faded and

green, discolored the skin of his chest, and at close quarters a fading bruise on his forehead was visible. At Finlay's gesture, he turned to display more bruises on his back.

Guthrum repeated his question, frowning when he received no answer. "The man is a half-wit, perhaps?" he suggested, and turned away.

Sorchand whirled round. His lip curled and he took a belligerent step forward. The attendant guard swung his spear like a club. It connected with a crack across the youth's upper arm and Sorchand's face went white. The guard reversed his spear. Sorchand, his arm hanging useless at his side, backed away from the sharp steel point.

Finlay exerted pressure on Guthrum's shoulder. "Not very well done," he said. "His arm may be broken. On the other hand, it will reduce his asking price. Lord Sitric will not be pleased with you. I know I would not."

Guthrum's face was almost as white as Sorchand's. He produced a placating smile. "I am sorry, lord." He glared at the soldier who had inflicted the blow, and then at the slave, who stood dejected, head hanging, and finally turned back to the stern-faced King of Alba. "Allow me to pay the difference, lord. Then all parties may be happy."

"Lord Sitric would be proud of you," Finlay said approvingly. "Conclude the deal with whoever is in charge. I will send for the slave in a day or two. Between now and then I want you to have him bathed, cleaned, and his arm tended. I shall return for other slaves before I leave Dublin." He turned away, but his voice drifted back to Guthrum. "If I find any more bruises on him I shall expect to pay a lower price."

Chapter 8

Lord Sitric's hearth-hall was ablaze with light that evening. Hanging lamps lit the centre of the hall and wax and rush candles glowed from each support pillar. Hareth flinched on the threshold. "My eyes hurt," he muttered. "Make them take down the wall hangings."

Finlay glanced around. "It's not the hangings," he said, staring at Sitric's huge personal banner in the middle of the long wall. "He's pinned the sun to the wall. Look."

Hareth squinted up at the huge banner with its silver and gold stitching. It rippled in the up draught of warm air, and reflected the light in a ceaseless dazzle. "How could we have missed that this morning?"

"It certainly comes alive in the light. And here comes our impolite guide from this morning," Finlay said softly, staring across the hall. "I feel I might hit that young man before the night is through."

Guthrum smiled in what seemed like a genuine welcome, bowed and ushered them straight to main table. Harp music ran beneath the chatter of conversation and Lord Sitric rose from his seat to greet them. The rippled golden torque across his massive chest reflected a dazzle of light that made Hareth flinch once more. "You're wrong," he hissed from the side of his mouth as they walked forward. "He's got the sun beaten flat and hung around his neck. Let's hope he doesn't fall in the river, or he'll sink like a stone."

The King of Alba bit back his laughter, greeted his host and took his place next to Lord Sitric.

"I have two men for you to meet tonight," Sitric announced. "First of all, this is my son Goffraid."

A man in his late twenties stepped forward, smiling. "Welcome, Finlay of Alba. I've heard the story of your battle with Prince Duncan from the bards." His dark red hair flashed streaks of scarlet in the candlelight, and a slender golden torque spanned his throat. "They say you have the strength of three men when you have a sword in your fist!"

The large, deep set hazel eyes held no mockery, and Finlay clasped his hand with pleasure. "It'll be barely one tenth truth, if the bards here are like the bards in Alba," Finlay said lightly. "You, I hear, ride as if you were born in the saddle and have never been thrown!"

Lord Sitric drew forward an older man with fair hair, blue eyes and the shoulder development of a wrestler. "Torquil mac Leod is my champion. He understands the language, but has never got his tongue around it. He won't say much, but when he does, it's worth taking notice! Now, let us eat!"

Torquil was not in the least put out by his Lord's words. He nodded and smiled at Finlay, but said nothing as they all moved to the boards where large platters of codling, bass and a vast bowl of oysters stood next to smaller bowls of boiled, unshelled prawns and dishes of butter, leeks, onions and baskets of barley bread. A servant discreetly placed a chunk of pale bread by Sitric's elbow. "I cannot eat that rough stuff," Sitric said, eyeing the barley bread. "My guts have been out of sorts lately."

Since he had been invited to sit and eat, Hareth considered he was also invited to converse. "I am told the emperor Julian

would eat nothing but wheaten bread," he said cheerfully. "He thought barley bread fit only for horses."

One of the hyrd flung a hard barley crust in response. Goffraid laughed as Hareth plucked it out of the air, returned it neatly and caught the young man on the ear.

Lord Sitric grunted. "Our harvest was poor. Wheaten bread had gone by March, so I've eaten more barley bread than I like. My guts are paying me back for it, even though I softened it with milk. A woman's trick; but it helps."

Candles flickered in the draught as someone got up and left the hall. Goffraid asked question after question about Alba and Finlay answered between bites and managed to slip in a question or two about Dublin and its famous trade. Lord Goffraid moved on to Thorfinn, and Finlay, well aware Lord Sitric was listening, recounted the lighter aspects of their joint adventures at sea.

The companions drifted towards the fire pit and Finlay judged enough mead had soothed Sitric's innards for him to raise the real object of his journey. "We are on a quest now, as it happens." Lord Goffraid lifted reddish brown brows. Sitric looked wary. "A young girl was taken from her home on the west coast of Alba," Finlay went on, "and has possibly been brought here. We did not find her in the slave market and no one of her description has been received in the last month."

"Describe her." Lord Goffraid spoke around a mouthful of meat. "We will search for her!"

"She is very young, tall and slender, with blue eyes and fair hair."

Lord Sitric grunted. "She is important, this maid?"

The King of Alba nodded. "She was under my roof and therefore deserving of my protection. We will make every effort to locate and return her to her own people."

Lord Goffraid shot a swift glance at his father. "So that's the real purpose of your visit," he said, grinning at Finlay. "And we thought you were sizing us up for an attack!"

Torquil, who had taken no part in the conversation, suddenly leaned forward. "You pay sill'r for girl?"

A guffaw of laughter from some of the hyrd greeted the sly, halting tone. "You've just returned from the seaways, Torquil!" called one. "Do you have her?"

Finlay of Alba met Torquil's irritated gaze and spoke calmly. "Yes, we will pay in silver. May we call on you tomorrow?"

He had been overheard. The hyrd was curious. "We'll all call on Torquil tomorrow, if she's so beautiful!" Fists thumped the boards in approval.

Torquil scowled at the ring of young, interested faces. "Girl for son. Not same girl."

"Who is she, Torquil?"

"Where's she from?"

"When will we see her?"

"Girl from Stornoway! From my people."

Hareth's light eyes sharpened. "I thought I recognized a certain lilt to your speech." Someone sniggered, but Hareth ignored it. "I have relatives on Lewis, out near Uig. I might know her family."

Torquil shook his yellow head. He shot a swift, sidelong glance at Lord Sitric and then glared at the laughing men

around him. "Girl for son." He turned to the King of Alba. "These men—animals!"

A howl of derision went up. Voices clashed, but the general demand was clear. The hyrd wanted to see the girl, and they wanted to see her soon.

Lord Sitric raised a hand for silence and it was clear he was amused. "Torquil cannot keep her hidden now, however much he may want to. I advise you to arrange the wedding soon, my friend, before these young fiends get to her." He turned to Hareth. "You have something of the Irish tongue on you. Would you have relatives in this land as well as in the northern isles?"

"Lord Sitric, I have relatives just about everywhere," Hareth said truthfully. "But yes, I have relatives still in the north, between the two lakes of Ulster. I haven't been back in twenty years."

"Then you'll be of the Ui Neill." At Lord Sitric's flat statement, men around the table stopped smiling.

"True for you, then, though only on the fringes, you understand. The Ui Neill once had powerful kindred across the neck of Ireland, but I knew nothing of the fine folk that they were. I had word of my parents some years back, but as for the rest—" he shrugged, and spread his hands wide.

An elderly man beyond Lord Sitric waved for attention. "You would know Brian Boru, then?"

"For the love of Christ!" Hareth swung round, stung. "Do I look so ancient? I was four years old at the time of Clontarf! And he came from the other end of Ireland! How would I know of Brian Boru?"

"He made Armagh the chief place of Ireland, did he not? And Armagh is in the north ... Ah, these Irish allegiances," he said. "I will never get the hang of them. My mistake, young man." He glanced back, eyes twinkling, his face full of fun. "And to be truthful, you don't look so old."

"Thanks be for that," Hareth allowed piously.

"Speaking of allegiances," Finlay of Alba said, addressing Lord Sitric. "One of Boru's daughters married my uncle, once the King of Alba. I must make my compliments to your lady wife, Lord Sitric. I can give her news of her sister, if you would permit it."

What he said was true, and he could substantiate it, though the lady Grigha his aunt had been dead a year or two now; but it did not gain him an immediate introduction to Lord Sitric's wife, as he had hoped it might. Instead, he was treated to long involved tales of the more entertaining aspects of Irish and Viking intermarriages, to which he listened with every appearance of interest while hoping Domnall and Leod were being discreet in their surveillance of Fishamble Street.

* * * *

Eba lay awake half the night, her eyes on the subdued but comforting glow of the fire. Mice pattered back and forth along the beams above her head but she did not look up. There had been no privacy during the day in which she might sit down and think about what she had seen that morning, and now, in the quietness of her sleeping cubicle, she carefully reassembled the pictures in her mind.

She had glanced back up the street just as she stepped inside the door. On the corner of the street, two figures had caught her eye. Annikki had been behind her, and urged her inside, but Eba was sure one had been the stocky figure of her brother, and the taller, leaner figure had been Leod. She was sure of it.

Somehow she must reach them, make contact with them. They must have a ship on the wharf, and she could ask for them if only she was allowed out alone. She was always accompanied, if not by Annikki then by Conn, but she would have to find a way. Her brother must be looking for her. The thought stirred such a vast mix of joy and gladness that she did not fall asleep until the first blackbird ventured a throaty note in the greyness of morning.

She woke in a very much happier frame of mind, and settled beside the youngest maid to peel vegetables for the cauldron. Rhosyn had been taken from Wales last summer and sold in the Dublin slave market. She spoke little of the common language prevalent in Dublin, but managed to convey that she thought Annikki was a kind and good hearted mistress.

Eba was stunned. "You are *glad* you are here?"

Rhosyn frowned down at her knife. "Girls raped. Girls killed."

"*Killed?*"

Rhosyn's brown curls bounced as she nodded. "On ship. In market. In Dublin."

Eba recoiled. "Rhosyn, no!"

The girl's dark brown eyes did not flinch. "Beaten, yes. With stick." She measured out the length of a sword, and mimed cowering from blows.

"But you weren't raped, were you?"

Rhosyn had a question of her own. "You marry Kimi? Yes?"

Eba pulled a doleful face. "I don't want to."

"Kimi—" Rhosyn's fingers wiggled in the air beside her ear. "Not good."

"Oh, he's not good at all."

Eba watched Rhosyn mime fear of Kimi. "Yes, he scares me, too. There's something very wrong with him." She tossed a carrot into the pot and picked up an onion, and then paused, and let it lie in the palm of her hand. "Conn is nice, though. I like Conn."

Rhosyn nodded.

Eba studied the pale, shuttered face with its spattering of freckles across the small pert nose. "You don't like Conn?"

"I have Conn's child ... soon."

Eba gasped. "He—you—did you *want* to sleep with him? It wasn't—" She hesitated, and remembered how Rhosyn had evaded her question a moment ago. "He didn't—it wasn't rape, was it?"

Rhosyn went on slicing the carrot and would not look at her. "Conn—not ask."

It was one of those times when Eba wished she were older. Perhaps then she would have known what to say. As it was, she slowly realized that any man of the house would feel able to bed a female slave at will. They would not feel a need to ask, for where would a slave go if turned away from a

kindly home? The full significance of being a slave struck her for the first time. Eba swallowed, looked down at the onion and began to peel it. "Oh dear," she said. "I'm so sorry." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"If baby—son?" Rhosyn held her palm to her stomach. "He keep son?"

"Oh, yes! I'm sure he will." Eba hoped she had said the right thing. "A baby will be wonderful, Rhosyn. When will it be born?"

"Spring. When birds have chicks," Rhosyn said with a small, frightened smile.

Both girls jumped as the door opened and three figures, mere silhouettes against the bright daylight behind them, marched into the hall. A tall handsome woman strode confidently into the firelight. Conn and Kimi followed her.

Annikki abandoned her loom and hurried across the hall. "Marjatta! How lovely to see you, my dear. Please, sit down. How are you?" She smiled at Eba and Rhosyn. "Girls, bring some buttermilk and ale for our guests. No, Eba, not you. Rhosyn will do it."

Conn subsided on a bench out of Marjatta's sight and flashed his usual conspiratorial grin at Eba, but for once she did not know quite how to regard him. Kimi simply sat and stared in his usual malevolent way.

"Is that the girl?" The clear voice came from the woman Marjatta.

Annikki nodded, and drew the girl forward. "Eba, this is my brother's wife; she is Kimi's mother."

The woman sat firmly planted on her stool with her back spear straight and her small white hands clasped calmly together in her lap. Her bright yellow hair was coiled and plaited beneath a fine lawn cap. Her gown had a band of expensive embroidery at hem, throat and sleeves. Eba dipped her head. "My lady."

Marjatta inspected Eba from head to foot with an expression that said she was not impressed. "She does not look strong."

Conn hid a huge grin behind his hand. Annikki saw it, and her own lips twitched. She turned to Eba. "As you know, my brother wishes you to marry his son. Please feel free to speak to his wife."

Eba drew in a short breath, and then another. "I do not wish to marry anyone, and I long to go home to Alba. I think I must make that clear from the start."

Marjatta's silvery brows rose over eyes very like those of her son. It was easy to see where Kimi got his looks. Rhosyn hurried in with a tray and offered buttermilk and ale to the guests. Conn stretched out a long arm with a casual smile for Rhosyn that Eba would never have questioned but for Rhosyn's recent revelation. Eba jerked her attention back to Kimi's mother.

"My husband, who has some standing in this community, wishes to marry you to my son. Lord Sitric agrees, and so the marriage will take place. Returning to Alba is out of the question."

Eba lifted her chin. "Do my wishes count for nothing?"
The long silence gave her the answer.

Annikki touched Eba's arm. "You will marry into a good family, you know. I will be your aunt. Conn will be your cousin. My brother Torquil is Lord Sitric's most trusted companion."

Eba looked over at Conn and bit her lip. Rhosyn had given her a new view of him and she needed time to think about it. It was one thing to dream of change and excitement while safe at home in Bundalloch, she thought; but the reality was turning out to be quite different. Reality could be quite frightening. Reality was terrifying.

Marjatta smiled fondly at her son. "My husband and Kimi want the marriage to take place very soon, since Lord Sitric's hyrd now know of your existence."

She knew that one, at least. Finlay of Alba had a hyrd, which was what he called his bodyguard, made up of his friends and companions.

Kimi stood up, smiled at his mother and sauntered over to stand very close to Eba. "I want very much to marry you," he said politely, his back to his mother. "I will take good care of you." His lids lifted suddenly and Eba felt a dreadful coldness start somewhere in the pit of her stomach when she saw the malice in his eyes.

Domnall, she thought, clutching at straws. Domnall is here in Dublin. He will save me from this dreadful creature.

Marjatta glanced at her sister-in-law and smiled as if the matter was resolved. "Annikki, how soon can you have her gowned and ready? I shall take care of the feast, of course."

Chapter 9

Domnall and Leod strolled down Fishamble Street. They were both dressed in a brown cloth that suited Leod's dark coloring but made Domnall's pink skin look pinker than ever. They parted briefly to avoid a determined matron clutching a fearsome looking cod wrapped in a lump of coarse canvas. The tail of the fish hung almost to the woman's knees. "We know where she is," Domnall said, "so why can't we just go and claim her?"

Damp creels and leaky baskets full of fresh-caught fish stood ready for sale on trestle tables all along the street. Some of the larger pots held still living fish, and every now and then a shimmer of silver or the dark intertwined coils of an eel ruffled the water surface.

"They're not going to give her up without a fight," Leod said thoughtfully, "but they might give her up for silver." He glanced sideways at Domnall. "How much do you think they'll want?"

"How would I know?" Color flared in Domnall's face. "I've never bartered for slaves in Dublin. Why should we pay for her? She is my sister, and has been taken against her will."

Leod opened his mouth to reply, saw the King and Hareth mac Enna approaching, and said nothing. He was used to Domnall's flaring irritations and hasty decisions, but they were not. He saw them exchange glances.

"They may sell her back to you, or they may decide to keep her," Finlay said mildly enough. "But because she is

here, in a Viking stronghold, we shall have to deal with them as they dictate."

"*Can* you pay, Domnall?" Hareth moved round to stand beside Leod.

Domnall swore. With his hands gripped into fists at his side and his eyes sparks of blue in his flushed face, he looked ready to hit someone. "You all know I have just beggared myself with a fine for stealing cattle! How can I pay for my sister?"

"Your sister was under my care," Finlay said firmly. "She was my responsibility; and I will pay the price they ask."

Domnall's face cleared with remarkable speed and the relief in his voice was undisguised when he said, "I thank you for it, sir."

A trader flung discarded fish guts across the cobbles and seagulls squawked and plunged over their heads. Finlay looked around. "I grow tired of this street. Why don't we go and talk over a pot of ale?"

They found an alehouse nearby in Winetavern Street. The small, crowded room was dim and dark, with one suspended iron circle bearing three reeking tallow candles that dripped hot grease now and then on the heads of the unwary. The air was thick with odors of bacon fat, sweat and unwashed males. A couple of large barrels served as somewhere to lean or rest a beaker of ale and the earthen floor was damp beneath their boots.

Wary eyes looked them over as Hareth yelled for ale. A rich baritone floated across the room. "Finlay! Daveth mac Finlay!"

Conversation dipped as a man fought his way through the press of bodies, his features creased in one big smile. "*Dia duit*, Finlay! Good to see you!"

"Ragnall! *Dia is Muire duit!* I didn't know you were in Dublin!" Finlay's smile faded. "*Should* you be in Dublin?"

Ragnall's hazel eyes glinted in the lamp light. He was sturdily built, with a fine width of shoulder under the green tunic and carried no weapons beyond the usual dagger at his belt.

"I'm here to buy grain to keep Waterford going till the harvest is in, nothing more. I've been here four or five days—my ship is down on the waterfront. Didn't you see her? *The Wanderer?*" Ragnall eyed the slender gold band at Finlay's brow. "I see you won through in the end. I'm glad."

Finlay inclined his head. "Thank you. We're here on business. We need to rescue a girl."

Hareth plonked several full beakers on top of the barrel, and Ragnall took one. "I'd heard you were safely married," he said, eyes twinkling.

"I am. We're after a girl who was abducted from her home and brought here," Finlay said. "Domnall there is her brother."

Ragnall's grin faded. "I'm sorry. You've checked the slave market?"

Domnall shook his shaggy fawn curls. "She's in a private home where we can't get at her."

"Domnall wants to march up, knock on the door and demand her return," Hareth said, shaking his head. "And he expects she will be handed over to him for the asking!"

Leod said gently. "It might be worth asking. Everything has its price."

Ragnall considered that seriously. "It might be better to ask at a feast, where others can hear, and the man concerned will not want to appear niggardly. Every Viking wants to seem the generous ring giver."

Finlay shook his head. "We tried. I asked Lord Sitric last night. We suspect a man called Torquil has her, and wants her for his son. So far, we've found which house she is in, but we have no way of getting her out."

"Torquil mac Leod of Lewis?" Ragnall's sandy brows lifted. "I know him. Or rather, I know of him. He's a stocky, muscular man, with a heavy moustache? Speaks poorly? Yes, he and Lord Sitric have been friends for years and he does most of Sitric's fighting for him now. Sitric will support Torquil in whatever he wants."

"Well, that's it, then. We haven't got a hope," Domnall said, and drained his ale beaker.

"You're giving up too easily." Leod looked over at Ragnall. "Do you know the son, the one she is to marry?"

"I've heard of him." Ragnall looked down at his boots. "You know what the marriage market is like here. Or perhaps you don't," he added with a swift grin. "Everyone knows everyone's business almost before they know it themselves. Torquil is an important man, and the youth is his only son, with plenty of property to inherit." He hesitated. "But I wouldn't like to marry my sister to him. Rumor says he's a little strange in the head. It would be a hard man who married his daughter to Kimi Torquilsson."

"Some fathers would marry their daughters to a man with cloven hooves and a tail if there was money in it," Hareth said dourly.

Domnall's eyes glinted. "Strange? What do you mean?"

Ragnall grimaced. "They say he stares, without blinking. As if he would follow you to the grave and beyond. Folk say it's unnerving."

"He stares?" Puzzlement mixed with relief in Domnall's voice. "That's all?"

Ragnall let go his breath in a half laugh. "Remember I have not met this lad myself. I only know none of the lassies like him, in spite of his good looks. He frightens them."

"Is he half witted?"

"I don't think so." Ragnall sighed. "They say he is cruel and vindictive, and takes overmuch interest in bedding young lasses."

Domnall stared at Ragnall as the implications sank in. He wheeled on Finlay. "We have to do something! We must!"

"She doesn't deserve to be married off to a youth who preys on young girls, certainly," Leod added. Hareth's mouth tightened, but he said nothing.

Ragnall caught and held Finlay's glance. "We heard some gossip a few months back," he said. "Lord Sitric was fighting mad because Torquil had bought Kimi's way into a marriage with the King of Meath's daughter. Sitric put a stop to it as soon as he got wind of it, and Torquil had to buy off the King of Meath for the insult. It took him months to get back in Sitric's good graces. Torquil probably can't afford a marriage with any reputable family now."

* * * *

Lord Sitric threw down the vellum with a groan. His stomach griped and lack of sleep made him irritable, and now his fool of a Bishop was disagreeing in public about the best plot for the new church. Sitric had nursed his plans for years, and needed no opposition from the stupid man who would benefit most from a fine cathedral church in Dublin.

Sitric needed a church to atone for his sins, which were many, and he wanted it here, right in the middle of Dublin where everyone would see it as they sailed up the river or walked up from Hoggen Green. He already knew which lands and holdings would support it, and he knew he did not want it jammed up against St Colum Cille near the bridge, which was what the stupid Bishop had suggested, bleating something about the land here being unable to take the weight of a large building.

Bishop Dunan stooped and retrieved the scroll of plans before the breeze swept them away and cleared the dust off with the long sleeve of his robe. Lord Sitric moved out of the shade and wandered, with Torquil at his shoulder, through the crowds milling about the open junction of Winetavern and Fishamble Street.

The Bishop hurried after the two men, busily rolling papers and failed to see that Lord Sitric had halted. The Bishop juddered to a stop, his nose frighteningly close to Lord Sitric's broad, well padded back.

"Prince Ragnall of Waterford," Torquil said gloatingly. His tone suggested something both interesting and rare.

"Waterford's grandson. Here, in Dublin."

Lord Sitric stared. Ragnall, the grandson of his sworn enemy, stood in conversation with the King of Alba. The two young men shook hands and took leave of each other as if they knew each other well before the Alban contingent threaded their way through the flow of people down to the quayside and Ragnall of Waterford headed up the slope towards the High Street.

Lord Sitric stood in the sunlight, his arms folded across his deep chest, his feet planted hip width apart. Ragnall of Waterford saw him, stopped dead, gathered his scattered wits, squared his shoulders and opted for a pleasant, conventional greeting. "*Dia duit*, Lord Sitric."

Lord Sitric spat on the street and strode forward. "What are you doing in Dublin?" He had the advantage of both height and the slope of the land, and glowered down on the younger man. Torquil stood at his shoulder, bland and smiling, but with a nasty excitement lurking in his blue eyes. The Bishop moved up to stand at Lord Sitric's other side. Passersby sensed excitement and loitered nearby.

Sweat gleamed at the young man's temples. He cleared his throat. "I am buying grain to take back to Waterford, Lord Sitric. I shall be gone in a day or two—" The half dozen men who accompanied Ragnall fanned out at his back and eyed Lord Sitric with deep distrust.

"You are not welcome here," Sitric bellowed. "None of Ivarr's spawn is welcome here. They never have been, and

never will be." Sitric's face twisted and one hand went to his belly. His stomach griped harder than ever as his anger increased.

"My people need grain," Ragnall said, his words careful and precise. "Our harvest, like yours, was poor. Dublin is a trading centre with grain on offer. It seemed sensible to come here, buy and leave again without causing a fuss."

"Sensible!" Sitric bellowed. "For anyone else, yes! For you, it was the act of a fool, or a villain bent on mischief!"

"My lord, please." Bishop Dunan advanced a step. "To buy grain for his people is a venture that does him credit."

Sitric placed one gnarled, veined hand against the Bishop's chest and thrust him away. Bishop Dunan stumbled on the hem of his long gown, tottered and sat down in the dust and dirt of the street.

There was a ripple of smothered laughter among the passersby, instantly cut off as Sitric glared at Ragnall. "Your grandfather and all his spawn are vermin! I warned him if any one of his brood set foot in Dublin they would be killed!"

Ragnall met the chilly blue gaze. "I am sorry for the feud between you and my grandfather. I was not even born when it happened. Perhaps now—"

"Your grandfather kills a member of my family, and you expect me to forget?" Sitric's spittle splattered the younger man's face.

Lord Sitric's bellow, laced with hurt and anger, carried some distance. The good people of Dublin backed against the wattle and daub, prepared to watch but only from a safe distance. Word passed down the street. More people turned,

stared and hurried back to join the watching throng. Almost at the quayside gate, Leod sensed some disturbance in the air, and glanced back. He stopped. "Sir, something's going on!"

Already out in the sunshine on the other side, Finlay immediately turned back. Leod pointed, and Finlay's gaze focussed on the crowd at the top of the street. Air hissed through his teeth. "Ragnall!" He set off at a dead run back towards the ale shop and the knot of men beyond it. Hareth and the others sprinted after him.

Ragnall, white-faced, summoned every bit of self-control and spoke calmly to the man who towered over him.

"Perhaps, Lord Sitric, it is a time to be reasonable and forget the past. Neither of us can change it, however much we might wish to. I know my grandfather regrets what happened."

"No!" Sitric's growl reverberated from house to house. "Neither of us can change it. But I can have revenge for my boy!"

"They say revenge never heals a wound," Ragnall said softly, "but only succeeds in making men bitter." He hesitated, and took an uneven breath. "If you will not accept my apology for what happened, then I must leave." He inclined his sandy head with all the dignity of a man twice his age, and turned to leave. He saw Finlay racing towards him and smiled his relief.

There was a whining growl of anger behind him. "Don't preach at me, you dog!" Lord Sitric's forearm, with all his

weight behind it, slammed across Ragnall's unprotected throat.

"No!" Finlay skidded to a halt, his face stark.

Ragnall dropped like a rag doll. One of his own men sprang forward to catch him, but was too late. The sun sparkled on Ragnall's dagger hilt and belt buckle as he fell, twisting; and his hazel eyes were open as he struck the street. His man crouched over him, grasped him, and waited; but there was no movement, no answering of any kind. The man's fingers drifted over the close-cropped sandy hair, and hovered over his face. They all noted the odd angle of the head and shoulders. Ragnall's neck was broken.

Chapter 10

Finlay stood motionless in the sunshine and stared down at the sprawled body of the man whose warm laughter had encompassed them all such a short time ago. The horror slowly faded from his face, leaving it blank, though the lacing cord at his neck vibrated with the tension that gripped him. He drew in a deep lungful of air and expelled it slowly. All around him Ragnall's crew fingered their daggers, muttered at each other and glared at Sitric's men.

"Well?" Sitric crowed. Impatient, eyes blazing with temper as he glared at the Waterford men, his fist had already clenched about his dagger handle. A big man whose fine combed beard flowed down over the silver torque clasped about his throat, whose leather belt, shiny with use, girdled his ample waist and held his long dagger. Leather wrist guards studded with iron covered his massive veined forearms, and his pale tunic, banded and hemmed with embroidery, skimmed the top of his heavy thighs. In the candlelight of the hall-house Sitric was a big man; but out on the streets of Dublin with the blue sky behind him, he looked huge. He leered at Daveth mac Finlay and addressed the Waterford men. "Shall we make a fight of it? We're here, and we're ready!"

Daveth mac Finlay moved between the Waterford men and Lord Sitric. He caught and held Lord Sitric's eye. "No. They do not." Sunlight gleamed on the gold circlet as he glanced forbiddingly at the Waterford men. "They are going to pick up the body of their Lord and take him, and the grain he bought

for them, home to his people. His grandfather will give him a hero's burial."

Lord Sitric snorted in disgust. No one moved. Finlay flicked a glance at Hareth, jerked his head at the Waterford men and then turned, his boots almost touching Ragnall's out flung arm. He met Sitric's heated glare. The tension in the air was almost audible. Hareth moved softly forward and spoke to the Waterford men. They listened, eyed one another and then, with sullen faces, gathered up the limp body of their young Lord.

Hareth went with them. Lord Sitric watched them go, gloating. Nobody spoke. The crowd pressed back against the house walls to give the Waterford men easy access to the quayside, and every eye focussed on the young man's body as he was carried home.

Lord Sitric's glare switched to the King of Alba. "What gives you the right to interfere? You're not in Alba now. I say what happens here."

Finlay did not respond immediately. He stood straight and tall, the light breeze stirring the hair on his shoulders. Only the fine, rapid pulse in his throat betrayed the effort it took to stay calm. His black head tilted and he surveyed the older man. "Ragnall was my friend," he said. "He was also Thorfinn's friend. It is not possible to walk away and ignore an act of such savagery. I wish I had done more, and sooner."

Sitric's face twisted, his palm pressed against his gut and a blast of tainted air shot past Finlay's cheek. "This is my town." He jabbed a blunt forefinger into Finlay's chest. "I will

decide what goes on here. Not you." Beads of sweat appeared and crept down the furrows of his face. Torquil moved up, blue eyes glittering, to stand at his Lord's shoulder.

Finlay ignored Torquil. "If I had known what you would do I would have stayed with him."

Sitric leered. "Then I should have killed you too! And your followers," he said, jerking his chin in the direction of Domnall, Leod and the trio of men who made up the escort.

The two leaders stood face to face in the sunlight, all the differences of forty years of hard living between them. Sitric moved impatiently and the sun struck the silver torque across his chest and threw a dazzle of light across the dark, windburned skin of the younger man. When Finlay spoke into the silence, his voice rang with certainty. "And then you would have outright war, and another Clontarf."

The faint mewling of gulls seemed loud in the silence. "And that is a deterrent?" The veins in Sitric's temple pulsed beneath his flushed skin, and his voice bounced off the walls and echoed around the street. He laughed, lifted his chin and bawled at the sky. "We are warriors, Finlay of Alba, not young lads barely weaned!"

"Then you should have had no difficulty," Finlay said coolly, "in recognizing Ragnall's courage in coming here, and his courage in trying to make peace with you." His long mouth curled. "Instead, you cuffed him down like a dog."

"His grandfather killed my boy! It is right the whelp should pay!"

The Bishop stretched out a trembling hand. "My Lord Sitric—"

Sitric glared, and the Bishop retreated. The crowd around the junction of Winetavern Street and High Street held its collective breath and clustered close, eager to hear what was said. Word for word, the brawl would be all over Dublin by nightfall, and speeding off across the waves with every ship that left the Liffey tomorrow.

The men behind Lord Sitric anticipated action and laid hands on their weapons. Domnall and Leod exchanged worried glances. Hareth mac Enna winnowed through the crowd and brushed passed Leod to stand beside his King. Torquil greeted him with a leer.

"And when Ivarr races from Waterford to take his revenge—what then?" Finlay asked mildly. "When he kills your last remaining son, what then? How many whelps should you hide away?"

Sitric's hand pressed hard against a sudden flare of pain in his belly. Torquil glanced at his lord, and faced the younger man. "I defend Lord Sitric and son! All men will!"

"Will you?" Finlay's mocking glance acknowledged Torquil and returned to Lord Sitric. His long mouth moved in a brief smile. "Given a little time, neither Lord Sitric nor Lord Ivarr will have any one to defend. They'll have exterminated each other's entire families. But perhaps it won't matter; revenge will have been satisfied." The black head tilted. "I hope the families here agree with you, Lord Sitric. As the axe comes down on the youngest child's head, will you still say to yourself: this is right, this is what I wanted?"

Sitric's beard jerked. His mouth compressed and disappeared as moustache and beard merged. Air whistled down his nose. He was angry, but he had no answer.

Finlay glanced around the silent, sun-baked street, where people stood mesmerized, watching. Lord Sitric sucked in a huge breath but Finlay forestalled him neatly. "Tell me—do you feel any change, any difference at all, now you've killed Ivarr's grandson?"

"Revenge is always good!"

"You don't, do you? The pain is still there." A faint but sympathetic smile crossed the younger man's face. "It will always be there, whatever you do."

Lord Sitric did not speak. His eyes moved over the crowd, and a mother clutched a small child to her side and pressed back against the wall as her Lord's glance moved in their direction. Sitric saw the gesture, and frowned. The fierce flush had begun to fade from his cheeks when he turned back to Finlay. "It is not only Ivarr's son who had courage today."

Torquil glanced curiously at Lord Sitric.

"I hope," Finlay said in a tone that was carefully neutral, "I will always have the courage to tell you when I disagree with your actions, or your decisions. Otherwise I could not be your friend."

The Lord of Dublin loosed a harsh bark of sound. Finlay let the silence continue. The sun beat down on their heads and lit the rough texture of the walls on either side of the street. The crowd dared not utter a sound. A pair of seagulls watched from the gable end and a child's voice could be heard, crying.

Sitric nodded at last. "Aye, you've the courage to speak your mind, as equal to equal. And you've Thorfinn in your pocket, we know. Another Clontarf, eh?" He sighed. "I'll let this go, for now." He turned away, and then swung back. "But don't make a habit of it, or I'll have your guts for harp strings, and that," he added, with a rude gesture for emphasis, "is what I think of Thorfinn Sigurdarson!"

Finlay's expression relaxed. "I'll be sure to tell him when next I see him."

The big man swore, gripped Finlay's shoulder and turned to walk beside him. Leod and Domnall exchanged glances and quick grins with Hareth, who fell into step behind Lord Sitric and Finlay of Alba and found himself beside a glowering Torquil.

* * * *

The thunder of hooves on the wooden jetty brought the crew to the gunwale next morning. Lord Goffraid, grinning, sat astride a plunging pony stallion and gripped the lead rope of another equally restive beast. His grooms, at a respectful distance, held four or five more. The Prince's red hair gleamed in the sun as he shouted across to the King of Alba. "Come race with me!"

Finlay and Hareth didn't even think of a refusal. In no time at all three young men rode across the green slopes towards the rising bulk of Howth. Lord Goffraid swung round now and then to croon soothing words to the excited, snorting beast at the end of his leading rein, caught his companions grinning at

him, but took no offence. "We'll have a good day's sport, I promise you!"

The three young men surged up to rim of the sea, halted on the high grassy bank and gazed down on the clean stretch of sand set neatly between the horns of Howth and the broad, shallow mouth of the Liffey. Below them, men unpacked bridles, whips and horse blankets, and set up booths and stalls. Women tended fires and sold bowls of winkles and sections of roasted eel hot off the fire sticks. Children and dogs ran about and got in everyone's way, and off to their left a mass of ponies, horses and hard worked grooms seethed and swayed in a roped compound.

Finlay commented briefly. "I hope the tide's going out."

Lord Goffraid laughed. His profile was neat and decisive against the rich blue of the sky behind him, and his auburn hair glowed against the dark brown of his tunic. "We have half a day to get the races set up, run and done before the tide chases us off the beach."

Goffraid dismounted, beckoned a lad over and gave him strict instructions about the stallion on the leading rein and then plunged down onto the beach. "First of all," he said, "we need to mark the track."

He had a talent for organization. A group of men hammered running rails into the sand, children cleared the clumps of seaweed and stones that might trip a running horse and men heaved the larger stones aside and levelled the sand with coarse toothed wooden rakes. A second group hammered a second set of rails into the waterlogged sand by means of a long string and a peg to get the distance correct,

and they soon had an oval track marked out, wide enough for eight or ten animals to run abreast.

Satisfied with the track, Lord Goffraid took his guests to the racers compound and pointed to the powerful grey stallion straining and jerking against his tether. "He's mine. He won last year, and I'm hoping he'll win again."

Finlay watched the wild-eyed grey try to take a chunk out of his young keeper. "Do you ride him, or do you have a jockey?"

"I ride him! Where would be the fun in it, if I didn't?" The clean cut handsome face turned and eyed the King of Alba with a sly grin. "But I need jockeys for the bay we brought, and the chestnut behind him. What do you say?"

Finlay sensed a challenge. "We don't race much in Alba, and I'm heavy for these ponies."

"Look around you. Do you see any small men?" Goffraid's hazel eyes blazed with enthusiasm.

"Then I'll take the bay." Finlay swung round to Hareth. "What about you?"

"What else but the chestnut? There'll be someone who'll take a wager?"

Goffraid's whip pointed back across the sand. "Over yonder, by the booths. They're honest, because I put them on the rowing benches for a week if they cheat." He looked round with an air of satisfaction, and then glanced sharply at Finlay from under his brows. "I heard what happened to Raghnaill yesterday and I'm sorry for it." A frown shadowed his eyes. "Once I rule Dublin all this feuding will stop. It has got us nowhere in the last two hundred years."

"Sitric's men might not agree."

Goffraid's shoulders lifted and dropped. "Torquil will try and carry on old traditions. So will one or two more. But I'll win through in the end." He studied Finlay. "This girl you seek? Does Torquil have her? Is she the girl he claims he brought from Stornoway to marry Kimi?"

"We think so, but we have yet to find or speak to her."

Goffraid grinned. "I could visit when I know Torquil is out and talk to the girl."

"Torquil's wife would stop you," Hareth said.

"Marjatta? My father has had his eye on her for some time. She may be faithful to Torquil, but she dare not be rude to the heir of Dublin!"

"They look ready to start racing." Hareth gestured towards the track.

"If you can reach her," Finlay said, "We would be grateful."

Everyone converged on the very temporary oval racecourse. Children raced barefoot out of the waves leaving bewildered dogs waiting, tongues hanging over dropped sticks; lads stopped showing off when the admiring girls turned as one for the track. Women's gowns fluttered in the light breeze, and men laughed and exchanged bets as horse lads led the first batch of groomed ponies across the beach to the start line.

The sun found and glossed the thin, tight skin over a chestnut haunch and shoulder as ponies snorted at their jockeys, swung out from their leading ropes and kicked their heels at each other; they curvetted, sidestepped and danced

while the jockeys swore, hung on, seized their moment and mounted.

A crowd eight deep milled about the darkened oval of sand. Children wriggled between legs to kneel almost on the running boards, while anxious mothers screeched at their suddenly deaf offspring. Goffraid led his guests to a small raised platform. "We'll see everything from here. They're almost ready for the off! By Thor, the little chestnut has some spirit!"

A smart chestnut mare had taken an instant dislike to its neighbor. She jittered and half reared back, pawing the air with her front hooves. The starter lost patience, and blew a blast on a horn. The runners surged forward, the checkered tunics of the jockeys a bright colored blur in the sunlight. Screams of encouragement assaulted the ears and left the red faced jockey forcing the chestnut's hooves to the sand. He crouched on her neck like a demon as she bounded forward and started to run; the other runners were three lengths ahead. The crowd jeered, Finlay laughed and Goffraid howled abuse.

The little chestnut's hooves thudded into the sand. Without obstruction or interference from other horses or jockeys, she sped round the course. The six horses ahead of her reached the first turn. Whips flashed in the air, and the crowd roared. A horse stumbled over the running rail, pecked and flung its jockey off into the crowd. People staggered and fell backwards in the sand.

Goffraid was intent on the race. "Look at that little mare," he breathed. His eyes glowed with delight. Hareth jumped off

the platform and headed towards the booths at the back of the beach, making signs that he was off to place a bet. Finlay nodded, heard a great roar and looked back at the track. Two horses had collided on the next turn and one jockey was beating the other over the head with his whip. Goffraid clutched Finlay's shoulder. "Conor won't stand for that!"

Goffraid knew his jockey. Conor's arm shot out, and a well placed shove knocked his opponent clean out of the saddle. The crowd whooped and cheered, the unfortunate man thudded down into the soft sand, and the other horses flashed on towards the finishing post. "I knew it! She's won!" Goffraid yelled, jubilant. "The little filly had it in her after all!"

The races followed each other in quick succession. The tide was just on the turn when Finlay vaulted onto the back of the neat dark bay and squeezed his knees. The horse's head jerked up, they bounded forward to the start line and at the warmth of the animal's hide beneath his thighs Finlay's mind suddenly filled with boyhood memories; of games, mock battles and races on small, neat ponies. The sun was hot on his shoulders, Goffraid was off to his right, and Hareth, who had reappeared just in time to mount, was somewhere beyond him. Goffraid's grey stallion, flecks of foam dripping from its bridle, tried to bite the horse beside it.

The eight horses lined up, constantly sidling and snorting. Finlay stared down a dark tunnel of spectators and saw only open mouths and waving hands. The noise deafened him and he only just heard the horn, but there was no need to squeeze. His horse shot forward and flew down the track

beside the running rail, neck stretched, shoulders lunging forward with each stride.

A dark horse thundered at Finlay's side, the rider's teeth bared and his whip hand busy. Finlay had only a vague impression of a waving mass of manes beyond, white ringed eyes and shouting, screaming men. Showers of sand flew up and Finlay was thankful he wasn't at the back of the group. The dark horse pecked, dropped back out of sight, and the grey arrowed in towards the approaching bend.

The crowd noise grew, and Finlay flicked a glance to the side. Other horses leaned towards the bend, and crowded the grey's hindquarters, and the grey didn't like it. His head snaked from side to side, the parrot mouth gaped and Finlay had a glimpse of yellow teeth. If Finlay pulled ahead, those teeth would likely take a bite out of his calf. Goffraid rode like a demon, his red hair flying in the sun, his whip flashing in the air. Somewhere at the back of the group Finlay sensed rather than saw a flurry of dark sand as a horse went down, and a rider flew through the air.

Finlay held his whip ready and squeezed his horse on. They came off the bend and pulled ahead, but Finlay's little horse had his ears back, afraid of the grey on his heels. The grey drew closer, hoof by hoof, and its head flicked towards Finlay's leg. Goffraid, his face a mask of glaring eyes and bared teeth, appeared not to notice.

Finlay dared not rein his mount back at the next corner. The horse heeled round the bend, Finlay's boot scraped the sand and he held his breath; hooves clicked against the running rail, then the little horse was upright again and racing

for the line. Goffraid fended off a challenge from the chestnut on his far side, crossed whips with Hareth mac Enna and the grey lunged at Finlay's leg.

Finlay brought his whip down and his calf back in the same movement. The grey recoiled, screeched, checked and barged the chestnut off course. Finlay's horse sped on, crossed the finish line to a great roar from the crowd and jogged to a halt. Finlay looked back.

Goffraid sprawled on the sand, very close to the plunging heels of his own horse. He struggled to his feet, wary of the grey bucking and lashing out at Hareth's chestnut. The crowd scattered. A loose horse pounded through, flung Goffraid to one side and trotted off the track.

Finlay slid off his horse and ran back. He too kept a wary eye on the grey, grasped one of Goffraid's boots and dragged him away from the stamping hooves. The crowd surged and swayed as folk at the front pushed to get out of the way and those at the back strained to see what was going on. Children stared round eyed while mothers shrieked and fathers lunged to reach an unwary child.

The grey and the chestnut crashed chest to chest, forelegs flailing. The grey's yellow teeth sliced the chestnut's ear clean off. Blood spattered Hareth's face and chest. He tried to haul the horse off, but a snakelike twist of the chestnut's head ripped the reins out of his hands, and he only just whipped his knee out of the way of the grey's front hoof crashing against the chestnut's shoulder. He vaulted clear, staggered on landing and reeled away to the side of the track. Hands reached out of the crowd to pull him to safety.

Finlay left the stallions to the horse masters, and looked down at Goffraid. Sand clung to his eyebrows and lashes, but his face had taken no damage, every limb seemed straight and his breathing was even. Handlers appeared clutching sharpened sticks, and wormed their way through to where the squealing beasts whirled, lunged and kicked. The sound of the blows echoed like a bass drum across the beach, and the squeals and bugle calls chilled the blood. The grey grunted, ducked its head, and the yellow teeth closed on the chestnut's throat.

The chestnut surged forward, and pushed the grey off balance. The deadly grip loosened, but left a raw bleeding patch in the glossy skin. The horses wheeled, plunged away and then turned, tails stiff and heads high, to crash against each other. A red stain spread down the grey's withers and the rank smell of horse and blood clouded the air.

Goffraid stirred, muttered, scrambled to his knees and spat out sand. His hazel eyes squinted up at Finlay. "What's happening?"

"You fell off," Finlay said. "I won, but your stallions are fighting."

Goffraid swore and staggered to his feet, shedding clumps of damp sand. He leaned against Finlay's arm for a moment or two, watching the horses. "They'll kill each other," he said. "Stop them!" He yelled at the handlers, who looked at him, then at each other, and stayed where they were.

"Get a net," Finlay said. "A fishing net. You must have one? Throw it over them."

Goffraid looked at him, grasped the idea and shouted.

"Are you strong enough for this?" Finlay asked. Goffraid didn't even bother to reply.

Someone panted up with a grey bundle in his arms. Goffraid grabbed the net, and shrieked at the handlers. "Get ready to control the grey! Any mistakes and it's the galleys for you!"

Finlay moved forward, and matched Goffraid stride for stride across the sand. "Give me one end!"

The chestnut trumpeted in fury and charged, his head low, towards the tiring grey. "Ye gods!" Goffraid swore. "He'll snap the grey's foreleg if he gets hold of it! We go for the chestnut," he said, and glanced at Finlay. "Ready?"

The two young men were well matched and the net flew out from their hands in a graceful arc against the bright sky, and then dropped, a shadow of darkness over the chestnut head. The grey backed on its haunches and swung away, snorting. The chestnut screamed and plunged as the strange thing settled on its head and flanks. Sand flew everywhere. The two handlers swarmed over to the grey and backed it out of harm's way.

Fearing the chestnut would catch a hoof in the netting and injure itself, Goffraid ran forward, stumbled and almost fell in the churned up sand. Finlay used the advantage of the slight slope to vault onto the horse's back, bent forward and grasped the netting in both hands. He bunched it, brought the horse's head down tight against its chest and drove it seawards with all the power of his legs and back. Around him shouts and war whoops rang through the air, and Goffraid appeared running alongside him, his mouth open, yelling.

Dark Pool [Sequel to Banners of Alba]
by Jen Black

Finlay grasped the Prince of Dublin by the wrist and swung him onto the horse's rump. He was just in time. Spray flew up around them, and Goffraid's laughter rang in Finlay's ear; the chestnut plunged into chest high water and slowed, hampered by the slow roll of the waves, the constricting net and the double weight on his back.

Chapter 11

Kimi sat by the fire cleaning his fingernails with his dagger and amusing himself and annoying Eba by tilting the blade so that reflected light flashed over her. Kimi was guardian while Conn and his father were out, and Annikki was off visiting friends for the morning. Eba breathed sharply through her nose as light danced across the flat fell seam in the half finished linen shirt on her lap.

The bone needle slipped and jabbed her finger. Eba favored Kimi with a fierce glare. He merely grinned back as if daring her to complain. Eba moved the steatite bowl which gave her light in the dim hall, turned her back on him and shook out the linen across her knee. Annikki had not told her, but from the size of the garment Eba guessed the new shirt was either for Conn or Arne.

Heaven knows what Kimi would do if she were alone. The three maids were within earshot and Eba was thankful Rhosyn stayed nearby, finding endless small tasks to keep her occupied. She noticed that Rhosyn too cast frequent, apprehensive glances in Kimi's direction. When Annikki bustled in from the street a little later, the frigid atmosphere in the hall was palpable and she sighed in mock exasperation.

"Can you two not spend a pleasant hour in each other's company? You need to come to terms with each other, you know. You will be married soon." Annikki looked from Eba's tight, frowning expression to Kimi's bland smile and sighed. "It's a beautiful day. I think you should go for a walk and see if you can't come back in a better frame of mind. Rhosyn

deserves an outing, too. Kimi will see you girls don't come to any harm, won't you Kimi?"

Rhosyn looked shocked, but Eba dropped her sewing and jumped to her feet. In her view a walk was an offer not to be refused, whoever their escort might be. Kimi acknowledged his aunt with a brief nod of the head. "Where should we go?"

"Take them to St Patrick's. Yes, Rhosyn, you shall go too," she added. "It would be proper for you to go with them."

Kimi stalked to the door. Annikki's voice followed him. "Mind you give those girls time to say their prayers, Kimi."

Eba grabbed Rhosyn's hand and hurried after Kimi. The bright sunlight made them blink as they stepped outside, but Eba's frustration drained away almost immediately. She had to admit, as their escort turned and waited, that he looked the part. The afternoon sun haloed his silver hair, the blue of his tunic set off the deeper blue of his eyes and though he was still smaller than Conn, his body was neat and well proportioned. "Stay close to me," he ordered.

"Of course, Kimi." Eba kept hold of Rhosyn's hand. The streets were busy, and as they marched along High Street, the maid's wondering brown eyes darted from booth to booth.

Eba shook her head at the pestering tradesmen, who turned away, disappointed. She gurgled with suppressed laughter and whispered for Rhosyn's ear alone: "Everything for sale to those who have money to buy."

Kimi headed south, put up with some good-natured chaff from the St Nicholas's Gate keeper about escort duties and pretty girls and shepherded them through the protecting walls.

The sound of the Dublin streets faded behind them. The Poddle hurtled in from the hills, and wattle and daub cabins supported each other like a row of drunken cronies along its banks. Hens pecked among the weeds and a clutch of ducks waddled importantly across the track down to the water. A wooden church reminded the neighborhoods of their prayers and obligations.

"Isn't it fine?" Eba shut her eyes and breathed deep. "Can't you smell the grass and the flowers?" A watermill rumbled not far ahead and the higher note of a bullfinch chirruped from nearby gorse bushes. The land was richer than Kintail, and well suited to cattle and crops. Much of it was flat, or seemed flat; there were hills away to the south, but nothing like the fierce uprush of land around Bundalloch. A longing for home shot through her and tears stung her eyes. She blinked hard. She had never expected to miss the mountains.

The tang of salt water whispered past on a breath of air; at a turn in the path she saw the vague glitter of the open sea away to the east. The way home to Alba, she thought and then noticed the much nearer settlement of Dublin, crouched beastlike on the rising ground above the steep drop to the Poddle.

Rhosyn tugged at Eba's arm. "A magic spring. St Patrick's spring." The sun lit reddish glints in Rhosyn's curly brown hair and her eyes, brown and soft as those of a young calf, glowed with delight. Smiling in return, a sudden pang shot through Eba. Conn had had a relationship with this girl, and she was bearing his child. The thought unsettled her more than she

cared to admit, and the smile disappeared from her face.

"What's magic about it?"

"Annikki say, saint made it! Heals people!"

"Healing properties!" Eba said. "Well, that is impressive."

Rhosyn heard the mockery, bowed her head and retreated like a snail into its shell. Eba frowned and guilt struck her. She stared at the clear pool beneath the yew tree and knew she had been needlessly cruel.

"Rhosyn, I'm impressed, really I am." She touched the girl's arm. "Don't be angry with me. I mean no disrespect to the saint, or his church—or his well!" She lifted her face to the sun and executed a single twirl so her brown skirts belled around her. "I'm so happy! Is it not wonderful out in the fresh air with no smoky fire to make your eyes sore, no smelly midden next door and, best of all," she said, coming to a standstill, "to feel the sunshine on your skin?"

Rhosyn refused to look at her. Eba curled both hands around the maid's thin forearm and hung on. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said over and over in a small pathetic voice until Rhosyn couldn't prevent an escaping giggle.

"Smells worse on river," she said with a quick, shy glance at Eba.

Relieved, Eba tucked the girl's arm beneath her own and wondered how long it had been since Rhosyn had giggled. As they walked the last few paces towards the church she glanced at the small dark girl and said carefully, "The stink of the street where the animals are slaughtered is much worse. It almost turned my stomach when I first arrived. I suppose I've got used to it."

Rhosyn wrinkled her nose. "The wind," she began, and hesitated. "The wind brings smell from flax pits. Bad smell! Very bad!"

Eba knew that smell, too. "Oh, yes! Do you know," she said, blue eyes alight, "they say young boys and old men are paid to bring the flax up from the dams, because the vile smell clings and no woman will go anywhere near a man who has harvested flax from the dams!"

The small, happy sound of their laughter floated across the planked bridge over the Poddle and reached Kimi where he waited, arms folded across his chest, brows pulled down. The girls exchanged glances and hurried over to him. "You must stay closer to me, or I cannot protect you," he said grandly. "This," he added with a quick nod of his head, "is claimed to be the oldest Christian site in Dublin. They say a church has stood here for five hundred years, but I doubt it."

Eba looked around. Several well-used tracks converged here before heading off in five different directions. Laden donkeys plodded along the rutted tracks, men shouldered sacks of vegetables and travellers strode by, their long staves stabbing the ground. Women stood and gossiped as women did the world over. "Many tracks lead here," Eba remarked. She looked at the large wooden church. "Perhaps it has been here a long time."

"Cross Poddle." His eyes dared her to contradict him. "Six ancient routes cross here where the Poddle splits into two. Everyone passes by, but few stop and pray."

"Well, I should like to," Eba said. "May we go inside?"

He could not refuse, but he remained at the church door. "I will wait here." He settled one shoulder in the curve of the warped doorpost. "Make sure you speak to no one, and if anyone approaches you, get up and leave at once."

The girls exchanged glances of veiled relief. "Yes, Kimi." Eba gave him a warm smile.

She pushed Rhosyn ahead of her through the door and followed quickly. Kimi's hand strayed towards her long gold plait just as the heavy iron studded door swung shut and cracked his knuckles. He swore and sucked the broken skin.

Kimi had no time for churches. The old gods of his great grandfather Olaf suited him and his father far better than the new, soft religion of St Patrick. He leaned against the wall and stared at passers by until he grew bored, and then impatient. He pushed the door open. Inside it was dim and cool and smelt of wood, candle wax, and dry, dusty rushes. The two girls were talking to one of the clerics.

Eba heard the door bang, glanced round and saw Kimi striding towards her with a face like thunder. She turned back to the young cleric. "Please don't apologize; I understand why you cannot disobey Lord Sitric. But if you meet my brother one day soon, perhaps you could tell—"

Kimi grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards the door. Startled gasps from those at prayer echoed around the church, but no one moved to help. Like the cleric, they dared not intervene. Once outside, Kimi shook Eba till her teeth rattled. "I told you not to speak to anyone!"

"You're hurting me!" Eba said. "Let go! What gives you the right to—"

"I'll do more than hurt you!" Kimi dragged Eba across the grass and Rhosyn, white-faced, ran behind. Beneath the shade of the old yew tree the tang of water enveloped them. Kimi forced Eba down onto hard, flat stones let into the grass around the Holy spring and rammed her head into the cold, clear water.

Eba inhaled, with disastrous results. She came up wheezing and gagging, with Kimi's fist tangled in her hair. Water left dark tracks over her brown linen. Kimi thrust his scarlet face close to hers. "Next time, do as I tell you!" He plunged her head down again.

She had some warning, and managed a quick breath. The water was shallow, but even with both palms braced against the slippery moss at the bottom of the pool she could not force clear of the water. Instead she sought and found his hand at the back of her head and dug her nails deep into the tender flesh of his wrist.

The young cleric, roused by Rhosyn's shrieks, pounded across the grass, his long brown robe flapping about pale shanks. Shocked by the sight of the well-dressed young lord trying to drown a pretty girl, he hesitated, then gathered his courage and ran the last few paces. He tapped Kimi's shoulder. "Sir, you must let her go, please."

Kimi shrugged him off and swore. The young cleric grasped the young man's shoulder and shook him. "Sir, she will drown!"

Kimi did not even acknowledge him. Terrified the girl was going to die in front of his eyes, the young cleric wrenched with both hands at Kimi's shoulder. Kimi staggered off

balance and Eba reared back in a rush of streaming water. The back of her skull collided with Kimi's nose.

Kimi fell on his backside. Blood spurted from his nose and spotted his tunic and tears glazed his blue eyes. Eba braced her weight on her hands and drew hideous, wheezing breaths. Rhosyn scuttled over and clutched her shoulders. The young cleric paled at the rage in Kimi's face and backed away across the grass. Behind him, a party of riders came into view, with a collection of weary, bloodstained horses trailing behind them. They stopped, intrigued, and their leader asked the nearest onlooker what was happening.

Kimi went for his dagger and snarled at the young cleric. "Back off, you oaf!"

His voice, clothes and pale hair identified Kimi as a member of one of the leading Viking families of Dublin. The young churchman was Irish, and out of his depth. "I cannot stand by," he said, his frightened gaze on the long sharp blade in Kimi's hand, "and watch you inflict such punishment on an innocent young girl."

Kimi's tongue licked the blood around his mouth and his blue eyes blazed in his white face. "She needed a lesson." He shifted the knife from hand to hand, spat on the grass and eyed the young cleric. "And for certain you're not going to stop me, are you?" He laughed, showing bloodstained teeth, and turned towards the two girls huddled beside the spring.

"No, by Christ, but I will!" The young man leading the cavalcade spurred his pony across the grass.

Kimi bent to grasp the girl's arm. Eba, still wheezing, lurched away from him, and Rhosyn dragged her still further

away. The crowd, searching for the best view, drifted sideways like sea wrack under the tide.

Oblivious to danger, Kimi strode after the girl. The young lord slid out of the saddle, took a quick step and grasped the youth with strong hands. Kimi hurtled through the air and landed with an undignified thump on the grass. Some of the onlookers laughed. Kimi heard it, and sprang to his feet, lowered his head and charged.

The newcomer stood his ground. He side stepped, turned as Kimi swept passed by and landed one heavy fist fair and square in the centre of the youth's back. Knocked off course, Kimi ran on and then stumbled to his knees; but before he could turn, his attacker grasped a wrist, forced him down and twisted the sharp blade from his hand. He tossed it to the ground and cuffed the youth across the head.

"Don't you recognize me, you young clod?"

Kimi looked up, scowling. He took in the dark red hair, the rich clothes and the heavy rings and recognized Lord Goffraid. "No," he lied.

"Then it's high time you did..." said Goffraid, and told him.

There was a long silence. Released, Kimi got to his feet. "My father is Torquil mac Leod," he said, offering his father's name as some kind of shield. Insolence filtered into his eyes.

Lord Goffraid's brows, darker than his orange-red hair, rose in surprise. "And does Torquil know you terrorize young girls and junior clerics?"

"No. It's none of your business, either."

"It is now," said Goffraid. "What had the girl done to merit such treatment?"

"She was disobedient."

"Ah, and her disobedience makes it alright to drown her? Are you mad?"

Kimi dabbed his fingers beneath his nose, stared at the blood and ignored the Prince.

"We had trouble with you last October," Goffraid snapped. He glanced towards the church, where Eba stood with the maid and the cleric beside her. "Who is the girl?"

"No one important," Kimi said, smirking. "No one you know."

Goffraid's hazel eyes narrowed. "Go home. I shall speak with your father about this."

Kimi limped away, the crowd dispersed, chattering amongst themselves and life at Cross Poddle got back to normal. Lord Goffraid walked across to white-faced and shivering girl, who stood quietly while her maid twisted the sodden golden hair into a rope and watched water drip to the grass. A door banged and the young cleric, a hemp cloak in his arms, hurried over and thrust it at the girl. She gave him a grateful and wobbly smile.

"My Lord Goffraid, this young lady needs help," the cleric blurted. "She told me she was taken against her will by that young man's father. Can you help?"

Goffraid looked at the girl. "My men will escort you to ... wherever it is in Dublin that you live."

The girl's hair clung to her skull and she shuddered with cold and shock, but managed a wan smile. "My home, sir, is in Bundalloch in Alba. Torquil mac Leod lodged me with his sister Annikki. Can you help me reach my brother? I believe

his ship is on the quayside." A runnel of water traced the curve of her cheek and dripped to her wet gown. "I'm sorry," she said through chattering teeth. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"I'll speak to Finlay of Alba on your behalf," Lord Goffraid said.

She held them up once on the way to Annikki's house, and was sick by the side of the road. Delivered safely to Annikki's door, Eba went in with none of her usual grace and energy. Conn sat by the hearth, whetstone and dagger stilled in his hands as he looked up. He took in her dishevelled appearance, dropped the whetstone, sheathed his dagger and met her halfway down the hall. "What happened?"

"Your imbecile cousin tried to drown me."

"He did what? Where? Why?"

"In St Patrick's spring," Eba snapped, "because I spoke to a priest in the church."

Conn looked from Eba to Rhosyn. It sounded preposterous, but she was soaking wet, and Rhosyn looked terrified. "Come and sit by the fire. Rhosyn, go and get a blanket. Get two." He led Eba to the hearth, pushed her onto a stool, draped the blanket Rhosyn brought over her shoulders, and swung the other one around Rhosyn like a cape.

"Now then," he said briskly, leading the maid to the stool beside Eba. "You look like a drowned rat, and Rhosyn is as white as a sheet. Which of you is going to tell me what really happened?"

Chapter 12

The rich smell of roasting beef obliterated the more delicate odors of the salmon and eel pie, the cheeses and the sweet honied oats rolled into sticky, buttery balls. Lord Sitric's harpist occasionally lifted his nose from his ale horn and ran his fingers across the strings of his instrument; even more occasionally he delivered disjointed, half remembered lines of a song and it did not matter, for no one was listening.

Sitric's wife, the Lady Emer, sat close by her husband and her dignity gave the evening a formality it might otherwise have lacked. Her black hair, now streaked with silver and carefully drawn back and bound with gold mesh, emphasized the pale skin of her Irish forebears. Fine gauze swathed the slender column of her throat and though she conversed with her ladies and kept a calm, almost indulgent eye on the harper, she did not speak to her husband until the moment she sought and received his permission to make a graceful exit from the hall.

Men relaxed with her going. The ale jug speeded along the boards and conversation turned rowdy and boisterous. Goffraid caught Finlay's eye and launched into a tale that soon collected a laughing audience as he described the attempted drowning at St Patrick's sacred spring that afternoon.

Goffraid described the girl's long golden hair, wondrous blue eyes, red lips and went on, to rising howls from his attentive companions, to describe the supple grace of her

limbs and the sweet perfection of her bosom; a fair land, he said, in which any man would like to wander.

Domnall guessed that the girl might be his sister, turned scarlet and shot furious glances at Leod and Hareth. The rising moan of laughter increased. Torquil drank off his cup of ale in three swallows and laughed along with the rest.

Lord Sitric laughed, too, slouched in his chair, but he was aware of the unrest among the men from Alba and was therefore not surprised when the King of Alba addressed Goffraid across the hearth.

"The description fits the girl we seek in almost every detail." Finlay did not raise his voice, so men quietened in order to hear him. "Can you tell me who she was with?"

Goffraid answered without hesitation. "Most of you can guess, I should think! She was with Kimi Torquilsson."

Torquil scowled, his furious blue gaze flicking from face to face around the hall. Lord Sitric draped one arm over the back of his chair and regarded the alcohol flushed face of his champion with interest.

Finlay raised his brows. "Then my lord Torquil," he said quietly, "will know of this girl?"

Torquil's knuckles shone white where they clenched around his ale cup. "Girl from Stornoway!"

"If you will allow us to meet her," Finlay said slowly, "we will soon know if it is the girl we seek."

Domnall breathed hard, his mouth clamped shut and Leod's worried brown gaze switched from one man to the other.

"We would pay compensation, Lord Torquil, if she is the girl we seek. I would not have you put out in any way over this." Finlay quietly named a figure that made Torquil blink and Domnall's eyes widened in a mixture of surprise and pleasure.

Lord Sitric leaned towards Torquil and whispered a word or two in his ear. Torquil frowned; then a grin spread across his face. He rose to his feet, clutched the table for balance and swung his cup high in the air. He ploughed his way, with a great many misplaced syllables, through a jerky and ungrammatical refusal of the offer on the grounds his son Kimi was desirous of the girl, would marry her very soon, and his captive was not, could not be, the person the King of Alba sought.

Long before the speech ended, Finlay knew he would have to give way. Lord Sitric had supported his own man, and to pursue the matter could only lead to raised tempers and bloodshed.

Finlay was not unduly worried. They would get the information they needed from Goffraid. In the event, he did not even have to ask, for Lord Goffraid joined him later, and told him of his brief conversation with Eba.

* * * *

Matters were less civilized in Annikki and Arne's house next day.

Conn had advised Eba to talk first to his mother, and let her speak to his father rather than blurt out the story to them both that evening. So, once Arne had left with both

wolfhounds trotting behind him, a white faced Eba waylaid Annikki between the fire pit and the loom, begged the surprised woman to sit down and gave her a garbled account of the incident outside St Patrick's.

"Kimi's behaviour was too bad, I agree." Annikki shook her head. "But Eba, you must understand. Torquil will give Kimi anything he asks for. The boy has always been high-spirited—"

"It was more than high-spirited. It was vicious." Eba nodded towards the servant girl sweeping ashes back into the hearth. "Why don't you ask Rhosyn? She was there!"

Annikki sighed again, turned and addressed the maid. "Well, Rhosyn?"

Rhosyn's eyes were enormous in her pale face, and she clutched the broom handle to her chest. "Mistress, Kimi ... Eba face in water, long time. Kimi hold head in water." Rhosyn mimed forcing someone down with both hands.

The street door banged opened, a puff of ash flew up around the hearth and Kimi strode into the lamplight. The three women, surprised, stared at him and Kimi slowed, looked from one to the other and recognized the dislike in all three faces.

"It's all lies, aunt." His voice was thick, as if he had a blocked nose. "You shouldn't believe what these two tell you."

Rhosyn quietly retreated and resumed sweeping at the other end of the hearth. Eba focussed on Kimi's red, swollen nose and could not help smiling. "There were witnesses, Kimi," she said sweetly. "You really can't expect to lie and be believed."

"Who would believe you?" Scorn laced Kimi's voice. He turned away from his aunt's curious stare.

"You think a priest and Lord Goffraid will say I fell in the river when they both saw you trying to drown me in St Patrick's spring? Don't be silly."

Annikki swung round, alarmed. "Lord Goffraid?" She took a deep breath. "Please Kimi, tell me the truth. Did you do what Eba says?"

"No, aunt, I did not."

"Kimi! You held me down in the water and nearly drowned me! Perhaps you could tell your aunt how you came to have such a swollen nose?"

Kimi scowled. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

"But you should explain yourself to your aunt, Kimi! Tell her why your favorite blue tunic was so splattered with blood you cannot wear it today. Go on, tell her!"

Further down the hall, Conn heard raised voices, opened sleepy eyes, rolled over on his sleeping bench and peered around the edge of his cubicle. His mother sat by the fire and looked from Kimi to Eba with lines of worry creasing her brow; Kimi stood in the shadows and glared at Eba. Conn lay back, sighed, and then reached for his breeches.

"I had a nose bleed, that's all," Kimi said at last.

Conn sauntered over, hair rumpled from sleep, still tying the drawstring of his breeches. "Good day, cousin."

Annikki smiled with relief. Conn draped a heavy arm across Kimi's shoulders, and Kimi, confident of his cousin's support, relaxed a little.

Annikki addressed her son quietly. "Did you see what happened yesterday, Conn?"

Caught in mid yawn, Conn's answer was slow. "I didn't see what happened at the church, for I wasn't there, mother."

Kimi grinned; his split lip oozed blood and he yelped at the sharp pain.

"But I did notice one thing," Conn said. "Eba was very wet when she came home."

Kimi grunted. "She would be, wouldn't she! She fell in the river!"

Conn considered his cousin. "I don't know of many lasses who fall in the river and come home soaked from the head down, but manage to keep their feet dry," he said. "Do you?"

Eba clapped her hands and grinned. "If I'd fallen in the water, my feet would have been wet, too!"

Kimi glared at Conn, who stared back, unimpressed. Annikki looked from her son to Kimi. "It sounds reasonable," she said. "And I know you have a temper, Kimi. Your nose—it does look sore, and you cannot speak clearly—"

The door banged again and Torquil strode into the house, his silver gilt hair lifting against his shoulders with the speed of his stride. He nodded to his sister, and turned on his son. His furious blue eyes were bloodshot and dark shadows lurked beneath them. "Last night I hear—you drown girl, Lord Goffraid strike you?" A long silence followed. "Answer me!" he bellowed.

Eba jumped and Annikki flinched, but Kimi was not afraid of his father. "It's not true!" A shift of his head indicated Eba. "She's the one telling lies!"

Torquil's lips thinned beneath his moustache and he turned to his sister. "You know truth?"

Annikki waved eloquent hands in the air. "I think it must be true. She says Lord Goffraid's men brought her home. He may confirm it. Eba was drenched, yet she had dry feet so she could not have fallen in the Poddle, as Kimi says. And Kimi's nose does look swollen this morning, which it would be if Lord Goffraid hit him."

"Goffraid didn't hit me!" Kimi's fine pale skin was scarlet with temper as he pointed at Eba. "She did!"

Torquil's silver brows rose. "Girl hit you? You let girl—"

Exasperated, Kimi looked ready to burst. "She didn't hit me, she—" He broke off, realizing he could not say more unless he incriminated himself.

Torquil stared; then a smile lit his square jawed face. "You lie. Girl slap face!"

Kimi stared at the floor. Conn and his mother exchanged glances. Eba lifted her chin, gazed at Torquil and spoke with determination. "I'm sorry, but I cannot marry your son."

Kimi took a step forward. "But I want to marry her," he said. "Please, father."

"I refuse!" Eba backed away, rejection in every line of her body.

Torquil's blue gaze travelled from Kimi to the girl. "He, Kimi—" He nodded at his son. "Well born, good home. Fine children to come. He inherits all. Is good match."

Eba shuddered. "He would kill me, I am sure of it."

Torquil clicked his tongue in irritation and raised his eyes to the roof thatch. "This all flying," he declared, and glanced

at his sister. "Talk. Tell her, good match." He frowned, and turned to Eba. "You wed. Lord Sitric agrees. Good future." He turned to his son and spoke in his own language.

Kimi smiled and tried not to make his lip bleed.

Chapter 13

Marjatta retreated to her private quarters while male servants, capped and hooded, jabbed long poles into the roof thatch and brought down a shower of dust and debris. Two dogs patrolled the hall and pounced, snarling, on dislodged roof dwellers. Maids raked the debris and the old rushes into piles, and Eba trailed behind them, a long handled besom in her hands.

The action of sweeping warmed her blood and roused her thoughts. She knew Conn and his mother could not help her openly without losing Torquil's friendship and if he turned against them, such was his power that their position in Dublin would be tenuous at best. She had hoped for more from Lord Goffraid, yet it seemed that he too was afraid to act against the joint wishes of Lord Sitric and Kimi's father. She concluded that since no one would help her, she must do something to help herself.

Conn had confided that he had seen Finlay of Alba at the horse races on the beach, and that he had also heard him ask Lord Sitric and Torquil to release her. "He seems like a good man," Conn had said softly, one eye on the loom where his mother worked.

"Well, if it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be in this predicament," Eba said tartly. She remembered her excitement when Finlay of Alba had stalked into Bundalloch, when she had thought him the handsomest man she had ever seen, and ground her teeth together. So much for looks, she thought. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

"He could have ignored the situation," Conn said mildly.
"He could have left it up to your brother to come after you."

Eba thought about it. Domnall didn't have a ship capable of sailing to Dublin, or the knowledge to do it. "I suppose ... Yes, you are right."

She had also asked Conn why his cousin now seemed so in favor the marriage. "He didn't want me at all in the beginning," she said.

"He didn't expect you to reject him out of hand," Conn said. "When you did, you hit at his pride, so he tried to humiliate you by saying you would be his slave, that's all."

"What a wonderful marriage this is going to be," she said sourly.

Eba swept slowly, one eye on the servants and chattering, flirting maids. She had spied a small door at the rear of the hall and hoped that it matched the one in Annikki's house. She chose her moment, lifted the latch and peeped through to find oh! Joy of joys it opened onto the cooking area and from there, open air.

Eba stepped over the threshold, closed the door and darted out into the damp weedy undergrowth. The wicker fence was old and she tore her skirt scrambling over it; but it didn't stop the elation rising in her chest as she trotted through the neighbor's garden and edged quietly out into the narrow deserted lane.

Buildings lined both sides of the rutted track that curved gently down to the river. Eba set off at a run, turned the corner and shot into a small open square. She rotated on the spot, panting. There were several exits. She could smell the

river. The palisade reared high on her left, but where were the gates? She bit her lip in frustration, and plunged off to the right. Within a few strides she ran onto the quayside.

She met noise and a blast of cold damp air off the river. The quayside was busy. Eba plunged to a halt, her mouth dry, glanced left and right, confused once again. Ships lay along the length of the quay like piglets to the sow and each one covered, like flies on rotten meat, with men. Some had already noticed her. They stared, and nudged their fellows.

Eba shut her mouth and tried to control her wild breathing, but she could not prevent the damp breeze from flattening her skirts and revealing the outline of her legs. More men stared. Her instinct was to turn and walk away. She backed a pace or two, and then got a grip of herself. If she was to escape, she could not go back into the settlement. She had to go on. She ignored the stares, leers and catcalls, clenched her teeth, set her shoulders and marched along the line of vessels.

In ten paces, she saw the emblem of Alba at the masthead. She burst into a run, stubbed her toe painfully on a thick rope and hopped a few steps, her eyes on the distant ship. A familiar figure, made small by distance, was about to disappear below an awning. "Leod!" she yelled, and waved, too excited to care who heard her. "Leod! I'm here! Here!"

She did not notice the hand on her arm until it dragged her to a halt. She half turned, and found herself face to face with Kimi. She lunged away from him, but could not shake him off. She glanced back. Leod strode across the ship to the

quayside. Other men poured after him. Kimi saw it, too.
"Conn! Take her other arm. Quick!"

Eba's shock was doubled when Conn grasped her arm. Between them, the cousins propelled her back along the quayside so fast her feet never touched the ground. Conn yelled once and several Viking crews rolled ashore and blocked the entire waterfront so Leod and his men were unable to get through.

The cousins slowed and stopped in the same small open square she had run through such a short time ago. Released, Eba flopped to her knees, and hid her face in her hands. She had been so close, so very close to Leod's safe arms. White faced with shock and reaction, she sobbed uncontrollably until Conn crouched down, laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and rocked her gently. "Please don't," he said. "We had to bring you back. You know we can't let you go."

"Yes, you could," she stuttered, gasping between spread fingers. "It wouldn't have mattered. Leod saw me," she said accusingly.

Conn looked up at his cousin. "Kimi's father would have my head if I'd let you go."

"Annikki wouldn't have let him." Eba glared at him as if he was an imbecile. "She's his *sister*. You're his *nephew*!"

Conn laughed soundlessly. "You have no idea," he remarked, got to his feet and pulled her up beside him. "Now, please, we must go back. Marjatta wants to talk to you."

Eba groaned. "Why can't Kimi marry somebody else?" She wiped her sleeve across her cheeks and looked at the blond

youth standing quietly beside them. "Kimi, I don't like you, and I have no respect for you. We shouldn't marry."

Kimi shrugged. Eba saw the spark that appeared in his blue eyes and the unconscious, suggestive wriggle of his hips and felt sick. "But I want to marry you," he said, his gaze sliding down her slim form. "I can't wait to marry you."

"You mean you can't wait for a bed fellow," she snapped.

Kimi leaned forward and cupped his hand around her jaw. His mouth descended towards hers. Eba flung herself back with a moan of revulsion, but his grip was tight and he gathered her against him.

With a muttered oath, Conn tore them apart. "That's enough!" His voice was rough and his eyes blazed. One hand was curled into a fist and jiggled back and forth beneath his chin as if he longed to hit someone.

Kimi kept hold of Eba's wrist and glanced from the large fist to his cousin's face in amusement. "Who are you going to hit, Conn? Ah—no you don't!" He grabbed Eba's arm more firmly. "You don't get away that easily. What's wrong, Conn?"

Conn straightened abruptly, and let his fist fall to his side. "Nothing."

Eba fixed him with a stare that could have melted steel. Conn turned aside, his gaze on the ground.

* * * *

"Now, girl, tell me why you ran away."

Dishevelled and weary, Eba stood stiff backed in the cleansed hall of Torquil mac Leod. Her nose was blocked and her eyes were sore because she'd wept all the way back from

the quayside. At Marjatta's question, various answers rose in her mind. Along with them came a small image of herself standing in similar fashion before the Queen at Inverness. Eba wished fervently that she could go back to that time. "I don't wish to marry your son."

Marjatta settled more comfortably in her carved chair. "You had, perhaps, planned to marry someone else. Someone your family recommended."

They were statements rather than questions. A teasing conversation with Leod popped into Eba's thoughts; but that day at Bundalloch now seemed so long ago and so far away. Somewhere behind her, a bucket squealed across the floor and she flinched. "No, nothing had been arranged for me."

Marjatta regarded a point behind Eba's shoulder. "Lift the bucket, Niall; don't drag it." The calm blue gaze returned to Eba. "Then why make such a fuss?"

"I don't—can't—he—" The denial would not frame itself into tactful phrases. Eba shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. "I don't think we're suited."

"His bloodline is good. He will inherit his father's property in Dublin, and there are also lands in Lewis and Uist. You would not be poor. And he is such a kind, handsome boy."

Eba stared at Marjatta's placid face and realized the woman saw nothing wrong with her son and would never believe he terrorized and tormented people. The familiar splatter of a wet cloth on wood sounded behind her. She cleared her throat and looked up. "I'm sorry. Kimi and I are not suited. He frightens me."

"Frightens you? He is but a boy! I do not think he has even bedded a girl yet." Marjatta's smile was genuine. "You would learn about bed matters together."

"Kimi has had many women, according to Lord Torquil." Eba could not repress a shudder of distaste.

"All men boast of their prowess," Marjatta said dismissively. "You need not be afraid of the marriage bed, girl. It is good sport, and nothing to fear. Has your mother not told you this?"

"My mother died when I was twelve," Eba said stiffly. "I ask you to release me and let me go back to my own life in Alba. I'm sure my brother would be glad to redeem me. I know he is in Dublin now, and searching for me."

"It is my husband's wish you should marry our son." Marjatta's shoulders lifted a little, and her expression did not change. "It is a good offer. Better by far than the slave house." She nodded as Eba's eyes widened. "For myself, I had hoped my son would marry a princess of Ireland rather than a girl who has nothing to offer but her looks."

It wasn't unkindly meant; indeed, sheer practicality rang through Marjatta's voice, but Eba closed her mouth before she could say something rude. Marjatta took her silence for acquiescence and smiled. "I have had one of my maids make a gown for you. Would you like to see it?"

* * * *

When Eba made her bid for freedom, Sorchand had been engaged in the one diversion open to him within the confines of the slave camp. The guards made no effort to prevent the

slaves coupling, and often stopped on the palisade above to watch and make wagers. If a slave got pregnant, then her price went up, for her buyer got two slaves instead of one.

The shrieking female voice had shocked him into stillness. He stared at the wall without seeing it, for he recognized the voice. When Sorchand did not move, the girl beneath him used her hips to nudge him, and her hand dragged his head back to her mouth. Sorchand disengaged without apology, scrambled to his feet blank faced and with his tunic askew. The girl stared, thought him mad and hastily covered herself. Sorchand stood over her, wide-eyed, listening.

"Don't worry." She spoke kindly, as if she thought him scared witless by the noise outside and sought to soothe him. "It's nothing to do with us."

* * * *

The *Shadow Wolf* swung at anchor on the dark water and the crew ate and listened while their leaders argued. "We can't leave her there," Leod said hotly. "We have to do something!"

"I think abduction is out of the question," Finlay said. "You saw how the two lads came after her, and the crewman stopped you reaching her."

The light breeze drifted over the mud of the river bank and brought dank river smells to mix with odors of food. The crew went on eating and Domnall, a sullen cast to his face, remained uncharacteristically silent. The lantern dipped with the ship's movement and revealed a spreading bruise across Leod's cheekbone where a Viking fist had caught him. "But

she is in danger!" he said. "She must be—she was running as if all the furies of hell were after her!"

Finlay nodded, surprised at Leod's sudden vehemence. "We are all concerned, Leod. But we are four men and a small crew compared to the vast number of men Lord Sitric could muster if Torquil required it. Do you really think we would be allowed to take her, and sail away?"

Leod let out a deep, resentful sigh. "Are we to just sit on our backsides, then? We've sailed a hell of a long way to do nothing!"

Finlay tossed his empty skewer into the dish. "How do you recommend we rescue her? Do you have a plan? No, I thought not." Finlay smiled in the gloom. "I recommend we pool what we know and perhaps then we might think of something."

They knew more than they expected, when they put it all together.

Chapter 14

Light streamed across the flat, colored stones of the square and whoops of laughter echoed through the night. As he crossed the threshold of Torquil's hall, Finlay looked down. "Clean rushes," he said. Domnall, Leod and Hareth crowded in behind him.

Guthrum overheard the comment as he pushed through the crowd towards them. "A big feast to celebrate Kimi's wedding tomorrow, you see. The Lady Marjatta has worked the slaves until they're ready to drop; everything must be perfect for her wonderful son." His quick dark glance lingered on the snarling beasts trapped forever within a rim of gold at the King of Alba's shoulder, and then rose quickly to his face. "Welcome, my lord," he added belatedly.

"Have I met Kimi?"

Guthrum's thin face broke into smiles. He had finally warmed to the Alban King. "My lord, you've likely heard of him. He's Torquil's son, and still young, perhaps fourteen. He's over there, dressed in blue. Would you like to meet him?"

A group of well-dressed youths talked and laughed at the far side of the hall. "It's one of the lads I saw on the waterfront," Leod said.

"He'll make a handsome bridegroom," Hareth said.

"We should wish him luck." At Finlay's gesture, Guthrum set off across the hall. Finlay turned back briefly. "Leod, Domnall; find out what you can. We'll talk to the lad."

Kimi did not end his conversation, but kept the King of Alba waiting. Finlay's brows lifted at the discourtesy and Guthrum shouldered into the group, grasped the fair haired youth's arm and introduced him to the King of Alba, who said only, "Allow us to offer good wishes for your marriage tomorrow."

Torchlight lit the youth's bored expression, the dense blue eyes and the bruising covering half of his face. "Thank you."

Guthrum looked from one to the other, and felt the constraint. Frowning at Kimi, who took no notice, he finally filled the growing silence himself. "The marriage will take place in the morning, with the blessing shortly afterwards." He saw his opportunity for revenge, and took it. "She's a beautiful girl and none of us thinks Kimi deserves her." His eyes sparkled maliciously. "Especially not with a face like that!"

Kimi's lip curled back from his teeth, but Guthrum, with a quick duck of the head in Finlay's direction, left them. Kimi glared at the King of Alba instead.

"It must be painful," Finlay said, studying the blotched, fine grained skin and swollen nose.

"Not at all." Already annoyed, Kimi's voice lurched from soprano to baritone between three simple words and his skin flushed pink in between the bruising.

Hareth coughed to hide an impulse to laughter. "It is indeed lucky you are to be marrying a beautiful girl. Is she here tonight?"

"No."

"Have you known her long?"

"No."

A spark appeared in Hareth's pale eyes, and Finlay's hand closed in warning on his arm.

"Where is she from?" Finlay asked.

"I don't know."

Finlay's expression hardened. "It is usual to find well brought up sons have been trained to converse politely with guests in their father's hall. Where," he said, and allowed an edge to develop on his voice, "did you meet this girl?"

Insolence deepened in Kimi's eyes. "Here, in Dublin."

"Then she's Irish, perhaps?"

"No! I cannot marry into the Irish!"

"Why not?" Finlay asked. "Many do."

"Lord Sitric won't let me. He says we must keep our blood line pure."

Finlay's brows rose again. If such sentiments had indeed come from the man with the most mixed blood in Dublin, it needed serious consideration. "Then we ask again: where is she from?"

Kimi shrugged. "Father brought her from Lewis." His voice changed register again between one word and the next.

The embroidery at Finlay's collar glittered as he nodded. "Norwegian stock from Stornoway, then; your father knows the parents, perhaps?"

"I wouldn't know," Kimi said, bored. A sudden smile lit his face, and a bead of blood sprang up on his lip. "And I don't care. All I know is she's beautiful, and I can't wait to bed her." The blatant, erotic thrust of his hips made the idea unpleasant.

"Then I hope she feels the same way," Hareth said, as he saw the look of distaste cross Finlay's face. "I wonder, is your mother here tonight?"

Kimi gestured across the hall. A handsome woman with hair as fair as Kimi's own sat in the place of honor with the harper at her feet and Lord Sitric at her shoulder. As they watched, the Lord of Dublin leaned over, smiling, and smoothed his fingers across the bare skin of the woman's neck. He spoke softly into her ear, and she listened, and then smiled.

"Then we must pay our respects to your lady mother," Hareth said.

"White Christ!" Finlay muttered as the two men walked across the hall. "The boy's repellent, in spite of his looks! If this is how Kimi behaves on his wedding eve, what is he normally like?"

"A nasty piece of work all the time, I should think," Hareth said, and put out a hand to detain Finlay. "I'd like to congratulate whoever worked on his face. Lord Sitric seems on very good terms with his mother, too. Did you notice?" He surveyed the crowd. "Kimi was one of the two lads who caught Eba when she escaped. Where, I wonder, is the other?"

They stood in the middle of the hall and stared about them. "Goffraid should know him," Finlay said. "If Kimi is Torquil's son, the other lad might be a cousin. Do you think he'll be like him?" Finlay jerked his head in the direction of Kimi.

"No family could be so unlucky, surely?"

They soon found Lord Goffraid. Resplendent in dark blue silk and with his dark red hair waving to his tunic collar, he escorted them towards a group playing dice and tapped a blond youth on the shoulder. Conn rattled the bone squares onto the board, groaned at the outcome and stepped aside with a smile. His broad, good-natured face clouded when he heard their query.

"Eba is at my mother's home," he answered pleasantly. "She is to be married tomorrow, to my cousin Kimi. There is nothing I can do about it." He spoke as if he wished things were different, but before he added anything further, his hand shot out close to Hareth's ear. Hareth flinched as a leather ball smacked into Conn's palm. "They almost got you," Conn said, grinning.

Lord Goffraid spun round, ready to bawl out the culprit. The noise in the hall had grown, and most of it emanated from a group of high-spirited youths who had long since grown bored with bowling at wooden skittles. They had grabbed Hurling sticks instead. One of them had whacked the ball without thought for where it might land.

"They should go outside if they want a game," Finlay said mildly.

Hareth's face blazed with sudden enthusiasm. "Hurley! I haven't had a decent game since I left Glaslough!"

Lord Goffraid caught the tone of longing and his quick glance flicked from Finlay of Alba back to Hareth. "I'm sure they'll give you a game, if you want."

The young men bounced a small white ball from stick to stick between them. Hareth could not tear his eyes away.

"Be warned," Conn said, laughing. "They play rough."

Hareth swung round, affronted. "You think I play a soft game?"

Lord Goffraid raised his voice. "Hey, lads! This foolish man wants a game of Hurley."

They came clustering around, a group of handsome, fit young men with grins from ear to ear. One thrust a hurling stick into Hareth's hands. Conn looked at Finlay. "It's the fastest game I know, and the oldest," he said. "We picked it up from the Irish. If you try it, I can promise you'll come out with bruises."

Goffraid laughed. "You didn't see these two at the horse races! They can hold their own!"

Finlay hesitated, and the ring of lads waited, their eyes keen and bright. He grasped the stick, and tried a sweep or two. The youths raised a cheer, and someone handed him a curious leather ball sewn so the ridges were raised to give it a precarious foothold on the blunt, rounded end of Finlay's stick. "This is the *sliotar*."

The ball promptly dropped off the stick. The lads thought it was hilarious. "You're supposed to balance it and run with it at the same time," Goffraid said, grinning.

Finlay twitched the stick under the ball, scooped it up and bounced it as he had seen the others do. Hareth watched him. "We'll be calling you Setanta before the nights out. Come on! Let's give it a try. I'll bet these lads don't know how the game should really be played."

His enthusiasm was infectious. They swarmed outside into the cool twilight, and someone ran for a supply of sticks. The

big door was left open and light spilled out across the open space, but it wasn't enough. Goffraid called for torches and had them fixed to the darker corners of Torquil's house until the colored cobbles shone in the flaring light. Lord Sitric and Torquil strolled to the door and watched the proceedings.

"It's small, but it'll have to do." Goffraid stood and glared around the rectangular space outside the hall-house. "The playing field is outside the gates and anyway," he grinned at Finlay, "this is where the ale is. The church door over there will be one goal, and Ragnar's house," he swung round, arm outstretched, "at the far end, there, can be the other." He turned back to Finlay, and eyed him up and down. "Have you played this before?"

Finlay rammed the gold circlet down over his brow, and shook his head. "No, but I was brought up on games that were much the same."

"You need to run, and run fast for a long time so you can mark your man. In your case, it'll be Bjorn there. Good luck to you. Don't say you weren't well warned."

Conn had already distributed colored sashes among his team and invited the two Alban men to join him. At the last moment Torquil mac Leod snatched a colored sash from Goffraid's hand and stuck it through the back of his belt, and slid a nasty glance at Finlay as he did so. Lord Sitric lobbed the *sliotar* into the centre of the open space. The four nearest players pounced on it. There was a short sharp squabble of sticks and cobbles and the *sliotar* shot up into the air. Hareth caught it on his stick and ran towards the church door, shrieking "Glaslough! Glaslough!"

Finlay flinched at the bone-jarring crunch as every other player converged on Hareth. A slight figure he thought might be Guthrum wormed a way out from the struggle, and tossed the ball forward. A team-mate caught it, dropped and whacked it in one beautiful movement. The ball flew down the length of the pitch and Finlay started to run.

He was still running when the ball hit the church door and a goal was declared. The ball came back to the centre and it all began again, but this time Finlay was ready for the speed of it. When the ball flew up from the mid-field player's stick, Finlay met it in midair and ran with it. Bjorn challenged him from the left and Finlay heeled right and heard Hareth yelling behind him. Torchlight flickered and danced on the smooth stones, the calls of the spectators echoed in the dark space between the buildings and he was conscious of muttered curses punctuated by the clatter of sticks on cobbles as opposing players tried to take the ball from him.

A stick shot forward underneath Finlay's, hooked the ball and veered away in the opposite direction. Finlay swore and stared after a grinning Goffraid. "Is that legal?"

Hareth pounded by. "Yes! Come on, keep up!"

The ball hurtled past chest high in the opposite direction, and Finlay turned, swore again when the soles of his boots slipped on the smooth stones and raced after it. The *sliotar* bounced twice, one of Goffraid's players got his stick to it and slapped it off the wall of the building to land almost at Finlay's feet.

Finlay swung at it and saw another stick hook the ball out from under his own. A solid muscular body cannoned into his

shoulder and shoved him through the air. Finlay landed like a cat to face the furious squabble behind him. Torquil hovered off to one side, shot a sly glance at Finlay and watched the scrum like a cat at a mouse hole. The ball flew up, Torquil leapt forward, Guthrum slammed his stick round and the ball shot off at an angle and sailed through the air to land on the thatch of the building next to the church. Everyone groaned.

Hareth panted at Finlay's elbow. "Bloody hell! Is it coming down?"

His eyes on the roof, Finlay waited. "Yes. No. Yes, there, quick!"

The ball rolled, and gathered speed down the slope of the thatch. It hit a rough patch, hopped into the air, dropped into a hollow and stayed there.

"Now what?" Finlay stared around.

Guthrum was at his left shoulder. "Normally, we'd carry on with another *sliotar*. But there's a problem."

"There's no spare ball?" Hareth guessed. "Hey!"

Lord Goffraid's team ran to the wall. Two men crouched with arms clasped around each other's waists, and hoisted the smallest youth to their shoulders; from there he leapt to the roof. He grasped the ball, and hurled it just as the thatch gave way. His mouth open in a soundless shriek, he toppled backwards and dropped out of sight. The players whooped with laughter and surged after the ball.

Conn got his stick to it, and whacked it towards the goal. Goffraid raced across the cobbles, stuck out his stick, and the *sliotar* flew off on a diagonal. Finlay twisted, swung his stick,

heard it connect and watched the ball slam into the goal mouth.

Elation shot through him. His team cheered and danced while the opposition muttered, glared and stalked back to the centre. Goffraid looked across, smiled and waved his stick in acknowledgment. The ball went in, and mid field players threw themselves onto it. Conn darted past Finlay, a wide grin splitting his face. "Now you'll see some action!"

Conn had positioned himself well. The ball came to his feet, and he hooked it over his head to the next player, who slapped it towards Hareth who tore off down the field and no one was there to stop him striking the ball into the goal mouth.

Finlay waved his stick in the air and yelled at Hareth. "This is as good as sailing the *Wolf!*" Lord Sitric lobbed the ball into the centre, the mid field men dived on it and the rattle of sticks echoed across the square. The ball trickled out to one side, two men dived for it and the *sliotar* shot skywards.

This time it went clean over the rooftree. There was a massed groan. Someone had the presence of mind to grab the nearest torch from its iron socket before he ran into the dark alley between the houses. Thirty men pounded after him in furious, silent concentration.

The new moon provided some light. There was an unkempt yard with a pigsty and the usual midden. There was also a young couple locked together against the wall of the pig house. The torchlight found them, gleamed on naked flesh and howls of derision and gratuitous advice hit the air. The young man, with a single-minded devotion to duty, kept up

the pounding rhythm and the sounds from the girl seemed to indicate she too found it an overwhelming experience.

The *sliotar* had been painted white but proved hard to locate. Men prowled through the shadows prodding anything remotely small, white and round. The girl's discarded cap, hooked into the air, floated down again, strings dancing. Someone's pet cat shot off, yowling, and one or two doors opened a finger span as cautious owners peered out, saw what was happening and slammed the door shut again.

A small black shadow with four feet and a long tail skittered across the yard and disappeared into the next garden. Someone put his foot in something soft and unpleasant, and growled an oath. A cry went up. Someone held up a small, white round ball, and rolled it towards the lighted square. Finlay and Hareth streaked after it and pounded into the square with the *sliotar* at Hareth's feet. He was mobbed before he could get rid of it, and an impacted knot of men shuffled towards the goal.

Torquil guarded his goal mouth. He bounded forward to intercept with his stick held across his chest like a weapon. His eyes never left the shuffling mass of bodies, and when they were ten or twelve paces away, he charged forward, the ash wood stick above his shoulder and swung it in an arc. Finlay heard the solid thud as it landed, and a man went down. The *sliotar* trickled out of the group. Torquil skipped to one side, flicked his stick and whacked the ball down the length of the square.

The pack roared off after it. Finlay set off, and then looked over his shoulder. Torquil sauntered back to his goalmouth,

his stick over his shoulder, and never gave a thought to the man lying immobile on the cobbles. It was a mistake to look back. The *sliotar* hurtled through the air, slapped against Finlay's chest, dropped to the ground and rolled away. He sprang after it, and the pack swept over him.

Buffeted from all sides, Finlay could do nothing until the pressure eased. When it did he roared after them, saw the *sliotar* in the middle of a goal mouth muddle and lunged for it. Someone hooked his stick. He met Torquil's ferocious glare and wrenched his stick free. Torquil overbalanced, tripped and fell forward and as he rolled, he swung his hurling stick round on a line with Finlay's ankles. Finlay skipped to one side, and saw Goffraid's stick deflect Torquil's lethal swipe.

* * * *

Conn limped home with his head full of Hurley, polished off two beakers of ale and regaled his mother and Eba with the highlights of the mad, vicious game before he noticed Eba's quietness and how often her eyes slid sideways to the gown hung on wall pegs. It was the gown Marjatta had sent for her to wear tomorrow.

The peat burned on the hearth, droning to itself in the quiet shadows of the hall. His mother settled a feather filled cushion behind her head, stretched her toes towards the hearth and relaxed. Conn picked up a knife and piece of wood from the log basket and studied it from all angles.

Eba roused, and turned to Annikki. "Where are the clothes I was wearing when I arrived here?"

The older woman blinked. "Oh, they're brushed and clean." She stifled a yawn. "I've put them in the chest for you."

"Could I—will you let me have them now? Please?"

Annikki rummaged through a chest by the wall and pulled free a roll of soft, honey colored leather. "A good sturdy riding dress and breeches, but hardly fit for a wedding." Annikki smiled and handed over the garments. "But a little bit of home, you'll be thinking?"

Eba let the soft bundle unroll and held a sleeve to her nose, but the soft scents of Alba had long since vanished. Nevertheless, it represented Bundalloch, and Alba and all the craggy burns and valleys and soaring hilltops she might never see again. Her face crumpled.

Conn sat silent and watched his mother put an arm around the girl's shoulders. "Eba, go to bed. I'll bring a hot drink, and you shall sleep. It's been a long, hard day. You'll feel stronger in the morning."

Eba shook her head, blinked away the unshed tears, sent a vague smile in Conn's direction and wandered towards her sleeping place with her old clothes held close in her arms. She pulled off tunic and shoes, unrolled the goose down quilt and crawled under it, still hugging her riding clothes to her chest. Even if the opportunity arose, she was too tired to escape tonight.

Chapter 15

Hurley players staggered inside, battered, bruised and stripped to their breeches, and consumed vast quantities of ale and relived the game while others concentrated on noisy games of dice and skittles. The mood was one of prodigious good humor, and Leod's idea they should, indeed must, speak to their hostess was born out of that goodwill.

Marjatta and the few remaining ladies had retreated to one corner of the hall. Gowned in the same shade of blue as her son, with amber stones at her ears and her pale hair plaited in luxurious coils and rolls at the nape of her neck, she agreed to speak to them.

It was not unusual for men to approach her when the request would normally have been directed to her husband, for Torquil's poor grasp of the language deterred strangers. Her gaze slid over Leod's darkly handsome face, moved down, lingered on his thighs and slowly returned to his face.

Leod was shocked by the warmth of her gaze and embarrassed by the wave of heat that rose through his body. He cleared his throat, introduced himself and his companion and forgot what he wanted to say. The nudges and smiles among the girls behind Marjatta's chair increased.

"Get on with it!" Domnall muttered behind his shoulder. Leod pulled himself together and took a deep breath. "It was agreed long ago I would marry Lord Domnall's sister the Lady Eba." Marjatta nodded, raised one eyebrow and shared a smile between the two men. "Unhappily the girl has been taken from Lord Domnall's protection."

Marjatta's eyes flickered as Leod continued. "The girl was taken by Vikings, and brought to Dublin. We know where she resides, but we cannot find a way to approach the lady of the house without causing alarm. We wondered if you might act as intermediary."

The dense blue eyes scrutinised him carefully. "Does this girl have a name? How does she look?"

A smile lit Leod's face and there was a sudden flurry of movement behind Marjatta's chair as the maids glanced at each other. "She is about so tall." Leod held his palm flat to the floor at a point level with his shoulder. "Her hair is golden. Her eyes are blue, and she is slender and graceful. I have loved her for so long I cannot recall a time when I have not loved her. We were to marry at Christmas." He glanced down at his feet. The last was a lie, but Marjatta was not to know.

"My sister has a birthmark," Domnall said. "It is a small purple mark on the underside of her arm, her right arm. You can't miss it."

Marjatta's brow cleared with remarkable speed. "I am sorry for your loss, but I cannot help you. I thought for a moment I knew the girl of whom you spoke, but this is untrue. The girl I know has no birthmark on either arm."

Domnall was not convinced. "Does the girl you thought of live with a woman called Annikki?"

"That girl has no birthmarks."

Domnall considered her answer. "Well, you'd have to lift her arm and peer at the underside of it," he said. "I don't suppose you've done that?"

Marjatta's smile was for Leod alone, and it was a dismissal. "I am so sorry. I would have helped you if I could, but it is not possible."

Disappointed, they had barely rejoined Finlay and Hareth when Domnall registered a small tug at his elbow, and glanced down into the thin, pale face of a young girl with brown curls. "What do you want?"

The small hand leapt off his arm and the girl took a step back, ready to flee. "Girl at house Annikki..." Her voice was a mere whisper. "She has mark ... here." She tapped the underside of her own arm, and nodded. "I not stay. Marjatta—" The girl showed a clenched fist, and shivered.

Domnall opened his mouth, but the girl slid through a gap in the crush of people and was gone. Hareth's eyes followed her progress across the hall "Who is she?"

"She was standing with Marjatta's maids. The ones who found Leod so handsome," Domnall grunted. "She knows Eba!"

"Domnall told Marjatta there was a birthmark on Eba's arm," Leod explained. "Marjatta said the girl at Fishamble Street did not have the mark. The maid seems to think otherwise."

"She wanted to help Eba," Finlay said slowly. "We seem to have most of the information we require."

Hareth's gaze roamed over the hall. "This lot will be too drunk to stand before too long," he said.

"Exactly," said Finlay, grinning. "And I'm about to encourage them."

* * * *

Marjatta sought her son. His beautiful face was discolored, his fine-boned and delicate nose swollen quite out of shape. Marjatta stroked his cheek in commiseration. "Is it very sore?"

Kimi flinched away from her, anxious to avoid any discussion of how he had met with such damage to his face. "Of course it's sore," he snapped. "What do you expect? I got a powder from the men's hall to take away the pain." He waved the ornate cup in his hand and his mother caught a whiff of honey and spices. She also recognized Lord Sitric's gold cup from which favored bridegrooms were allowed to drink on their wedding eve, and smiled happily. It seemed Lord Sitric had forgiven their indiscretion of last October. At least, she thought, this girl Eba was pretty and had some breeding, even if she wasn't a princess of Meath. "Don't worry," she said. "It will have gone down by morning."

"I hope so, mother."

Marjatta studied him with affection. "I like your new voice, Kimi. You're so grown up at last. Do you truly like this girl Eba?"

Kimi shrugged. "I cannot get her out of my mind."

"You've not shown much interest in girls until now. She must be special."

Kimi smirked. "Perhaps, mother, this is what folk call love? This ache to have her from the day I first saw her? I must have her for my own."

The blue of his eyes made her think of the small, delicate violets in the grassy banks at home in Lewis. Marjatta

squeezed his warm silk covered arm. "I think it must be, Kimi. If you care for her happiness, and long to share the pleasures and cares of every day with her, then, yes, I think it must be love."

His lids dropped. A slight smile curved his swollen mouth. He lifted the gold cup, and drifted away.

* * * *

Conn stayed by the fire long after his mother and Eba retired. Tired servants returned from the festivities, extinguished the torches and candles and sought their own beds. Light winked and gleamed on the turn of the blade in his hand and he relaxed in the rare peace and quiet of the silent hall. Slowly the rough lump of wood changed shape. Now and then his fingers stilled as revellers threaded their noisy way home, and he cocked his head to one side but his father's voice was never among them.

At last Conn rose to his feet. He stretched to ease the muscles in his spine, walked a few paces into the shadows and turned to study the carving. He viewed it from all angles; paced to and fro, frowning, for some time. It was good. He smiled, well pleased, decided enough was enough, sheathed his knife and took himself off to his bed, yawning.

A little while later, the street door opened and a cool draught of air streamed across the banked fire and sent a fine plume of ash spiralling towards the rafters. A dark hooded shape eased around the door, closed it without a sound and crept down the middle of the hall. The shadow paused by Conn's alcove and then moved forward, drawn like a hound

on the scent towards a long strand of pale hair looped across a dark quilt.

The figure hovered over the sleeping girl, threw back the hood, shed the long cloak and placed one knee on the solid sleeping platform. Eba slept on; but warned, perhaps, by some deep instinct of self-preservation, she turned away from the invader, who waited, immobile and then drew closer and reached out to fondle her.

A few paces away across the hall, Conn stirred and wakened. He looked round, unsure what had woken him. He saw a vague, moving shadow by the girl's sleeping place. He frowned, looked again, yanked back his blanket and surged across the hall. He grasped the shadowy figure and hurled it back towards the fire pit.

Conn stared down at the pale, silvery hair revealed by the dim glow of the firepit. "Kimi! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The violence in his voice woke Eba with a jerk. She sat up, hair ribbons trailing, shift draped low over her shoulder and her hair sparkling in the gloom like a tangle of gold wire on the jeweller's workbench. "What's happening?" Then, in a different voice, she demanded, "What is *he* doing here?"

Kimi, flat on the floor, his legs outstretched and his weight braced on his palms, said nothing.

"I have no idea, but he'd better get out now before mother wakes or father comes home."

The fire slid apart and rosy light washed over them all. Eba blinked, looked again and saw that Conn was naked. Kimi

pushed one handed from the rushes with unsuspected grace and energy and stalked over to the girl.

Eba recoiled, and clutched the quilt to her throat. She could not see Kimi's expression, for his back was to the fire, but from the gusts of sour ale guessed he was drunk. She retreated to the wall at her back. His hand shot out. Eba lurched sideways and knew she had evaded his grasp, but when she looked down a strand of her hair stretched between them like a glinting golden rope. He wound it round and round his index finger. "You have such lovely hair," he said. Eba sat very still. "Eba, I am so sorry. I may well have terrified you. I realize now this was a stupid thing to do. But, Eba, I am so longing for our marriage tomorrow it seemed no sin to do this tonight."

Eba huffed in disbelief. "Believe me, it's a sin."

He toyed one handed with the lock of hair. His shoulders lifted once on a long, slow indrawn breath. Conn stood on bare and silent feet just behind his shoulder. "But I think it would be a sin to wait for tomorrow," Kimi said. "Don't you?" He closed his fingers and jerked hard on the strand of hair.

Eba squealed. Conn pounced on his cousin. Kimi was strong, for all his slender, boyish looks and he wrenched himself out of Conn's grip. Conn grasped him again, and Kimi's dagger flashed in the firelight. Eba yelled. "Conn! He's got a knife!"

Conn's fist fastened in Kimi's hair, jerked him off his feet and hauled him in the direction of the door. Eba swung out of bed, and ran after them, her pale shift billowing around her. She kicked Kimi twice and Kimi, scarlet with anger, screeched

insults at her and tried to break free of his cousin's grip at the same time.

The uproar woke Annikki. She marched into the hall with a stout quarter staff clutched in her small hands. "Stop!" she cried. "Eba! Stop kicking him! Kimi, stop fighting!" Losing her head, Annikki cracked the staff across Kimi's shoulders and felt real fear as he turned on her, his face a mask of rage. Conn's strong hands gripped and held him. Horrified, Annikki backed away, the staff clutched tight to her bosom.

No one spoke. Barefoot, clad only in her sleeping tunic, her brown hair standing out around her head in a fluffy tangle, Annikki grasped the quarter staff firmly and glared at them all. "Well?"

Eba pointed a shaking finger at Kimi. "He attacked me! Here, in your hall, in the middle of the night!"

Kimi shot Eba a look of pure hate. Conn turned, thrust a torch into the hearth until it flared and then rammed it into a holder above their heads. Light washed over them all. Eba caught a glimpse of Conn's nakedness, flushed and averted her eyes.

"Conn! Get dressed." His mother transferred her gaze to her nephew, who shrugged his blue silk tunic back into place. "Why are you here?"

Conn grabbed a blanket from a nearby bench and tied it around his lean hips. His eyes flicked from Eba to Kimi and back again.

"She wanted me to come tonight, in secret; she couldn't wait." Kimi lifted innocent blue eyes to his aunt's stern face.

"That's a lie!" Eba said.

Conn lit more torches and rammed them into holders. The strengthening light shone on Kimi's pale head as he lifted humble, apologetic eyes to his aunt. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have agreed to come. I know that now. But it didn't seem so wrong, since we marry tomorrow."

"You lying toad!"

Annikki ignored the girl, and glanced at her son. "You must have heard some of this. Did it sound like an assignation to you?"

"I was asleep."

"But you must have heard something!" Eba retorted. "You don't want to protect..." Eba's finger accused Kimi. "He is your cousin, I know, but Conn, I need you as witness."

Conn's wide shoulders moved in the torchlight. "How can I? I don't know if you did or you didn't. I was asleep, something woke me. I saw someone lean over you. It could have been anyone."

Kimi leered at her. Eba turned to Annikki. "I swear to you I'm telling the truth. I've said over and over I don't want to marry him! I dislike him! Why would I invite him to my bed in the middle of the night?" She glanced back at Conn. Did he believe she had invited Kimi to her bed? Is that why he was being so unhelpful?

Before Annikki could reply, the street door swung open for the second time that night, and her husband strolled in with his two great hounds loping at his heels. A middle-aged man of medium height, with broad shoulders and powerful arms, Arne was almost a stranger to Eba. Come straight from Torquil's hall, his blue eyes vivid in his drink-rosy skin, he

stared at the silent group in some surprise. "What's the matter here?" His gaze moved to the girl, and then to Kimi. "What are you doing here? It's passed midnight."

Annikki draped a blanket around the girl's shoulders, and Eba clutched the ends together across her chest. Kimi sniggered. He clasped his fingers behind his back and studied the floor.

Annikki sighed. "The girl says Kimi attacked her in her bed. Kimi says he didn't. Conn won't say what he heard or saw. Perhaps you can get some sense out of them."

Arne, swaying gently, looked at Kimi, a question in his lifted brows. He got no response. One of the hounds yawned behind him. Arne hooked his thumbs into his belt and glanced at his son. "Conn?"

"I was asleep. We all were, and something woke me. Someone was leaning over Eba, I couldn't see who, in the dark. I dragged him off her. Now he says she asked him to come tonight. She says he's lying."

Eba sent a wobbly smile in Conn's direction. If he hadn't reacted so quickly, what might have happened?

Kimi scowled and gazed at Arne. "Uncle, she did ask me to come here tonight."

"Sir, he's lying!" Eba cried.

Arne ignored the girl and turned with exaggerated care back to Conn. "Begin at beginning. How long ago did you go to bed?"

"Mother and Eba retired and then the servants came home. They doused the torches and went to bed. I stayed up; I spent some time carving by the fire. It was peaceful, for a

change." He scooped up the block of wood from the hearth and tossed it to Arne, who caught it one handed, examined it and nodded, smiling. It was an eagle, and very good. "I went to bed late," Conn added. "Everything was quiet and I was tired. I don't know how long I'd been asleep before he came creeping in."

Arne's head lifted at the last few words, a frown fretting his forehead and Annikki stifled a gasp with her fingers. Arne stared at his son. "He crept in? Like a thief? He didn't ask for entry?"

"He didn't come openly. As I said earlier, he was already here when I woke. He made no sound, and he had to pass by me to reach the girl."

Arne's blue eyes narrowed. He handed the carving to Conn, removed his cloak, laid it across his wife's arm and faced his nephew. "You waited till the house was asleep, and then crept in; the girl says you attacked her."

"Uncle, she begged me to make love to her tonight." Kimi's quick, flashing smile appeared. "Since we marry tomorrow, I could see no harm in it."

"I can," said Annikki, annoyed. "It is against all the rules."

"And my wishes!" Eba's temper revived and she whirled on Annikki. "How can you believe him?" She glared at Kimi. "He's a brute and a bully, and I've never wanted anything to do him! I didn't invite him here tonight. He must think we're all stupid!"

Kimi's face twisted, and his clenched fist drew back to strike the girl. With unlooked for speed, Arne's large hand blocked the blow in mid-air and fastened on Kimi's wrist,

wrenched it behind his back and marched his nephew down the hall. "I don't want any man in my house unless he knocks on the door and asks entry!" He gave Kimi a hefty double handed push between the shoulder blades, and followed it up with another. The youth crashed against the door.

"Oh, Arne—" Annikki clasped her fingers to her mouth. Her brother Torquil idolized the boy, and wouldn't be pleased to see him covered in new bruises for his wedding day. Not that he'd be able to tell, she thought; he wouldn't be able to tell the new bruises from the old.

Her husband stood legs apart, and dusted his hands together in satisfaction.

Kimi hovered by the door, and glared at them all. Arne took a step towards Kimi, prepared to throw him out. Kimi snarled, turned and slid round the door.

Eba backed a couple of paces to her mattress and sat down rather suddenly.

Arne announced he was off to bed, and left. Conn moved the candle stand closer and sat on the floor with his back against Eba's bed. The dogs yawned and sprawled on the warm stones of the hearth. His mother brought a beaker of warm milk, sent Conn off to bed and sat with the girl while she drank.

Eba understood things would go hard for them if they released her, and she did not plead. She was grateful Conn had reacted so fast. In her mind's eye she recalled the strapping of muscle running from neck to shoulders, the width of his wrist bones, and the sheer girth of his arms. She lifted her own arm clear of the blanket, rotated her wrist and saw

at once how delicate the bones were in comparison. Even Kimi, who did not yet have Conn's bulk, was so much stronger than she. Eba pulled the warm quilt higher and huddled beneath it.

In Bundalloch, she had always had Domnall to protect her. At Inverness, the mere fact she had the King's interest had been some protection, and Hareth had looked out for her in an odd sort of way. Here, she was alone, but for Arne, Annikki and Conn.

She wondered how far Arne would go against Torquil and Sitric, and guessed it would not be, could not be, very far. With a jolt, she remembered Rhosyn. Even Conn, it seemed, would take a girl if he felt so inclined. She wondered why she had ever been so stupid to think it was a good idea to leave Inverness.

Chapter 16

Finlay stood at the gunwale as the *Wolf's* crew took the ship silently down the river and wondered if he was on a fool's errand. His duty, and his heart, lay in Alba, where his task was to bind the loose community of Celts, Vikings and Picts into one harmonious and hardy nation. He had promised his wife that the separation would be short. "It will take as long as it takes," she had said, leaning close and speaking softly against his ear. "Ross and I will take care of Alba for you."

The hairs on his forearms lifted in the cool dampness of early morning. Yesterday evening, when the scout had clattered into Dublin on a hastily requisitioned pony and warned of the Waterford fleet, it had seemed a good idea to sail out and meet Ivarr of Waterford. Now, staring at the widening river mouth, Finlay wondered what he would say to the man hell bent on revenge for his grandson.

Hareth moved up to his shoulder as the ship turned south. The sun burned off the thin cloud, and warmed both men as they sailed southeast, beyond the sandbars of the estuary where a flotilla of lean and powerful ships lay at anchor south of Dalkey Island.

They had sailed up the rocky, indented coast from Waterford, their square-rigged sails taut under the wind, war shields displayed along the rails. The bold dragon prow of each vessel declared to anyone with an eye to see exactly how Ivarr of Waterford intended to mourn his grandson.

Finlay scanned the dragon ship as they approached and recognized the tall, grey headed figure of Ivarr of Waterford.

He waited until he was close enough to be heard, then cupped his palms and hailed them. The Waterford men stared inimically over the shield row and their leader ignored Finlay's courteous greetings.

The image of Ragnall had spurred Ivarr over every wave of the long sea journey, and it would carry him further yet, right into the heart of Dublin where he would bait his old enemy the high and mighty Lord Sitric in his own stronghold. Ivarr's long yellow teeth showed in a grim smile and his rough veined hand was white to the knuckle on his sword hilt as he responded to the hailing.

"You were with Ragnall." Weariness laced his voice.

"Ragnall was my friend," Finlay said. The brisk wind whipped black hair across his face and he flicked it away. "May I cross and speak with you?"

Two of the Waterford crew had lifted an oar to fend off the *Wolf* should it drift too close. When the old man nodded, a pair of oars trundled out through the gap in the row of shields, and rested on the *Wolf's* gunwale.

Hareth frowned; they had practiced such tricks beneath Thorfinn's relentless eye that spring, but it would take only one disgruntled man in the far boat to move unexpectedly and Finlay would be tipped into the sea.

Finlay eyed the twin shafts of wood that rested less than a hand span apart between the gunwales of the two ships, and waited until the crew settled. He moved to the gunwale, gauged the waves; then, with confidence and grace, stepped quickly across the narrow bridge and down into Ivarr's ship.

Both crews sat in uneasy silence. Hareth stood with one hand on the smooth pine of the *Wolf's* mast, concerned because he could hear nothing of the conversation aboard the other ship. The snarling dragon prow of the Waterford ship, locked in impotent and permanent rage, rose and sank with the swell. Birds wheeled and called above their heads. The sea slapped and sucked at the side strakes, and the strengthening breeze chilled his skin.

The wait seemed interminable. Finlay and Ivarr moved at last, and Hareth stiffened. He saw Ivarr of Waterford place a gnarled hand on Finlay's shoulder and speak a few words. Whatever they were, Finlay smiled before he stepped back across the oars to the *Wolf*.

He radiated quiet satisfaction. "Hold back, and let them go ahead of us into the river. I have given my word we'll carry no warning of their approach to Dublin."

Hareth and Leod exchanged dubious glances, and Domnall half rose from his bench. "This battle is not for us," Finlay said quickly, eyeing each man in turn. "I've warned them of our search for Eba. If they find her, they will keep her unharmed. I have also warned them one of our people is in the slave compound. They will look out for him, too."

The crew manoeuvred away from the Waterford vessels, and the *Wolf* danced in their wake. Finlay stood wide legged by the mast, swaying with the movement of the ship. "As long as Eba and Sorchand keep their heads, no harm will come to them. We will pick them up by the end of the day, and then," he said with a wide grin, "we can start for home."

"Damned if I think a girl will keep her head if she sees a mass of marauding Vikings coming at her," Domnall muttered.

* * * *

Eba forced down the creamy cheese and new bread because good food should never be wasted, and she did not want to offend Annikki. She crunched her way through an apple for the same reason, and also because it took away the thick taste of the cheese and cleaned her teeth. The food calmed her quivering stomach and when Rhosyn and the other servants took her to the bath house, she let them add handfuls of flowers and herbs to the steaming water, climbed in and sat there, hunched and silent, till the water grew cold.

Annikki was surprised when Eba asked if she might be allowed to wear her own clothes, but nodded as if she understood her need for something of home. "You can wear the new dress this evening, when you reach Marjatta's house. You'll be her daughter then."

The maids chattered, giggled and brushed out Eba's long hair and let it hang below her shoulders like a golden cape and watched as Annikki settled a loose garland of woven straw and flowers on her head. Rhosyn, her gaze sympathetic, dotted berry juice across Eba's lips to redden them. Eba sat silent on her stool, her hands clamped together in her lap and clung desperately to the hope that her brother would find her and the dreadful marriage would never take place.

Arne, Annikki and Conn acted as her family and escorted her through the streets. Annikki had chosen a purple overgown and her favourite amber necklace, and Conn and his father looked particularly handsome in rich chestnut brown linen and dark brown tunics with yellow braid at neck and cuffs.

Eba was aware that her pale leather riding clothes attracted some odd glances but she felt oddly proud of it; the beading at neck and throat had taken her days to stitch and she strode out knowing the side slits revealed the close cut leather trousers beneath. She held her head high but a solid lump in her throat threatened to choke her when she thought of what awaited her with Kimi.

If only she had waited in Inverness for her brother; Comgell would still be alive, Sorchand would not be a slave and she would not be forced to marry this horrible boy. Though her own predicament was bad enough, she felt a huge weight of guilt for the two gallant youths who had left home because she had persuaded them it would be a good thing to do.

She stole a sidelong glance at Conn. She had no illusions about marriage. Love was a small thing compared to the bride-price, dowry and sometimes political bartering that went on between families; girls were asked but not expected to refuse when their fathers proposed a match. But this was a rather hole in the corner affair, she thought. There were Viking families up and down the west coast of Alba, and she knew much of their wedding traditions. Here, no young kinsman preceded her bearing the sword that a Viking bride

should present to her new husband, and surely Lord Sitric's Christian sensibilities would have done away with the need for a blood sacrifice.

Kimi, with Torquil and Marjatta behind him, waited for her in the square but she was only aware of a shining, shifting mass of colored silks, linens and blazing jewels packed around her as the elite of Dublin gathered around the church door. The sunlight danced across the heavy golden torc at Lord Goffraid's throat as he turned and smiled. Eba did not return it, for he might have helped her, and he had done nothing.

She stared at the cobbles throughout the brief time it took for the man of the church to make her Kimi's wife. She was aware of a soft susurrant of sound as people shuffled in the open square behind her, and she smelled mead rather than sacrificial blood when the priest dipped the fir twigs and then sprinkled the liquid over her, Kimi and the assembled guests.

Kimi turned with a sword lying horizontal across both palms, and presented it to her. Surprised, her eyes flicked up to meet his intense blue gaze. "The sword of my ancestors," he said softly. "You should accept it."

Belatedly, Eba remembered the ritual and laid her hand on the weapon. "I will hold this sword in trust for your son," she said.

She had nothing to give him in return. But then, she thought, the sword of his ancestors represented the continuation of the blood line; but the sword she should have given her husband represented the handing of a bride from

father to husband. There had been no handing over; she had been stolen. She stared at the cobbles again.

He leaned forward, took her hand and jammed a broad silver band onto her finger. A ring of ownership, she thought. In a true marriage she should have offered her husband a ring in return; but no one had thought to provide one, and she could not hide her smile. It seemed, at that moment, like some kind of a victory.

The ordinary folk of Dublin, who loved to see the rich folk's finery, stood around them like so many heads of barley nodding gently in the sunshine. The aroma of unwashed bodies hung in the warm air and Eba felt a wave of nausea. The priest saw the color leave her face, and gabbled the last few lines of the blessing. Eba's eyes flickered when Kimi half turned and ran his knuckles down the fall of her silky golden hair.

Conn, standing well back, smothered a startled snort of amusement as he caught sight of Kimi's multi-colored battered face, and received a sharp jab and a glare from his mother; she had seen Marjatta's taut face and saw no reason to annoy her.

Eba wanted to bolt. A line of happy smiling faces blocked her way, and she recoiled sharply. Kimi gripped her elbow in a proprietary way. She turned her head and snapped at him. "Get me out of here before I faint."

Kimi looked at her green face, and barked an order in his new, pleasant voice. Folk shuffled aside, and watched open mouthed as the bride ran to the shade of the hall-house with her handsome young husband behind her. Someone opened

the door but Eba collapsed against the wall and hauled in breaths of fresher, cool air. A few moments later, she realized Kimi was watching her. "Do you feel better now?"

Eba nodded. The queasiness had receded, and she was eager to leave the heaving, jostling throng behind. "What now?" she demanded, and then fell silent, her eyes wide as she studied the contours of his bruised face. Last night, the dimness had masked it, but in the harsh light of day, the colors were spectacular.

Kimi pushed himself off the door pillar, his eyes cold. "Yes, you did it. I intend to pay you back for it very soon. For now, we go to Lord Sitric's Hall; then we move back to my father's house, where there will be another feast. Take my arm."

She took it without a word because folk were gathering around them and she had no wish to be amongst them. Teasing, impudent sallies came from the crowd and Eba tensed in expectation of an outburst from Kimi; but he nodded and responded in kind. It was fortunate, she thought, that though there were sniggers and giggles from the back of the crowd, no one mentioned the bruises.

When Eba arrived at the door of Sitric's hall, Kimi blocked her entrance into the house by brandishing his bared sword across the threshold. His insistence on old traditions amused her, and she was tempted to deliberately trip over the door sill, for her passage across the threshold represented her movement from her life as a maiden to her life as wife and mother. Doorways were still thought to represent portals between two worlds, and spirits hovered there. If she

stumbled, then the portents would be bad indeed for their future life together.

Kimi took Eba's hand, indicated the raised lip with the tip of his sword and watched her step over the door sill.

Lord Sitric waited to greet them. Eba remembered the stories about him as his blunt fingers grasped her chin, and twitched her head from side to side. Eba willed herself calm and wondered if he was about to examine her teeth. If he did, she thought she might bite him. She avoided his cold, pale eyes and focussed instead on his beard; combed, perfumed and with the ends waxed into two miniature plaits.

"She is indeed a pretty thing. See you take care of her, Kimi." Lord Sitric led the way to the main table.

Eba glanced around. Huge curving timbers, still pale and clean, supported a high roof lined with wattle and the smell of new limewash was strong in the air. Small square windows had been cut into the pale walls and slabs of sunshine splashed across the planked floor. A cloth-covered board joined two flanking boards and barrels of ale stood by the door. Lord Sitric placed the young couple in the centre of the cross board, from where they could watch other guests file in and take their seats.

Torquil took his place beside Lord Sitric, and his pleasure was reflected in his son's smirk which never wavered as the guests found their places. Eba sat ramrod straight, sipped from the chased silver goblet, and found to her relief it was mead rather than ale.

Servants brought food. A haunch of beef arrived before Lord Sitric and he sliced into the meat with his dagger. Pink

juices dripped and soaked into the cloth. Eba averted her gaze and picked at a bowl of shelled hazel nuts. Platters of game arrived, dishes of leeks and onions and bowls of creamy cheese and green apples that made saliva spurt when she caught their sharp, fresh smell.

The well-fed, handsome wives wore their best silks and linens, and sat proudly alongside their husbands and cast sly looks now and then at the costly gowns of neighboring wives. Golden earrings, garnet studded bracelets and copper arm bands flashed and gleamed. A necklace of twisted gold and silver cones caught Eba's eye and she admired the elaborate hair styles, meshed with gold and beribboned with silk. Most ladies had reddened lips, and one or two had stained their nails as well. She remembered the berry juice Rhosyn had applied that morning, and smiled faintly. She knew how it was done.

The wives gaped at the bride's odd suit of pale leather, glanced at each other and gossip flourished. Eba's cheeks turned pink. Kimi seemed anxious to please. She allowed him to place a slice of beef on her platter, but picked at it without much appetite. He radiated happiness but Eba dreaded what might happen next. What she knew would, without doubt, happen next.

Eba thought of Domnall, and Leod and Bundalloch, and grieved for what she had lost. Kimi frowned at her glum face and Eba braced herself; she expected harsh words and her heart thudded once in surprise when he carried her hand to his mouth and pressed his damaged lips to her knuckles.

He retained his hold on her fingers. "This is the first time Lord Sitric's new Hall has been used. We are honored, are we not?"

Eba tried and failed to free her hand. "It does seem very new." She looked around. "The holes in the wall let in so much light. He doesn't live here?"

"He lives next door, in the old hall. Lady Emer wanted a new residence, so this is it. You are aware the Lady Emer, Lord Sitric's wife, is here?"

Kimi stroked her palm suggestively. Eba jerked her hand away. "Boru's daughter?"

"Over there, dressed in plain dark red, and seated next to my mother."

Lady Emer must have been past fifty, but she was slender still, and sat straight as an ash spear in her chair. The lustrous dark hair, salted with grey, was held in place with ivory combs. High cheekbones and a pointed chin accentuated large, shadowed eyes devoid of emotion; as if they had seen all the world had to offer and rejected it. "She is still beautiful," Eba said. "But she does not seem happy."

Kimi grimaced. "She lacks for nothing."

"A woman may lack for nothing and still have a need for happiness."

"She has a famous husband, sons, jewels, silks. She has servants; she eats well every day of her life and does not have to work. What more could there be?"

"To have happiness with a husband, and sons and daughters alive; a life without war, where woman are not bartered and sold between kings as bonds for the future."

Kimi's blue eyes clouded. "A woman should be honored to be the wife of a King."

"Was it easy for the Lady Emer to honor her husband when her father opposed him on the battlefield? No woman should have to make such a choice."

"The choice," Kimi said bluntly, "was already made. She left her father forever when she married. Her duty is to her husband."

He meant it, too. Eba tried again. "I don't believe anyone forgets the feelings they have for their parents. Surely you love your mother?"

"Yes. But I love my father more."

"The point is," Eba said, "you won't have to forget either of them. You will not leave home like the Lady Emer."

"No. Why should I?"

"But the Lady Emer had to," Eba said. "She left her home and the fields she knew and the outline of the hills against the sky, the smell of the heather in bloom, and for what?" Eba shrugged. "Lord Sitric."

Kimi stared at her as if she had lost her mind. "She married a king and has all the riches anyone could want. Who wants hills and the smell of heather when you can have the streets of Dublin?"

Eba looked at him. "I do!"

He laughed.

"I do," Eba repeated. Her eyes brightened with growing anger. "I think the Lady Emer is far, far braver than Lord Sitric. I feel sorry for her!"

"Don't be stupid," he said, and would have said more but his father leaned over, tugged his shoulder and whispered in his ear.

Kimi's eyebrows rose and his gaze ran over her body. "She's wearing breeches?" He reached forward and, like a small boy, pawed through the folds of her leather tunic and then halted, his hands outspread in the air before him as a pair of breeched feminine limbs came into plain view. He looked up, his face alight with mockery. "Is this how women dress in Alba?"

Eba glared at the identical grinning faces of father and son. "When they wish to ride, yes, of course."

The smile became outright laughter on Torquil's part. He nudged his son. Kimi spluttered. "You wanted to wear this costume because you wanted to ride!" His father rocked with laughter and struck him on the shoulder.

Some play on words had been made, and Eba reddened without understanding the joke. She sat back in her chair, clasped one arm about her waist, sipped her mead and jumped when Marjatta tapped her shoulder. "Come, daughter. Lord Sitric suggests you take around the wine cup."

She had not expected it. The drinking of the bridal ale was part of the marriage, the first of her duties as a new wife, and all eyes would be on her. Eba knew enough of Viking customs to recognize a compliment, and glanced over at Lord Sitric, who smiled and nodded. Eba got to her feet with some trepidation, and followed the older woman to the back of the Hall, where a large ornamental bowl stood on a shelf. It had handles on either side in the shape of a bear's head. Marjatta

took it down, handed it to Eba and began to fill it with mead. "This is indeed a compliment," she said. "Be careful, for it will be heavy, and will seem to get heavier as you go. I carried one like it when I married Lord Torquil. Whatever you do, don't spill any, for that would be disastrous. Put it down on a table if you have to, but don't spill the mead."

"Why, what would happen?"

"Bad luck for everyone here," Marjatta said. "Bad luck especially for you and Kimi."

Eba's hands trembled as she grasped the bowl, and the surface of the mead quivered. "I'll do my best," she said.

"Where should I start? Where should I finish?"

"Offer it to Kimi first, of course. You should offer words of compliment as you do so."

Eba inhaled, held the air in her lungs and approached her husband. His eyes raked over her as she offered the bowl. "I bring you mead," she said, unable to think of anything further.

Kimi took it from her, held it high and made an odd T-shaped movement over it with one hand. "To Odin, the all powerful!" He gulped mead, handed the bowl back to Eba and waited.

Belatedly, she remembered she was required to offer a toast also; to one of the many Viking goddesses. "To Freyja," she muttered, hoping she'd got the name correct and gulped a mouthful of mead.

Everyone smiled, so it must have been the right name. The simple act had once confirmed a marriage in the eyes of the

law and the gods; now one of the monks would dip his quill and scratch it into the annals.

Mindful of the courtesies, Eba approached Lord Sitric and presented the cup with a respectful smile. He took it from her in one hand, got to his feet and raised the gleaming cup aloft. "We drink to the marriage of Torquil's son Kimi and this beautiful maiden! May it be a fruitful and happy marriage." His eyes slid round to Torquil. "I may see you as grandfather yet, my friend."

Torquil laughed, and beat the table with his palm. Lord Sitric drank, and handed the cup back to Eba. Under the ranks of approving eyes she approached the benches and offered the cup to the oldest man present. Harp music ran beneath the conversation and Eba moved slowly and with grace about the Hall, accepting good wishes and smiles.

Marjatta was pleased to discover the girl had some breeding and knew how to behave. She sat down, aware the day was running on and there was another feast awaiting them in her own home. The merriment would continue for the next few days with dancing, wrestling and the inevitable *flytings* once the ale had gone round two or three times. It would be exhausting. She must persuade some of the guests to prepare stories and poems of romance and the supernatural so that there might be some periods of quietness.

She watched Eba and could not imagine what Annikki had been thinking of to let the girl wear such odd garments. She must get the girl out of that ridiculous leather costume and into the delightful new gown the moment they got home.

Marjatta had no doubt all would be well between the two young people. It had been much the same with Torquil and herself, in the beginning. Her parents had pressured her into accepting the match because his family was wealthy, but Marjatta had been doubtful of him, and a little afraid. Her father had vouched for his courage and honesty, and her mother had explained the rough ways of men so she had known what to expect on their wedding night. It had not been quite the disaster she had feared; Marjatta had found unexpected pleasure, and her eagerness had surprised both herself and Torquil. As for the rest, her calm temperament had made it easy to negotiate for what she wanted.

A roar went up. Marjatta saw the younger men, impatient for the mead cup, had crowded, laughing and joking, around Eba. The girl retreated, flustered and pink cheeked. One young man reached out, pulled the girl close and bestowed a resounding kiss on her cheek. It was done in high spirits, with the best of intentions; but Eba, her nerves raw, recoiled and mead slopped over the rim of the bowl.

Before Marjatta could intervene, a slim pale-headed figure hurtled past, grabbed Eba's arm and jerked her away from the group of young men. Eba squealed, the bowl slipped in her grasp and half the contents splashed onto the new wooden floor.

There was an indrawn gasp around the Hall. Everyone stared at the young couple and the dark, spreading stain on the floorboards. Kimi dragged a protesting Eba across the hall and Marjatta experienced an unaccustomed surge of irritation with her son. The girl said something, and Kimi halted long

enough for her to put the bowl down on the table, then dragged her towards a small door set in the gable wall. Lord Sitric hid a smile behind his hand. Kimi opened the door and chivvied his new wife into the dim passage beyond. People guessed what he intended and laughter rose around the benches.

Conn surged off the wall, frowning. The hall door burst open, releasing a flood of sunlight in a straight, shining path across the floor, and a messenger stumbled along it. The man headed straight for Lord Sitric.

Chapter 17

"Viking ships in the river, my Lord!"

Kimi halted at the messenger's call, and turned back into the hall. Eba followed more slowly and found everyone staring at the cross board where Lord Sitric sat very still, his beard twitching from side to side. "Waterford?"

The messenger nodded. Lord Goffraid shoved back his stool and vaulted across the table, his face a fusion of anger and joy. Torquil, blue eyes alight, raised a clenched fist in his son's direction, ignored his wife and headed for the open door. The vast majority of men thundered after them.

Lord Sitric remained seated. His chilly blue gaze on the messenger, he heard how Ivarr of Waterford had sailed up the Liffey on the incoming tide and entered the city via the unguarded gate opposite St Andrew's church.

"Unguarded?"

"Everyone was celebrating Kimi's wedding, my Lord."

Lord Sitric, displeased, flung himself back in his carved chair. The women, anxious and fearful, clustered near by. Marjatta waited, and when Lord Sitric remained silent, turned to the messenger. "Can we reach our homes?"

"You'd be safer here than out on the streets, Lady. There are five shiploads of Waterford men prowling through Dublin as we speak."

"The wedding feast!" she cried. "It will all go to waste!"

* * * *

The guard uttered a short rasp of a shout and toppled off the walkway into the dust of the slave yard. Women clutched each other, their frightened, fascinated eyes fixed on the long arrow through the man's chest. Sorchand moved back against the wall and scanned the walkway from end to end.

The remaining guards pointed at something beyond the east wall then turned and ran, coalesced at the head of the wooden stairway, thundered down and vanished into the wooden building. The door slammed shut and the big wooden bar dropped into place with a muffled thud that reverberated round the yard.

Sorchand could see nothing untoward, but he could hear a deep growling hum that lifted the hair at the back of his neck. His hands clenched into fists and he longed for his sword. The noise swept closer and Sorchand smelled smoke and stared at the gate to the outside world as heavy feet pounded by. He could hear the clang and scrape of steel and the shrieks and squeals of panicked women, children and dogs and, below it all, the constant deep growling roar of men's voices. The ponderous gate to the compound creaked and swung open.

There was nowhere to hide. Sorchand pressed his shoulders back against the fence and stared at the widening gap. He glimpsed men running by, weapons glinting silver, and four men stepped through the partially open gates, scanned the yard and gestured him forward. "You! Come!"

Sorchand stood rigid. "Sorchand of Angus! Come! Come!"

They knew his name; in sheer disbelief, Sorchand stared at them. They called again and Sorchand surged off the wall, straightened his shoulders and walked to them.

They took him from the slave yard, and he tried very hard to shed his rescuers all the way up the slope to Dame Gate. He argued, pleaded and finally begged but it made no difference; they flung him over the cobbles to face a grim old man wearing ring mail and an old fashioned steel helmet. Furious, Sorchand caught his balance and opened his mouth ready to argue and then thought better of it; the man might be old, but he still looked like a warrior. The flared nose guard of the helmet hid much of his face and a vigorous moustache and a grey, spade shaped beard hid the rest. His eyes were shadowed pinpoints of light in a nest of wrinkles and he seemed no more pleased to see Sorchand than Sorchand was to see him.

"I am Ivarr of Waterford." The short, clipped words chilled Sorchand. "Through a kindness to Finlay of Alba, you will remain unharmed, but you will not interfere in our work in Dublin."

A crackling roar made Sorchand spin round. Flames leapt up the side of the building behind him, licked at the thatch and billowed in a shower of sparks towards the next rooftree. The rosy glow flickered and danced across ring mail and metal and Sorchand realized just how many swords, axes, daggers and spears surrounded him.

"Thank you, sir, for your kindness," he said, dipping his head towards Ivarr of Waterford. "I must find a young girl, captured with me some time ago. She is in this city, and both the fire and your men will be a danger to her."

Colorless eyes moved beneath Ivarr's helmet brim. "Finlay of Alba searches for her. Leave it to him."

"But—"

Ivarr shook his head. "My men do not know you, and would kill you on the streets."

All the frustration of the past few weeks rose in Sorchand's throat. "I cannot just stand here!"

Ivarr of Waterford wasn't prepared to argue. He made a small gesture and two men grabbed Sorchand, bundled him to the ground and a third man tied his hands and feet with rough cords. They shoved him over against the timber palisade out of harm's way and then ignored him.

* * * *

The *Shadow Wolf's* crew rowed slowly upriver at dusk, veered across to St Michan's on the north bank and anchored there. They stared across the river, where the orange glow of the fires clashed with the narrow streak of turquoise sky. Billows of smoke hung over the settlement and flames roared over dry thatch with a noise like a giant blacksmith's bellows; sparks climbed into the air and the hot, rising draught of the wind carried them to the next clutch of homes.

"Dear Christ," muttered Leod, unable to tear his eyes from the conflagration. "Do you think she's still in there?"

The crew of the *Wolf* stared across the river. Eba was unknown to many of them, but they all knew Dublin as the most prosperous trading port in the Irish Sea. They had walked in her streets, bartered goods on her quaysides and drunk themselves silly in her taverns and alehouses. They knew the richness of the goods in her storage sheds and they

stared across the water with a pang of regret, as if a good friend was dying before their eyes.

The crackling roar of fire thrummed steadily in their ears as they watched the citizens stream towards the clogged north gate. The dry, bitter smoke from burning thatch drifted over the ship, stung their eyes and attacked their throats but still they watched as parents struggled beneath packs and bundles and young children. Older children struggled with the house goose tucked under a piece of canvas, a hen or two in a basket and a cow or a goat on a tether.

The bridge across the river was thronged and some chose to splash across the old hurdle ford beside it. Finlay turned from the gunwale, his face grim in the fiery glow, laid his palm on Domnall's shoulder and gripped hard. "Stay here with the crew and guard the ship. Hareth and I will search for her."

There was an immediate outcry. Finlay's hands lifted, palm out. "No. No! *No!* You do not know the girl we seek, and you cannot all come. Protect the ship, and be ready to put to sea the moment I ask it. Hareth will come with me," he said, glanced at Leod and Domnall and added quickly, "and you two."

"The fewer we are, the better we will do tonight. And remember, we stay out of the fighting, or my agreement with Ivarr is broken. Sorchand of Angus will be on the loose over there, and we'll see if we cannot find him, too." He looked over the crew. "You all know Sorchand," he added. "Try not to kill him if he wants to come aboard."

They fought against the flow of people on the bridge and reached the unprotected gate near St Colum Cille without incident. Once away from the main thoroughfare, the streets were eerily and emptily silent and the increasing darkness could easily hide a vengeful Waterford warrior. Finlay waved his small band on and up the slope towards the light and swooshing roar of fire.

They quartered the small area around the church, walked unchecked into Lord Torquil's house and seized and ate food from the laden tables. Outside again, they followed Finlay's instructions. Domnall pounded towards the Corn Market, guilt streaming through him. A small part of him feared he would never see Eba again and he knew he had taken her for granted until Finlay had turned all their lives upside down by taking her to Inverness. Now he ran like a crazy man through this dammed crowd arrowing towards the south gate, heading towards St Patrick's church and searching always for a glimpse of his sister.

Leod loped along the quayside with high hopes, for if Eba had managed to get free, she would run to where she thought the *Shadow Wolf* would be. Boxes, sacks and bundles on the wharf made it difficult but he checked every alleyway and ducked into empty workshops and storage sheds. He passed seamen throwing water over the vulnerable timbers of their vessels, and saw others rowing their ships away from the flames and sparks. Some lay dark and silent, their crews long since fled. Leod's heart leapt at the sight of a lone feminine figure running ahead of him, but it was not Eba.

Hareth and Finlay quartered opposite sides of the High Street, vaulted dividing fences where necessary and drifted silent as shadows through narrow streets and lanes. As they moved up the town the flames gave them some light, and they detoured several times to avoid a Waterford axe.

They reached the spot where Ragnall had died. Finlay peered round the corner and waved Hareth across a stream of ruddy light and into Fishamble Street. A house had been fired, and orange flames lit the lower half of the deserted street. House doors hung open, and discarded goods littered the street.

A man sprawled among the rubbish, a gaping gash in his throat where a blade had caught him. Furtive movement betrayed feral creatures rooting through the mess, and a large sow blundered by, a length of frayed rope trailing; a dog loped eagerly towards them, whining, and then turned away.

Finlay entered the hall they had watched for so many days and tripped over two bodies by the door. Both men had torn and bloody throats, and a silver casket lay open beside them, jewelry tumbled over the floor beside it. The hearth fire smouldered on a bed of ash and the whole of the big hall was dim, shadowy and reeked of ale and smoke.

Wooden chests yawned, their contents hurled about the floor. The smouldering remains of smashed shields and spears littered the hearth. The big loom was on its side, the weights hopelessly entwined in the colored threads. A barrel of ale had been smashed open and the contents had soaked into the earthen floor.

One body lay face down on the far side of the hearth, with a great furry shape stretched beside it and another at his feet. Finlay nudged Hareth and indicated another body in the corner.

"Oh, Christ," said Hareth. "I hope she wasn't here."

One dog turned its head at the sound of their voices, but did not rise. Hareth turned to go, but Finlay's hand detained him. "He's still breathing."

Hareth stared at the prone man and saw his chest lift. "And what do you propose to do? Those brutes won't let you near him."

Finlay gazed round the shadowy room. "We can't leave him. He might know where she is. There's no sign of fire, or of raiders." He looked at Hareth. "Are we scared of dogs?"

Hareth opened his mouth, but Finlay had already clicked his fingers. He called, and the seated dog rose and limped warily across the rushes to sniff at Finlay's hand. Blood trickled from a wound on its shoulder. The other dog lifted its head, looked round and made a feeble effort to rise. Finlay called again, and the man by the hearth twitched. The dog left Finlay, padded back and slumped down, nosing the man's face and neck.

Finlay strode forward and placed his fingers at the man's throat, and spoke over his shoulder. "Get some water, will you?"

Hareth muttered about people who had no regard for their own safety and walked past the dogs, which paid him no attention. He checked the man slumped by the wall. "It's Conn! He's alive, too!" Moving fast, Hareth lit torches at the

fire, checked the hall was empty, thumped a dish of water down beside Finlay and went to see what he could do for Conn.

Finlay probed a tender area on the back of the man's skull. The man moaned and twitched, the dog whined, and its tail beat once on the floor. The patient opened bleary blue eyes and squinted up at Finlay. "Who the hell're you?"

Finlay helped him scramble to a stool. Arne sat down gingerly, his bloodshot eyes on the stranger. One of the dogs half fell and half sprawled beside him, its jaw finding and resting on his knee. The man's hand dropped to the dog's skull in a familiar gesture and rested there. "You'll be Lord Finlay," he said at last. "I recognize you from Sitric's Hall."

Finlay nodded. "What happened here?"

Arne frowned, and gazed slowly round the wrecked hall. "Waterford men looted the place. The dogs got a couple of them, but we took a beating. They've taken the maids and most of the good stuff." He looked about him in a puzzled way and then his face cleared. "Conn!" He staggered to his feet, head swivelling as he searched the hall for his son.

"Be still." Finlay pushed Arne back to his seat.

Hareth called across the hall. "Your son has a leg wound and a sore head but he'll survive."

Conn roused as Hareth bound his leg and swore so loudly his father was reassured, and looked again at Finlay of Alba. "What are you doing here?"

Finlay spoke quietly. "We're here because a young girl was taken from her home by force and we tracked her to this house. Torquil has plans to marry her to his son. We want to

take her home with us." Finlay lifted eloquent hands. "Before we found her, the Waterford men came to avenge Raghnaill."

Arne's brow furrowed. "Christ, the Waterford men! We should be..." He started to get up, thought better of it and flopped back onto the stool. "And you thought you might find the lass here?"

Finlay nudged half burnt shields and spears into the centre of the fire, and watched the sparks flare. Conn, his hand grasping Hareth's shoulder, struggled to his feet and hopped to a bench. Arne sat up straighter and smiled at his son, then addressed Finlay. "In the confusion, you thought you might take her back?"

Finlay nodded. Arne shook his head. "You didn't know, then, the lass married Kimi today? She is now formally his wife?"

Hareth swore. Finlay's mouth flattened. "Where will she be now?"

Arne shrugged. "She'll be in Lord Sitric's new hall. That's where we all were when the messenger came with the news." He half rose from his stool. "We came back for our sword and helmets!"

Hareth eyes glinted in the fire glow as he glanced over his shoulder at Finlay. "We know where the Hall is."

Finlay turned back to Arne. "The women would stay in the Hall?"

"Yes. Sitric will have stayed with them, too. Your lassie should be there with them." His blue gaze travelled from Finlay to Hareth. "But Torquil has married the girl to his son, and he is not going to let her go."

Dark Pool [Sequel to Banners of Alba]
by Jen Black

Finlay stood up. "It seems to me," he said, "Sitric has avoided most of the battles in his lifetime. Will he be watching this one from a tower, as he did Clontarf?"

Head on one side, Arne considered. "Likely he will. If the odds are not good, then Sitric will use someone like Torquil. There's always someone available."

Chapter 18

At fourteen Kimi was not old enough to fight battle-hardened men but he had little in common with the few youngsters milling about in the hall. He perched one hip on a table, stared around with a supercilious smirk and drank his way down a beaker of ale. Eba sat among distraught women who had left younger children at home in the care of nursemaids and kept a wary eye on the Lady Emer, Marjatta and Annikki.

Kimi tossed his empty ale cup aside and Eba stiffened, but Kimi smiled and took one of her hands. "Come," he said softly. "I have something to show you." Eba did not move. "It's a church." His head tilted to one side. "Please?"

He had charm, she saw, when he wanted something. A wave of cold air rushed by her as Kimi led her through a short stone passageway towards a faint glow of light. "Careful." His voice bounced and echoed off the stone walls. "Watch out for the steps. It's a tower. From the top we'll see what's happening outside."

Eba was not sure she wanted to leave the safety of the Hall and hung back, shivering in the cold air. "Won't that be dangerous? You said it was a church."

"Of course it's not dangerous," Kimi said. "We'll stop in the church when we come down." He tugged her hand, and Eba decided she had better humor him and took a step forward. A muted roar came down the flight of stone steps. It was like the sound trapped within a seashell, and she looked up to see an open archway with the sky behind it. Warm, smoky air

whisked by her nose and specks of soot and silver filaments of ash whirled by her face.

A rosy sheen lit the flat stones beneath the open archway at the top of the tower. The smell of burning wood and thatch increased, and she could hear the faint cries of men and the crash and ring of metal against metal.

Kimi let go of her hand, rushed to the parapet and peered over. The roar and the dazzle of fire was incredible, and when Eba walked across and grasped the parapet, a blast of hot, smoky air streamed up the outside wall of the tower and unfurled her hair like a banner.

She stepped back and counted half a dozen fierce fires in the sweep of Dublin laid out before her. Sparks spiralled up on the hot, rolling wind, and glowed like fragments of gold against the indigo sky. The roar and crackle of flames filled the air and movement drew her eye to the spot where a group of men fought, their swords flashing silver and vermillion in the glare.

Kimi grinned with excitement. "Everyone thinks it's just a church tower, but it's Sitric's look-out tower. Aren't you glad you came?"

Eba peered cautiously over the side. Lord Sitric's new hall-house sat on the highest point of the long ridge running west to east across Dublin. The south-eastern corner was very close to the earthen bank and palisade, and beyond was the forty-foot drop to the Poddle. Anyone standing on the south-western side of the tower had an uninterrupted view over Dublin from St Andrew to St Colum Cille near the bridge and the hurdle ford.

Ath Cliath would have been visible in daylight, but now the cluster of cots and cabins lay hidden in the smoke and blackness. The shifting reflections of orange and gold turned the river into something strange and beautiful, and her eye followed the dazzling ribbon from the bridge, past the dark mud below the Steyne and out to sea.

Her eye adjusted to the flickering patterns of light and dark and she made out the black, moving shapes of men running, screaming and fighting. Her new husband flung his arm about her shoulder and she felt the excitement that thrummed through his body and shone in his wide eyes. "If you look over there," he said with his mouth close to her ear, "I would bet the man in ring mail is Ivarr of Waterford. There, down by Dame Gate.

Eba stared through the flickering shadows. "Do you know him?"

"Sitric and Ivarr haven't fought for years. I've never met him. I don't think my father has, either." Eba looked down. Several men grouped about their Lord, alert and ready to guard him from danger. They won't want to lose another leader, she thought. "But he looks old."

Kimi's smile vanished. "How can you tell? He's wearing a helmet with a nose guard!"

"He just looks old; the way he stands, the way his head hangs forward, the lines on his face."

"You can see *lines on his face*?"

"Yes. Can't you?"

"No," he said. "I'm damned if I can. What else can you see? Where's my father?"

"I've no idea."

"Then look for him!" Kimi grabbed her arm and forced her to face the settlement. "Tell me when you've found him."

The solid stone parapet nudged her hip as she walked along its length, fingertips grazing the rough, gritty surface. It was difficult to see anything in the dark shadowy areas away from the flames. She turned the northern corner, and pointed. "There!"

Kimi surged up behind her, his breath hot on her cheek. "Where? Show me! Point him out!"

She pointed to the open space where Lord Sitric planned to build his new church. A great many men struggled and fought there but Kimi finally isolated a stocky, bright haired figure wielding a heavy sword. He let go of her arm and stared down, absorbed in the struggle. "Watch him," he said quietly. "He's so good!"

"Not as good as all that," she said dryly, without thinking. "He seems to be retreating."

The back of Kimi's hand cracked across Eba's cheek so hard she reeled back against the opposite wall under the force of it. The story of Sitric and the Lady Emer jumped into her mind. She probed her teeth with her tongue and was relieved to find all seemed firm.

"Get up! Get up and come here. I want you to watch my father."

Eba hesitated. Her gaze slid sideways. She was so much nearer the doorway to the stairs now, but almost as if he guessed her thought, Kimi took a quick step, gripped her wrist and yanked her back to the parapet. He jammed her

between himself and the stones and stared out to where his father's sword flashed in the darkness.

Kimi ground his hips against her, groaned with the pleasure it gave him and Eba feared she was about to become a wife in a very real sense. He yanked at her laces and dragged the leather garment to one side without taking his eyes off the fighting below the tower. His fingers found the soft swell of her breast, his mouth sucked the bare skin of her shoulder and Eba cringed away from him.

His fingers stilled. Torquil stumbled and almost fell, forced to give ground to the men from Waterford and Kimi's teeth sank into her shoulder. She cried out, air rushed up the side of the tower and carried her hair with it, a bright golden mass floating on the hot air stream. Kimi, his face stamped with fright, watched the Waterford men isolate Torquil. "Father!" Kimi shrieked, his mouth close beside her ear. His fingers dug into her bare flesh. "Break free, father! Break free!"

It was the probably the last thing Torquil heard. Eba stood in horror and watched the glittering axe rise and flicker in the fiery light as it flashed down to cleave Torquil's skull like an apple. A second sword, swung from a different angle, separated his head from his body.

Eba's hair flared over her face in the strengthening breeze and she did not see the savage, war-crazed faces of the Waterford men turn, seeking the source of the youthful cries. She did not see them point to the pale-headed youth and the girl with hair streaming out like the figurehead on one of their ships; nor did she see them start to run towards the tower.

Kimi did. With a strangled grunt, he dragged her to the steps and hurtled down so fast Eba missed her footing and bounced off the curved wall. "Ow! Stop! Stop!"

Kimi took no notice, turned sharp right at the bottom of the tower and ran towards the church. He hissed a single sentence that sent a chill down her spine. "They're chasing us now!" She registered cold, stale air and darkness, the echoing slap of their feet on the stones, and crashed through a jumble of wooden stools before the altar. Kimi ran on like a madman, pulled up short at the far wall, ripped aside a glittering tapestry and groped at another small door.

He wrenched it open and pushed Eba through, followed her and pulled the tapestry into place. He closed the door behind them without a sound.

They were out in a cold, dark, damp space where the air smelled of grass and earth and a huge shadow hung over them. Eba yanked her laces tight, nursed her bruised shoulder and glanced fearfully into the shadows. Kimi grabbed her arm and plunged into the deepest shadow.

She ran with him until Kimi hissed at her, peered into the gloom at their feet, found a set of overgrown steps and led her down through nettles and briars. Some twenty feet down was a small, ancient gate. Kimi heaved with all his strength and swore when it would not budge. Eba stood, panting and looking back over her shoulder.

The gate grudgingly opened and they squeezed through and pulled it shut behind them. Beyond the thickness of the palisade, the sounds of Dublin were cut off as if they did not exist. A peaceful countryside silvered by moonlight lay

opposite, and the Poddle glinted at the bottom of the slope. To her right and left the wooden stakes of the palisade stretched away on either side. Two hundred paces to the east, a burst of light and noise marked the St Nicholas Gate, where a lessening stream of people jostled through heading for the Slige Dala and the roads to the south.

"If we can join them, we will be safe," Kimi muttered.

"But where will you go?" she asked. "Your mother ... she is still in Dublin. She was in the Hall ... What if the Vikings found her?"

Kimi stared at the water below them. "I can't help it," he said. "Would you rather they caught us?" The water slid uncaring over the stones. "Lord Sitric was there. He will have made a deal. It's his fault all this happened, anyway."

Eba shivered in the cool breeze and hugged herself for warmth. "But don't you want to go back and see if she's ... alive? Your father..."

"We have to cross," he said, as if she had not spoken.

The Waterford men scared her, but she worried that Annikki, Conn, her brother and Leod were caught up in the violence, too. Out of nowhere the image of a striking blade, bright hair and blood flashed across her mind and she knew that if it unsettled her, it must be very much worse for Kimi.

He stirred. She looked at him, and then looked again; he sensed it and turned away; but not before she had seen the gleam of moisture on his cheek. She dithered, uncertain how to help him. She opened her mouth and then closed it again, and he launched them both down the slope towards the water

and only just stopped herself pitching forward into the stream by clutching at Kimi.

"Can you see the stones?" He glanced up the slope behind them.

Serene in the moonlight, a series of black, shiny stones dotted the gleaming river like beads on an invisible string.

"Yes. Is the water deep?"

"No," he said. "But it's cold, so don't fall in. Come on!"

He stepped out and skipped across to the other side.

"Come on," he hissed. "Three paces and you're over!"

It occurred to Eba she should run in any direction to get away from him; but he skipped back across the stones and offered his hand. Sighing at her own slowness, Eba took the first step. From there, it was easy to reach the adjacent stone. The next one wobbled, but she regained her balance with a great whirling of arms, jumped and landed in a damp patch of mud. She skidded, fell into Kimi's arms and he staggered under the impact. Eba giggled, and then remembered where she was.

Kimi took the bank at some speed, dragging Eba behind him and her thigh muscles soon began to burn. When they reached the top Kimi halted and Eba, breathing hard, found she was almost looking down on Lord Sitric's Hall. She could see no sign of pursuit. The blackness of the walls made the glowing orange and yellow glare above them seem so fierce she felt sure no house in Dublin could survive.

Kimi brooded in silence and then asked, "Can you see the Tower?"

"What? Yes. Why? There's someone there, waving. Do you think they're waving at us?"

Kimi swore. "I thought you had good eyes," he snapped. "They're pointing at us! Come on!"

* * * *

Leod abandoned his search of the quayside, walked back in through the unguarded Dame Gate and jerked to a halt. A gust of dry heat met him and burning stuff whirled in the air as house posts crashed down in a shower of sparks and red-gold embers. A group of armed men stood just inside the town wall. Leod hastily stepped back into the shadows of the gate.

He hesitated briefly, weighing his options, then sought the door in the recesses of the gate, hurtled up the narrow stairway stinking of urine and out onto the walkway that ran along the top of the palisade. A man ran across the cobbles below and bowed his head before someone in the centre of the group. Leod peered cautiously over the rail and saw Ivarr of Waterford. The messenger pitched his voice to carry above the roar of the fires.

"Sitric's son has been spotted outside Dublin. He's heading for open country and he's got a woman with him."

Ivarr seemed well pleased, and ordered men to follow at once. A dozen eager young men set off at a steady lope. Leod sat back on his heels below the parapet. He doubted very much that Sitric's son Goffraid had left Dublin, with or without a woman in tow, but he could think of someone who might

have done. He moved cat-footed along the empty walkway and followed the Waterford men.

They blundered, tripped and stumbled down a narrow alley and exclaimed when they found a disused, overgrown gate in the wall. Leod watched them spill out onto the river bank, and lifted his gaze to the rolling hillside opposite.

The rising moon sailed in the open space between the land and the bank of dark clouds above it, and its silver light illuminated two small figures. Leod clutched the fence so hard he drove splinters into his palm. The clink of metal and an exclamation, quickly cut off, told him the Waterford men had also seen them.

Sick at heart, Leod watched the Vikings leap down the bank, cross the river, and jog up the opposite slope.

Chapter 19

Finlay and Hareth reached Lord Sitric's new hall, and halted. No rushlights burned, no guard watched the entrance and not the faintest chink of light showed round the door frame. Finlay tapped Hareth's shoulder and pointed across the square. A shaft of moonlight illuminated the open door of the little stone church.

They separated, edged through the shadows with every sense alert and converged at the door. No sound came from within. Finlay pushed the door back on its hinges with the tip of his sword, and waited, listening. He stepped cautiously inside, fingertips brushing the plasterwork in the dimness.

The air was cold, and tainted. Mixed with the smell of old incense, rushlights and stone dust, a wisp of smoke swirled down the small, silent body of the church and stirred the tapestries against lime washed walls. If the altar had once held gold or silver, it had gone. There were no bodies. A draught crossed Finlay's cheek, the door banged and both men turned like hounds scenting prey and followed the gust of smoky air to the tower stairs.

Finlay probed for the first step of the curving stair with the toe of his boot and climbed cautiously. From the parapet they looked down on a dazzling, moving patchwork of black and red and gold. A low, growling roar of noise surrounded them and smoke stung their eyes as it whirled over the top of the tower. Many of the Dublin men, still in their wedding finery plus the hasty addition of a helmet and sword, poured through the streets and hunted down Waterford men among

the narrow alleys. Those they caught were bludgeoned without mercy.

Hareth sucked air between his teeth, and pointed. Lord Goffraid pursued two men through the narrow streets. He ran lightly, firelight flashing on the sword in his hand, his face a snarling mask beneath his silver helmet.

The men shot through a narrow opening, and discovered they had run into a dead end. They slowed and turned, swords ready, and faced Goffraid, who ran forward to meet them. Flame flared, lit the rich blue of his tunic as the gable end tottered and fell with a roar and a shower of sparks behind him.

The two men dropped their booty and went to meet him.

"He's trapped! And it's two to one!" Tension flattened Finlay's voice.

Hareth grunted. "He can probably hold them on his own. Look."

With the flaming debris piled up behind him, Goffraid was easy to see; his sword described a swift arc through the air, and one of the Waterford men reeled back, staggered and fell. A sheet of flame roared across the blackness above their heads. Goffraid advanced on the remaining Waterford man.

"He's good," Hareth said, and then whooped in triumph as Goffraid loosed a tremendous blow that cut clean through his opponent's forearm. The severed hand and sword flew high, hovered at the peak of its arc; and then turned, light spilling off the heavy blade as it fell point down. It struck cleanly and neatly through Goffraid's throat.

"White Christ!" Finlay stiffened, and barely felt Hareth's hand close like a vice on his arm as they watched Goffraid drop to his knees and pitch forward in the dirt of the alley. The Waterford man clutched his arm to stem the spurt of dark liquid and did not see the wall above him sway, collapse and pour down on top of them both.

The terrible rumble faded into the discordant jumble of noise around them, and Finlay and Hareth stared down at a heaped mass of blackened wood and blazing thatch. Fragments of burning wood and straw floated upwards on the rising currents of air.

"Goffraid's men? Where are they? He should never have been alone! Christ!" Finlay said softly. He rammed one fist into the other.

"No," Hareth said. He took a deep, slow breath, and glanced at the man at his side. "I wonder, though ... Sitric's last son has just died. He has no heir, now. And no one knows what happened to Goffraid but you and me."

They stared at each other, and then out over the wreck of Dublin. It was true; they had seen Lord Goffraid's death only because they had climbed the tower. Men fighting in the next street would have no idea what had happened.

"I feel sorry for him," Finlay said softly. His gaze fell to the blazing rubble. "He has lost five sons. Coward that he is, and bully that he is, I feel sorry for him."

Hareth nodded soberly. "A man should not outlive his sons." He took another long, deep breath, and grasped the parapet with both hands. "But we can use this."

"You mean we should keep quiet about what we've seen?"

"Sitric will send out search parties. He'll be concerned with nothing else till he finds his son. We should be able to get the girl away before he realizes we've gone."

Finlay stared out over the checkerboard of red and black beneath the tower. "It would be cruel, and prolong his agony, surely?"

"He will know he is dead," Hareth said. "How could he not know?"

"But he will hope. He will hope against hope that his last son has survived. Any man would."

Hareth said nothing. He turned his back to the parapet, leaned against it, folded his arms and stared at his boots.

"You're right," Finlay said slowly. "This may be the chance we've been looking for to grab the girl and get back to Alba, and it is long passed time we were back." He lifted his head and straightened his shoulders. "We will use whatever we can. We have seen nothing tonight of Lord Goffraid."

But they found it difficult to move away. Memories of the vivid redhead, so unlike his father, ran through their minds; and it was with reluctance that they stirred, retreated and walked silent and thoughtful to the door of Sitric's new hall.

It was still dark and silent. Finlay put his hand on the sneck and lifted it. The door swung silently open and the warm, spicy odors of food, ale and perfume reached their nostrils. Finlay closed the door as gently as he had opened it. He grabbed Hareth's arm and moved him back, away from the door. "There are people in there. I can feel it."

"I could smell food, and wine, and perfume, and ... yes, that means people. But ... what of it?"

"But who are they? We have no idea who is in there."

"Who the hell would they be, hiding in the dark with the lights out? If they're Waterford men why aren't they eating the food, drinking the wine and running ragged across the tables? More likely it's shit-scared scared citizens hiding out till daylight, keeping their heads down till it's all over."

"It could be a trap?"

"They'd have barred the door." Hareth thought about it. "Ye-e-es. Unless ... unless they've set a trap."

Finlay gazed at the door, frowning. "It's Sitric's Hall," he said. "Yet we've never seen Sitric all night, have we? Arne was convinced Sitric would be in this hall with the women."

"Hiding?"

Finlay smiled unseen in the dark. "I'm sure he'll call it something else."

Hareth snorted. "Eba could be in there."

"And they might be scared out of their wits and ready to loose a set of spears at the next person who comes through the door," Finlay said.

Hareth sighed, and his palms flashed pale in the moonlight. "That's true. Let's do the sensible thing, then; let's knock."

They stared at each other in silence; and then Finlay walked over, reversed his dagger and hammered on the wood.

* * * *

Leod turned at the shoulder of the hill and stared back at the settlement. Flames flickered above the palisade, and the

wind carried smoke and debris north across the river. He spared a brief thought for the crew of the *Shadow Wolf*, turned and loped around the curve of a seemingly endless hill.

He slowed again at a patch of shadow and felt his way down to a moss-covered trunk, felled in some ancient storm, and heard the chatter of water over stones a long way beneath him as he trod carefully across. He ran on into moonlight at the top of the hill where a chilly breeze met him, and his lips tasted of salt. The sea was not far away.

Leod stopped and looked round. Moonlight silvered the grass stems and gorse bushes and a stray tree studded the rolling landscape like a splatter of ink on vellum. Tales of gateways into other, magical worlds rose from his long forgotten childhood; tales where caves, streams, rocks and trees all had their deities, and he half expected a beautiful woman to step out of the earth and beckon him over. A hare started up almost at his feet and fled across the shining land to vanish into a stand of slender silver saplings.

Men's voices and the steady pad of many feet over soft earth brought Leod sharply back to the present. He remembered the Waterford men hunted human quarry and would not deal kindly with interference, and on the thought, sprinted towards an outcrop of small boulders a good forty paces away. Leod gripped the cold stone, peered through swaying grass stems and watched them jog past. They did not have a woman with them. Eba had not been captured.

He swallowed hard, and refused to think about alternatives as the men strode with perfect confidence through a strange

land, chattering to one another in an unknown tongue. A rough sacking bag swung from one man's hand and for no reason he could think of, a chill ran down Leod's spine.

As soon as the group disappeared over the skyline, Leod got up and ran in the opposite direction. The land sloped away from him, and the smell of the sea grew stronger. Six or seven sheep, already disturbed, stood rock still and watched him, and some distant guard dog issued a series of challenging barks. Coarse strands of couch grass whipped against his knees and he plunged to a stop on the edge of a shallow cliff overlooking a wide sweep of beach. Breathing hard, he looked around and saw that many feet had ploughed down through the sandy slope and out onto the strand below.

A line of grey lace advanced over the sea, caressed the dark humped shape in the shallows and retreated. Leod sucked in a harsh breath, plunged down the slope and raced across the hard flat sand to the water's edge and laid hands on the still warm body.

Chapter 20

Finlay hammered his dagger hilt against Sitric's door twice and got no response. He lost patience and shoved the door open so hard it bounced off the wall. Two arrows thudded into the doorpost at chest height and more against the inside of the door. Hareth spoke dryly from the pool of shadow on the other side of the door jamb. "Not an entirely successful manoeuvre. Now what?"

"Now we try plan two." Finlay lifted his head and bellowed. "Lord Sitric—it's Finlay of Alba! Call off your archers and open the damned door."

Soft footsteps whispered close to the other side of the door. Lord Sitric's voice issued from the darkness. "Are you alone?"

"Lord Hareth is with me. We are alone."

At last, the door opened. Someone waited with a shielded candle in their hand. A child's penetrating treble ordered, "Shoot them, mama, shoot them!"

The woman ducked her head, and hushed the child. Behind her another woman stood, and an aged serving man, each holding a bow.

"It is almost over," Lord Sitric said quietly. "The fires are dying down, and the vermin will leave soon." The candlelight slid over Sitric's expensive silks and the torque at his throat; but vast shadows pooled below his eyes and the weary curve of his mouth.

Women, servants and children milled about the room and the half-eaten wedding feast lay forgotten on the trestle

table. Women, bowls and bandages in their hands, moved quietly between half a dozen injured men. A women spooned liquid into a man on a pallet before the embers of an almost dead fire.

Eba, of course, was not among them. Finlay sighed, turned back to Lord Sitric and had to quell a compulsion to tell the man of his son's death. A robust, well built woman stood just behind Lord Sitric's shoulder. Finlay became aware of her unwavering blue gaze and the moment she had his attention, she demanded, "What is happening outside?"

"Lady Marjatta." Finlay thrust his smoke blackened thumbs through his belt and looked at them all. "You must know the Waterford men have looted your homes. They have killed, and burned and many of your households have been taken as slaves." Moans and cries of despair rose in the dark room, but Finlay continued. "Fires still burn between the quayside and the High Street. The Waterford men are going back to their ships. They will leave on the tide."

Marjatta glanced at Lord Sitric, who had placed his hand on her shoulder. She did not seem displeased at his action. "I need to know of my husband, and my son," she said. "What can you tell me? What of Torquil and Kimi?"

Finlay shook his head. "I'm sorry. Perhaps we will learn more as we continue to search for the girl, Eba."

The candle flame illuminated the crease that sprang to Marjatta's brow. "Forget the girl," she said bluntly. "We need to know of our husbands."

The worried, irritated faces pressed closer, muttering agreement. "I understand," Finlay said, "that she married your son today. She is therefore a daughter of your house."

"That is true." Marjatta blinked and then shook her head in denial. "But without my son, she is nothing to me."

Finlay assessed the semi-circle of women. "I know you are worried for your men," he said. "We—" his gesture included Hareth, "have been out in the settlement tonight. Our task was to find the girl, and stay neutral in this quarrel between Dublin and Waterford, for it was not our quarrel. We have seen many fatalities." He ignored the image of Goffraid that sprang into his mind. "But we can give you news of two men we know by name. Arne, his son Conn and his two hounds, for example. Is his wife here?"

A small, homely woman pushed forward, her eyes pleading for good news.

"This is Annikki, my husband's sister," Marjatta said impatiently. "She is wife to Arne and mother to Conn."

Finlay smiled down at the smaller woman. "Arne is safe in your home with only a sore head to show for his battle. Conn is there, too; he will limp from a sword cut for a little while, but will soon recover."

Tension left Annikki and a glimmer of tears sprang to her eyes. "Thank you, thank you! I must go to them," she muttered, and whirled towards the door.

Finlay's hand trapped her wrist, and held on when she would have shaken herself free. "Wait a while longer," he said softly. He raised his voice. "Give the Waterford men time to leave. Until then, it will not be safe for you outside this hall."

There was a broken wail of sound from many of the women and Marjatta moaned loudest of all. Lord Sitric retreated to his carved chair. He smiled a wintry smile and with a lazy gesture of his hand, invited Finlay to deal with the women.

Finlay schooled his expression. It was a wonder that Sitric had retained his hold on Dublin for so long. "Hear me!" The rich timbre of Finlay's voice cut across the soprano uproar. "Let the Waterford men go back to their ships without interruption." He stared around the room. "If you leave now, they will see you, and take you with them to Waterford." Finlay shrugged wide shoulders. "You will go, of course, as slaves."

A concerted gasp rose in the shadows of the hall. "How can you know what they will do?" Marjatta had seized a candleholder, and the trembling flame threw spiked shadows across her face.

"Lady Marjatta, Ivarr of Waterford is a Viking," Finlay said. "And we all know Viking raiders take slaves." His glance shifted towards Lord Sitric. "Your own lord has brought slaves back here to Dublin, and you use them to run your homes and your farms. You have a slave-market on the quayside, another on Dalkey Island. There is a similar establishment in Waterford, and one in Cork and in any other market where Vikings trade. This time, you would be the slaves." Finlay smiled "We will return and tell you when it is safe to return home. You have my word on it."

* * * *

Sorchand of Angus lay curled like a roll of ham beside the cold, damp wall near Dame Gate. His limbs itched and pricked at the long restraint, and his wrists were sticky with blood and sore from his struggles to escape his bonds. He had watched in disbelief when armed men had carried out a chair and a small table from the nearest house, and persuaded their leader to sit. They had brought food, too, but had eaten most of it themselves.

Lord Ivarr had sipped the wine as he waited. His pleasure at Lord Sitric's death had been obvious, and Sorchand knew he waited now for news of Sitric's son. A hum of expectation ran through the men and word came that Gunnarsson's band had been sighted. Sorchand knew nothing of Gunnarsson, but he wriggled upright because he very much wanted to see and hear whatever was going to happen next.

It wasn't long before a band of men marched straight to their leader. A tall, strong-jawed man, Lodver Gunnarsson met his Lord's gaze with a smile and swung a sack to the ground with the air of a man who expects praise. Even in the dim light of early dawn, Sorchand could see that the coarse sacking was stained along its lower portion. Ivarr lifted his head. "It is as I asked?"

Gunnarsson's smile flickered and disappeared. "It is as you asked, Lord. Feast your eyes on Sitric's son." A torchbearer moved to stand by Gunnarsson as he dropped to one knee, and wrenched apart the folded sacking. Sorchand's stomach flopped over and he swallowed hard, but could not tear his eyes away.

Dark blood clotted the silver hair, and the half closed blue eyes had a sly and unpleasant cast. The disfiguring bruises, already present when death came, would remain for evermore.

Ivarr looked away. "Cover the thing!"

Gunnarsson's face reflected both disappointment and surprise at his Lord's reaction, but he flung the ends of the gory sacking together, knotted them and stood up without comment. Ivarr stared out over the ruined settlement. "Throw it in the river. Let the river god deal with it as he will," Ivarr said, his voice harsh and thick. "Get rid of the ugly thing." He glanced around. "We have done what we came to do. Let us leave this stinking hole and return to Waterford."

Ivarr rose to his feet, laid a trembling hand on a companion's shoulder and walked through the Gate without a backward glance. Men rushed to collect their gear. Abandoned at the back of the crowd, tied hand and foot in the shadow of the wall, Sorchand of Angus waited expectantly, and finally realized they were going to ignore him. "Hey! It's all over! Untie me, like you promised!"

Ivarr was out of earshot, and other men looked at him, laughed and continued to ignore him. Incredulous, Sorchand shuffled on his knees towards the nearest fellow, who glanced at him, spat, picked up his pack and stalked off without a word.

"Untie me!" bawled Sorchand. "Blast and buggery!" He glared around. The last man swung his pack over his shoulder and set off after his fellows at a dogtrot. "Untie me!" Sorchand yelled. "Free me!"

Sorchand wasted some time swearing at the injustice of it all; then got a grip on himself, and shuffled towards the wall. Once there, he used the rough stones as a crutch and wriggled upright. A crow flapped to the wall above his head, and sat there, beady eye tilted curiously towards him, a black silhouette against the strengthening light. Sorchand ignored the bird, stared around, saw a glint of metal and hopped carefully towards it.

It was a discarded knife blade, perhaps dropped by one of the raiders, and Sorchand fell on it with delight. It was awkward to hold, even though his hands were tied before him; and sweat ran down through his hair by the time he had cut the wrist cords. He was sawing furiously on the rough cords around his ankles when he heard a slight rustle of sound and looked up to see Finlay and Hareth approaching. Sorchand set his mouth in a mutinous line and went back to sawing at the cord with his broken blade.

Someone knelt down beside him, introduced a sharp, jewelled blade between the cords and sliced the strands apart. Sorchand looked up, and met Hareth's sombre grey gaze. "I see Ivarr kept his word and freed you from the slave house." It was Finlay who had spoken; but Sorchand staggered to his feet, stumbled and grunted.

Hareth's head tilted to one side. "You don't like being free?"

"I wouldn't've called it being free." Sorchand scowled. "He kept me trussed up alongside him all night."

Hareth sheathed his blade. "Ungrateful little runt. It kept you out of trouble, no doubt."

"Next time," Finlay remarked blandly, "We'll just let you rot." He ran his eye over Sorchand, for the redheaded youth had filled out in the few weeks since he had left Alba. His shoulders had always been broad boned, but now there was a strapping of muscle from neck to throat and down into the chest region. Finlay remembered a promise, and swung round. "Hareth, the women? Will you tell them the Waterford ships have left and they can go home?"

Hareth set off to Sitric's hall. Finlay frowned, and watched Sorchand jig from foot to foot as sensation wriggled and pricked back into his limbs. "We need to discuss what happened in Alba, but now is not the time. I need to ask you but one thing; have you seen the Lady Eba at all this night?"

Sorchand continued jigging, and pointed. "I saw her on top of the tower."

Finlay turned to stare at the squat stone tower rising above the thatched roof of the hall. He had reason to know the tower provided a fine view over the wrecked buildings and burned out homes between the church and the river. "When was this? She was alone?"

"No," Sorchand said shortly. "She was with a fair haired youth in a blue tunic." Realization hit him, and he made grimace of disgust.

Finlay watched him curiously. "What is it?"

Sorchand swallowed. "The lad. He's dead. They killed him."

"How do you know?"

"I've just seen his head in a sack." Sorchand said bluntly. "They brought it to Ivarr."

"But nothing was said about a girl?"

"No."

"But you saw the same lad and the girl, on the tower?"

"He shrieked at his father. He could see his father from the top of the tower," Sorchand said. "He saw the Vikings kill him. He grabbed the girl and disappeared. I don't know where they went."

"You could see all this, at night, when you were bound hand and foot here by the wall?" Finlay's voice was carefully neutral.

"Of course I could see them! You'll have noticed the Vikings set fire to the place? There was a lot of light about."

"Swallow your sarcasm, Sorchand. It isn't helping. Now, if you can, tell me; when was this?"

Sorchand opened his mouth, and then shut it again. He took a deep breath. "Around midnight. The Waterford men ran to the tower after them. There must be a doorway on the other side," Sorchand added, "because they didn't come out here. I would have seen them."

Finlay thought it made some kind of sense, for Kimi would have been keen to see his father lead the fighting men of Dublin and might well have taken his new wife with him.

"Walk with me," Finlay said briefly to Sorchand.

They had to stand aside when the door of Lord Sitric's Hall burst open and a stream of anxious and beautifully gowned women poured out; women who moaned as they caught their first glimpse of the smoke-blackened streets and ravaged, burnt-out buildings. Small, wavering cries struck the air. Some could not face going home alone and begged friends to accompany them but others plunged into the streets, anxious

to know the worst. Hareth edged his way through to join Finlay and Sorchand, and all three men stood and watched the exquisite silks disappear into the burned, reeking alleyways of Dublin.

The three men walked to the church and examined the outside walls while Finlay relayed Sorchand's tale to Hareth. "We are looking for a door."

"There," said Sorchand, who had happened to glance the right way during Finlay's explanation. The small, metal studded door had been set deep into the stones of the church, and dandelions and nettles sagged and drooped all the way from the door to the narrow alley running parallel with the base of the palisade. They followed the trail and found themselves at a narrow gulley where broken stems of willowherb and cranesbill heeled drunkenly askew all the way down to the old gate at the end of it.

Hareth touched Finlay's arm and nodded back the way they had come. "Sitric." Finlay's gaze came to rest on the top of the tower where Lord Sitric stood, his back to them and surveyed the ruins of his settlement. Hareth snorted. "It'll be awhile before it turns a profit for him again."

Sorchand moved restlessly between them. "That's Sitric? But Ivarr of Waterford thought he'd killed him last night!" His puzzled blue gaze swung between the two men.

"Sitric never budged from the Hall last night," Hareth said.

"But—"

"Think about it," Finlay said. "Sitric did not fight; Torquil and Goffraid had the honor of fighting for Dublin. Torquil was

killed. He has blond hair and a beard. I imagine Ivarr's men thought Torquil was Sitric."

Pale sunlight broke through a cloud and lit the contempt on Sorchand's face. "The man's a coward, then?"

Finlay and Hareth regarded him. "You might say so," Finlay said. "But not in his hearing, if you are wise."

Sorchand followed them down to the unlatched gate. The Poddle sparkled at the bottom of the slope, and the stepping-stones were pale coins against the brown water. Beyond the grassy banks the roof of St Kevin's ancient church peered at the sun, and much closer, a lean dark haired man strode down the slope towards the water. It was Leod; he saw and acknowledged them, crossed the stones and bounded up the slope.

On hearing Sorchand's name, he cocked his head to one side and looked Sorchand up and down. "Ah! The youth who persuaded Eba to leave Inverness, I think."

Sorchand stiffened. Eba had talked about Leod. "The lady Eba wanted to go," he countered.

Leod's brown eyes roved Sorchand from his matted hair to his soiled breeches and leggings. He sniffed. "She could have picked a better guide."

The younger man's ears reddened. "Try living in a slave camp and see if you come out smelling like roses."

"It might have been better if you'd stayed in it," Leod said, his eyes full of unaccustomed anger.

Sorchand's brows shot up and his fists clenched. Hareth met Finlay's startled glance, and shrugged. Leod eyed the fists with scorn. "What are you proposing, exactly?"

A new voice hailed them. "Has anyone found her?"
Domnall, fists on hips, stood at the head of the alley.

Finlay shook his head. "I'm sorry. No. No one has seen her."

Domnall strode down the slope to join them. "Not even a glimpse?" His bright gaze interrogated each of them in turn, and then wandered back to Sorchand. "Who's this?"

Hareth made brief introductions. Domnall scowled. "Huh. You're the laddie who persuaded Eba to leave home, then? You're the one who started all this mess?"

Already ruffled, Sorchand bristled at Domnall's off hand remark. "As I heard it, you were the one stealing cattle—you started it."

"You little runt! I'll—"

Finlay got his arm and shoulder between them just in time and spoke as if to common soldiers in the field. "That's enough!" He glared at each in turn. "Yes, she is missing. Yes, we must find her. Yes, you're upset about it, but fighting each other is not going to help. Do I make myself clear?"

They agreed he did. With a hand on both their shoulders, Finlay turned Sorchand and Domnall and walked them back up the slope until they faced the blackened, smoking ruins of Dublin. He let the silence lengthen. "Yes. Look again, and see what faces us. Instead of a secure trading settlement, we now have to deal with people who have lost relatives, homes and livelihood in one night. It will not be easy."

Leod unbent enough to tell them what had happened to Torquil's unfortunate son Kimi, and Hareth groaned. "Christ!

Marjatta's lost both husband and son! Let's keep out of her way if we can."

Strengthening sunlight lit the lean planes of Finlay's cheek and jaw, and revealed the dust coating his black hair. "Let's hope the Lady Marjatta doesn't blame it all on Eba."

Leod twitched. "But Eba left with Kimi! I saw them! She may well be in danger, but it won't be from Marjatta." He gestured south, beyond the palisade. "Eba's out there, somewhere."

There was a little silence. "Ivarr agreed to keep an eye out for her," Finlay said slowly. "If the girl was with Kimi, why didn't they bring her back?"

Sorchand shook his head. "I don't know, but she wasn't with them, and they never spoke of a girl."

All eyes turned to Leod. He looked from one to another. "I didn't see her either. Unless she's..."

He couldn't bring himself to say that Kimi's patience might have run out, or the Waterford men might have found her, killed her and said nothing to their leader, who would never know, or care. Domnall choked and turned away.

"Perhaps it's not that bad." Finlay's eye rested on the rounded curve of Domnall's hunched shoulder. "She'd slow Kimi down. It's likely he just abandoned her. She'd hide, and stay hidden, when she saw the Waterford men, especially if she saw what they did to Kimi."

Domnall's head lifted. "Then I must go and search for her," he said. "I can't go back to Bundalloch without her."

"We'll all go and look for her," Hareth smiled a brief, crooked smile. "I'd miss her, too."

"I'll come," Sorchand said. "Comgell would have had my hide if I didn't."

Finlay stared at the redhead. "*Would have had?*"

Sorchand swallowed. "Eba told me on the ship," he said. "I'll miss him."

"He's not dead. He had a terrible headache, but he was alive and well when we left him in Bundalloch."

A slow, delighted grin spread across Sorchand's face.

Chapter 21

Eba stumbled, fell and dragged Kimi to a halt. He flung her hand free, swallowed hard and glanced back at the settlement. "You'll get up and run if you've any sense!"

Air wheezed in and out of her lungs so violently speech was impossible. Braced on her hands and knees, she glanced over her shoulder, thought of the Waterford men and clambered to her feet.

"Come on," he gasped, turned and loped off.

She didn't get far. "Wait! Kimi, wait!"

He turned with a snarl of impatience, seized her wrist and plunged on, dragging her behind him at a speed she could not have achieved alone. Eventually even Kimi had to stop and Eba sank dizzily to her knees. He stood wide-legged over her, hands on hips and panted for air, his eyes scanning the way they had come. Sweat and tears streaked his face. "They're still following. Come on!"

"I can't." She fought for breath and a pain stabbed her side.

His finger jabbed the air behind her shoulder. "They'll kill you!"

"I'll hide ... before..."

Kimi's pale hair stuck up around his brow in damp spikes, and at some point in their wild run he had ripped apart the strings of his shirt. Sweat glistened on the tendons of his throat when he threw back his head on a single croak of laughter. "Hide! Where?" His arm swept through the air in a wide arc.

She glanced around the bare hillside, and saw nothing but undulating grassland.

"Get up!" He grasped her arm. "You know what they do to girls before they kill them!"

Eba simply hung there, a dead weight on his arm. He gripped so hard he crushed the small bones of her hand together and dragged her for a pace, and then stopped. "Have it your way!" He let go of her, and loped off into the darkness.

Eba stared wide eyed after him, panting. She glanced back over her shoulder. A fiery glow in the sky marked Dublin, and she could hear a faint thrum of sound; men running, perhaps. He must have heard it, too. Fear flared through her, and she scrambled to her feet.

She had to hide. She glanced round, straining to interpret the light and shade of the landscape and set off towards a narrow band of shadow. It would be enough, perhaps, if she could reach it. She stumbled across the downward slope, and prayed she could keep her feet.

The shadow became a straggling line of bracken and gorse, and she flung herself feet first under the thickest section. Some small, startled creature bolted from the far side with a shrill yip, but Eba did not even glance in its direction; neither did she register the sudden shower of dried and broken foliage that fell on her. On a sudden thought, she rammed the bulk of her hair inside her bodice lest its paleness should attract attention. She turned onto her stomach, pressed into the dry leaves, and tried not to pant out loud.

She felt them through the earth; ten warriors, each clothed in the moon's colors of grey and silver and black; men who moved at a half run across the skyline. Fit young men who tossed comments between them as they ran. Their voices and the faint chime of ring mail floated across the hillside to her prickling nest.

Eba lay like the fawn that seeks escape in stillness, hardly daring to breathe until the band passed out of sight. They had taken the same general direction as Kimi. She thought the sea lay that way, for she could scent it on the air. She did not know where Kimi had intended to run. He could be safe in some uncle's farm or cot while I'm out here, she thought, flat on my face under a gorse bush.

Weary, aching muscles complained. Twisted roots lay underneath her hips, but she felt far too weary to move and in any case, she did not dare move while those men were anywhere about. She laid her cheek on her arm and closed her eyes, prepared to wait for daylight if necessary.

Faint, shrill cries drifted by on the breeze from the sea. Eba's eyes opened with a jerk and she stared through the gorse bushes. Her chin wobbled. Tears spilled over, she put her hands over her ears and breathed in quick, retching gasps. It did not seem very long at all before the rich deepness of men's voices reached her.

Eba nerved herself to raise her head and risk a slow careful glance through the shielding fronds of gorse and grass. The warriors strode through the night at a steady pace. Sword hilts jutted, ring mail gleamed and a heavy sack swung

from one man's hand. She checked and checked again but there was no slender blond youth within the group.

A cold feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. She wriggled further back into the gorse bushes and curled into a ball, desperately afraid something would bring them back to find her.

She slept, and didn't know it until she woke some time later to find the moon had vanished behind cloud and the world was a dark and chilly place. She listened, heard no sound but the faint whisper of wind through grass and eventually wriggled out from under the gorse bushes and limped over undulating grassland towards the muted sound of the sea. Her eyes were gummy, every muscle ached and even the horrid fear had gone. Resignation and indifference had taken its place.

She stood on the edge of a shallow cliff in the chill of near dawn. The cold breeze off the water whipped her long divided skirts about her calves, and Eba hugged herself and wished for a good thick cloak. The moon broke free of cloud and tracked light across the dark sea and pale sand. There was nothing in either direction, at first glance, to cause alarm. No ships swung at anchor, no one paced the long beach. Close by her feet the sand was rumped, the tall grass stems trampled and bent and her eyes followed the pocked trail down and out across the flat band of silver sand. A small wave rolled shoreward and silver and white foam broke and danced around a darker shape.

Eba half jumped, half stumbled down the sandy slope, hit the firm sand and forced herself to run. She laid hands on

him, thinking he would drown if she did not pull him clear of the water and then realized the enormity of what they had done to him. A wave trundled in and foamed around Kimi's shoulder and arm, played between his splayed fingers. The once rich tunic was soiled with blood and seawater, and his hands were gashed and sliced where he had tried to protect himself. The next wave lifted the body and Kimi's lifeless arm nudged her feet.

Eba fled. She ran from the beach, slithered and clawed her way back up through the dunes until the soft sand slipped, a tuft of grass gave way and she tumbled, her breath snagging in her throat, down into a dark hidden pocket deeper than she was tall. She came to rest at the bottom of the hollow lined with fine, silky sand that was still warm to the touch, curled her knees towards her chest, buried her face in her hands and cried in huge gasping sobs.

* * * *

Leod informed Marjatta's steward where the lady might find her son's body, and then spent a fruitless hour trying to hire horses. Half the ship's crew spent the day scouring the countryside for Eba on foot, and came back weary and empty-handed.

The settlement of Dublin was unrecognizable. Sitric's hall on the highest point on the ridge had escaped the fires, but a good third of the buildings were burnt out, and another third were damaged. Many ships were now nothing but charred, blackened timbers half in and half out of the Liffey. It made the quayside a dangerous place for shipping, and Finlay

deemed it wise for his beloved *Wolf* to remain close to the northern bank of the river.

By general consent, the whole crew opted to remain on board. Finlay sent the ever courteous Leod with a message for Lord Sitric's household, so that no offence might be given when he withdrew from the guest accommodation and settled down to a night under the canvas awning. They had beer in barrels, fresh meat caught in the oak woods north of Dublin and a sack of apples under the decking; they would fare better on board than in Lord Sitric's hall among the wounded and grieving.

* * * *

The second day after the Waterford attack, the sun rose over the sea, crept with infinite slowness towards the dunes and probed the rim of the hollow where Eba lay curled in sleep. A gull spotted her, swooped low and called the nearby flock out of the sky.

The gull landed. Sand slipped beneath its flat grey feet and it took off again with a raucous squawk. Eba stirred, and woke in panic as sand grains ran under her cheek, her palms, her hair and into her mouth.

Memory came back. Eba sat up and spat out sand, then got shakily to her feet, staggered and flopped back down on her backside. Every muscle ached. She rubbed her calves, and several rosy insect bites immediately began to itch.

The soft shell sand moved under her foot at every step, but she finally clawed her way out of the hollow, and sat on level grass while she got her breath back and considered her

next move. She refused to look at the beach, faced north and walked with the sun's warmth on her right shoulder.

The dunes gave way to rolling grassland; waves curled white onto black rocks, and a pale blue sky spanned the horizon. Whispers of white cloud streamed above her head, and a breeze ruffled her hair. Eba plodded determinedly north, and thanked whatever impulse had made her wear her Bundaloch clothes for the wedding. If she had worn the flimsy pink gown Kimi's mother had insisted on, she would have had a poor time of it. She stopped to drink at a small spring, rinsed the sand from her hands and face and ignored rising hunger pangs.

Seabirds were her only company. They wheeled and dived and cried constant warnings above her head. By mid day she was hugely hungry, blisters had formed where her boots rubbed, and the blue sky had filled with streamers of white cloud. By late afternoon she limped badly, and dark towers of cloud billowed above her head. She wished she had listened when the men talked weather lore; she wished she were home, or in Annikki's cozy hall, but most of all she dreamed of a good venison stew and a hunk of fresh, warm bread.

The gusts of wind increased and whipped her hair across her eyes, found every gap in her leather tunic and jolted her off balance. There was no shelter. The wind rippled the surface of the brackish pools and the reeds and coarse grasses leaned away from the wind. Eba suspected the fires in Dublin would have burned out, but she hoped for a light, any light, to shine through the gloom. How far, she wondered, did candlelight shine?

She groaned aloud when the wind roared off the sea and drove the first big drops of rain into her face, for there wasn't a tree or a wall within sight. She plodded on across the flat, marshy land that fringed the sea and if a few tears mingled with the rain on her face, there was no one to know.

The sky lost light and the land darkened around her. Muddy pools trapped her unwary feet. When the Thingmote loomed through the gloom, Eba came to an unsteady halt and squinted through the rain. She made out a tall thin stone pointing like a finger towards the darkening sky, and beyond, she thought she could see the river winding out to sea. If they were real, if she had not imagined them, then she was close to Dublin.

A little spark of hope rose in her chest, and she ignored her blistered feet and the crippling ache in her hipbones. She had never known such tiredness, but she could not stop now. The rain sliced down like cold steel and bounced off the sodden ground but Eba followed a straight line doggedly through grass and puddles until the faint trail under her boots widened and became a path. There were ruts, formed by wooden wheels of farm carts. She looked up, blinking in the rain; the settlement must be near.

A low wooden cabin huddled in the shadow of the mound, with chinks of light around the doorframe. Eba veered towards it and heard laughter and raucous voices, all of them male. She hesitated, sorely tempted to go over and push the door open. It would be warm inside, and there would be ale and food.

There were other considerations, however. She could hear her mother's voice, declaring that no well-born woman would be abroad alone even on a fine July evening; and none but the desperate would be outdoors on a night such as this. If she were foolish enough to go in and ask for help, the men would see her as fair game for any nasty sport their minds might devise. With a huge effort of will, Eba forced herself to walk on towards the settlement.

Vicious stabs of pain shot through her left heel as she began to walk again and she whimpered aloud until it eased a little. She thought of her brother and his friends. They would have a fire, a warm bed and a bowl of hot, succulent stew waiting for her.

She recognized the dark bulk of the priory. It was barred and shuttered. The watermill was not far ahead, and it too was silent. The blades had no doubt been lifted at the first coming of the Waterford men, and the miller would have fled to country relatives until all was safe once more. It crossed Eba's mind for the first time that the whole of Dublin might be deserted, but she pushed the thought away.

The bridge across the Poddle was just beyond the mill. It wasn't far now. She reached the crude wooden bridge, and gripped the wooden rail to keep her balance on the slippery wood. A flicker of light in the darkness ahead made her heart leap in her chest. She was chilled to the bone, her riding dress was soaked and heavy, her hair and boots sodden but none of it mattered now. Dublin was just ahead, and she could see a light.

* * * *

Several young men stumbled out of the crude cabin by the Thingmote, cursed the rain, tucked their heads down and ran for Dame Gate. Full of ale and good humor after a hard, gruelling day's work in the burnt out ruins, they splashed through small puddles, leapt larger ones, and pushed and shoved each other as they ran.

Eba heard the noise, and hesitated. Tiredness dulled her mind, and she could see nowhere to hide; she stood there in a fog of exhausted indecision and terror, and peered through the grey screen of rain.

The young men hurtled over the rickety bridge with a noise like thunder, and Eba, her nerves flinching, lurched off the path out of their way.

Head down, eyes on the ground, the leading man crashed straight into her at full speed. "Bollocks!" Battle trained and fully fit, his reactions were quick even with the ale; his arms closed instinctively about the girl and they flew several paces through the air, and hit the ground hard.

The man's body shielded her from the worst of the fall. Eba, more shocked than hurt, opened her eyes on a flurry of movement. Rain pounded into her eyes, and the man pushed her to one side, rolled over and disentangled his legs. His companions, whooping, slid to a halt, and crowded round, grinning. They hauled him to his feet, saw the mud that covered him from head to toe and reeled with laughter. The rain blasted his face and runnels of clean skin showed through the dirt. As one, they turned to stare at the girl.

Eba struggled to her feet. Her heels hurt and she was too tired to be frightened. She didn't even glance at the group of men, but turned and started walking towards Dublin.

"Hey! Hold hard there!"

Eba's only thought was to reach the bridge across the Poddle and the safety of the quayside. It wasn't far now. She heard footsteps splashing behind her, and increased her pace to a shambling run that made the breath saw in her throat. A warm hand clamped her arm, and a large presence loomed in front of her. Four tall men, blinking in the hard, slanting rain, stared down at her. She looked straight ahead, and refused to meet anyone's eyes.

"She's pretty, Aralt." The voice was good humored.

"A nice shape, too."

"She looks like a drowned rat," the first voice said. "Do we know her?"

"I don't think we do." The man who held her arm turned her gently to face him.

Eba had no problem understanding them, for they spoke like Annikki and Arne, in a strange dialect of her own tongue. "Let me go. Please." Her voice was thin and reedy, and the man they called Aralt retained his grip for a moment, and then let go. "Thank you," she said, frowning. She turned, but there was no way out of the circle.

Aralt's smile widened. "Why, she's not one of us," he said. "Listen to her! I don't think so, my girl!" He blocked her attempt to sidle between them.

He was much taller than Eba, and well made, with close cropped hair rendered flat to his skull in the rain. Mud

obscured half his face. His companions hovered around, sniggering, but made no move to touch her. Half formed thoughts flew through her mind, and vanished. "I must go," she said. "I am expected, and I'm late now. They will be looking for me."

Aralt's eyes were colorless in his dirty face, but his voice was pleasant. "And who would they be?"

"My brother," Eba said. "He will be waiting for me."

"Who and where would he be? Dublin is a bad place just now for such as yourself."

"I'm cold," Eba said, with perfect truth. She was soaked and her back was covered in wet mud. "Please let me get on home."

"You'll come home with me," Aralt said. "I'll dry you, and warm you afterwards."

His companions laughed. Aralt reached for her, and Eba backed, but found another pair of hands right behind her. She stood still. "No. I should go to my brother."

Fright percolated her bloodstream in short, erratic pulses. The man called Aralt drew both palms down his face, wiped them against his hips, looked at them and wiped them again. He stared up into the rain and let it wash his skin clean. "You go on, lads. I'll follow behind."

They nodded and moved off with knowing grins. Eba couldn't decide if it was better to stay with one man or move on with three, but before she could make up her mind, Aralt grasped her shoulder and propelled her off the track and into the shelter of a lean to. Once the wood store for the water mill, now it was little more than a crooked corner of thatch in

the angle above two timber walls and offered scant protection from the rain. Eba wondered how she had missed it earlier.

Aralt crowded in against her. Heat came off him in waves and his eyes glittered in the dimness. He plucked at the laces of her damp, muddied tunic, ripping and pulling the leather and her undershirt apart so he could handle her chilled flesh. His hands were warm, and so was the mouth that came down over hers.

Thought is aimless when panic strikes, and often leaves no trace. Eba had struggled so hard to avoid physical contact with Kimi. This couldn't happen now, she thought; not with a stranger, not as a casual rape. She looked up past the close-cropped head to the dark sky, where silver lines of rain slanted down towards the ruined thatch. They were beautiful. She felt light and bodiless, and wondered if she were falling asleep, or perhaps drifting out to meet the stars, for her thoughts were thickening like cream and the world was tilting to one side.

She slid through his arms without a sound. Aralt cursed aloud, secured his grip of her just before she hit the ground and stared for some time at the long throat and bold jaw line gleaming dimly in the darkness. A moment later, without having made a conscious decision, he lifted her and set off through the rain towards the bridge, the settlement and home with the girl curled fast around his shoulders like a scarf.

Chapter 22

Aralt ignored her pleas to be taken to the quayside. He strode instead towards Lord Sitric's hall, turned aside at the last moment and barged through a set of stout wooden doors with the confidence of long use. He slid the girl from his shoulders, set her feet down on the earthen floor by the firepit and looked her over.

His instincts had been good. The girl was wet, bedraggled and exhausted; her hair was flat to her head and made an odd lumpy bundle down the back of her sodden, muddy leather tunic that gaped from throat to waist. She stood straight-backed and gazed around, her expression a mixture of apprehension and curiosity. It occurred to Aralt that she had never been inside a men's communal sleeping hall.

The residents of the hall crowded closer, sharp eyed, curious and delighted with anything new. They were rough and fit and carried fresh battle scars; some laughed, others sent leering, sidelong glances from her face to her feet and back again.

A strange hand yanked her hair clear of her tunic and fingered the long yellow strands. Eba backed against Aralt. One man reached out to touch her cheek, and laughed as she recoiled. "You'll have your hands full there, Aralt!"

She turned and focussed on Aralt. Puzzled, he stared back. Another comment floated across the circle. "A nice little handful! I wouldn't say no, myself."

Aralt glanced over her head. "Don't be greedy, Magnus. You've had your share. This one's all mine."

The girl sucked in a breath, and another. Her chin wobbled, and Aralt's head tilted and his eyes narrowed. "What's the matter? You look as if—" Her knees buckled, her head went back and he caught her as she fell.

"Ah, she'll never last the night unless you feed her up!"

Aralt did not reply. He stared down in dismay at the white face lying quiet across his arm. This was no cheerful Irish farm maid scampering home late; this girl was light as thistledown in his arms; slender and fine-boned, with smooth skin and with stylish clothes beneath all the mud and dirt. His glance traced the delicate, firelit curve of her mouth before he turned towards his own alcove. "Bring a bowl of stew over for her, then."

* * * *

Eba stirred in a brief, incoherent way and then woke with a jerk. She was naked beneath the wool blanket and a man she did not know stood within the cubicle; thankfully his back was to her, but he was so close she could have touched him. Beyond him, a crowd of men laughed and talked round the long hearth out in the open hall.

Her wet clothes hung from a peg in the wall, well out of her reach. The man ran a wad of straw gently up and down the blade of his sword, stripping it of dried mud, and took no notice of her. With her gaze fixed on his broad back, Eba gripped the edge of the blanket, pulled it tight around her and shuffled cautiously across the bed platform until she got her back against the wall. The straw mattress squeaked and

rustled beneath her, but his own work masked the sound and he did not turn.

Eba curled her knees in close to her belly and looked at the man. He was tall and broad across the shoulders. A memory of his rain drenched, mud splattered face filled her mind, and she remembered he had dragged her to a ruined shed of some kind. He would have raped her if she had not fainted. Her heart leapt in her chest, and the air vanished from her lungs as the thought struck her that he would probably do it now.

He hung the sword belt on a convenient wall peg, jerked a rough leather curtain across the front of the cubicle and laughed softly when the simple act provoked a roar of outrage from men deprived of their entertainment. The sickening realization struck Eba that most likely they had already had a fine view of her when he had removed her clothes.

She watched him hitch his sodden linen tunic up and over his head and toss it onto a small wooden chest. He towelled his hair, face and throat, and Eba's gaze flicked nervously over the shadowed ridges of his chest and stomach. He half turned, noticed she was awake and smiled. He tossed the rough cloth to her.

Eba ignored it, and huddled so far back into the corner of the bed space that the wattle wall pressed into her back. Fear rose through her in spiralling waves. Torquil had captured her, but he had commanded his crew and kept them away from her. He had kept her safe until she met Kimi. Even then, Annikki and Conn had kept a careful eye on her. Now there

was no one at all. She was alone in a hall filled with rough men.

Fear magnified her senses. She registered the rumble of conversation outside in the big hall, and the mixed and jumbled smells of pine, wet wool and smoke in the air around her head. She thought she might be sick. The curtain twitched to one side and admitted a pair of large and dirty hands offering two steaming wooden bowls between curtain and wall.

"You wanted to feed the lassie, Aralt. Here's broth for you."

Light gleamed on Aralt's shoulders as he took the bowls with a word of thanks, nudged his tunic off the chest and set the bowls down in its place. "Dry your hair," he said. "I want to see what color it is."

Eba's stomach rolled so violently at the rich smell of food she was surprised he did not hear it. He got up and Eba's gaze flickered from the bowls to Aralt and back again. He sat on the bed and by the time he had tugged off both boots, she still had not moved.

"Well, if you won't, I'll have to." He put one knee on the bed and leaned forward, the towel in both hands.

Eba lurched sideways. A warm, musky aroma clouded the air about her and two large palms clapped the towel to her head and began to rub. A memory of her mother drying her hair in the same fashion flashed across her mind, though her mother's gentle hands could never have achieved this roughness. Thought was impossible; her brains were being churned like butter and her ears would be ripped off. Terror

turned to indignation. Eba lifted clenched fists and swung at anything of him she could reach. "Stop it!" she howled. "Stop! Stop!"

Aralt sat back, the damp towel suspended between his hands.

Eba gulped and stared at him. She had struck him! Jesu, but he might take off her head with that sword! She bit down on her lip and tried to hide her terror. Lewd suggestions in raucous male voices hurtled in from every side. Aralt cocked his head, listened and a grin spread across his lean face. Eba heard them, too, and she flushed with color from throat to brow. She ducked her head and clutched the blanket to her chin.

"I see less of the drowned rat," Aralt said, staring at her. "And more of your true colors." Slowly, with surprise in his voice, Aralt added softly, "By Freyja! You are lovely! What's your name?"

Eba scowled. "Eba." She refused to look up. "Why should you want to know my name?"

He lifted one shoulder. "Is it a secret? Mine is Aralt, but you heard that from my friends."

A background hum of conversation and an occasional bellow of laughter filtered through the leather curtain and she could hear voices and footsteps that made her feel both less alone and threatened at the same time. Eba didn't like the way he stared. She had seen it before, but always Domnall or Leod had been there to stand between her and any over amorous male. She had an inkling of what was to come and absolutely no idea how she could prevent it. Would it be just

the one man, she wondered, or the rabble outside as well? A voice, unbidden, and surely not her own, wailed childishly through her head: I want to go home!

Aralt's rough finger touched her cheek. Eba flinched like a nervous horse. The finger curled and rolled up and down her fine skin, and then hesitated. Aralt dragged the long wet hank of hair over her shoulder and began to dry it. Eba sagged with relief.

Her heartbeat had steadied into something like its normal rhythm by the time he tossed the wet cloth aside and picked up a bowl of stew from the chest. "Eat this." The steam from the bowl wound in slow spirals under her nose and the bowl's heat warmed her palms. A hunk of bread soaked up the fat on the surface, and a horn spoon slid against the rim. She grabbed the spoon, and very soon the bowl was empty. She held onto it like a talisman until Aralt, smiling, took it from her and placed it on the chest.

"Eba is such a pretty name; a pretty name for a very pretty girl." His voice was rich and rounded, his accent unremarkable. Close too, he was not handsome. You might call him pleasant, she thought, if you liked fair-haired men. His brows were silver against a skin weathered to brown by sun and wind and his eyes were a dense dark blue with thick brown lashes clumped about them. He leaned towards her, slid one hand under her hair and let his warm palm rest across the nape of her neck, and then sank back onto one elbow and pulled her with him.

It had been inevitable from the collision on the muddy track in the rain. Their bodies touched, and Eba jerked, got

her hands between them and pushed, but it was like trying to push her horse away from his feed in the stable at Bundalloch. This man's skin was hot, too, just like her horse. "No! No! I don't want—"

He contemplated her with eyes full of laughter. "But I do, very much," he said. The candle flame reflected in his eyes as he caught both her hands and brought them to his mouth. His tongue circled her fingertips and her face twisted in rejection. At the sudden pressure of his knee between her thighs she flung herself away but she could not escape him. He dragged the blanket from her shoulders, rolled over and pinned her against the straw mattress. Her raw heels dragged across the mattress cover, and pain flared.

* * * *

It happened again during the night. Eba wasn't prepared for the warm, sleepy stirring in the darkness, the alert hand or the sudden burst of heat radiating from him; and before she was fully awake he pushed into her and the pain was so hot and sharp she had to clamp her teeth together until he was finished, for some instinct told her not to cry out and alert every man in the hall.

Aralt soon drifted off to sleep. Eba lay still, dry eyed and listened to the deep, even breathing of the man behind her. He had not been cruel, if you ignored the fact that she had not wanted to ... she could not think of a word. Mate with him; perhaps that would describe it. Eba wondered if he guessed how much he had hurt her, for he held her against him all night long, his strong body curved behind her, his arm

a huge weight across her chest. It might also, she thought, be so she could not sneak away from him in the night.

It happened again in the early morning. She woke in panic to prowling hands and his tongue at her throat. Feigning sleep did no good, for he simply woke her with kisses. He was good tempered, but insistent, and Eba lay stiff and still, her teeth sunk in her lip, and wished it over. All through it, her mind was awake. People moved about in the hall and the smell of porridge hung on the air, and fresh baking bread.

He soon turned on his back, yawned, braced his feet against the partition and stretched his spine like a bow. "Go and get some bread and cheese." His voice was raspy from sleep.

White faced, plagued with multiple aches and pains and the sharp new soreness he had created, Eba hesitated. "I have no clothes. I cannot go out there."

"You could get dressed." He pointed to the hook near the door where her clothes hung.

She sat up reluctantly and then groaned as the combined exertion of yesterday and the night's activities caught up with her. She would feel altogether safer if she were clothed; but she had to get past Aralt first and he took up a good deal of the bed platform. "Where will I find the bread and the cheese?"

"From the..." He shot her an impatient blue glance. "You don't know where anything is, do you? Ach, stay where you are! I'll go myself, otherwise I'll go hungry!" Disgruntled, he flung the blanket back and marched naked out into the larger

room, treating Eba to a view of a muscled back, tight buttocks and long sinewy thighs.

Other sleepers were waking. Eba retreated under the blanket, and wished Aralt had closed the curtain. She clutched the blanket close, shuffled off the bed and drew the curtain back across the gap. Her leather tunic was damp and heavy, but she dressed quickly.

She could not bear to push her raw heels into her boots. She had one foot in her palm, examining the raw skin beneath the blisters when Aralt rattled the curtain back and dropped bread, cheese and a flagon of ale on the chest. He sat on the edge of the bed, an elbow on each knee, perfectly at ease in his nakedness and tossed half of the bread to Eba. "Eat," he said. "You need to be strong. I have work for you."

The soft, crumbly cheese lay within reach. Eba reached out, tore off a chunk and ate it slowly. She was ravenous, but she wanted to savor it. The faint trace of herbs in the cheese brought a rush of juices to her mouth and she failed to notice Aralt's astonishment. Feeling his stare, faint color washed up through her skin. "Have I done something wrong?" The lump of cheese grew and filled her throat as she tried to swallow.

He reached for his trousers, and stood up. "No," he said, sucking his breath in as he tied the draw cords. "But you're the only girl I've ever brought back who refused to get me my breakfast, and then proceeded to eat all my cheese. The others made do with bread."

"Oh." Eba lowered her lashes. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again. I didn't eat all..."

"Eba." There was a hint of impatience in his voice as he rattled his leather vest against the wall to shake off the dried mud. "Eba." She raised her head. "I was attempting humor. If you are used to eating cheese, then please do so. Your small appetite will not run us out of cheese." He bit into the moist bread, swallowed a huge mouthful and washed it down with ale.

"Why didn't the other girls eat your cheese?"

"They were not brought up to it." He shook his tunic and wriggled into it even though it was decorated with swirls of mud and soot. His head shot through the wide neck. "They were used to serving the men, and eating after the men had finished." He ran his fingertips along the burst of golden stubble on his jaw.

"You didn't offer it to them?"

He shook his head. Dry, his hair was a ragged cap of dark gold.

"Why not?"

"It never occurred to me." He got up and walked out of the cubicle.

She waited until she was sure he wasn't about to reappear, and then ate the rest of the bread and cheese. She saw a fine-toothed comb on a shelf, pounced on it and started to pull it through the snarled, tangled mass of her hair.

Absorbed, she didn't hear him return. When a warm hand covered hers, she jumped and cried out, thinking it was one of the men from the hall. He took the comb from her hand.

"Let me do that."

He sat down behind her, picked up the long hank of hair and began to comb out the snarls and knots from the bottom up, as if he was well used to the task. She found it soothing. Her breathing slowed, and her eyelids drooped until his voice in her ear made her jump. "I have told Nuala you will help her today." The hand holding the comb pointed beyond the curtain to a small red haired woman seated by the fire.

Nuala inclined her head and smiled as if she knew what Aralt was saying.

"You should remember," he added, "that you won't be allowed to leave the hall. You'll keep out of trouble if you stay with Nuala. Some of the men will try to bed you if the chance arises."

Eba looked up, glanced towards the crowd of men by the fire and shuddered.

"Nuala cares for the wounded at the far end of the hall, and I must go and help with rebuilding the settlement. I want you to take my undershirt to the washer-maid. It stinks of cow dung from last night. I expect to find you here when I return. Do you plait this?"

"Yes. I have some skill at nursing."

"Good. Nuala will be pleased. Plait it so it is out of harm's way." He whipped the comb through his own short hair and dropped it back on the shelf. "She won't want to find your hair in with her bandages. She won't stand any nonsense, but she has a kind heart underneath the bluster. She might look after your blisters for you, if you ask her."

His smile was spare and swift, but it was there and she was grateful. She was also surprised he had noticed her

blisters. She watched him stride across the hall and join his companions, all of them ready for a hard day's work in the burned out remains of Dublin.

Eba dressed her hair into a long, fat plait, tied it with a strip of leather from her pocket, and then got to her feet and limped, barefoot, over to the fire. She was glad to sit, but did so with a deep sigh. Nuala greeted her with a knowing expression while her fingers continued to roll a long strip of old linen. "Your first time?"

She flushed, and guessed what the woman referred to. "Yes."

"And you're sore?" The serious brown eyes regarded her with interest.

Eba's skin grew pinker. "Yes. Very. Will it wear off soon?"

A sound very like a snort escaped Nuala. "In time, yes." Her round cheeks dimpled. "I have a salve that will ease it." She dug into a deep pocket hidden in the folds of her dun colored over tunic, and came up with a tiny, close woven straw cube, which she pressed into Eba's palm. "Use it where you're sore," she said. "Go on, do it now."

Eba looked down at the little box on her palm. She lifted the lid and found a soft salve that smelled of some herb whose name eluded her. Nuala nudged her arm and nodded, with much eye rolling, towards the privacy of Aralt's cubicle. Eba got up with the box clutched in her hand, and returned a little later with the distinct feeling that everyone knew what she had been doing. She held out the little box.

Nuala shook her head. "You keep it," she said. "Use it as often as you want. It will help you heal, and it will make it

easier when Aralt returns. These men," she said, shaking her auburn curls in half amused exasperation, "don't know the word moderation."

Eba hadn't expected ever to smile again, but at the sharp observation, her mouth curved into a smile. She looked at the small, plump woman with gratitude. "Thank you."

Nuala's gaze was direct. "I see it all the time. Young girls like you who have no idea how to deal with what is happening to them, or how to take care of themselves. Do you have any idea where you are in your courses?"

From pink, Eba's face rapidly turned scarlet. "Er ... not really," she stammered, her gaze riveted on the older woman. "I'd have to work it out. Why?"

"Because you could find yourself pregnant in a week or two," Nuala said bluntly. "Think about it, and tell me when you've remembered. While you are thinking, roll this for me. I need bandages. I have the injured men to see to. Did Aralt leave you instructions?"

"Oh!" Eba remembered. "Indeed he did. I have to ... Aralt said I should give his shirt to ... you know, someone to wash."

Nuala pointed to a small doorway in the corner of the timber hall that had faint whiffs of steam drifting around it. "The washing room is through there," she said. "Finish the roll, take the shirt and then come and find me."

The washermaid was plain, pock marked and downright rude. She took the muddy tunic between thumb and forefinger and tossed it into a corner without a word. Eba retreated, her cheeks scarlet with humiliation, and hurried

back into the main room. The big double doors had been thrown open and sunlight poured in across the uneven earthen floor. Eba's stride slowed, and she glanced around; she could be through the door and down to the quayside before anyone noticed she had gone.

On the thought, she altered direction and headed straight for the fresh air. Everything in the big hall stopped and every face, from the young girls lounging around the hearth to the man sitting nearest the door, turned in Eba's direction. The man rose, grim faced and strolled forward, his intention clear. He intended to bar her exit. Eba abruptly changed direction and went in search of Nuala.

The man slowed, turned and went back to his seat. The girls by the hearth smirked as Eba walked passed, and the outbreak of feminine giggles brought the sting of tears to her eyes. She blinked rapidly, lifted her chin and stiffened her spine. The corner Nuala had indicated was furthest from the door and so dimly lit that she could just make out ten or twelve beds in neat lines against the walls, but at least by the time she got there, the wish to weep had gone.

"Eba! What are you doing here? Down here! To your left! Damn it, Eba, I'm *here!*"

She saw a hand waving in the shadows. "Conn! Oh, Conn—" She flew to kneel at his side. "What happened...?" She peered at the wad of bandage on his thigh. "Is it bad? I can't see! Will you be alright?"

Still talking, she scrambled up and darted across the hall, snatched up a soapstone lamp and brought it back to the ledge above Conn's head. The wavering golden light lit his

honey colored hair, threw dark shadows across his eye sockets and revealed a mass of bruises and scratches across his chest and shoulders. "A sword cut, and it's healing well. Mother had too much to do taking care of father and Marjatta, so I came here. The girls were taken by the raiders, you see. Nuala's promised I'll be up and about in a day or two." He hesitated. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story," she said, perching on the bed frame. "Do you want to hear it?" She took his hand, and was relieved to find it cool and dry. He was naked but for a modest wrap of linen, and he groaned as he hauled himself to a sitting position. The sudden play of muscles beneath his smooth skin rendered her breathless for a moment, and she forced her eyes to his face.

"Of course." His gaze focussed on someone behind her. "But I think you're about to be chased away."

Nuala stood nearby, frowning, a hand on each hip. "I'll come back," Eba whispered, and scrambled off the bed.

"Do you know that young man?" Nuala demanded.

"He is cousin to the man I married two ... or is it three, days ago. I lived with his mother for some time."

Nuala's white forehead wrinkled. "You...? The day the raiders came? You are the girl Kimi married?"

Eba nodded, and the older woman reached out to grasp Eba above each elbow. "Then you perhaps don't know. Both Torquil and Kimi are dead and Marjatta is distraught. You could help her. Or perhaps not," she added, for Eba's reluctance was plain enough in her face.

"I know what happened," Eba said harshly. "Kimi made me watch his father die, and then forced me to run from Dublin. They followed us and killed him. I saw his body. It would not help Marjatta to see me. There is nothing I could say she would want to hear."

Nuala's blue gaze turned speculative. "I take it Aralt does not know who you are?"

Eba shrugged. "He did not ask my name before he dragged me in here. I do not know what he knows, or does not know." It crossed her mind that she had made an error, for if she claimed she could help Kimi's mother, she might be taken away from this place. She tilted her head to one side and offered Nuala an ingratiating smile. "Do you truly think Marjatta would want to see me? Would I really be of any comfort to her?"

"I suspect that you and she were not friends, and Aralt would be annoyed if I removed you without his consent."

Eba shrugged. "She was not kind to me, but I was thinking only of myself. If she has lost both her son and her husband, I ought to help if I can."

Nuala nodded. "Then I will think about it before I make a decision. Now," she said, "Conn is healing and does not need your attention; Ketil, over there, most certainly does. But first, we must salve your heels. I see why you go barefoot."

Chapter 23

"When a woman loses the men of her family, her future is uncertain. Remember that, and be kind. You may be in need of help yourself one day."

Eba thought she would never be in greater need of help than she was right now, but decided to stay silent. She had been in the hall for three nights, and was desperate enough to grasp at any chance of escape. Nuala sensed it and kept a close grasp of Eba's arm as they left the hall and set off to visit Marjatta.

Eba's blistered heels healed beneath one of Nuala's salves and a pair of backless slippers put no pressure on them. The mysterious ointment in the straw cube eased the discomfort that followed Aralt's demands, and there had been advice on that score, too.

Eba's natural optimism rose in the sunlight and she strode out with such energy that Nuala begged her to slow down a little. They walked around a burned out gable end and Eba stopped dead in her tracks.

Nuala stopped, too. "Ah, you've seen the burnt out ships. It's sad, is it not? Heaven alone knows why, but the King of Alba had the good fortune to anchor on the other side of the river. His ship was untouched."

Eba glanced across the expanse of brown water. "Some are just born with good fortune, I suppose." She pointed. "Is that his ship, over there?"

Nuala nodded, and grasped Eba's arm. "Let's not waste time. We must be back within the hour, or there'll be the devil to pay."

Nuala entered the dark and smoky hall and called for Marjatta. Eba, apprehensive in the near darkness, trailed behind her. They both halted rather suddenly, and then Nuala hurried forward, went down on one knee and gathered Marjatta into an awkward embrace. "Oh, Marjatta, my dear."

Marjatta sat at her loom, her fingers motionless among the wool threads. Her hair fell in snarls and tangles down the back of an old gown, and her eyes were swollen with weeping. At Nuala's voice, the weeping broke out afresh.

Eba listened to the rising sobs and doubted the wisdom of being here. But the woman *was* her mother-in-law, even though Kimi was dead; and almost as if the thought reached her, Marjatta's head lifted, and her blue eyes focussed on her. "Eba!" There was no pleasure in the fair, heavy boned face. Marjatta began to rise and sat down again rather suddenly. "Where is my son? Where is Kimi?"

Eba's stomach flipped over. She cast a quick, agonized glance at Nuala. "Has he not been found?"

Nuala shook her head. Since the girl remained silent, Nuala addressed Marjatta in soft, persuasive tones. "I brought the girl to see you," she said, "because I thought it may be of some comfort to know what happened to the boy, if you will allow her to tell you."

There was a short, rather ominous silence. Marjatta sat with her hands clasped tight in her lap. Finally she stirred and said, "Please Nuala, find the maids and ask them to bring

wine. I think we might need it." The shadow of a smile crossed her pale, tear bloated face and Nuala nodded and swept off into the gloom.

"Fetch a stool, girl; sit there."

Eba sat quietly, her brown leather skirts falling aside to reveal the breeches beneath and wondered if there would be any maids to find. When Nuala reappeared, carrying cups of wine on a tray, she knew the answer and thought briefly of Rhosyn and all the other servants stolen by the Waterford men. She took a quick gulp of wine and then waited, her fingers tight around the cold metal stem of the cup.

"Now, girl, tell me about my son. I saw him lead you into the church after the news came of the invasion. Tell me what happened afterwards. Where did you go?"

"He dragged..." This was Kimi's mother, she reminded herself. She began again. "He took me to the tower because he wanted to see the fighting. From the top, we could see most of the town. We saw his father." Eba stopped and looked down at her cup. "We saw Torquil killed."

The silence stretched on. Nuala reached across and patted Eba's hand. "Go on," she said. "The Lady Marjatta needs to know."

Eba shifted uncomfortably on her stool. "It was very quick," she said, wondering how much to tell. "Two blows at the same time, so he did not know what ... Kimi knew a way out through the church, and we took it. He was crying. We ran down to an old gate, and crossed some stepping stones across the Poddle, and..."

She stopped again, and shook her head. "Kimi was upset on the tower, and screamed. The men saw us, and gave chase. We ran." She looked up, and her throat twisted painfully when she saw Marjatta's face running with tears. "We ran for a long time, and the men followed us. I could not keep up," she said. "So I hid and Kimi ran on." She took a gulp of wine. "The men followed him."

Marjatta's tears ran faster, and a small damp stain appeared on her soft linen of her gown. Eba watched it grow and spread. "I heard cries and..." Eba hesitated. "The men marched back to Dublin," she said. "I found Kimi on the beach, on the tide line. He was dead. I'm so sorry."

Nuala glanced from the girl to Marjatta and back. "How had they killed him?"

Eba kept her eyes on the wine left in her cup. "They had cut off his head."

Marjatta's harsh breathing punctuated the silence. Nuala murmured in sympathy, reached for Marjatta's hands, and Eba sat and stared at the shivering surface of the wine, then drank it all and put the cup to one side.

Marjatta's voice was thickened with tears. "And you? How did you escape?"

"By hiding in the gorse bushes," Eba said. "They never saw me. I walked all the way back along the coast to Dublin the day of the storm. But I ran into a band of Sitric's men, and one of them raped me. I know this is quite the wrong time, but could you please ask for me? Could you please get me away from Aralt?" Tears formed and glittered in her eyes as

she pleaded with her mother-in-law. It would be easier to escape from Marjatta than from Aralt. "Please?"

Marjatta glanced at Nuala. "Take her away." She got to her feet. "I want nothing to do with her. She has been the cause of my son's death, and I do not want to see her face again. Take her back to Aralt."

Stunned, Eba jerked to her feet, blood singing in her head. "Because of your husband I am now some man's unpaid whore! I have done nothing to deserve this!"

Shocked, Nuala stared at the two women. She laid a restraining hand on Eba's arm and glanced at Marjatta. "She is your daughter-in-law. Perhaps you would bring each other comfort in the hard days ahead."

Marjatta's lip curled. "She is not even carrying my son's child," she said. "Since he never bedded her, she cannot be, so why should I keep her? Let her stay as Aralt's woman. She deserves no more." She turned her shoulder and walked to the far end of the hall and disappeared into her own room.

Out in the fresh air, Eba marched up the slope in short, angry steps. "I told you we shouldn't have gone!"

The older woman shrugged. "These are early days." She met Eba's fiery gaze without flinching. "We may still win out, my pet. In a day or two she will be over the worst of the shock and grief, if I know her at all. People do strange things in grief, but she is not a vengeful woman."

Eba's brows lifted. "She just gave a very convincing display of being exactly that. If she's not vengeful, I'd hate to meet someone who is."

"She has just heard how she lost an only son and her husband three days ago. She has no blood relatives here, and is fearful of a future without Torquil. Would you be expecting reasonableness at such a time? I know I would not."

Eba thought about it. "I suppose not. But it's hardly my fault. I didn't ask to be here."

Nuala squeezed the girl's arm. "No, you didn't, any more than Marjatta wanted to lose her men folk. You just have to accept life can deal some strange twists and turns, my girl. There is a saying, and it is worth consideration: *Work with what you have.*"

"Ha!" Eba said forcefully.

Annikki gauged the girl's stormy expression. "Aralt, now. Ach, before you go pursing your lip and scowling at me like that, listen to what I say. He's not a bad man. Yes, I know he uses you and you don't like it, but think on it for me. He's never beaten you, has he?"

An unwilling shake of the head answered her. "No. Is he cruel? Does he share you around his companions?"

Stricken at the mere thought, Eba swallowed hard and shook her head again.

Nuala nodded. "This is what I mean, girl. He feeds you. You have a roof, a fire and a bed, even if he is in it. What do you imagine will happen if you become tiresome, or he grows bored with you? He'll offer you to anyone who wants you, anyone who'll give silver for you. Some of the men in that hall would have used you once and tossed you to their companions."

"Aralt won't beat you," she added, watching the girl's weebegone face. "Not unless you're unreasonable, and he isn't the kind of man to share you around. Be thankful for those two things at least. He will let you visit with me and in time, if you are a clever girl, he will allow a lot more." She wagged a warning finger under Eba's nose. "But antagonize him with your silly ways, and you'll end up on the coast of Africa with a Moor for a master."

* * * *

Men found Lord Goffraid's body beneath the rubble the day after Eba's interview with Kimi's mother, and took the news to Guthrum, who contacted Bishop Dunan. Together they told Lord Sitric of his son's death, and by afternoon, the news was all over Dublin.

Sitric looked at the black, burned thing they showed him, saw the stray locks of dark red hair still clinging to the underside of the skull and wept silently; he stooped and gently drew out his son's warped, tarnished sword, cradled it in his arms and agreed that they had found Lord Goffraid. He thanked them, dismissed them, refused all company, and turned and walked away.

He walked until he reached the Long Stone, where he slowed, hesitated and sank down at its base. He sat there for a long time, his unseeing gaze on the river.

Men watched him, but from a distance. They respected his grief, and his anger. Guthrum had the body carried back to the hall, and waited for further instructions. Lord Sitric got to his feet late in the afternoon, squared his shoulders, turned

west and began to walk. He moved slowly, as if reluctant to arrive at his own hall. Once through Dame Gate he hesitated for some time and, on impulse, veered down the hill towards the river and set off towards Dubhgall's Bridge. His pace slackened as he drew level with Torquil's home, and he turned towards it, and then away again; walked on, slowed, and turned back.

The door was not locked. Lord Sitric ducked underneath the lintel and walked into the hall, his eyes adjusting slowly to the dimness. The shutters were closed and the torches burned down, but a sound reached him; a sound that made his skin shiver. Marjatta knelt by the fire, hugging herself as she rocked back and forth, keening.

Lord Sitric stood silent in the shadows. His head tilted back and his eyes closed against the soft keening that filled the room like an invisible barrier. He took one step forward and hesitated. He did not offer condolences. He did not even speak.

The weeping ceased between one breath and the next. Marjatta rose unsteadily to her feet, her reddened eyes fixed on the Lord of Dublin. In a flat, hoarse voice she accused him. "Torquil died instead of you."

Sitric closed the distance between them in three strides. "He did. I know he did." He reached for her, but she backed away from him, and stumbled over the hem of her gown. Coils of soft, pale hair tumbled about her face and neck.

"Torquil was my good friend," he said, his voice deep. "And I have lost him."

Marjatta made no effort to hide her scorn. "I have lost the man I lived with for twenty years, the father of my children. You surely don't expect my sympathy because you have lost a friend?"

Sitric's face crumpled. "I have had other news today, Jatta. My son is dead. Goffraid is dead." Tears stood in his eyes and his palms reached out to her.

"You have lost a son." She smiled. "Go to your wife if you want sympathy."

Lord Sitric flinched as if she had struck him. "I can't. You know I can't."

"Then go to your mistress," Marjatta snapped. "You always have one, somewhere."

Sitric shook his head. "No. It is you...."

"I had a husband. And he was your friend. He gave his *life* for you!" She inhaled noisily. "Did you see him?" Fresh tears glittered on her swollen cheeks as she took a step towards him.

Sitric made a small involuntary movement as if to step back but controlled it and stayed where he was.

"Did you see what they did to him?" Her breath came in uneven gasps. "Did you see? They cut off his head, Lord Sitric. I found his head three paces from his body and already the crows pecked at him!"

She looked up into his pouched, wary eyes. "There is something very strange about a body without a head, Lord Sitric." Tears coursed down her face. "I had the strangest urge to stitch them one to the other again, as if I could make

him whole. But he's dead." The dreadful smile was taking over her entire face. Sitric reached out for her.

She warded him off, spine straight, extended fingers stiff and shook her head until she had her breathing under control again. "He's not coming home this night, not any night, not ever again, and who must I thank? You!" Her finger stabbed once and then again and again against his chest. "You and your stupid, endless feuds! The young man did no harm to anyone in Dublin, yet you killed him, and for what? Some killing half a century ago—"

Lord Sitric jerked away from her. "You dare to try and shame me, in my own town?"

Marjatta flung her head back. "My man died." The tears spilled onto her breast. "And my son, my beloved Kimi, he died, too! All because of you and your stupid feuds! You should go down on your knees and beg my forgiveness! You should thank me! My husband saved your puny little life—"

Lord Sitric's shoulders flexed and his palm connected with Marjatta's cheek. Well built she might be, but she flew sideways through the air and fell in a flurry of skirts. Her hand crept to her jaw and her face dissolved around the open wound of her mouth.

Her high pitched keening struck him like a blow, and his throat closed and his innards turned over at the quality of the sound. He shuddered and pressed his fingers to his temples, shaking; then, his face white, he strode forward and dropped to one knee, gathered her up and rocked her between his knee and chest.

"I'm sorry, woman, I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry." His blunt fingers soothed the swirls of hair away from her damp, swollen face. Marjatta burrowed into his shoulder. Sitric looked down, his eyes following his own fingers as he spoke. "I miss him so much. He was my good friend, and your husband. Now, my last boy has been taken from me; Goffraid is gone too," He hesitated. "I am adrift, Jatta. I need you. I have no future. We are partners in sorrow." He stared down the dark hall without seeing it. "That young Alban king was right, after all. He said it would solve nothing, that it would bring retribution that would leave me ... desolate.""

The sense did not reach her, but the pain in his voice struck a chord. She reacted to his pain, so akin to her own. When he clutched her to him and buried his face in her neck, she moved within his arms and stared at him. The rosy light of the fire flattered his features and hid the lines and white hairs. He was still the ruler of Dublin, and men would still flock to his cause if he required it.

The hall was warm, fragrant with peat smoke and the dim light was a kindness. A coil of pale hair slipped across her breast and tangled around the large metal brooch that pinned her gown.

Sitric's gaze followed it. His lids lifted, and he met Marjatta's cloudy, enigmatic gaze. She did not move when he teased the lock of hair away from the brooch pin, or when his fingertips drifted over the firm skin of her throat and the mound of her breast.

Nor did she move while Sitric unpinned the metal disc, nudged aside the straps of her gown and let his hand hover

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by Jen Black

over the smooth white rise of her breast. His hand cupped and held the warm fullness and pleasure jolted through her as his fingers moved, over and over, across her stirring flesh. She moaned and when his mouth came down on hers, she met him with surprising eagerness.

Chapter 24

Domnall prowled aimlessly up and down the grassy river bank between the bridge and the abbey, his dour face an accurate reflection of his feelings. He did not cope well with adverse circumstances at any time, and worry for his sister, combined with the sheer frustration of not knowing what to do next, had worn his limited patience down to the nub.

Finlay rested his shoulders against the smooth pine of the *Wolf's* mast, and let his thoughts drift. He regretted the time spent on this rescue mission, but his own sense of responsibility tied him to Dublin until they found the girl, and she had disappeared the night of the Waterford attack. Churning through the possibilities once more, his gaze followed Sorchand simply because the lad paced relentlessly up and down the half deck.

Without warning, Sorchand slapped his palms on the gunwale, whirled round and glared at Finlay. "Can't we do something?"

Finlay of Alba groaned. He squinted sideways at Hareth, who sat nearby, his face tilted to the sun's warmth.

Hareth opened his eyes, met Finlay's pained glance and then looked at the youth. "What do you think we should do, Sorchand?"

"Something. Anything." The redhead folded his arms and settled back against the gunwale, one knee bent and the sole of his boot on the side strakes. The sleeveless leather jerkin showed off the bulging muscles of his upper arms and his

copper bangles glinted in the sun. "Anything would be better than just sitting here on our backsides."

Hareth leaned against the gunwale, linked his fingers across his lean belly and surveyed the toes of his boots as he tapped them gently together. Finlay smiled and his black head tilted to one side. "Yes, but what?" he asked mildly. "What do you think we could usefully do?"

Physically, Sorchand had come a long way from the thin, gangly youth who had threatened to fight Finlay after his father's death. Very much aware of his increasing strength, he longed to use it. His blue eyes narrowed as he thought out his answer. "We should have spies out in Dublin. We should talk to Sitric's men and to the traders, because they always have all the gossip. Someone must know what has happened to her."

Finlay of Alba nodded. "All good suggestions," he agreed. "Will you feel happier if I tell you we have men in Dublin at this moment? Men whose faces are not known, who have instructions to talk to anyone they think will be able to help."

Sorchand's mouth thinned in frustration. He turned back to the settlement and banged his fists on the gunwale. Hareth shrugged and tipped his face to the sun again. The faint breeze rippled the standard high above the deck, gulls wheeled through the sky, and the sound of hammering floated across the water from the burned out quayside where Sitric's men worked.

"There's someone watching us." Sorchand stiffened like a dog flagging up prey and stared to the west, towards the bridge.

"Don't move," Finlay said crisply. "Tell me what you see."

Sorchand had lifted his arm to point, and hastily aborted the movement. "Over to my right. There's someone on the bridge; a big lad with fairish brown hair and a limp. He walked out from the town and he's been there a while, just watching us."

Finlay turned casually, and Hareth rolled smoothly to his knees. A young man leant his forearms on the woodwork of the bridge and stared at the steady flow of tidal water beneath it. There was nothing unusual about him; but after a while, the three watchers could predict when the brown head would lift and turn in the *Wolf's* direction. The stranger was watching the ship.

"He's about your age, Sorchand. Go ashore and talk to him."

Sorchand's red head whipped round. "Now? Just me?"

Finlay nodded. "Just you. Try and make it look as if it's a chance encounter between two lads of similar age. We don't want to frighten him away. And whatever happens, I want no fighting."

"It looks like the lad who played Hurley with us a couple of nights ago," Finlay said as Sorchand set off. "The one we found in Arne's house, with the dogs. What was his name?"

"Conn, was it?" Hareth got up, stretched, and perched on the gunwale and gave Finlay a running report of Sorchand's activities. A good deal later, he spat over the side. "The young idiot's running back this way! Slow down, you fool, slow down!"

They watched Sorchand sprint across the grass and down to the shoreline. Moments later he vaulted over the *Wolf's* gunwale and spewed out facts. "His name is Conn and he's cousin to Kimi. He says you know him, and he knows where Eba is. She's being held captive in Sitric's crewmen's hall. We have to get her away. She's been raped, and it'll go on till we get her away from there!"

"He came with the intention of passing on this news?"

Sorchand nodded. "Yes, sir. He took a bad wound to the leg the other night and can't get far yet. So he came to tell us, so we can do it."

"Do what, exactly?"

"Rescue her!" Sorchand fizzed with repressed energy. "We can fight if need be! The crew will do it, and Sitric's men are not at full strength after the attack."

Finlay gripped Sorchand's arm and forced him to sit down on a nearby chest. "Listen, listen, *listen!* There's no point in rushing off and not knowing what to do when we get there. We must sail the moment we have her. And that means waiting till our own crew return from Dublin, and we need the full tide, remember, to get out past the sandbanks and flows in the estuary."

Sorchand's face fell, and then brightened. "It'll be full tide soon. Can we do it now? Before tonight, before..." He broke off, hesitated and then challenged Finlay. "You do realize she is in some man's bed, against her will?"

Hareth groaned aloud, and Finlay punched the youth's shoulder. "We have both grasped that message, I think. Sit

down, and start thinking with your brain instead of your balls."

* * * *

All kinds of doubt assailed Eba as she sat on Aralt's bed in the large, raucous hall that served Lord Sitric's crewmen as home. She did not know and dared not ask Conn what he thought now he knew Aralt bedded her. The other girls avoided her, and even the washermaid was rude, with no fear of reprisal. If a simple washermaid thought she was Eba's equal, then Eba's whole world was upside down.

The hall was perfectly adequate for a man who spent his life sailing from one adventure to the next at his Lord's whim, but the thought that she may spend her life here was unthinkable. The Alban ship was still in the river. All she had to do was get there and she would be safe.

The young cleric at St Patrick's had feared retribution from Torquil if he aided her. Lord Goffraid had said he would tell her brother where to find her, but he had been killed and may not have found her brother. Domnall could not know where she was, so it was up to her to do something. She had tried. Yesterday Thorkell had stopped her going out of the door three times, and had seemed amused by her persistence. She could not give up.

She glanced around from under her lashes, saw everyone was occupied, slipped off the bed and sauntered towards the exit. The sun's warmth touched her face, she took another step and a hand gripped her shoulder and hurled her back into the shadows. Eba cried out, stumbled and fell.

Thorkell loomed over her, his face full of anger. "Get back to Aralt's bed place."

She retreated, stony faced, to Aralt's cubicle, yanked the curtain behind her and fell on the bed. It was hopeless. She could see no way out of this dreadful place. The curtain whipped aside and Thorkell stood on the threshold, a long length of rope dangling from his hand. Eba wriggled back into the corner of the partition, her heart racing. Thorkell stooped awkwardly because of his bandaged leg, tied one end of the rope to the bed post and then seized her ankle. Eba yelped and wrenched her foot out of his grasp. He seized her other foot, yanked and tied the rope around her ankle.

"Try and escape now," Thorkell grunted and limped back to the hearth.

The girls who served any man's needs sauntered by to stare at her, and their laughter was rude and hateful, their jibes coarse and spiteful. Eba wrapped her arms around her knees, ignored them and huddled in the corner. Resentment coursed through her, and slowly changed to an anger that simmered and grew.

She hated the hall. In the day time it was dim and dismal, for no one bothered to pull on the ropes that opened the shutters high in the wall and the fire was allowed to burn low. The air held a permanent meld of smoke, food and ale, and there was another smell that Eba assumed came from the men; a mixture of sweat and unwashed bodies and a heavy muskiness she did not like.

It wasn't so bad when the men came back in the evening. Then all the torches and rushlights were lit, the fire burned

higher against the cold and the golden glow and chatter made the place bearable. A sudden image of a little room at Bundalloch crept into Eba's mind; a room she had taken for her own even though it was tucked away under the barn thatch with the comfortable sounds of cattle and sheep beneath her and the hens clucking in the yard outside. It had become her very own refuge and private space and because her brother gave her most things she asked for, he had ordered it floored and walled to make it snug and weatherproof.

Now she had to share a room with sixty men who spent the night snoring, coughing and worse; and share her bed and her body with a total stranger. It was not even her bed, but belonged to the stranger and according to Nuala, she was lucky indeed he was prepared to let her climb into it. Some men made their women sleep on the floor.

The confinement was a torment, too. Eba remembered days when she had clambered rocks after stray sheep, when she had skipped across puddles and stood and laughed in the wind for the joy of it. Yet within the space of one unfortunate day her whole life had become a crippled shadow of what it used to be, and there seemed to be no way of escape.

Eba attacked the knot at her ankle and broke a nail on it before she sat back and sucked the sore finger. There was a besom in the corner. Without stopping to think, Eba jumped up, seized it, leapt on the bed and swung the broom like an axe at the crannies above her head. She pictured Thorkell's face and aimed a particularly vicious blow at it.

Dust, straw, mice droppings and spiders tumbled around her, but she shook her head, shut her eyes and carried on. Grim faced, she swept down the wattle partitions. If she had to live here, then her quarters would be as clean as she could make them. She was not going to live in the same squalor as those wretched girls, and she was tired of removing spiders and other creatures from her bed. From Aralt's bed, she corrected herself.

Activity made her blood run faster, and swinging the broom gave her immense satisfaction, but she realized, on a surge of irritation, that it would have been better if she had rolled the bedding out of the way first. She grabbed the straw mattress and shook it hard, sneezed and clutched it to her chest and stamped on the creeping things scuttling across the floor. She yanked the long restraining cord out from under her feet, grabbed the besom and swept all the debris into the hearth fire.

Activity was wonderful. Once started, she could not stop. She grabbed the few clothes from the pegs hammered into the wall, shook them all out and re-hung them. She got the oil jug, refilled the small steatite lamp and by its light scraped off the accumulated drippings of what seemed like months of candle grease before she lit and placed the new candle in its holder. She shook the blankets over the fire, folded them and placed them on the mattress, and then stood, arms akimbo, and surveyed the tiny room.

A growing murmur of sound made her turn to find half dozen men lounging in a ring, ale pots in the air, grinning in approval. One jovial soul with a bandage over his eye raised

his ale horn to her. Eba scowled, grabbed the leather curtain and rattled it shut.

She could not sit still. Aralt would return soon with the other men and they would be tired, dirty and reek of sweat and smoke. She attracted Nuala's attention and with her assistance soon had a large bowl and a jug of hot water waiting for Aralt when he walked into the hall.

He looked from the girl to the bowl and back again, puzzlement on his grimy face. Eba perched on the edge of the sleeping platform, with a swatch of coarse hemp ready in her hands. Her hair was combed, plaited and tied off with a leather thong and the cord attached to her ankle was coiled and hidden beneath the sleeping platform. His clothes were neatly hung and every surface was dust free and shiny.

"I thought you might like to wash." Eba poured the water into the bowl and forced a smile to her face. "I have put some sweet smelling herbs in the water to t-take away the s-s-smell of s-smoke." Her voice faltered as her courage leaked away.

Aralt was too tired to smile, and his unremarkable face remained blank. Eba suspected she might have gone too far. He may not like the way she had taken over his living space. He would beat her, or throw her out and then what would she do? Eba swallowed hard and sat frozen on the bed platform.

Without a word, Aralt hauled his dirty tunic over his head, dropped it to the floor and grasped the rim of the bowl. He breathed deep and plunged his face into the bowl. Eba let her breath go in a long, soft sigh of sheer relief.

It wasn't so easy later. Washed and well fed Aralt kicked aside his dirty tunic and found the rope around her ankle, twitched it and lifted curious blue eyes to her flushed face. She hesitated and then answered with the truth, for he would hear from the other men why they had tied her to his bed post. He regarded her steadily. Eba bit down on her lower lip and lowered her gaze, her heart knocking against her ribs. "Look at me," he said.

The candle threw shadows slantwise across his face as his large hand cupped her jaw. He drew her towards him. "I am strong," he said steadily. "I do not want to hit you." His hand closed and he shook her gently from side to side before he let go of her. "But try to escape again and I will have no choice."

"But I shouldn't be here!" The words erupted without thought.

His head tilted as he studied her. "But you are here," he said. "You are my woman."

"I don't want to be your woman! I want to go home...."

Losing patience, Aralt rose, unsmiling, and left the cubicle. He joined the group of men by the fire and accepted an ale horn. Eba sulked for a while then extinguished the candle and huddled back on the sleeping platform. When he returned, soft-footed and smiling, he brought the smell of ale with him. Light from the hearth and the hall glanced off his shorn golden head as he stood there, filling the door space. "Get out of those leggings," he said softly.

Eba's stomach lurched. He hauled his tunic over his head and sat on the bed within arm's reach. Her mouth dried out and her blood thudded in her ears. Firelight glinted on the

whorls of fair hair fanned across the two leaves of his chest, and she kept her gaze fastened on them so she did not have to meet his eyes. She had hoped he would have tired of her, that the novelty would have gone by now.

Aralt reached for her and straw rustled beneath him as he pulled her across the mattress to land in his lap. Her cheek touched the cool, smooth skin of his shoulder, and she smelt the corn mint she had put in his washing water. "Never mind," he said. "I undressed you the first time, and I can do it again." His slanted teeth gleamed white and shiny in the candlelight.

He unfastened the rope, tugged the long tunic over her head and tossed it aside. He dragged her undershirt off one shoulder, and tugged at the laces holding her trousers with his other hand. Eba stayed his hands, for if he damaged these garments, she had nothing else to wear. She scrambled off his knees, pulled the curtain across the alcove, and, thankful that her undershirt reached well down her thighs, undressed and hung both her tunic and the trousers on spare pegs.

When she turned, Aralt was already in bed, and held the blanket back for her, still smiling. Eba joined him, stiff, awkward and with a stomach ravelled in knots as his warm hands closed about her waist. He grew hot, and placed her as he wished and Eba gritted her teeth as he pushed into the sore place.

Aralt felt her stiffen, sensed her fright and whispered in her ear. Eba remembered Nuala's advice, but she could not relax. Her nails cut into his shoulders as he moved faster, and his last thrusts were strong and hard against her sore flesh.

Eba squealed and clamped her hand across her mouth. Aralt withdrew, which caused another searing pain, and a tear slid down her cheek. Eba wiped it away. Dear Lord, she thought, must it go on like this?

* * * *

Finlay King of Alba, Hareth mac Enna and Domnall of Bundalloch walked openly across the bridge into Dublin. They all wore clean, short sleeved tunics and close fitting trousers down to their half boots. Each carried a sword and dagger. Hareth led them towards a gang of a dozen men who swung long-handled axes and chopped out the burnt timbers from the palisade. Others manhandled the still warm timbers down to men who collected it by the cartload and tipped it in the river.

Most were naked to the waist and sweat gleamed on their bodies. They straightened, leaned on their axes and stared at the advancing strangers. Hareth addressed the gang leader, who wiped a grimy hand across his mouth, turned and bawled at someone at the top of the ridge. A golden haired man let his axe rest at the bottom of its swing, worked it loose and stepped carefully down to street level.

"This is Aralt," the gang-master said.

Finlay inclined his head. "We would discuss a small thing with you. If we have found the right man, it might be that you have taken a young girl named Eba into your care in the last few days."

"It's true enough, and no secret." Aralt wiped his craggy face and neck on a rag and re-hung the rag from his belt. His

honest blue eyes widened. "The lass you've been looking for all this time? You think I have her?"

Finlay nodded. "This is her brother, Domnall of Kintail."

A silence developed which no one seemed eager to break. The workmen shrugged, turned away, and soon the thud and whine of the axes began again. Lumps of blackened wood thumped and rolled down to the street while Aralt thought about it. "She is my woman now."

They all knew what he implied; but Domnall kept his tone polite. "It is my sister Eba?"

"Her name is Eba." Aralt agreed, assessing Domnall. "I found her soaked and exhausted in a rainstorm east of Dublin a day or so after the battle. I thought she was some farm girl heading home."

Black dust from the broken walls swirled into their faces and laid a gritty coating across Aralt's sweat-covered shoulders. He seemed absorbed in thought. Domnall inhaled and opened his mouth, but Finlay forestalled him. "We would like to see the girl returned to the safety of her home."

Aralt frowned. "No." A chopping motion of his hand emphasized the single word, and men nearby stopped work to watch and listen. Hareth's hand fell to his sword hilt. "No!" Aralt repeated, his sharp blue gaze moving from Finlay to Domnall and back again. "I owe compensation for her." He looked at Domnall. "You are her brother. I would like to keep her. She suits me well, but I would not like you to think ill of me over it." He glanced at Finlay, and the skin around his blue eyes crinkled. "I have made her mine; therefore I owe money for her." He smiled, named a generous price and with

a crooked grin added, "Thank the Lord you are not Irish. If you were, I should have to give you several cows in payment, and cows I do not have."

"You will pay me in silver, in order to keep my sister?" Incredulity rang through Domnall's voice.

"I could not send her back to you now, blemished as she is," Aralt said reasonably. "No man of good family would accept her in marriage, and she would be a burden on you all your days. She is my responsibility now." He exchanged a quick, rueful glance with Finlay. "I will make restitution, then she and I will marry and raise a family. I have done well as Sitric's man."

There was a long silence which neither Finlay nor Hareth attempted to break. Domnall gazed at the big, broad-shouldered man who leaned on the long-handled axe, smiled and offered such a generous, tempting sum of silver for his sister. There was a rough honesty about him that was appealing. Domnall stuck out his hand. "I accept."

Aralt smiled in genuine pleasure, took the calloused hand and shook it. "Then I am glad, for I would be sorry to part with her now. I shall bring the silver to you tonight."

Chapter 25

Word of Aralt's transaction travelled from mouth to mouth across the burned out ruin of Dublin and caused very little comment; but when a sailor got wind of it and brought the news back to the ship, there was a reaction that took the starlings off the treetops.

The smoke from the brazier beneath the *Wolf's* awnings curled lazily over the crew as they hunkered down to eat and swap tales of the day's happenings.

Sorchand glared at the sailor who had spoken, swallowed hastily and demanded gracelessly, "What did you say?"

The man repeated his tale. Sorchand's incredulous gaze transferred to Domnall. "You've sold her?" Sorchand leapt to his feet, knocking his food bowl into the lap of the man next to him, and surged across the decking. He hung over Eba's brother and hissed into his face. "You *sold* her?"

Domnall's aquamarine eyes flickered like jewels in the lamplight as he stared up at the furious youth. "Aralt paid restitution for her, so I left her with him."

Sorchand swung his arm and knocked Domnall's food bowl clean out of his hand. "Why? *Why?*"

"She is blemished now."

"Blemished? You are her brother and this is how you think of her?"

"It is not your affair," Domnall said repressively, and turned to retrieve his food bowl from his neighbor.

"I'm making it my affair!"

"Go away and stop meddling," Domnall snapped. "It is not your business."

Sorchand's lip curled. "She was afraid in Inverness you wouldn't come for her. She had good right to be afraid, didn't she?"

Leod half-rose from his place. Hareth carefully put his bowl of food aside, got to his feet and laid a hand on Sorchand's shoulder. "Come and sit down—"

Sorchand squirmed out of Hareth's grasp. He whirled round, his fine-grained skin scarlet under the freckles and jerked his thumb in the direction of Eba's brother. "This is the man you should be talking to! Ask him what kind of a man leaves his sister as a slave to some Viking raider, and all for a bag of silver!"

Domnall shot to his feet. Short, well made and exasperated beyond measure, his fists weaved patterns in the air. "Shut your mouth! Or I'll shut it for you!"

Sorchand laughed in Domnall's face and flung his arms wide. "Come on then! Come on, hit me! You haven't got the guts, have you?"

Domnall's fist cleaved the air with all the power of his heavy shoulders behind it and Sorchand flew backwards across the ship. The crew raised their food bowls high and watched Sorchand crash against their knees and drop to the wooden decking. He bounced once and rolled to his feet.

Hareth rapped out an order. "Sit down, both of you!"

Sorchand did not move. Hareth put a palm in the middle of the youth's chest and rattled the redhead back into his place on the bench so hard he grunted. Domnall, massaging the

knuckles of one hand, smiled in satisfaction. Hareth turned to glare at him, and Domnall subsided without comment.

The crew went on eating, their eyes bright with curiosity when Finlay rose to his feet and looked around the ship. "Domnall accepted a proposition today. It concerns him; it is his decision, and his alone. No one here has the right to criticize him or ask him to change his mind. Had one of you spoken for the girl, things would have been different. As it is, Domnall is her guardian and her brother. He and he alone had the right to decide in this matter."

"Aye," Domnall grunted, glancing from Sorchand to Leod and back again. "She has no husband or lover to speak for her."

There was a moment of silence. The cook drove skewers into a bucket of cleansing sand, and fed the brazier to keep the biting insects at bay. Above their heads a faint pricking of stars littered the night sky and a chill breeze prowled the ship and carried away the cooking smells. Somewhere out in the middle of the river a curious fish jumped, and the rings widened across the dark surface of the river.

Two voices spoke at the same time. "I would have—"

"I always intended—"

Leod and Sorchand stared at each other in some surprise. Domnall stared at them both. Sorchand was quicker. "I intended to ask for her when we got to Bun ... Bund ... whatever the damned place is called. Being dragged here stopped me." Impatience and sincerity warred in his voice, and he faced Finlay in open appeal.

Finlay's dark glance swung towards Leod, one eyebrow raised, and Leod got to his feet. "I always intended to ask for her. Domnall knows I waited for her, since she is still so young."

Men muttered to each other along the length of the ship. Domnall shook his head when Finlay glanced at him. Finlay glanced at both Sorchand and Leod in turn. "You do realize Aralt has taken her to his bed? That she may by now be carrying his child? Aralt thought her chances of marriage blighted because of this, and I have to say I agree with him. The man did the right and honorable thing and offered her brother compensation. He intends to marry her. Domnall made the difficult decision to leave her with this man. Does either of you still want to press for the girl?"

"Yes!" Sorchand stepped forward.

"Of course," Leod said. "But is it too late? I thought Domnall had already accepted silver for her?"

"He did. We could try negotiation again," Finlay said. "But if it fails you will have to accept it."

Sorchand's head shot up, blue eyes wide in the lamplight. "We should attack the hall and take her!"

Around the ship men looked at one another and shook their heads. One comment drifted clearly in the twilight. "The lad's besotted!"

Sorchand heard it and scowled. "You're all afraid," he scoffed, throwing a scornful glance around the entire crew. "I thought you were warriors!"

A mutter of comment ran down both sides of the gunwale. One man spoke up. "This is'na our fight, laddie. Siller has bin paid and ye'll have t'accept it."

Sorchand's bright hair flashed vermillion under the lamp. "Then I'll go and rescue her myself and be damned to all of you!"

Hareth stared up at him and sighed. "Oh, for Christ's sake," he said to no one in particular, rose to his feet with his hand on his dagger, reversed it, and hit Sorchand behind the ear. He caught him as he fell.

There was a murmur of laughter and appreciation from the men. Domnall sat staring at nothing, his expression sour, and refused to meet Leod's puzzled eyes.

* * * *

Aralt found the bowl of warm, scented water waiting for him again when he strode back into the men's hall. His own cubicle, in sharp contrast to the others, was spotlessly neat and shone with light from newly trimmed candles. He smiled at the beautiful girl perched on the bed platform and stripped to his trousers without a word.

He washed slowly and deliberately, aware of the shy glances Eba stole when she thought he was not looking. He reached for the hemp towel, and thought perhaps he should pay her more attention. After all, she had cost him a good portion of his carefully hoarded silver and now Lord Goffraid was dead, silver would not be as easy to come by as once it had been. He had also as good as promised to marry the girl.

He sent her to fetch food, and stretched out on the straw mattress, his arms behind his head.

Eba returned, laid out the food and put the bowl of dirty water outside the alcove. Aralt sat up to eat and recollected her brother had unbent enough to inform Aralt he should visit Bundalloch in the near future and bring the girl with him. Aralt had been surprised, but found he liked the idea. He would not mind this Alban for a brother-in-law. He sensed they were both pragmatic men, and Aralt had the woman he wanted, Eba would be married and Domnall had silver, so all was well.

"I shall buy you a dress soon." His eyes rested on her as his broth cooled on the spoon.

"You will? Why?"

"Because I would like to see you in a dress instead of that..." His spoon indicated her leather-encased legs. "Those breeches."

Eba looked down at the offending items. "There's not a break in them," she said, affronted. "There's no need—" She broke off as she met his amused glance.

"It isn't because they are torn or dirty. It's because I want to see you in a dress."

She swallowed her broth and did not argue. Aralt raised the bowl to his mouth and his throat moved as he swallowed the liquid. He ripped the hunk of bread apart, wiped the bowl and chewed for a few moments. "Blue, I think."

"Oh no! Not blue!" Eba shuddered.

Aralt's silver brows lifted in surprise. She still startled him from time to time. Most girls in her position would not have

dared to contradict him. He shrugged. "Why not? I think blue would suit you, and it's always been my favourite color."

Her bowl thudded down onto the tray. "I don't think you should waste your silver on me." She smiled. "I won't be here long. And I hate blue because it was what Kimi and his mother used to wear all the time. It would remind me of them."

Aralt chewed, thought and swallowed. "I see, but you must understand something else. I paid silver for you today."

Eba's mouth dropped open. "Paid silver ... for me?"

"I paid your brother."

She sat and stared at him like a day old calf. "You paid my brother silver to keep me? He doesn't want me back?"

Aralt hesitated. He didn't want to hurt her, but the truth was simple. "Your brother accepted money from me on the understanding you and I will marry."

A tear appeared from nowhere and ran down her cheek. She wiped it aside, but another followed, and another. Aralt sat with his back to the partition, one leg raised at the knee, and waited. After a little while, he broke the silence. "Are you weeping because your brother has left you? Or because you are with me?"

Eba's pale head lifted. "Both," she muttered.

"We shall marry. You will not be a whore, passed from man to man when I tire of you."

"You'll marry me?"

Aralt nodded, watching her. "It is time I married. Your brother asked me to visit him in Bundalloch, and to take you with me. I am happy to do as he asks, for I have no family

here. It will be a new start for us both." He leaned towards her and grasped her arm.

She got up. Aralt indicated the leather curtain behind her. "Close it, Eba, unless you want an audience."

Eba did not smile. His news wearied her. If her brother had sold her then she was little more than a slave and the idea demoralized her. She would be no better than poor Rhosyn. For a brief, fleeting moment she wondered what had happened to Rhosyn during the attack on Dublin. Dead, perhaps; or taken with the raiders to Waterford. She would never see her again, and never know what had happened to her.

She drew the heavy cowhide across the doorway, but couldn't quite bring herself to join Aralt on the bed platform. She drifted to an uncertain halt in the small space.

His warm hand grasped her wrist and tugged her to the bed. She refused to look at him. He rolled to his knees and pulled her close. She could resist him so far, but when he wrapped both arms around her and pulled her against him from thigh to throat she could not break free. The familiar burst of heat indicated his need and Eba's gaze shifted to the writhing snake patterns of the wattle weave behind his head. He moved again, lifted her off her feet, deposited her on the bed, twisted round and followed her down.

His fingers investigated the laces of her leggings, and he was far too successful for Eba's peace of mind. In no time at all the supple leather was over her feet, and she felt cold and vulnerable. She drew her limbs tight together and crossed

them at the ankle while he pushed aside the leather skirt and ran his fingers up and down the length of her thigh.

"We could make this good, you know." He looked young and eager. "It is good for women as well. I've not had complaints before."

Eba stared at the roof rafters. "I haven't found it good at all."

"I know." He nuzzled her neck affectionately. "That's why I wanted to talk to you, to tell you it can be good."

Eba shook her head. "It hurts."

Aralt sighed. "Not for long. For the first time, perhaps." His fingers edged closer to where he wanted to be.

She pushed them away. "Untrue."

His silver brows drew together and a frown ridged the weathered skin of his face. "Well, it's ... for most women, it's only the first time. Perhaps it's because you were afraid of me. I'm sorry."

"What do you expect when you abduct girls from the street and drag them off with no possibility of escape?"

He shook his head and the gesture spoke of repentance. "I said I was sorry."

"And you think that makes up for everything?" She shook her head. "I should never have been here. I should have been safe in Inverness! How could I ever have been so stupid?"

"What did you do?"

She told him. She gave him the detail in concise, clipped sentences and ended with her wet, dogged walk back into Dublin. His brows rose towards his yellow gold hair. "And I

thought you were some farm maid running back home from a dalliance."

Telling the tale had reminded her of who she was. "So it would have been alright for you to rape me, if I had been a farm maid?"

"Most farm girls wouldn't have minded," he said, sliding her undershirt aside. "They enjoy the ... um, the preliminaries as much as we men do. It doesn't always end in sex, you know. Sometimes it's just a bit of fun on both sides."

Eba realized she was staring and dragged her gaze away. "I find that very hard to believe."

Aralt shrugged. "Maybe, but it's true. How was I to know you were a ... well, not a farm girl?"

"Do I look like a farm girl?"

"It's no good glaring at me," he said. "What's done is done, and you may as well accept that I've paid money for you, and we'll marry soon." He looked at her, and tweaked a strand of yellow hair behind her ear. "You know, there's something about the way you look at me, the way that eyebrow quirks up..." Aralt shook his head, and smiled. "No one will have a prettier wife than me!"

She wasn't pleased when his mouth descended to her throat, but she did not struggle when he pulled her close, nor did she resist him when, a little later, he wanted greater intimacy. Her body did it for her. Try as he might, he could not gain entry. Puzzled, he backed off and ran a palm over his shorn golden hair. "Could you try and relax?"

Eba was as confounded as Aralt, but soon saw the advantages, and speedily altered her expression. "But I not

doing anything, really I'm not. I don't know what's happening."

It was true; she had not resisted him. Nuala had explained that if she could be less frightened the likelihood was she would suffer less pain; if she could welcome him, there would be pleasure. Realizing the sense of what she had been told, Eba had made up her mind to let him do as he wished and had noted, with detached and growing curiosity, her body's small adjustments. It had worked, up to a point; and then the final intimacy had been refused.

Aralt's frustration grew, and Eba's relief grew in direct proportion to his frustration. He explored the same territory with his fingers and met the same iron resistance. "It's as if your body has just shut down and closed up," he said, sinking down beside her.

"I'm sorry."

He frowned. "You think it's amusing, don't you?"

"No! Really, I don't."

"I think you do. You look like a child with a secret it doesn't want to share."

"I could ask Nuala tomorrow—"

"No! I don't want half the hall chattering about it. Don't speak to anyone."

"Very well, Aralt."

It was the first time she had used his name. Aralt frowned, as if considering alternative strategies, but it hardly mattered, now; his eagerness had subsided. He stretched out, hands clasped behind his head, and there was a long silence before

he turned on the pillow and studied her delicate profile. "You haven't taken anything, have you? A potion of some kind?"

Eba shook her head. "No. I didn't know such a potion existed. Why would you think so?"

He stared at the smoke-blackened rafters high above. "Women seem to have potions and salves for every ailment under the sun. I just thought...."

"I have not done anything at all to bring this about."

"Ah, but will I believe you?"

Eba sighed. "Of course you should believe me. If you cannot, you should not marry me."

His blue eyes flew to hers. Eba's innards clenched. She found it extremely hard to be subservient and she saw her answer surprised him. Perhaps he would not want to marry her if he could not take his pleasures with her. She took a quick little breath. Perhaps he would send her to the slave market. She turned towards the man at her side. "It won't stay like this." She allowed her limbs to lean a little against the warmth of his body.

He noticed it, and his glance warmed a little. "True." His arm reached out and gathered her in. "Come, let's get some sleep. We can always try again tomorrow."

Strangely, she felt much safer snuggled against his shoulder. "Perhaps two or three days might be necessary. Bruises take time to heal."

It was softly said, but he heard it. "Well, then; three days you have before we try again. Go to sleep now."

Chapter 26

"Is this girl worth all this?" Hareth demanded. "We could just leave her with Aralt."

"No." Finlay answered the question and leant his forearms on the bridge parapet. "But I took her as hostage for Domnall's good behaviour, and she was in my care. She was my responsibility."

"She took herself out of your care the day she left of her own accord."

"She would not have been in Inverness, had I not interfered. I need to go back with a success. It is too early to have failures. But it is taking far longer than I anticipated."

"You're missing Rada?"

"Yes." Finlay jerked upright, and strode off towards the settlement. After a few paces, his dark head turned. "Don't you miss Kilda?"

"Yes, of course, and no. I like to be out in the open air," Hareth said. "I like sailing, seeing new things, new places. Kilda will be there when I get back, and I'll be happy enough to see her then."

"But you don't find it hard, being alone?"

"Alone? We're never alone." Hareth grinned. "We have sixty crewmen as bed fellows." His silver grey eyes narrowed. "Is it a bed mate you miss? We can soon..." He broke off at Finlay's expression. "She won't expect you to be celibate, man! No wife does! Not for three weeks or more."

"Yes, she will," Finlay said, thinking of Rada. "Just as I expect it of her. Don't you expect it of Kilda?"

The thought that Kilda might be unfaithful to him made Hareth laugh so much he didn't watch where he was walking, and had to step hastily aside to allow three small boys, a donkey and a massive load of saplings through the gate into the settlement.

Evidence of rebuilding was everywhere. Small boys hauled saplings and older brothers trimmed and wove them into fences, walls and partitions. More than one farmer had yoked his oxen and dragged large tree trunks in from their raths and ringforts, to be split and shaped as beams and supports for a new home. Men were busy with chisels and wedges, women bundled heather and reeds for thatch, old men sat on stools and fashioned dowels and pegs by the lapful and grandmothers stirred cauldrons and kept a stern and weary eye on the toddlers by their feet.

Everyone had a task, and the streets were busy all the way to Lord Sitric's hall. Even there, business seemed urgent. "It is the funeral today," Guthrum said apologetically when they found him. "I cannot stay. I have duties."

He was already turning to leave. Finlay detained him. "This morning? What funeral?"

Guthrum's hair stuck up in damp spikes and curls from a hasty dip in the water butt, his tunic was unfastened and his belt and dagger askew. "We have to get the ship ready." He took a deep breath, steadied himself. "Perhaps you don't know, but Lord Sitric's son was killed in the fight with the Waterford men and his body found just yesterday. At Lord Sitric's command we are to give him a Viking funeral, and

afterwards we'll probably sail to attack Waterford, though nothing's been said about that yet."

Finlay looked surprised. "Then it is perhaps not a good time to request a farewell interview with your Lord. Please convey my thanks and my condolences as soon as you may. He will be in great distress, and we will trouble him no further. We will sail to Alba on the next tide, and hope to meet again in more favorable circumstances."

Guthrum nodded and offered a weak smile. "I will, Sir, when I have an opportunity. Lord Sitric has taken the Lady Emer to church. She is distraught, as you may imagine." He added apologies that he had no supplies to offer for their journey.

Finlay shook his head. The last thing he wanted was a procession of water casks and food, however fresh, trundling down to the *Wolf*. He turned down the offer gently and made their farewells.

Hareth waited until they reached the quieter streets. "What fortune! This is the diversion we hoped for!" His eyes shone like polished silver in the cool, damp morning, and a smile split his face from ear to ear. "We could probably winkle her out and away in all this confusion. The men's sleeping hall is just behind the house. Do you think we can get to talk to the lad who brought us news of Eba?"

Finlay's fingers lifted to the gold circlet about his brow. "They might find this a little daunting. You go," he said. "They won't be afraid to speak to you. The lad's name was Conn, was it not? Tell him we need to get Eba out of there and down to the ship, immediately."

Men dodged around them. One blundered between them, saw the ring of gold at Finlay's brow and apologized. Finlay nodded and smiled, then spoke to Hareth. "If he can get her out of there ... the back way, over a wall, in a sack, a chest, anything—you take her down to the quayside and from there it should be easy to the ship. All he has to do is get her out and into fresh air. We'll do the rest."

Hareth turned and strolled to the door of the men's hall and stood quietly for a few moments observing the tremendous activity across the square. Men charged out of the doorway with a sea chest clutched beneath one arm, a shield flapping awkwardly over a wrist and a slipping bundle of spears, arrows, bows and quivers clutched to their chest. Hareth paused, counted more men out, seized an opportunity and slipped inside

It was dim, and he stepped into the shadows beside the door while he got his bearings. His eyes soon adjusted and indeed the hall was very similar to many other halls he had known, and he set off to the far end of the room, where the injured men lay on pallets and bed platforms bemoaning the fact they were out of the action.

A broad-shouldered young man stooped awkwardly to support a patient's head while he drank from a wooden cup, and then lowered him to the pillow. Hareth stood quietly by, thinking the pallor and sunken eyes indicated that the patient might never fight again. Conn looked up, recognized Hareth and hesitated. He glanced at his grey-faced patient, and saw the man had closed his eyes and rolled his cheek into the pillow. Conn put down the cup, and limped towards Hareth.

Hareth greeted him with some flamboyance. "We're sailing today, lad, so I came to say goodbye." He wanted other men to hear that piece of news, and then wrapped his arm about Conn's shoulders and steered him away from the pallets and into the centre of the hall. In a lower voice, he said, "We need to get Eba out of this hall, now, at once. Can you do it? Is there a way?"

Conn turned his head, and Hareth followed his glance. Two people stood in one of the cubicles lining the hall walls: the tall, well built man called Aralt, and a young girl, the slender, straight-backed girl Hareth remembered from Inverness. Aralt spoke to the girl, who unhooked a tunic from the wall peg, folded it against herself and handed it to him. He shoved it into his chest, slammed down the lid and swung it onto his shoulder. Grinning, he stooped, said something to the girl, pulled her close to his side for a moment and then let her go.

Aralt strode across the hall and vanished through the door. The girl backed and sat down on the bed, her face blank. Hareth looked at Conn. "Well? Can you do it?"

Conn nodded. "I think so. I will take her through the washroom and out into the drying yard. Where will you be?"

Hareth grinned. He liked this lad, who didn't make a fuss, but got on with whatever life offered. "Once I've gone through the main door, I shall find my way round to the drying yard." Hareth gripped the young man by both arms and, for the benefit of anyone watching, but also because he meant it, said in ringing tones, "Come visit me in Inverness before too long, mind!"

He turned and strode to the door without another glance at the girl. Eba had stiffened at the sound of his voice, saw him vanish through the door and marched across the hall towards Conn. "Did you see who that was? Did he talk to you? What did he want?"

Her blue eyes were riveted on Conn's face even when he turned her round till she fitted into his armpit so he could lean on her a little more than he needed to. He limped towards the cubicle she had just left. "Yes," he muttered. "It was Hareth mac Enna, and he wants me to take you outside. He will meet you and take you down to the quayside and from there onto the Alban ship."

She stopped dead. "He does? Are you sure?"

Conn glanced down into her astonished face. "Yes, of course. Now do what I tell you and don't argue. Go and collect everything in your cubicle you could wash, and come back to me here."

"Everything I could wash?" She stared blankly at him.

"I said, don't argue. Go and do it. And pin your hair back."

"But what—"

"Eba!" His tone was pained and exasperated at the same time. "You need a reason to go to the wash room, and you need to look as if you are going to work. Now go and do it!"

He watched her tie back her hair with a strip of leather and at the same time look wildly round the cubicle. Aralt hadn't left much she could wash, and she had no change of clothes. She sat on the bed platform, dragged her boots on and grinned for a moment when her heels did not scream a warning. Conn sighed when she hurried back to him with no

more than one shirt to wash. "Go to my cubicle," he said, "there's another shirt there. Bring it as well."

Pride, annoyance and repressed irritation flitted across her face, but she flounced off and reappeared with two more shirts. She glared at Conn, daring him to laugh. "The man in the next bed gave me his as well."

Conn laughed. Eba's brows angled down towards her nose, and her mouth opened to make a sharp retort. "Come on," he said. "We'll make a little washermaid out of you yet."

Conn took a stride towards the back of the hall and then realized she had not moved. He turned, saw her furious face, and reached back, gripped her wrist and yanked her towards him; with the flat of his hand against her shoulder blades, he pushed her towards the washing room. Pitched for her ears, his voice followed her. "This is good. Keep it up. We don't want to look as if we're escaping. We want to look as if I'm making you do my washing for me."

He limped behind her, and when she baulked, full of questions, he prodded her forward until they had reached the steamy regions of the washing room. By some freak chance, the room was empty. Conn called out, and then grinned when no washermaid answered. "She's gone out to see what's happening," he said. "Lucky for us! Come on!"

With amazing speed for a man with a healing wound in his thigh, Conn loped awkwardly across the room and pulled open the far door with care. "She could be out here," he said, and stuck his head out.

His open hand groped behind his back, found Eba and pulled her round the door and into Sitric's private orchard.

Ropes hung between trees, and tunics and shirts flapped in the breeze. Conn looked round. "Now then, we need to get you over the fence and out into the streets of Dublin. Over there," he said and dragged Eba across to a fence taller than his head.

"I can't climb that!"

"Of course you can." She was still clutching the bundle of shirts. "Let me have those."

She watched wide-eyed at the fence rearing way above her head. "Conn, I can't—"

"Yes, you can." He flung the shirts aside. "Put your foot in my hand. Hurry! We haven't got all day!" He held his palms together at knee height. Eba put her foot on them and he raised her in the air. "Now, put your foot on my shoulder. Your other foot!" She hesitated. "Now then, can you see over?"

"Yes. It's a long way d—"

"Don't look down," he said. "Can you see mac Enna?"

"Oh." There was a silence while her weight shifted a little on his shoulder. "No, I can't see him. I can't see anyone."

"Good. Now, it's up to you. Get hold of the posts, step over and let your feet slide down the other side. Once you've got as far as you can, just let go. Once you land, roll over. Don't try to stay upright, break your fall by rolling. Understand?"

A noncommittal reply drifted back. Her weight shifted about on his shoulder as she deliberated. "Eba? Move! Someone will come soon and your chance will be gone. Make for the quayside and stay out of sight of anyone who knows

you. I'll come round the other way and catch you up. Now, go!"

Her weight vanished and he straightened and spun round. He heard a gasp and the scrabble of feet on the other side of the fence. Another gasp followed by a groan, and series of small, startled gasps. He listened. There was silence. "Eba? Eba!"

"I'm alright." A small voice came from the other side of the fence. "I think."

Conn pulled a face, debated with himself, then measured the fence with his eyes and leapt off his good leg. It was harder than he had thought, but he hauled himself up the fence until he could peer over it. "Get up! Get up and run!" he hissed, scarlet faced with effort.

Eba gaped at him, and then moved as if she'd been kicked. Satisfied, Conn watched her run along the side of the fence. It was a good thing she was still wearing those dammed leggings. He let himself drop back to the ground, fell back against the fence and, since his leg objected, sat down.

* * * *

Domnall sat on the bank side and flipped small stones into the Liffey. He watched Finlay stride back across the bridge, slip neatly through the growing stream of people and turn down the grassy bank towards the ship. Halfway down, he registered Domnall's presence and beckoned him over. Domnall scowled and stayed where he was.

Finlay waited for Domnall. He beckoned again, and called sharply. Domnall flipped another stone, and then another.

Finlay walked across the boards laid on the mud and up the sloping ramp onto the ship.

Domnall was damned if he was going to jump when everybody tried to tell him what to do. He was a grown man, with responsibilities, and if the silver for Eba allowed him to feed his people through the next winter, how could it be wrong? Domnall thought that, given the circumstances, he could have searched for weeks before he found a suitor for his sister who would match up to Aralt. It wasn't as if the girl had been left with a bully or a coward. Aralt seemed a good tempered man of his word.

Domnall watched Finlay stride across the decking. From the look of the sudden activity on board, he was issuing orders. He's good at it, Domnall thought sardonically.

His face sullen, he watched as men ran at Finlay's bidding. The small boat set off, with three men in it, heading for the other side of the river. It was on course with the main gate on Dublin's quayside. One of the crew came to the side of the ship and urged Domnall to get back on board, and another man joined him. They cupped hands round their mouths, and yelled. Domnall ignored them, and spat on the grass to relieve his feelings.

It was only when the crew pulled in the ramp and the boards that it dawned on Domnall that the *Wolf* was getting ready to sail. He sat up straight. Blast and damnation! Did they expect him to walk all the way round to Dublin to get the boat back to the *Wolf*? Well, he wouldn't do it.

The waving became more urgent. Finlay appeared at the gunwale and his gesture was peremptory. Domnall ignored

him. Finlay turned away and shouted out orders. To Domnall's amazement, the crew put poles over the side and prepared to push the *Wolf* away from the mud and into deep water.

Domnall swore, got off his backside and loped down to the edge. "Wait!" he yelled, but no one took any notice. Domnall put one tentative booted foot into the dark, oozing mud of the river bank. It held, and he stepped forward; but at the third stride he sank to his ankles. Black river ooze plopped and squelched and a nasty smell filled the air around him. He yelled, a deep, inarticulate sound, and someone on board saw him floundering, laughed and disappeared.

The fifth step left Domnall thigh deep and sinking, and though he was but a few paces away from the steep wooden sides of the *Wolf*, deep brown water swirled between them.

Domnall took a deep breath, felt the mud give way under him and threw his weight forward just as a rope splashed down near enough for him to grab. He wound it around his forearm. He and the rope would not be parted, whatever else happened. The rope jerked taut and cold wet mud and water slapped high on his chest. He shut his eyes, expecting the worst, but he didn't submerge; he slipped sideways and surged towards the high wooden prow of the ship.

Relieved, he looked up. It was a mistake, for his nose collided painfully with the side of the vessel. He swore loudly, grabbed the rope and hauled himself up until his legs were free. He applied his boots, slippery and half full of river mud, to the rope only to have them shoot straight off and thud against the ship's side.

He clung to the rope and heard the explosions of mirth from above. He shouted obscenity after obscenity at the grinning faces above him then gritted his teeth and hauled himself up the rope until he could swing over the gunwale.

He landed in a damp, smelly and breathless heap on the decking just as the *Wolf* slid into deep water. "Hose him down! He stinks to high heaven!" Before he could gather his wits, bucket after bucket of cold Liffey water sluiced over him. He rolled and crawled and yelled and screamed at them to stop, but he couldn't escape the deluge of water or the jeers of laughter.

In the end he crawled to the side of the ship, tore off his clothes and hung on to the gunwale stark naked and let them sluice him down till the stink had gone. Someone threw his clothes overboard, which made Domnall swear again, grab the nearest boat hook and run to fish them out.

Chapter 27

Eba ran to the end of the fence, dropped to one knee and peered around the corner. Hareth was not in sight, but Lord Sitric's Vikings filled the square before the hall. Many wore the padded jacket that cushioned their ring mail tunics with sword harness on top. Expensive ring mail lay in shimmering heaps on sea chests with round metal helmets on top and bedrolls and blankets, leather food bags, sea cloaks, spears, bows and weapons scattered around.

She retreated, shut her eyes and visualized Dublin in her mind. If she were to head in the general direction of Fishamble Street, she might then slip down to the ship. The patch of open land behind her was used as a practice ground for sword play and wrestling but no one had time for that today.

She retreated and set off, skirting wooden planks where traders set up booths on fair days and festivals. A horse tethered to a stake had cropped a light colored circle in the lush grass, and barely looked up as she trotted by. A cluster of wooden cabins, sties, stables and outhouses led her to the lane leading towards Skinner's Row and Bothe Street. She glanced over her shoulder, saw the height of the fence she had scaled and a bolt of sheer delight shot through her. She had done it! She was out!

She slowed to a walk in case running attracted attention. Soot stirred under her boots and her elation seeped away as she walked through the burned out rubble of the grandest settlement she had ever seen.

Charcoal and charred wood surrounded her and the peculiar odor filled her nostrils. Whole families sheltered beneath sailcloth rigged over poles and children and adults rooted among the debris for anything they could salvage. A small child, blackened with soot and smoke, backed out of a tangle of beams with a wooden beaker clutched in both small hands and took it to her mother, who smiled in pleasure.

Eba crossed the ridge and headed down the slope to the river. She glimpsed two or three men who shared Aralt's quarters at the corner of Winetavern Street, and any one of them would recognize her and take her back. She turned on her heel and stole back around the corner, and then ran like a hare for Fishamble Street.

It wasn't ideal; it would leave her a long stretch of quayside to negotiate. She supposed ships would still be sailing into the Liffey, for their crews might know nothing of the sacking of Dublin, but it couldn't be helped. She would have to risk it, or go right round the other way, which was riskier still. Eba glanced back, turned into the street where she had once been held against her will and breathed a sigh of relief. The men had not followed her.

She set off towards the quay at a fast pace, her eyes darting about the blackened gaps where several buildings had burned out. Further down, some of the bigger houses on the other side had survived the fire, and Annikki's house was one of them. It seemed untouched, and she was glad for Annikki and Arne's sake.

She did not go in. She thought of Conn and wondered where he was, but could not recall clearly what he had said

about joining her. She would feel so much safer if he was at her side. Conn had been so steady, ever since that first day in Annikki's hall. He was fun, too.

He had made her life more bearable in the men's hall. The majority of men had gone out to work each day, but those with minor injury had stayed behind, full of frustration and often bad tempered. She would have been an easy target for them if Conn had not sat with her and told her about the night of the attack; how he and his father had rushed home for weapons, and been ambushed in their own home by marauders from the Waterford ships who had taken the girls, anything of value and thrown a burning brand onto the roof thatch while Conn, his father and his father's beloved dogs were still inside.

His own wound, he said, had been the worst injury; his father and the dogs had nothing worse than sore heads, and time had soon brought them to recovery. The raiders had intended the house should have burned down with them inside, but the torch had burned out without setting it alight.

By staying with her, Conn had saved her from the attentions of men who wouldn't have been afraid to try their luck, and be damned to Aralt's reaction.

* * * *

Hareth left Conn to deal with Eba and strolled out into bright daylight, blinked a little after the dimness of the hall, and realized the day was overcast. He set off to meet the girl and take her to the *Wolf*, but Lord Sitric chose that moment to stride from his Hall, saw Hareth, and beckoned him over.

Lord Sitric's green tunic was banded with scarlet embroidery at sleeve and hem and he carried himself well for a man of his age; but the marks of grief were plain on his face, and he had aged a good deal in the last few days. Hareth felt a twinge of pity mingled with guilt and offered condolences on behalf of Finlay of Alba.

Sitric brushed them aside. "Walk with me." It was more a plea than a command; Sitric's voice was hoarse with tears, and Hareth felt obliged to fall into step beside him.

Sitric walked around the square, his eyes returning often to the hall door. "Speak well of me to your Lord," he said. "He will understand my loss. His words are etched on my brain and I could not be rid of them last night as I sat by my son's bier." His eyes flicked to the hall door. "If I had not killed Raghnaill, then the Waterford men would not have attacked Dublin and Goffraid would be walking beside me today. It is my fault this happened; my actions caused my grief and suffering."

"I had five sons," Sitric went on. "The Good Lord has taken every one of them before me. No man should have to face such a thing. It started at Clontarf. Dubhghall, my eldest, died there. He would have made a fine King of Dublin, and I asked the church men why he was taken." Grief twisted and thinned Sitric's voice. "The Bishop told me it was because I had not built a church. I repented. I built a wooden church, but it was not enough. More of my sons died. It is never enough. It did not help my grief."

Liquid formed in Sitric's eyes and filtered down the creases of his pale skin. "Your Lord is young, but he understands

more than I did." He wiped his face with the back of his hand, turned to look at the hall. He stiffened his spine. "Now I must go and set my last son on his final journey."

Hareth turned. Four men stood in the hall doorway, their faces solemn. At Sitric's nod they carried the covered bier on their sturdy shoulders across the quiet space of the square. Men fell silent and followed it down to the quayside. A silken square covered whatever was left of Lord Goffraid's face; ring mail gleamed on his chest and thighs and his warped and twisted sword lay alongside him, with a new one next to it. His helm sat in the curve of his shoulder.

The men walked at a dignified pace, with Lord Sitric in his place behind the bier. He looked at Hareth, who felt obliged to walk with him. A sense of being watched made Hareth turn and stare at the tower, where a small woman, shrouded in veils, stood quietly watching. Lady Emer had chosen to grieve in private.

Hareth matched his stride to that of the cortege and walked slowly to the old quayside where everyone stood silent and sombre beside Goffraid's handsome war ship. The *Wave Walker* was about to take her last journey. Lord Goffraid's crew waited by the ship, Aralt among them, and all of them dressed for war. Hareth wondered briefly how they would get Aralt's hard won silver back to him once they had the girl, and then forgot about it as the bier was carried aboard.

They laid the young man in the place of honor in the waist of the ship, hard by the mast with his own personal shield across his feet. Men carried helms, spears and axes and laid them around him; the weapons of a warrior, the tools of war,

swords and body armor heaped in a shining, glittering mound. Two men dipped buckets in the river and doused the sail and the rigging over and over again so they would not burn too fast.

Goffraid's personal banner rose up the mast, and burning brands were handed aboard Lord Sitric's ship before it edged away from the jetty, towing the *Wave Walker* in her wake. The tide was turning and would take the ships out to sea. Once across the sandbar, Lord Sitric would hurl the burning brands across the shifting seas to the smaller ship, which would be cast adrift. The wind and the tide would take *Wave Walker* far out to sea and she and Lord Goffraid would find their way home to Valhalla together.

Lord Sitric's oarsmen knew their work. The ships glided across the water like swans, their painted prows and shield colors reflected, rippling and stretching, in the dark, mirror like surface of the river. Hareth watched the ships disappear and wondered if Sitric would indeed sail off to Waterford and take his revenge on Ivarr's people, or if, as he said a final goodbye to his last remaining son, Finlay's words might finally find a resting place in Sitric's heart.

Hareth stayed until the scarlet and green banners were hard to see, for however brief a time, Goffraid had been their friend.

Hareth edged discreetly out of the crowd, turned and ran back up through the streets to the fence outside the drying ground of Sitric's Hall. The girl was not there, of course. He had been delayed far too long. Hareth swore and took the route he imagined the girl would have taken down Bothe

Street to Winetavern Street. He expected to catch her before she reached the quayside. After all, she would not be travelling fast.

The day was cool and it was no trouble to run down through the quiet, empty streets. Faint cheering carried on the air and Hareth frowned for a moment, thinking there was a sardonic quality to the sound, and then forgot about it. He ran onto the quayside and jerked to a halt.

The crowd at the eastern end of the quayside still gazed silently after the ships. The cheers were coming from further west, somewhere between the Fishamble Street and Winetavern Street gates where a semicircle of rough seamen leered at a tall girl who looked familiar. She was angry, and clung to the arm of a harassed, black haired man who seemed out of his depth.

Hareth groaned.

Chapter 28

Hareth looked for the *Shadow Wolf* and found her in midstream. A flicker of movement caught his eye, and he squinted at the strange sight of a naked man fishing over the stern. The small boat, with Finlay and six men aboard, battered its way through the choppy brown surface of the river straight for the quayside. A roar went up much closer at hand.

Hareth turned back. The rowdy knot of men numbered about twenty heads in all; each fully armed and shoddily dressed, their boots and knives tied with broken thongs. He had seen their kind in every back alley, sleazy drinking house and marketplace between Dublin and Inverness, and wondered which of half a dozen ports and harbors along the western seaboard they might call home.

Hareth squared his shoulders and walked towards them. From the cadence of their speech this group were from Ulster and the sour odor around them suggested that they had forgone a bath, a change clothes and the use of a razor between one full moon and the next. Their hair and beards were wild, unkempt and probably alive with fleas and lice.

A short, sharp retort rang out in a feminine voice. Hareth eyed the seething semicircle of men. If he was any judge, the girl was in a tearing temper; either that or she was very close to tears. There was something about this girl, he thought; she caused trouble everywhere she went.

Hareth put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. It was loud, it was shrill and it cut through the uproar like a knife

through butter. The turmoil ceased and the ruffians turned and stared at the man who had dared to whistle them off like dogs. Hareth wondered if he would not have been wiser to wait for reinforcements and then decided to bluff it out.

The girl was not alone in the middle of the group, for Leod was there, standing close behind her, both hands gripping her close to his chest. His face displayed all the strain of a brave man pressed too far. Hareth nodded grimly, and wondered how he had got there, and looked at the girl.

Unlike Leod, Eba was scarlet with temper. Dressed in worn leather, her hair tied carelessly back on the nape of her neck, she turned with the men as they faced the newcomer and Hareth saw first recognition and then relief dawn in her face. Hareth smiled to cover his surprise.

She was still tall, and still slender, but there had been changes in the weeks since he had last seen her singing scurrilous songs in the hall at Inverness. Her breasts pushed against the leather tunic, and the once plump cheeks now described a subtle concave curve between eye and jaw that momentarily took Hareth's breath away. Her eyes burned blue against her flushed skin and strands of the wonderful silver gilt hair fluttered across her fine boned nose and jaw. She smiled, a devastating, pretty smile, and Hareth, who had a beautiful and much loved wife waiting for him in Alba, felt a small tremor somewhere deep inside. He had his answer. He knew why men fought over her.

Leod clamped an arm around Eba's waist and carried her with him as he plunged forward through the loosened ring of men to stand beside Hareth. The Ulster men allowed the

strangers to come together, and then closed the ring around them. Hareth gritted his teeth. Instead of getting the other two out, he was now in the trap with them. It wasn't pleasant, but the boat from the *Wolf* would surely have landed by now.

"Christ on the Cross, I thought we were dead!" Leod said, grinning with relief.

"You still might be," Hareth said mildly, watching the Ulstermen. "What do they want?"

"Her." Leod's eyes dipped towards Eba, who stood with her back pressed against them.

She half turned and fixed her excited sapphire gaze on Hareth. "I haven't done anything! I was walking along the quayside looking for you, or Finlay, or somebody I knew! Conn got me out, and you were supposed to meet me and you didn't! He was supposed to be here, but he isn't here either!"

"I believe you," Hareth said, and gave her a brief smile.

He searched for a familiar face among the Ulster men, and found none, but he could hear the faint pad of feet on the quayside. He drew breath, and under the combined hostility of twenty pairs of eyes, offered the same reassuring smile.

"My name is Hareth mac Enna and I'm from Ulster myself." Ignoring the girl's astonished glance, Hareth spoke in the lilt of his homeland and employed a pleasant, conversational tone. "Home was between the two lakes and not a stone's throw from Armagh, so it was. Would any of you be knowing it?"

For a few moments there was no reaction in the hostile faces. Then a tall gaunt man with a hooked nose and unblinking blue eyes grunted. "Ay." A remnant of courtesy learned forty years ago floated to the surface, and he added, grudgingly, "I am Conor mac Ailil, and from Armagh. But I know you not."

"I'm not surprised," Hareth said. "It's many a day since I last saw Ulster. But I'd welcome news of Glaslough, if you have it."

A short-legged barrel of a man shoved his way through the ring of men to stand, fists to his hips, beside Conor mac Ailil. He leered at Hareth. "Ach, don't listen to him then, Conor. Why should we be telling him anything at all of Glaslough?" His pugnacious face swung round and appealed to the rest of the circle. "It's him should be telling us, isn't that right, boys?"

A deep-toned growl of affirmation answered him. Hareth smiled, shook his head and glanced at the sky, which was darkening even though it was just after midday. "Well, now," he said easily. "What can I say that will convince you? More to the point, what can I remember? It's close on twenty years since I left, and that's a grand step of time in any man's life. There's the lake, and the seven hills and the crannog at Emy and the chieftain's grave at Dotagh that I remember." Hareth paused to rub the back of his head, thinking. "Then there's Emain Macha but a lazy day's ride to the east and it the seat of the kings of Ulster seven hundred years ago. A grand place, as I recall."

The fat man pushed forward, and gazed up at Hareth from hot brown eyes almost obliterated by folds of fat. "And where in that fine grand place would you and yours be living, then?"

Hareth thought about it, and shook his head. "I can't tell you where they are now," he said. "But twenty years ago they were but a stone's throw from the lough itself. Niall mac Enna was my father, and his brothers Donagh and Cathbad." His ears caught a sound beyond the circle, and his light gaze sharpened. "Now, will that be enough for you, or will you be demanding my lineage back to King Conor and Cuchulain himself?"

There was an uneasy silence. The tall man shifted from foot to foot, unblinking blue eyes fixed on the stranger. "There's no man here who can put a name t'ye."

"But I can!" A new voice rang out, and Hareth grinned as the circle of men half turned and stared at the stranger.

Finlay of Alba exuded wealth and authority as he stood straight backed amid the wreckage of the quayside and surveyed them all with a haughty arrogance caught somewhere in the tilt of his head and the angle of his black brows. The short, richly embroidered cloak he had worn in honor of Lord Sitric swirled still over one shoulder and gold gleamed in the dull light when his hand moved to rest on the hilt of his jewelled sword. "His name is Hareth mac Enna and he is my most trusted officer. We are ready to depart for Alba within the next hour. Leod? Eba? The tide will not wait."

He made a sweeping gesture that suggested they should precede him along the quayside. Half a dozen of the *Wolf's* crew stood behind him, all armed with swords and daggers

and Hareth knew more men would already be unloading from the light boat.

Conor's gaze flicked over Finlay, noted the sword, the massive silver cloak pin and the gilt and silver embroidery that bordered the cloak. "There's no dispute here. We found the lass, and we'll keep her."

Finlay did not even glance at the girl, but his smile disappeared and arrogance filtered into his tone as he said, "Eba? I am her guardian. She returns to Alba with me."

Eba's eyes glowed. She lifted her chin. A king had defended her! The threat of the slave house receded from her mind, and she grinned at Leod.

Conor's blue eyes wandered over the few men who accompanied Finlay. He turned to his own followers, and an ugly grin broke through his ragged beard. "What do you say, boys? Do we keep her, or do we give her to this foreigner?"

A roar answered him; it was generally in favor of keeping the girl and hacking the foreigners to bits right there on the quayside.

"There is something you should know." Hareth chose his moment to address Conor, and because they all wanted to hear, the noise died down. He nodded towards Finlay. "This man is the King of Alba, and a good friend of Lord Sitric. You would be wise, friend, to back off from this matter."

A blast of thick cloudy sputum landed on the jetty very close the King of Alba's foot, and the fat man grinned. "Lord Sitric has other matters on his mind just now, wouldn't you say? And we don't care much for kings of any persuasion, do we, lads?"

A roar answered him, and the fat man flung his arms wide. "We are for Conor of Derigal! We will have the lass!"

The men shrieked Conor's name and their black haired leader grinned and regarded them fondly. He turned back to Hareth and shrugged. The circle of men tightened. A young fellow leapt forward and grappled Leod from behind. With some presence of mind Leod pushed a startled Eba into Hareth's arms; Hareth forwarded her into the King of Alba's embrace. Finlay grasped her waist, stepped backwards, spun her with him and shoved her into the arms of one of his crew.

"Get her back to the ship! Now!"

Conor's men watched the sailor drag the girl at a dead run towards the waiting boat, and a roar of mingled surprise and frustration split the air at the neatness of it. They also saw the disembarked crew of the *Wolf* pounding along the quayside towards them, and turned in fury on Leod and Hareth.

The *Wolf's* crew hurtled on like hounds that have found their quarry, and more than ready to teach a few uncivilized louts what was what. Leod had already vanished beneath a heaving mass of bodies, but Hareth shot a fist in the air and shrieked, "To me! To me!"

Finlay stood to one side, fists clenched, and fought down the impulse to join in the fight. Instead, he watched Eba's appointed guardian push her down into the boat, seize the oars and row for the *Wolf* as if his life depended on it. Men waited to haul her aboard. Finlay's long mouth curved; the girl would get no delicate handling, for the men would be keen to get to shore and join in the fray.

Conor of Ulster fought with his men until he noted the young Alban King standing to one side. His greedy eyes slid to the jewelled sword and dagger and the bulging gem studded-purse and automatically tallied costs in his head. Gold gleamed as Finlay's hands clenched and unclenched, and Conor saw it, misinterpreted it and sneered. This unknown kinglet seemed afraid of a good fight. Conor ducked, avoided his opponent and backed out of the fight. He drew his sword.

Finlay watched the small boat row at speed for the quayside. Spray flew up. The surface of the river was not the smooth sheet of water it had been earlier, and Finlay glanced at the lowering clouds looming up from the west. The breeze was strong enough to skitter the debris down the quayside. He frowned. It might mean a difficult passage out of the Liffey.

A flash of movement on the periphery of his vision alerted him and he turned to see light flash off Conor of Derigal's sword, already shoulder high on an up stroke. The down stroke to follow would likely cleave his skull in two halves. Finlay flung himself backwards, the sword hissed through the air where he had been standing and by the time Conor turned after him, Finlay had his own blade in his hand.

Conor was well into his fourth decade, with years of fighting ground into his bones. He had been fighting petty kings for years, from the outer isles down the entire Irish seaboard to the southern tip of Wales, and judged this fellow to be of much the same calibre as the rest. He did not hesitate; he strode grim-faced towards the younger man and lifted his sword for an execution.

Finlay's eyes lit with something close to joy; he moved to one side, flexed his fingers round his sword hilt and watched his opponent. For the first time since this protracted expedition to find the girl had started, he felt in control of the situation, and relished it.

The older man surged forward, and met a sword wielded by an arm as powerful as his own. He frowned, and tried again, and again; but wherever his blade probed, the other man's sword was there to meet him. The clash of metal rang out in the cooling air, and by common consent, the brawling men stopped battering each other to the ground and turned to watch their leaders. Leod was the last to get up, and he took his time about it before he limped over, bleeding and dizzy, to lean on Hareth's shoulder in the hope of getting his breath and his senses back in some kind of working order.

Conor very soon perceived it was no soft prince brought up on cream and easy living who faced him. This Prince had been well taught, had learned all the moves and fought with a skill both effortless and instinctive. The two men were well matched for height and reach, but Finlay had the advantage of youth and his swift, challenging response worried Conor.

Finlay had already torn out the domed pin and hurled his cloak to one side. At once he felt the improvement; his sword arm was free of impeding folds of cloth, and the sudden, disconcerting swing of the heavy fabric no longer pulled him off balance. One of his crew snatched up the cloak and its pin from beneath the dirty, grasping hand of an Ulsterman and grinned into the fellow's scowling face.

To make matters worse, Conor thought the young man was enjoying it all. He almost laughed every time he parried a blow, and Conor's irritation grew as the dark, laughing eyes mocked him. The sound of clashing swords reached the townsfolk at the eastern end of the quay and since the two funeral ships had long since disappeared over the horizon, they turned to the source of the noise.

Facing west, they saw the darkening sky and the small waves whipping down the brown, mud colored Liffey, and muttered about the foul weather on the way. In ones, twos and then in groups, the bulk of the crowd hurried away to seek shelter, while the more restless spirits drifted along the quay to watch the fight.

Finlay fought as he always did, in silence; the only sounds came from the ringing, ear shattering clash of swords and the susurrant of sound as each man's soles slithered through the charred litter of the quayside. Conor panted, his mouth open, his breathing harsh. He drove Finlay across the quayside and was quite surprised when his victim skipped to one side and Conor found himself teetering on the edge of the dock with the swirling brown water of the Liffey beneath him.

Like many sailors, Conor could not swim, and the momentary fright of almost falling into the water provoked a furious retaliation. He gripped his sword with both hands, raised it shoulder high and drove for his opponent's throat.

Finlay swerved, backed and Conor stalked after him, the breeze cool on his face and throat as rain swept unnoticed across the river. Old men jerked hoods and mantles into place, younger men ignored the cries of their women and

stayed to watch. Their wives left, dragging their off-spring with them. Soon only the crew of the *Wolf*, the Ulster men and a handful of toothless, cackling old men remained on the wet quayside.

The rain stamped cold, overlapping coins of damp onto men's tunics and breeches and bounced off the dirty quayside, splattering mud and wet ash knee high. A bold wind darted along the quay and whipped Finlay's black hair across his face. He shook his head, and wished for his war braids. Conor's greasy curls held beads of moisture and droplets sprang into the air about his head as the swords jarred and slid against each other.

Conor was out to kill. Finlay knew it; he also knew that if he wanted to sail the *Wolf* out on this tide then the fight had to end quickly. The storm clouds were gathering, the wind was rising and the light was going. He took a deep breath and attacked the other man's blade. The fun was over.

Conor snarled, his breath whining over discolored teeth. He had found Finlay's defence impenetrable, but Finlay attacking was a frightening proposition. Cold rain slid down Conor's spine and he shivered. His blue eyes flicked sideways to Patrick, hovering nearby.

Finlay drove Conor back towards the Liffey and did not give the man time to guess what was about to happen. Finlay swayed away from Conor's sword, deflected a low swipe aimed at his knees and sprang forward. His sword pierced Conor's tunic down to the thin curved ribs. Conor hurled himself to one side, swearing.

Finlay hooked his foot round Conor's ankle and yanked it towards him. Hareth hooted. Conor's arms flailed, and a half skip saved him; but before he could retaliate Finlay used the strength of his leg muscles to yank again, leaving Conor seriously unbalanced. Finlay leaned forward, pressed his weight onto the back of Conor's calf, and the Ulsterman dropped to one knee in the black mess of the quayside.

Conor's men moaned and Finlay's supporters cheered. Conor launched himself forward, caught his weight on his hands and rolled head first through the dirt to the cheers of his own men. Finlay sprang clear to avoid Conor's backward kick, then jumped forward and used his blade to prod, jab and poke at a dirty, dishevelled and disorientated Conor who scrabbled backwards, felt air under him and dropped, shrieking, into the Liffey.

There was a mingled roar and moan from the quayside. Conor's men ran to the edge of the wharf. The tide was fast approaching the flood and a tiderip swirled among the pillars, supports and wrecks beneath the surface. Conor surfaced, thrashing and spluttering, his sword held high above the salt water.

"He canna swim," Patrick cried. The crew glanced at each other and two men flung themselves flat on the dirty, miserable quayside and stretched towards the drowning man. Conor choked, spat dirty water and sank.

Finlay's men turned and pounded jubilantly down the quayside towards the waiting boat, laughing as they heard a faint splash as a second man fell into the water. Hareth

glanced back. "It's about time that ill smelling crew took a bath."

When everyone was aboard and the boat stowed with swift efficiency the *Shadow Wolf* nosed her way cautiously down the river. Finlay glanced to the west where the sky was dark and heavy with thunderclouds. The sky to the east was clear and blue, and he wanted very much to be out of the river before nightfall. He hooked an arm around the main mast and squinted to where Conor spewed river water over his boots and Patrick, red faced and furious, shook his fist in the air.

Chapter 29

Finlay glanced around, frowning. The rain had eased for the moment, but it was bound to come again. Hot blood surged through him and he longed to be away from Dublin. Irritation filled his face as the girl marched up smiling, and stood beside him. "I hope," he snapped, "you have learned a lesson."

Her smile vanished. Rainwater darkened her hair and spiked her lashes, and someone had given her a dark, heavy cloak. Her fingers tightened in its folds, and the darkness of the cloth emphasized the pure oval of her face. Sorchand stood nearby, his wary blue gaze flicking from the girl to Finlay and back again.

"I have learned many lessons," Eba muttered.

"Then perhaps you'll stay at home when told to in the future." Finlay gauged the dark clouds again, and then swung back to her. "It would save everyone a great deal of time and energy."

"I had to leave Inverness," Eba said flatly.

Exasperated, Finlay glared at her. "What did you imagine I'd do? Sell you to the highest bidder? Slit your nose and stick a ring in it? Your idiocy earned Sorchand a place in the Dublin slave market and damn near got Comgell killed."

Eba recoiled at the violence in his voice. Rain silvered his dark hair and rolled down his fierce, hawk-like face. The cloth at his shoulders was already drenched. "We left Alba because of you." He flicked the hair out of his eyes and raindrops flew in all directions. "We've spent days traipsing all over Dublin

after a feather-brained girl who thinks her own concerns are far more important than those of Alba!" He leaned towards her. "Try it again and no one will lift a finger to find you!"

Shocked, Eba swallowed. "I wanted to go home. It wasn't my fault—"

"Then whose fault was it? Why couldn't you wait for your brother to collect you? None of this was necessary!"

Eba shook her head to clear rain drops from her lashes and drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

The King struck the mast with the flat of his palm. "White Christ, girl! I left Alba undefended for the best part of a month to find you. You do realize, don't you, that without the distraction of Goffraid's funeral today we would never have got you out of Dublin?"

Finlay of Alba glared round the ship. Hareth's attention was on the rowers, who used the *Wolf's* sweeps just enough to keep them in the middle of the current taking them slowly towards the estuary. Sorchand kept his head firmly down, Leod sat on the deck with both palms clasped to his head, and Domnall, rebuffed by a sister unable to forget that he had sold her for silver, stared sullen faced out over the settlement.

Finlay turned back to the girl. "As soon as we get back to Alba I want to see you married, and with a husband who can control you."

Eba stiffened. "No one will want me after this."

"Want has very little to do with it."

"But you can't marry me to just—"

"A man's signalling. Over there." Hareth's voice drowned whatever she had been trying to say and every head swung round. "I think it might be Conn."

A hooded figure stood at the edge of the channel that had once led into the Poddle, and waved steadily to attract attention.

"It is Conn," Hareth said, and shot a glance at Finlay. "Shall we pick him up?"

Finlay slapped his fist against the wood at further delay, and then nodded. "Get him on board. But if he wants to go back to Dublin later, he'll have to swim."

Conn limped across to Finlay a little later, his canvas bag slung across one broad shoulder and apologized. Then he added, "I should like to join you, if I may."

"Join me?"

Conn mistook the off-hand tone. "I'm a good fighting man when I'm fit and I should like to sail to Alba with you. I would join your hyrd, if you'll have me."

"Why?"

Conn's glance moved briefly to the girl beside Finlay; it was a very warm glance. Eba flushed bright as a beacon and Sorchand, well placed to see and interpret everything correctly, jerked to attention.

Finlay gritted his teeth, turned to the steersman and gestured to the north bank of the river. "We can't go on in this. Take us over to the Abbey."

* * * *

The storm blew itself out overnight and Finlay had the ship loaded and ready to leave in the quiet, wet and still dawn of the new day. He took the time to speak to Conn as they boarded and queried the lad's decision to sail for Alba. "If you've changed your mind, there's still time to slip around the northern bank and be home before anyone misses you."

Conn shook his head. "I bid my parents goodbye yesterday. They know what I am doing, and why."

"Does Eba know you are doing it for her?"

"I haven't spoken to her about it."

"Are you sure of her? Sure enough to change your life for her?"

Conn's brows lifted, and his bright, pleasant gaze was steady. "Sometimes you just have to take a chance," he said.

By the time the ship reached the estuary, the sun was a round pink disc over the Welsh hills and the air was clear after the storm. Men looked back at the smoky grey huddle of Dublin, shook their heads and wondered when the town would be ready to trade again. Some thought of Lord Goffraid on his last journey, and bowed their heads. Someone else spotted a tall mast in the harbor beneath Dalkey Point and suggested that Lord Sitric had sought sheltered there overnight.

The *Wolf* passed carefully over the treacherous shifting sandbars that lurked at the river mouth and met the swell of the sea. Eba groaned, knew what was about to happen, and hurried to the small space beneath the dragonhead where the curve of the prow offered some shelter beneath a small canvas awning that would keep off the worst of the spray. She huddled there, arranged her cloak with nervous hands

and swallowed hard at frequent intervals. The very thought of turning green in front of everyone was mortifying.

She tried to ignore the rise and fall of the ship by thinking of home and allowed her gaze to wander down the sloping deck to her brother, who stood, his back to her, staring into the waves. She was angry with him still; what kind of a brother sells his only sister for silver?

Domnall might be ignoring her, but others were curious. Every time Eba looked up she met a different pair of eyes. If it wasn't Leod, in one of his rare waking moments, it was Sorchand. If it wasn't Sorchand, it was Conn. If it wasn't Conn, it was Hareth. The crew watched her, too. Only two men on the ship avoided her eye. One was the King of Alba and the other was her brother. Eba ground her teeth together to stop her jaw wobbling and clasped her hands across her uneasy stomach.

The sun rose higher in the sky and Leod fell asleep again. Eba could not think why Leod should take so little interest in her. He had not asked a single question or spoken a single word to her since they came aboard. Surely he couldn't blame her for what had happened? None of it had been her doing.

Half a dozen men heaved on a rope and the brown cloth sail squeaked and whined up the mast. The wind poked, pushed and finally punched the closewoven wool out ahead of the breeze and immediately the motion of the ship changed, and Eba's stomach lurched. She pillowed her head in the cradle of her arms, braced them on raised knees and tried to sleep, but cold sweat had already broken through her skin

and the nausea increased. Her stomach heaved; but she fought it, and, for a time, she won.

It was a short victory. Blood drained from her face, and left her skin the sort of white she knew would be tinged with a most unbecoming green. Her stomach heaved again and this time she had no choice but to rise and rush to the side. She arrived rather faster than she anticipated; indeed, she collided with it, found it too high and had to edge sideways, one hand clamped against her mouth.

She leaned far out over the gunwale, fingers cramped on the damp wood, for nothing must carry downwind. The wave rose to meet her, rolled away a hand span from her face and the contents of her stomach went with it. When the cold green water rose again she thought about throwing herself into it and putting an end to the misery.

A firm hand held her shoulder. The steadying warmth was most welcome and a voice she knew spoke in her ear; Eba stifled a sob with the back of her hand and looked round, shamed. Her brother stood there, concern written across his face. "Drink this. You need something in your stomach."

The ship rose to a wave, and Eba had to cling to the gunwale to stop herself falling. A huge lump of land as large as a mountain loomed up in front of her and she gasped in sheer terror. As the ship slid down again, she saw the stretch of water between the ship and the shore and the fear receded. She could not stand upright without holding onto something. "I'm going to fall," she cried, staggering.

"No, you're not." Domnall stood steady as a rock.

She clung to him wild-eyed and understood that the ship was moving, but not as much as she thought it was. She was the unsteady one; it was all part of the seasickness, then. She groaned.

Her brother offered the cup of water once more, and steadied her with his arm while she sipped. "We're passing the Howth and the currents are strong just here. Soon we'll be in calmer water and you'll feel better."

Eba doubted it, but did not contradict him. "Lean on me," he said, and she all but fell onto his broad, familiar shoulder and turned her face in the warm place beneath his ear. He held her through each following attack and, at last, was able to help her back to the place under the awning.

He sat with his back to the wood and held her snuggled tight against him. "Go to sleep, if you can. It would be best."

"You'll stay?"

He glanced down at the green face against his chest, and smiled. "I'll stay. Go to sleep."

* * * *

Eba dozed restlessly for the better part of the voyage home. Domnall wrapped a blanket about her and held her so close his chin grazed the top of her head. With nothing else to do, he observed the young lad from Dublin flex his thigh gently from time to time, and wondered if Eba was the cause of his application to join Finlay's hyrd. He also watched Leod, still curled up in a corner out of everyone's way, with some concern.

Conn had watched Domnall stride over to his sister, and he was glad her brother had shown, in such a natural easy way, that he still cared. He watched the Alban crew, well aware he was under observation himself; Eba's brother watched him, and the tall youth with vivid orange hair glared at him.

It was the youth who had strolled along the bridge to meet him and talk about Eba. They were of similar age and he needed to make new friends in this curious life he had chosen. So he smiled, and was puzzled when the youth scowled and turned away.

They pulled into Iona after a long day's sail and received permission to make camp for the night on the green turf by the church. Conn walked slowly up and down the white shell sand until his thigh muscle eased. He couldn't afford to have the muscle tighten for good. Who would love a cripple? More to the point, how, with a crippled limb, would he fend for himself or a wife?

He saw Domnall carry his sister ashore. She would be given some kind of a bed in the monastery while the rest of the crew cooked their own food and rolled themselves in their cloaks beside the fire. It was a dry night. The soft sound of the sea on the sand sounded behind him, and the wind stole through the rustling marram grass of the dunes. A vast array of stars hung above his head for the counting and he lay on his back, let his gaze wander among the pinpoints of starlight and thought about Eba.

Chapter 30

Opportunistic gulls squawked and dived and squabbled above the smooth turf next morning. Crows tramped across brown tidal pools, pried and smashed open limpets and mussels; redshanks and oystercatchers marched up and down the damp beach and probed for sandworms.

Finlay opened one eye on the tall, waving grasses of the machair, rolled over and checked the sweep of land to the door of the abbey. Small pied sheep and goats cropped their way across the grass in the weak sunshine. Something moved on his hand, and he looked down and saw an insect scuttling away into the grass. The breeze spattered grains of pale shell sand across his sunburned knuckles and he watched it run between his fingers. The fine sand was visible all around him beneath the grass and clovers, trefoils and yarrow.

Finlay yawned, and propped his head on the heel of his hand. He must remember to check Leod, or get Hareth to do it. Or better still, Domnall. He spied Conn walking up and down the patch of grass just outside the church door; and saw that though the lad walked slowly, he did not favor his injured leg. The smell of food rose in the air and Finlay smiled as he saw Conn sniff, turn and approach a fire, where two or three men were busy with skillets and firewood. One of them was Sorchand.

Finlay frowned and concentrated on the little group hunkered down around the neat fire. Sorchand twitched something from the iron skillet, wrapped it in a hunk of bread and then froze as Conn loomed over him.

Finlay used his foot nudge Hareth awake. Hareth turned over, muttering, and Finlay kicked him again. Bleary eyed, Hareth struggled up enough to rest on both elbows. Finger to his lips, Finlay nodded in the direction of the fire.

The crewmen had returned Conn's greeting, and gestured to the fire. Sorchand tore an angry bite out of his food, and did not speak. Conn picked up the iron skillet, helped himself and offered the skillet to the fire.

Finlay spoke softly. "We are going to have trouble with Sorchand."

Hareth wrinkled his brow. "Was there ever a time when we did we not have trouble with Sorchand?" He stared across the grass. "I thought he liked the lad?"

"He's jealous. He wants Eba all to himself, and Conn made it obvious yesterday to anyone who has eyes to see that he has joined us because of the girl."

Hareth's bearded face was expressionless. His fingertips raked and scratched beneath his jaw. "They can't both have her. I think I'll have a shave. Beard's always itch. Will there be any hot water, do you think?"

Finlay shrugged. His own beard was two days old but no trouble to him. He squinted across at his friend. "Check for fleas," he said. "And sheep ticks, while you're at it. I would have thought," he added, frowning, "that Domnall's friend Leod was the man in the running for the girl. Didn't he say he had always expected to marry her after his wife died? He was just waiting for her to grow up?"

Hareth nodded, yawned and combed his fingers through his beard.

"Tell Domnall to check on Leod today. Every time I looked at him yesterday he was asleep, and he has a dazed look about him I don't like."

Around them men stirred, pushed back their blankets and got up. Monks clattered back and forth between the church and the dormitories in sturdy leather sandals, their long dark robes flapping about bare ankles.

Hareth rolled to his knees. "Perhaps Leod's changed his mind now. It's not every man who will take a girl who has been raped."

Finlay rolled his blanket and paused with the leather strap in his hand. "She may even be pregnant."

"She was only with Aralt a few days."

"Sometimes that's all it takes."

A spark of mischief appeared in Hareth's grey eyes. "Depends how keen he was. The girl has the looks."

Finlay pulled the strap tight around his blanket. "Is a man keen who pays silver for a girl he's already had? He was keen alright."

"You don't think..." Hareth hesitated and then answered himself. "No. He wouldn't come after her." He looked across at Finlay. "Would he?"

"Ah, White Christ! I hope not. We have enough trouble already." A bell rang somewhere, a persistent silvery chime on the clear morning air and every monk headed back to the church. "He would have cause, though. He has lost both her and the silver he paid Domnall."

* * * *

Eba woke refreshed after a second night's sound sleep and padded barefoot across the sandy stone floor to the door of her cell. As she expected, her brother had guarded her door. He had snored for a long time last night, but after so many nights filled with the snorting, snoring and other animal sounds of so many men, the relative silence had been a blessed relief.

Domnall was still there; his head tilted back against the wall, air purring through his open mouth and a rough blanket clutched to his midriff. An impish smile crossed Eba's face, and a warm feeling flooded through her. She bent and shook him.

His eyes snapped open, already focussed and sharp, and a slow smile worked its way down to his mouth. His arm came up and he hugged her close. "Still feeling sick?"

She shook her head. "I feel very well." Her lids hid her eyes for a moment, and then she gulped and spoke before she changed her mind. "Thank you for coming to find me. I don't deserve it. I know I've been nothing but a trouble to you."

He grinned. "An expensive trouble, too."

Eba bit her lower lip and looked contrite. Domnall relented. "It's alright. Aralt paid me, remember?" He frowned. "I suppose I should return his silver, since I now have you back. He sailed with Sitric, didn't he?"

Eba nodded. "He might not come back. Then you may as well keep his money, for he had no one else to leave it to."

Sister and brother stared at each other for several moments. She knew what he was thinking. "He should pay,

Domnall. He gave me no choice. He took me against my wishes."

Domnall groaned, and hugged her close. "That's no way to find out about how it is with a man and a woman. Did he hurt you?"

Her head moved slowly against his chest. With her face hidden, Eba answered him in a way she would not have done if they had been face to face. "I talked to a woman there, who said it always hurts the first time. He made me sore. She gave me some ointment and it helped a little. But he didn't beat me, and he kept the other men away from me. He fed me. He even promised to buy me a blue dress."

He rocked her in his arms, a frown etched deep into his brow. Domnall was not an imaginative man; neither was he one who could easily articulate the feelings of relief and anger that tumbled around in his brain. "If ... Eba, if..." he began, and shook his head. "Why didn't you wait at Inverness? Did you believe I wouldn't come for you?"

Tears stung her eyes and she tightened her arms around him. "I didn't know what you would do. I didn't know if you could raise the money to pay off the fine, or if you would risk putting yourself in the King's hands."

Domnall drew her up to stand beside him. The monks were chanting in church and the abbey walls gave them privacy. Domnall reached a blunt finger to block the single tear tracing its stubborn way down her cheek. "The fine wasn't too high," he said. "The cattle were all returned, and it wasn't me who killed the shepherd. No one knew who had killed him or if they did, no one was telling. It was the weather held me

back." He shook his head. "You could have avoided all this, Eba."

"But if you hadn't come for me I had no idea what the King would have done with me. He might have married me off to an ugly old man or thrown me in prison or ... I had to do something, Domnall. I couldn't just sit there."

His smile was one sided, but it was a smile. "So you talked two lads into running away with you. I suppose you know what risks you ran there, too? Self-reliant little Eba," he said dryly. "You got yourself out of one predicament and straight into a worse one. Did you ever stop to think? What if one or both of the lads had got amorous? What if the Viking leader hadn't wanted to save you for his son? What if he'd used you as the ship's whore and then tossed you overboard?"

Her nose turned red and tears threatened. "I know! I know! And I'm to blame for one of those boys being killed. You are right, I know. I should have stayed and waited for you."

Surprised at the violence of her reaction, Domnall decided enough was enough. Heaven knew what torments she had been through and here he was adding to it. He put his arm around her shoulder and turned her towards the sunlight shining through the arch at the end of the passageway.

"Well, the lad isn't dead, you know. Who do you think put us on your trail?" He grinned at her expression. "He's alive, and still in Bundalloch unless he's gone back to Inverness. You'll see him tomorrow."

"Oh, Domnall!" She pushed her arm through his and together they walked under the arch. The smell of frying ham

drifted from the crewmen's campfires. Eba blew her nose, wiped her eyes and slipped stray strands of hair behind her ears. "Then we are all going to survive." Her voice was light. "All of us, and I couldn't be happier! Where's Leod, do you think?"

"Oh, you'll find him soon enough." Domnall didn't want to deflate her happiness so soon by telling her his fears for Leod. "Let's get some breakfast."

Conn and Sorchand rose to their feet at the same time, and walked towards Eba and her brother. Sorchand's scowl increased. He suggested less than politely that Conn should turn around and walk away. Conn ignored him.

Domnall kept his hand on his sister's shoulder and watched the new lad's reaction. Conn was tall, and heavier than Sorchand, yet he could not be more than a year or two his senior. His broad, pleasant face held nothing but calm anticipation, where as Sorchand's expression grew fiercer by the heartbeat.

Conn looked only mildly affronted when Sorchand's shoulder barged him to one side. "Get back to the fire. I don't want you here."

Eba heard the venomous undertone, gasped and glanced up at her brother. Domnall continued to watch the two young men. Conn quickly recovered his balance, turned and met Sorchand's hot blue stare. "That's as may be, friend. But I'm sure the young lady has time enough for the both of us."

"You didn't hear me," Sorchand hissed. He stopped walking. "I told you to go. Go back to Dublin."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because you shouldn't be here."

"And why should I not be here?"

Sorchand's gaze flicked irritably to the girl and back again.

"She is my girl. Go away."

Conn laughed and a long lock of hair fell over his brow.

"The lady will soon let us know which of us she prefers."

Sorchand, his freckled face pink with temper, grasped Conn's arm, hauled him back and swung a punch at his jaw.

In one sweet movement, Conn ducked and pushed, his full body weight rolling forward at Sorchand's shoulder. Sorchand staggered, one arm flailing for balance, stumbled and pitched forward to the ground.

Domnall snorted with laughter and Eba clapped a hand to her mouth. Some things never seemed to change when Sorchand was around.

Chapter 31

Finlay stood bareheaded in the sunshine and absorbed the peace and sanctity of the place. Grass and rocks led his eye to where turquoise water flowed over white sand, and out beyond to the low hills of Mull and the higher hills of the mainland. Rada would like it. At the thought of her, his heart twisted and an ache of longing shot through him. He had been away far too long.

Many Kings of Alba had been carried in coffins along that ancient track to the burial ground, and at the thought the hairs prickled and lifted at the back of Finlay's neck. In years to come he might be carried to his grave in this place.

The Irish priests had built their monastery of wood, wattle and daub, and time and again the Viking raiders had burned it down to get at the treasures of gold and silver within: the basins, goblets, chalices and crucifixes; psalters that had taken many months of a man's life to write, to bind, gild and decorate with jewelled clasps. The Vikings took the jewels and the gold and tossed the writings on the fire.

They said the island was safe from raiders now, because St Oran had consented to be buried alive beneath the new stone church walls to prevent them from ever falling down. In return, the place was dedicated to his memory, but it didn't seem like a very good bargain to Finlay of Alba. Hareth came to stand beside him, and reluctantly, Finlay dragged his thoughts back to the matter in hand.

"Wherever this girl is, fights break out," Hareth said. "It's a good thing neither of them is wearing swords."

"Daggers can be lethal enough. Even fists, come to that."

Sorchand rolled to his feet, ran lightly forward, his red hair flashing in the sun and barged Conn off course. Because it was unexpected, and because one leg was less than sound, Conn stumbled awkwardly. Eba stopped laughing, and Domnall pulled her behind him and scowled at the two youths. Conn, his expression less than pleasant, faced Sorchand. "Are you mad?"

"I told you to stay away!" Sorchand's fists half curled in front of his chest and he danced from foot to foot in front of Conn.

Finlay inhaled sharply. "Sorchand!"

The redhead hesitated, met Finlay's stare and picked his way over the grass. He came to a halt two paces away with insolence lurking in his deep set eyes.

"There will be no fighting," Finlay said brusquely.

"That girl is mine!" Sorchand snarled, and turned as if to walk away.

Finlay took a swift pace forward, grasped Sorchand by the shoulder and flung him back with such force the youth landed knee and shoulder on the grass. "Do that again and I'll have you whipped," Finlay snapped.

Sorchand got to his feet. One hand cradled his upper arm and shoulder. The insolence in his eyes turned to dislike, but he said nothing.

"You have violated just about every instinct of courtesy to a stranger."

"I want Eba for my wife and I won't give up."

Finlay's black brows lifted. "Then behave in a manner that might persuade her to accept you."

Sorchand turned back to Finlay so quickly his overgrown carrot curls bounced. "Of course she'll accept me."

"Remember who I am," Finlay of Alba said coldly. Sorchand blinked, opened his mouth and shut it again. Suddenly uncomfortable, he met and was unable to sustain the King's glare.

"The girl has more than one suitor," Finlay snapped. "She may choose where she will."

"But I rule Angus!" Sorchand's head lifted at once. "She will not get another offer as good. Sir." The last word came as an afterthought, but it came.

Finlay's mouth curled. "She may have different criteria to you. Go away and think about it."

* * * *

Domnall had found the whole thing amusing and said so, in accents that mimicked old Fergus, the byre man in Bundalloch. "Your latest suitor is bonny wee fighter, and he'll be an even better bonny wee fighter when his leg is healed." He leaned a negligent shoulder against the huge stone cross and smiled benevolently when Eba asked Conn why he had left Dublin.

The confrontation between Conn and Sorchand had stirred strange feelings that puzzled her until she remembered Annikki's hall one night and an image of Conn's lissom, muscled back and gleaming brown shoulders strayed into her mind. Inexplicably, she blushed.

"I should have thought it obvious." Conn flicked his hair back and glanced warily at Domnall. "If your brother has no objection, I should like to have you for my wife."

The flush deepened along Eba's cheekbones. She looked at her brother, who cleared his throat in the unexpected silence. Domnall appeared to think about it for a long moment. "I don't know of any objections, but I have a question or two," he said at last, eyeing the younger man. "Will you live in Bundalloch, or Dublin?"

Eba gasped, and concern filled her face. She had no wish to live in Dublin. Conn smiled. "I haven't made any firm decision."

Another thought struck Eba. "Does Annikki ... do your parents know what you're doing?"

Conn looked at the grass at his feet, and the long hank of hair flopped over his brow. "I told them just before I left. I think ... my mother suspected I held back because of Kimi. While Kimi was alive I could not interfere, otherwise Torquil would have been angry. But once they were both dead, I could ask and be received."

"But Conn, you know better than anyone what happened to me in Dublin. You know exactly what happened. Aralt, and..."

Conn nodded, his unremarkable face both gentle and kind. "I know, and I also know none of it was your choice, and you had no escape. I also realize you may very well be carrying Aralt's child. Or Kimi's child."

Eba stared at him, stricken. So there it was. Someone had said it out loud, at last. The thing she had been trying to blot

out of her mind as if the possibility did not and could not exist. Eba swallowed hard, jammed her fingers together across her midriff and blurted, "It couldn't be Kimi's. We didn't—" Eba decided to take a chance. "Conn, I would want to live in Bundalloch. Dublin has no happy memories for me."

"If we visit my parents once in a while, I don't mind."

Domnall looked from Eba's rosy face to Conn's vivid blue eyes. "I can't see Eba wanting to go sailing too often," he said gently.

* * * *

The *Shadow Wolf* left Mull behind, sailed past Ardnamurchan Point, and up the Sound of Sleat towards the entry for Bundalloch. After the sea room behind them, the land crowded in on every side and the dark, narrow waters, brown with peat and seaweed, looked menacing indeed. Domnall felt an odd leap of the heart when he recognized the shape of the Cuillin hills and Beinn Sgritheall to the east, and bellowed at Leod. "We're almost home. Come and look."

Leod grunted, but got to his feet and stumbled across to join Domnall at the rail. He stared around. "That's Kyle Rhea ahead?"

"It is. Are you not glad to be home?"

"Yes," Leod said without inflexion. His skin was pallid, and the shadows were heavy about his eyes.

"What's the matter? You've been asleep for days and we've not had a cheep out of you since we left Dublin."

Leod grasped the rail to keep himself from falling, though the ship was steady in the water. "I feel sick most of the

time," he said bleakly. "And I've felt it ever since the fight on the quayside."

"Did you take a blow to the head?"

Leod nodded, and wished he hadn't. He swayed and gripped the gunwale tighter. He felt Domnall's hand on his shoulder, and brushed it off. "Look at me," Domnall said.

"Why?"

"Because I asked and because you are my friend."

Leod heard the warmth in Domnall's voice and did not resist. Domnall checked Leod's eyes, and then checked again, but it was not a trick of light. The pupil of one eye was larger than the other. He kept his expression neutral. "You don't look very good."

"I told you I didn't feel well." There was very little bite in Leod's tone. "I'm going back to sleep."

Domnall watched Leod stumble back to his corner. He had seen men like this before, and always the cause was a blow to the head. Some recovered within hours, some within days, others took weeks; and in at least one case he remembered from his childhood, the man had never regained normality.

He looked across at his sister. Eba occupied the most comfortable position on the ship and slept as much as she could, but for a different reason. Shielded from both wind and flying spray in the canopied space amidships, a metal basin was never far from her side.

He wondered if Leod would recover soon enough to do anything at all about the girl, and sighed. He had assumed for quite some time Leod and Eba would marry and they would all live in Bundalloch; but if Leod didn't wake up to what was

happening, Conn was going to take the girl from under his nose—if Sorchand let him.

Domnall woke his sister as they turned into Loch Long and stood by her side as the *Wolf* sailed them home on the calm flooding tide. As the familiar hills and slopes rolled into view he saw tears sparkle on her lashes. He clasped her close to his side. He thought he knew how she felt, and the reason. "How many times did you think you'd never see this again?"

"Oh! I thought a thousand times I'd never see it again! And I longed to be back among the hills." She dashed the flat of her palm across both cheeks. "Now I'm back I never want to leave again."

Domnall looked thoughtful. "I thought ... I heard you found Inverness very much to your liking?"

"I did like it," she admitted. "All the people, and the music ... it was just the same as here, but more of it. Do you know," she added in some surprise, "I don't think I have sung one song since I left Inverness."

Domnall squeezed her shoulder. "Well, you can start singing again now."

Eba said nothing. Her brother looked down at her still face. "If you settled with Sorchand, you could live at Inverness."

Eba sucked her lower lip. "Do you think so? He's never offered."

"And why do you think he was longing to beat the daylights out of Conn? Because he didn't like the way he cooked the ham?"

Eba shrugged. "I don't know. Sometimes he's very strange. He used to fight Comgell for little reason."

"And if he offers for you, will you accept him?" His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Since it is me they must ask, I think I ought to know your preferences."

Eba wasn't sure if he was laughing at her or not. "You know, before all this began Leod suggested I should ask you for a list of suitable suitors...." She broke off and peered around the ship. "Where is Leod? I haven't seen him for ages."

"Ah, I think Leod is not very well. He took a blow to the head on the quayside and he's been asleep almost ever since. You won't get much sense out of him for a day or two."

"Oh."

"You may have only two suitors instead of three."

Chapter 32

Eba looked at the hillsides gliding past, her face expressionless. After a little while, she turned to her brother. "May I not just stay at home, and be your sister, just as we were before all this happened? There have been so many dangers, so many new things. I don't think I want to get married just now."

The ship turned towards the jetty and the crew moved about behind them. Domnall stared ahead. "The King wishes it. I thought you might prefer a swift marriage. There would be some merit in the idea." His glance dropped to her slender waist.

"Oh, I see," she said. "I'm to be married off in case I'm carrying a child?"

Her brother shrugged. "If you married at once, they would never know the child was not your husband's."

"Neither would he. Neither would I."

The jetty loomed closer. Eba's mouth set in the firm line Domnall knew of old. He stared at Bundalloch and suddenly the straggle of cabins seemed mediocre, even pathetic after the streets of Dublin. Even the hall house, which had always seemed so grand, now seemed smaller than Conn's home and much smaller than Marjatta and Torquil's. Privately he wondered how Eba would cope with Bundalloch after seeing what Dublin could offer.

"It might be a good thing, for the child would seem to be...."

"My husband's?" Eba clutched the rail and glared at him as they nosed into the jetty. "So we'd start off with a lie. A good beginning, do you think?"

Exasperated, he glared at her. "Eba, be sensible. You have to put this behind you, and forget it, if you can. Do you think this sort of thing never happens?" He ignored the curl of her lip and ploughed on. "It might be best. It will be your child, after all, and you will grow to love it. If your husband thinks of it as his child, he will love it, too. Or at least he won't hate it."

Wide eyed, she stared at him. "Could you? Could you marry a pregnant woman and accept the child as yours? I'll bet you a calf to a comb you couldn't."

"I don't know." He looked at her, his blue eyes serious. "But I think Conn could."

The gangway straddled the space between the ship and the jetty and they were home. Everyone in Bundalloch had flocked to the jetty to watch the great longship sail in and Eba and Domnall accepted greetings and good wishes in plenty and then set out for the hall-house, still arguing in an undertone until Domnall realized he was remiss in his duties as host, and hurried back to escort the King. Eba scowled and stumped along behind them.

Sorchand leapt off the ship, saw Domnall was engaged with the King, ran to Eba's side and bent to peck her cheek. "I want to marry you," he said, by way of opening the conversation. He smiled, and was surprised when the girl drew back, frowning. He seized her hand and carried it to his lips.

"Don't, Sorchand!"

He dropped her hand. "Sorry," he said, eyeing her cautiously. "I thought you liked me?"

Eba made a noise that was almost a snort and then drew a deep breath. She gave him the full benefit of her smile. "I do, of course." Her eyes met his briefly before she walked forward again.

Sorchand frowned. He was not at his best, but he was unaware of it. His tunic was grubby, he was dirty, his beard half grown; his overlong carrot curls provided a blaze of color in the dun and green landscape, and tumbled over his brow and dipped to meet his sharp boned nose. "Well, then, why are you acting so coy?"

"Coy!"

Sorchand walked on a pace before he realized she had stopped. He turned back. Eba's mouth had somehow pinched together and her blue eyes sparkled; she took a quick stride and jabbed a forceful finger into his chest. "Just you listen to me, you cockscomb, you!"

Some of the crew heard it and grinned without troubling to hide it.

Finlay heard it too; he glanced round, and then resumed his conversation with Domnall, who was doing his best to ignore the argument boiling up behind him. His sister's voice, clear as a bell, berated Sorchand while Domnall, the King and most of the crew listened.

"You let me think you knew the route to Bundalloch but you didn't! You lazed about in the Dublin slave market while I

was bandied around like a prize heifer! Why didn't you rescue me?"

Sorchand backed, his large hands outspread in the air before him. "I, er ... I.... "He remembered how he had spent his time in the slave market, and blushed. His freckles stood out in dark blotches against carmine skin.

"Well?"

He made the mistake of shrugging. Before he could open his mouth to say a word, Eba slapped his chest. He backed away. She moved forward, and he retreated. "Oh, silent now, I see. Comgell almost got killed and the Vikings stole us both, but what happened?" She looked furious. "You spent all the time in the slave market, sitting around on your backside! Do you even know what happened to me, Sorchand? Do you know? Has anyone told you? Have you ever thought to ask?"

He shook his head, speechless, his eyes riveted on her face.

"Well, let me inform you someone tried to drown me! I was attacked several times, married against my will, spent a night out on the hill while my bridegroom was decapitated, and then walked several long and dismal miles back into Dublin through a rainstorm the like of which you've never even seen and then a passing stranger raped me and made me his whore!"

Sorchand stood there with his mouth open. The breath shuddered in and out of Eba's lungs while he stared at her, unsure how much of it was real and how much was exaggeration.

Domnall stole a glance at the man beside him and was more than a little surprised to see the King of Alba struggling to hide a smile. It made Domnall realize it was a long time since he had seen Finlay of Alba smile. They both turned back at the same moment and saw Sorchand still rooted to the spot, his mouth open.

Eba waited, then swung round and strode past her brother, her long plait swaying behind her as she headed for the hall-house.

* * * *

Bundalloch folk were happy to see the young lady back even if she was in a tearing temper and banged through the hall and out again without pausing to say a word to anyone. She crashed into the small wooden hut so suddenly she startled the young boy tending the fire and he dropped the hot stone from the tongs before it reached the barrel.

He retrieved it, blushing to the tips of his ears, and hurriedly dropped the stone into the water. Eba tested the temperature with a finger, thanked him and dismissed him. The door banged behind him. She stared around the cabin as if seeing it for the first time and laid a wondering hand on the rim of the huge oaken barrel. Here she could bathe in privacy and indulge herself in the warm water as long as she wished. She turned to the row of pots and beakers on the shelf and selected her favourite, sniffed it and tilted the jar over the steaming water. Eba shut her eyes and inhaled slowly.

The little cabin was quiet and still. Eba shed her clothes and worn boots, climbed into the barrel and settled herself,

with a groan of pure contentment, on the small wooden shelf. She leaned back, remembering to keep her feet off the hot stones on the bottom of the barrel.

The perfumed steam hovered in the air. The nearby fire provided both heat and light, and Eba soaked away the stale sweat and grime, added another hot stone from the fire when the water temperature dropped, and slowly relaxed. She had been rescued.

Eba thought of kind, sweet Rhosyn, who might be in Waterford, struggling to please new masters. No one had ever rescued Rhosyn. Eba frowned. Even Conn seemed unconcerned over the girl's fate. It was a sobering thought.

Eba climbed out of the bath, wrapped herself in a drying cloth and padded back to her own room above the barn where her maid was waiting to towel her long hair dry. A fleeting memory of Aralt flicked across her mind and suddenly the tension was back in her limbs. Frowning, she selected the gown that had been her favourite and was a little surprised to find it tight in some places and slack in others. She must have grown a little during the last few weeks. She smoothed her palms down her flanks, and decided the extra roundness of bosom and hip was an improvement.

As a suitor who had declared his interest, Conn was allowed to sit next to Eba during the evening. As a suitor who had offered but was out of favor, Sorchand could only glower from the other side of the hearth. Leod, the third and long time suitor, had pleaded a headache and retired to his bed the moment they landed.

Finlay sat in the thane's big chair, with Hareth and Domnall on either side of him. He leaned towards Hareth. "I want to leave for Inverness at first light. I'll ride inland, and let the master sail the ship round to Inverness."

"I'll make sure everything is ready. I thought ... you wanted to see the girl married off before you go?"

"Yes, I do. She can be wed at first light. I've had more than enough trouble over that young lady. But I want to be back in Inverness tomorrow," Finlay repeated firmly.

"There's nothing wrong at Inverness," Hareth said. "We'd have heard right away."

"White Christ! Does there have to be something wrong before I can go home?"

"I just thought you wanted—"

"I don't care who she marries, but Sorchand is leaving with us."

Hareth cocked an eyebrow. "Oh. Right. Does he know, or shall I tell him?"

Finlay's brows knitted together across his nose. "Yes, tell him now. It'll give him time to get used to the idea."

Hareth got up, hesitated and looked down at Finlay's frowning, bearded face. "I'm sure Rada will be as anxious to see you as you are to see her." He turned and strode off. Finlay's head whipped round, a retort on his lips; but Hareth was already out of earshot.

Firelight flickered on the gold embroidery at the neck and sleeve bands of Eba's long russet gown as she peered in first one direction and then another. She turned to her brother.

"Are there no festivities tonight? No games? No challenges? We are very sorry company."

"What would you like? Music, dancing?"

"I don't know. But something, please, before the King thinks we are all dull as ditch water."

Domnall glanced at the King, who sat alone, staring into the fire. "I don't suppose he will notice," he said, and lifted his ale beaker.

Sorchand, on the other side of the hearth, had heard enough to know Eba was bored. He got to his feet and in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, said "Let's have a competition."

Around the room, people turned, smiling. Hareth, already on his feet and heading towards Sorchand, turned the corner of the firepit and walked on just as the youth flung his arms wide and addressed the room again. "We have rescued the sister of your lord from Viking raiders," he declared. "We should be celebrating! We have ale, we will eat well in a little while and all we need now is amusement. I should be glad to exchange a bout or two with our guest."

He didn't mean the King, or Hareth. His eye swung to the man at Eba's side; the fair-haired, blue-eyed young Viking who had been introduced to everyone as Conn Arnesson of Dublin. Conn lowered his beaker and allowed his blue gaze to pass over everyone until it came to rest on Eba. "Delighted," he said, and a roar of approval burst out round the hall.

Eba smiled and clapped her palms together in excited anticipation. Domnall, in a clean tunic and breeches, glanced at her. "Well, you've got what you wanted."

"I can't imagine what you mean," she said, refusing to meet his eye.

It didn't take long to push stools and tables out of the way and mark out a square on the floor. Hareth reached Sorchand, spoke softly in his ear, and Sorchand shot a glance of acute dislike at Finlay of Alba.

Eba turned sparkling eyes on Conn. "A bout or two? What will it be?"

Conn shrugged. "Fists, I should think. Or wrestling, perhaps."

Eba wriggled on her seat and then remembered she should appear composed and serene. "Are you good at such things? Is your leg healed?"

Conn smiled. It started deep down in his blue eyes and transformed his plain ordinary face into something quite different. "I can hold my own with most men." The warm look in his eyes increased. "Don't worry about me. The leg is almost as good as new. I shall be fine."

Color flooded through Eba's fine skin, and Conn saw it, rose to his feet and grazed her cheek with the back of his fingers. It was a brief gesture, as light as the flick of a butterfly wing, but the color in her cheeks intensified and she could think of nothing to say. He spoke to her brother, nodded at whatever was suggested and hauled his tunic over his head.

Sorchand was already in the square, stripped to the waist, his white skin gleaming in the soft light of the lamps. He ran a swift, assessing glance over Conn's physique, saw the strapping of muscle between head and shoulder, the

definition of the pectoral muscles and felt the first frisson of doubt. Conn was older and certainly a stone heavier.

Domnall, as host, relieved them both of their weapons, and placed them on the hearthstone by the King's feet. With a hand on each man's shoulder he declared the fight to be an exhibition bout only, and the contestants grinned and nodded to show they understood. They faced each other across a square perhaps four paces by four, and the occupants of the hall crowded around to watch.

Eba had a splendid view of the two young men in the ring. She studied Sorchand curiously, for the glamour that had first attracted her was still there; but she knew him now, the glamour had disappeared somewhere on the ride across Alba and she wanted Conn to win.

Bars of light and shadow moved across Conn's midriff as he breathed, and his eyes never left his opponent. Despite his assurances to Eba, he knew his leg was still weak, but he was confident he could cope. Sorchand lunged, and Conn twisted aside like a dancer.

Sorchand punched Conn's shoulder and almost overbalanced, for Conn, happily, was almost out of reach. Another blow followed, but Conn swayed aside and the fist met empty air. They circled again. The long lock of hair flopped over Conn's brow and obscured his vision just long enough for his opponent to dart forward, and land a punch to the belly. The redhead was unprepared for the large hand that clamped over his arm, spun him round, flung him to the floor and sat on him.

The onlookers laughed at Sorchand's shocked expression, and bawled at him to get up. Domnall called, "First fall to Conn Arnesson." The two men circled again. This time it was Conn who lunged forward, got both arms around Sorchand's chest and prepared to squeeze. Sorchand glared wide-eyed at the rafters; he had the use of his arms from the elbow down, and he groped behind and between their bodies. By the time the pressure on his lungs had turned his face puce, he found the spot he wanted, and gripped hard.

Conn swore, let go and backed away, his face twisted. He mimicked walking cross legged for a few tottering steps. Sorchand scowled, and rushed forward. His skull caught Conn in the stomach, and drove him backwards. Conn fell to the floor, dragged Sorchand with him, and received him with the sole of one booted foot. Conn's good leg bent and thrust once and Sorchand flew to the other side of the square and landed heavily.

Domnall cried, "Second fall to Conn Arnesson."

Sorchand got to his feet. Conn waited for him. Someone had thrown Conn a leather thong, and he had tied it about his brow to hold the long lock of hair in place. "Now I can see," he said, smiling. Sorchand charged forward, Conn stuck out an arm and the jolt travelled all the way back to his shoulder, but Sorchand stopped dead. He lunged for one of Conn's boots, got a grip and jerked hard.

Eba's hands flew to her face, for it was Conn's injured leg that took his weight. He tried to shake Sorchand loose, twisted, jerked his foot and when the redhead hung on, did the only thing he could: he launched his weight forward.

Sorchand staggered back, let go and they stood chest to chest, and breathed each other's air.

Sorchand glared at his opponent, lips drawn back from his teeth. Sweat gleamed on his shoulders and his eyes blazed. Conn put up both hands, palm out, smiled and shook his head. "Steady, friend," he said softly. "It's an exhibition fight. Save your energy for the next opponent." Exhibition bouts were old and honored traditions among warriors. It was excellent training for the younger men, entertainment for everyone and never, ever malicious.

At the edge of the square Finlay of Alba saw the fury on the redhead's face and shifted in his chair. He knew Sorchand's temper. He did not hear Conn's words, or the response Sorchand made, but he saw Conn's face change and saw him duck and move away from a punch that would have broken his jaw if it had landed. The blows kept coming. Conn danced aside, blocked the blows and waited his opportunity.

Sorchand was not prepared to wait. He lunged to one side, grasped his dagger from the hearthstone in front of the chair vacated by Finlay of Alba and turned on Conn. The good-humored comment and ribaldry around them stopped as if a door had shut.

"Damnation!" Finlay shot to his feet, but stayed where he was. Domnall and Hareth, on their feet beside him, waited, poised for whatever happened next. By the time they could have overpowered Sorchand, he could have made the killing stroke. Eba shoved her clasped hands between her knees, and gripped them together till it hurt.

Conn stood motionless, his steady gaze on the young man crouched in front of him who moved his knife gently from side to side.

The blade flashed silver and pink and gold in the lamplight. "Come on, then. Let's see you fight now." Sorchand's dislike for the other man was plain, and he totally disregarded the fact his opponent was unarmed.

Conn watched the blade. Sorchand's eyeballs flicked towards Eba, and back to Conn. "Swear to me you'll leave the girl alone, you won't marry her."

Conn shook his head slowly.

"Swear!" Sorchand did not trouble to keep his voice down.

Again, Conn shook his head, gauged his opponent and launched forward. He grasped Sorchand's dagger wrist and banged it down onto his raised knee. The dagger fell to the ground and the arm hung useless, but Conn didn't hesitate. He hit him just where he intended and Sorchand's jaw snapped shut under his fist.

* * * *

Domnall, his face grave, crossed the hall to the bench where Eba sat alone, her feet curled beneath her and her head resting against the wall. Her eyes followed him to her side, and as he sat, she asked, "What news? What has happened?"

"Sorchand is to spend the night locked in the grain store. The King bawled him out and left him to consider his sins." He glanced sideways at her worried face. "There is old business between him and the King."

"I heard Finlay killed his father in battle," Eba admitted. "Sorchand caused an upset that almost cost Finlay the kingship, because of it. Everyone thought Sorchand would get over his grief, and was patient. But it's nearly a year now, and everyone's patience is running thin, so he'd better buck up his ideas, especially around the King."

"I remember it," Domnall said. "I was there when it happened. He is still one of your suitors, you know. He was trying to get Conn to swear he wouldn't marry you."

In her mind's eye Eba saw another, larger hall, where Sorchand had swaggered about with a group of young men his own age. "Domnall, do you like him?"

"No. Do you?"

A small smile slipped across her face and was gone. "You would not like him as a brother, then?"

"Indeed not." Domnall's voice was curt. "But it isn't me who might marry him. He has vast lands over on the other side of Alba. You could do worse. You'd be well provided for, and probably you'd live at court most of the time."

Eba's head rolled around to face her brother. "You think it would be a good match?"

Domnall's light brown curls trembled on his brow as he shook his head. "I hardly know him. You know him better, and must decide for yourself. The King has ordered that you marry tomorrow." He looked up and met her surprised gaze. "Did you think he would change his mind? You have three suitors: Sorchand of Angus, Leod and Conn. Sorchand has the highest rank. Leod you have known all your life. Conn is a

stranger to us all. I don't know how you will choose, but choose you must. He wants you settled."

"But why such haste? Ah, I see ... because I might be carrying a child?" she said guardedly. "Surely a few days would not matter?"

Domnall shook his head. "Not just that; he wants you married. He says you cause trouble, and he won't change his mind."

Eba pouted, and unwillingly considered her three suitors. A thought struck her. "Leod ... Domnall, should I forget Leod?"

Her brother clasped his fingers and brought them to his mouth. "Leod is still not well. I've seen it before when a man takes a blow to the head and wakes up muddled and confused. I don't know how long it will take before Leod is himself again. I'm sorry," he said, and laid his large square hand over hers.

"But he will get well? Domnall, he will, won't he?"

"I hope so," he said soberly. "But I can't tell you how long it will take. I know we all had a fine dream, that you and he would marry and we'd all live happily together ever after. But really, it was nothing more than a dream, Eba."

Chapter 33

Finlay rose at first light, attended a very brief ceremony that made Conn Arnesson and Eba man and wife, and bid them good luck and farewell in the same breath. Keen to reach Inverness and his Queen by the end of the day, he left his ship lazing on the loch. The master had orders to sail to Inverness within the week. Then, suddenly light of heart, Finlay set off for the east coast with Hareth at his side and a sullen bad tempered Sorchand riding with his escort.

The bride and her groom stood on the jetty as the sun climbed steadily over the horizon and warmed the two young people as they watched the party wind slowly around the head of the loch. The brown water slapped against the stones of the jetty, a blackbird sang from the hazel bushes and the good people of Bundalloch had dispersed some time ago. Even the longship was quiet. Conn stood close behind the girl, but did not touch her. He breathed deep of her scent. "Wife, I need to know this place. Won't you walk with me?"

Eba had been certain of her decision last night, but now her stomach rolled with nervous tension. Leod had not welcomed her when she had sought him; he had opened weary eyes, stared at her and said very little; finally she had excused herself and left. It had been like speaking to a stranger. Harder to bear was the fact that it had been like speaking to a stranger who had not the slightest interest in her.

Her brother had been realistic about Conn. "I know he wants you and left Dublin for you. But you don't have to marry him out of gratitude."

Eba had shaken her head. "No, it's more than that. Without him I might still be in Dublin. Besides, I like Conn; I did from the start and I think I will grow to like him much more than I do now."

Domnall tilted his head and looked at her. "Well, thank God you didn't choose Sorchand. He's going to be a very unpleasant young man unless he changes his ways very soon. You are growing up fast, Eba. I always thought it would be Leod, but never mind. Contacts with Dublin will be good for us, too."

Now she felt the weight of her husband's hands on her shoulders, and heard his request. Suddenly uncertain, she looked up at him. She hated having to look up at him, for it made her neck ache. He smiled and Eba offered a wavering smile in return. "Of course I will."

She escorted him around the whole of Bundalloch. She took him into every room, hall, hut, barn, sheep fold, sty and stable until he caught her hand. "Enough! Enough! Show me where we will sleep."

It made her catch her lip between her teeth. It was broad daylight. There was such a long time, surely, until they would have to think of sleep.

Conn noted the hesitation and pressed her hand. "Eba, you have introduced me to every person over the age of ten, and quite a few under the age of ten. You have introduced me to every guard dog, cow, horse, duck and goose in Bundalloch.

The one thing you have not shown me is where I will sleep tonight." His broad boned face looked suddenly wistful. "Must I sleep in the hall with the other men?"

"If you must." The coolness of her tone wiped the smile from his face, and immediately she regretted it. "I have a room above the barn. It is small, and not very clean. You may not like it. But I will show it to you." Her smile was tentative, but when she held out her hand, he took it.

She led him across the stone flags towards the barn and then slowed in puzzlement as Domnall bustled out of the small doorway. He strode across the yard without quite meeting their eyes, and informed them with a grin that he couldn't stop as he was off to check the cattle in the valley.

"Her name is Allasan," Eba said, her gaze following her brother over the meadow towards the pines. "She wouldn't be at all pleased to be referred to as a cow. She lives nearby, and Domnall thinks I'm too young to know of their friendship. You'll meet her this evening."

She was unsure about what might be about to happen next. Memories of Aralt and the painful act that had given Aralt so much pleasure crowded in on her, and she realized her fingers had curled into tight fists at her side. In spite of the sun's warmth, she shivered. "Conn—" She remembered something else, and before she could lose her courage, turned to face him. "Why did you rape Rhosyn?"

Whatever Conn had expected, it certainly wasn't the question she had just asked. He stared at her blankly for the space of several heartbeats, and then said guardedly, "I wouldn't have said it was rape."

Eba pursued it relentlessly. "Did you ask her to sleep with you?"

Conn slowly shook his head. "No. But then, who actually asks a maid to sleep with him?"

"She didn't want to!"

"Well, as I remember, it was one night only, and after a feast. She didn't seem to object. She seemed as keen as I was. What has she said to you?"

"She told me she didn't want to, that you never asked." It occurred to her that Rhosyn had said only that he had never asked. "She was pregnant, Conn! You didn't even know!"

"That's a pity," he said, frowning. "She didn't tell me."

"Why, what would you have done? Married her?"

He shook his head. "No. But I would have taken care of her, and the child."

"Ha! You mean Annikki would have taken care of her!"

"Look, I don't know what you do about this in Alba, but in Dublin we have slaves, and concubines. She was part of the family already, in a way. The men of a household support and feed the household and feel they have the right to use a slave as a bedmate if they want to. If a child comes, the child is brought up as part of the family. The slave and her child have a roof and food in their bellies. What's wrong with that?"

Eba shrugged. "Nothing, I suppose. Is the child a slave too?"

"Not always. It depends on the man. After all, it is his son, too. What happens in Alba?"

Eba realized she didn't know what men like her brother and Leod did about such things. "I don't know. Domnall has

Allasan. I've never seen Leod with—" She broke off. She had seen Leod talk to serving girls, and thought nothing of it. They were always pleased to talk to him. Indeed, they responded with smiles to his dark good looks, and flirted with him. How odd that she had never seen it for what it was before now. Leod probably took serving girls to his bed, and she had never realized it.

Conn pursed his lips. "You have remembered something?"

Color flared in her cheeks, but she refused to say anything.

Conn shrugged, smiled and seemed to consider the subject satisfactorily closed. "This Allasan is your brother's woman? Is she as pretty as you?" He walked forward and ducked beneath the low entrance of the barn.

Eba followed him reluctantly. Anxiety over what was to come drove all thoughts of Rhosyn from her mind. "Oh, yes."

He frowned. "I don't believe you. She too has hair the color of corn?" He looked around at the solid beams and the dark, ribbed roof. The barn was dim and shadowy, and though it was empty of livestock the strong smell of grain and animals curled into the nostrils.

"No, she's a redhead. Her hair is like oak leaves in October. She's pretty."

He glanced at the glimmer of her white face in the gloom. "Does she have eyes like the sky on a summer day? Like yours?"

Eba found a rickety set of stairs, and began to climb. "Yes. She has blue eyes." She reached the top of the ladder and stepped onto the landing, miserably unsure of what might happen next.

"H'mmm." First his head and then the rest of him appeared, drew level and then moved on. It was almost dark beneath the roof thatch, and Conn frowned as he looked around. "Does she have a waist as small as a silver birch?" He turned to her, his hands indicating a waist of impossibly small size.

"No, and neither do I!" A small burble of amusement came from her.

"I'll wager a gold necklace to a grilled herring she does not have lips as soft and pink as you."

"Of course she does! I'm not special. It is you," Eba said, "who has such a smile..."

He waited, but she did not complete the sentence. "What's wrong with my smile? Is it crooked? Have I got meat stuck between my teeth? What? What?"

She glanced at him sideways. "I can't see, but nothing is wrong with it. It makes you handsome, that's all."

"Ah." He leaned a shoulder against a sturdy wooden pillar, and let his eyes travel beyond her. "If only I could believe you. So where is this room?"

"Over there," she said, gathered all her courage and walked round a partition wall with her heart thumping against her ribs. Conn followed her into a small dim room under the eaves, and saw that it stretched the width of the barn. A long wooden chest stood under the shallow slope of the roof where it met the wall, and a small bed filled the central space. A tiny square cut through the wall let in light and fresh air. The space was neat and clean and someone had filled a big jug with a huge clump of rosebay willowherb and yarrow, and a

smaller one with ox-eye daisies. The colors sang through the gloom. Eba stared in amazement. "Why, someone has cleaned it."

"I think we can guess who left the flowers," said Conn, and grinned. "I thought your brother looked a bit sheepish." He moved closer, and drew her against him. Immediately, she stiffened. "Relax, Eba. I'm not going to force you, today or any day." He looked down. "You'll come to me of your own accord, or not at all. The thing is," he said, frowning, "the bed looks a bit on the small side."

Her heart thumped less hard, and found a more normal rhythm. Eba followed his glance. He was right. The bed was small. "Of course, it was built for me. Only for me, I mean." Her eye darted around the dimness. "But look! Over there! Wood," she said. "And someone has stuffed a new mattress." She sniffed the coarse cover. "Heather mixed with straw."

"Your brother has a strange sense of humor," Conn remarked. The words drifted back from the shadows as Conn ran questing fingers over the wood. "Do you think he's left a hammer—yes, he has! And a bag of nails. What a wonderful wedding night he thinks we're going to have."

He looked up, and grimaced; his woebegone expression made Eba snort with laughter. "I'll go and get a lamp."

"Don't bother," Conn said dourly. "He's thought of everything." He waggled a candle in one hand and a holder in the other. He got out his knife, flint, and gathered loose fluff and straw for tinder. He soon had a tiny flame. "Quick, where's the candle?"

The wavering light flared and steadied and their eyes met over it. Eba grinned up at him. "We have some work to do, my lad, and no slacking."

Someone had taken care to cut the few lengths of wood they needed, and it wasn't long before Conn threw the new straw mattress down on the extended bed frame and flung himself down to test it. The frame creaked and he thumped about on it experimentally.

Eba sat warily on her side of the bed. "Did you mean it?"

The creaking stopped. "Yes," he said, without hesitation.

Doubt filled her voice. "Yet you left Dublin because of me?"

"Yes again." His smile reassured her.

"Then I won't deny you," she said. "I just don't know how it will be."

The bed frame creaked as he rolled towards her, and in spite of her good intentions, Eba recoiled. "It will all happen in its own good time," Conn said, retreating. "Do you know if you are carrying a child?"

Startled, she stared at him. Full length on the bed, with one hand propping the weight of his head, the candle flame lit a spark in his blue eyes and glinted on threads of gold in his hair. He had shaved since they arrived in Bundalloch and the line of his jaw was sweet and clear. She shook her head. "No. But I think I told you, if I was, it wasn't, couldn't be, Kimi's child."

A brief smile answered her. "Then I have one thing to be thankful for. Do you want to wait to be sure?"

She opened her mouth, and shut it again, and thought about it. "But ... should I wait? For the child's sake? So it will know it's own father?"

Conn shrugged. "I don't know, but I do know Aralt. If it is his child, and it is a boy, he may want to claim it. Could you part with your child? If we make love soon, he will never know for sure any more than we do. I think for all our sakes, it would be better not to know. It might be better to believe it is ours."

The candle flickered and the scent of the flowers drifted from the corner. Daylight filtered through cracks in the worn timber walls and somewhere above a mouse pattered along a beam and scattered grains and dust on their heads. Eba could not think very clearly, but felt she had somehow reached a decision. Before she could change her mind, or lose her courage, she turned to face her husband.

Chapter 34

He had not moved; he still lay stretched out on the blankets she had found folded beside the new mattress. There was no levity in his heavy gaze.

Eba leaned forward. His eyes followed her, but he did not move. Eba took a breath, leaned closer still and saw his eyes close, waiting; her lips touched his gently. She withdrew, moved forward again, and this time her lips lingered on his. A subtle pressure rewarded her; and for a time she was content. His breathing deepened and warmth rose from him, strong enough to reach her, yet still he moved not so much as a finger to touch her.

Eba lifted her head and looked down. His mouth was full, and pink, with a glimpse of white teeth between. His lids lifted a little and his eyes, the pupils wide and dark, sought hers. "You are warm," she said, unable to stop the smile from that sprang from nowhere.

"You would be warm, if you were me." His voice was little more than a whisper but his lips curled in a half smile.

"I know the smell of you now," she said. "I would recognize you anywhere."

His hand moved and then flopped back as he remembered his promise. His head rolled on the straw pillow, and his lids closed. "I have known your smell, your own perfume, for weeks. I knew it when you lived with us."

"In Dublin? In Annikki's house?"

"In my mother's house. Yes."

"That's a long time ago."

The half smile vanished. "I cannot tell you what a torment it was, to have you ... possibly naked ... and sleeping beneath the same roof."

"Oh. I didn't sleep naked. I kept my chemise on."

"But you will sleep naked in my arms, one day."

His gaze held hers, and his hand moved on the pillow. His hand, palm up, was so much larger, the fingers so much longer than hers. She let the pads of her fingers graze his palm and heard his sudden harsh intake of breath. A flicker of movement ran through him; he closed his eyes and lay still. Heat flooded his skin.

Eba hesitated. She wanted to be a willing participant, and she was drawn to him; yet a fear of hurried roughness lurked at the back of her mind. She did not want her body to refuse Conn, as it had Aralt. While she hesitated, his lids lifted a little. "I can stay like this as long as you want." His tongue touched his lips. He watched her carefully, made a decision and took a quick breath. "But don't you think it might be more fun if you allow me to move?"

There was a challenge there, and humor, as well as a tacit understanding of her very genuine reluctance. A wave of shame flicked across her. She had never thought of herself as a timorous, fearful female, and yet here she was, holding this kind young man on a tight rein. Perhaps an over tight rein. He thought she needed this restraint, but some instinct told her that perhaps she needed help of a more spontaneous and tactile kind.

She swayed forward, and allowed their lips to meet again. Out of nowhere, she heard herself say, "I need you to take off your boots."

Without hesitation, he put the toe of one boot against the heel of the other and dragged it off. He repeated the process. His mouth fluttered against hers as he confirmed, "Both boots off."

"Now your breeches. I'll allow you to use your hands."

She heard a smothered expletive, stifled a brief giggle and felt his muscles tighten beneath her as his hips lifted. Eba kissed him, and tried her very best to distract him, but he managed it, and without breaking contact.

"This isn't fair," he muttered. His eyes were open and stared at the blackness of the rafters so close above their heads.

"Ah, I wondered how long it would be before you decided to whinge."

His eyes flew to hers. "Whinge? Whinge! I was delicately trying to imply it was time you shed something or other. Start with your shoes."

There was something delightful in being told what to do. Eba wriggled. One after the other, her leather shoes dropped to the floor. She gazed at him, and feigned innocence. "What next?"

He thought about it. "Well, I have very little left to remove."

Still he had not touched her. She felt warm and brave. "And I cannot remove anything at all without sitting up."

Their gaze locked and there was silence while they both considered the next move. Eba was suddenly aware that her heart thudded on a deep, steady beat, a new and exciting rhythm. The air sang around her head.

Conn turned a little, and the candle flame struck the blue of his eyes. "I could help, if you would let me use my hands."

Deliberate now, she met his lips. She pressed the tip of her tongue against his mouth, waited and sure enough, his mouth changed under hers and his tongue sought the shape and outline of her mouth. Her heart beat harder, and she lifted her head just enough to say, "You may use your hands."

He didn't cheer, and he didn't grab, as she had feared. Muscles in his arm and shoulders relaxed. He sighed in delight, and slowly ran his palms from her wrists to her shoulders and sought the straps of her gown and over-gown, fingered them loose, found the brooch pins that held her gown together and eased them away while her flesh shivered at the touch of his hand. All the while his mouth greeted her, visited her, entertained and reassured her.

Without quite knowing how she got there, Eba found herself kneeling to face Conn while he raised both garments over her head and her hair swung, loose, silky and incredibly sensual, to the back of her knees. His tunic was the only garment between them, and her questing fingers lifted it higher and higher until he grasped the back collar and hauled it over his head. Eba could not prevent her gaze descending, and saw with a shock how ready he was for her. A thrill of surprised anticipation spiked her innards.

His fingers found her jaw and tipped her face up to his. He burrowed both hands beneath the fall of her hair and eased her towards him. His skin was smooth, his chest was wide and in a sudden rush of giddiness she clutched at his arms, his shoulders and exulted in the hard muscle she found there. She sought his mouth, breathing as if she had been running over the hill, and when Conn slid his palms over her spine, learning and searching every contour, she moaned aloud. "Oh, Conn, please!"

It was no trouble, of course. The way had already been made clear, and Conn did not hesitate. He joined her, and not until the joining was achieved and he was sure she was comfortable did he grip her in a kind of crazed relief, laughing and crying as sensation flooded them both. Panting, he steadied for a moment, and grinned down at her flushed face. "Do I need to ask? I think not, but oh! Are you with me?"

It was going to be all right, and they both knew it.

The End

2006 Jen Black

About the Author

Jen learned to read by following the words her father read to her from her brother's comics *Rover and Eagle*, so she formed a taste for adventurous literature way before going to school! Working with books and information has been a constant all through a long working life, and she lives in Tyne valley in the north east of England, only a stone's throw from the Roman Wall.

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