

ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*

Northman's  
*Passion*

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Northman's Passion

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# *NORTHMAN'S PASSION*

**Kate Hill**

## **Chapter One**

Erik Ice Tooth was accustomed to getting what he wanted. Few men could match him in strength and prowess in battle. Those who valued their lives avoided crossing him for any reason. Though not a cruel master, his punishments for offenses were swift and harsh. He and his brothers, Sigfred and Grim, were favorites of the King and provided him with a wealth of goods from their raiding and trading.

Erik hadn't visited the King for almost two years and decided after his most recent voyage he would personally deliver his goods. He had agreed to take along his young cousin, Thorkel. Though the boy was taller than most men and strong in battle, his clumsiness caused difficulties. It shouldn't have come as a surprise when Thorkel tripped on his way to the King's house and knocked Erik into a pile of manure.

It took all Erik's control not to take a sword to Thorkel then and there.

"Calm yourself," Sigfred said. "I'm sure it's not the first time the King has smelled manure and it won't be the last."

Grumbling, Erik glared at Thorkel and scraped off as much of the stinking mess as he could. Erik worried less about offending the King, who wasn't known for his cleanliness, than about spending half the night in filthy clothes.

"Come on," said Grim. "But keep your distance until you can find a wench to wash your trousers."

Inside the longhouse, Erik approached the King who sat on his place of honor—a carved bench in the center of the room. Erik's annoyance was soon forgotten, replaced by the heady lure of desire. Standing near the bearded, leather-skinned ruler was a stunning black-haired beauty. Usually he preferred robust blonds, but the fire in this woman's dark eyes hinted at a fierce spirit that Erik found most intriguing.

"Erik, it's been a long time. Good to see you," the King said, a rare glint of cheerfulness in his slate-colored eyes. "You have brought me tribute?"

"Furs and other valuables," Erik replied, tearing his gaze from the woman. "All carried in a fine new ship I had built as a gift for you."

The King looked pleased, a faint smile tugging at his solemn mouth. If he noticed the smell lingering from the manure, he gave no indication, nor did the woman beside him. Perhaps the stench wasn't as bad as Erik thought, especially within the smoky confines of the longhouse. Still he would ask one of the serving wenches to wash his clothes and dry them by the fire so they would be clean for the trip home. Later though, when he could lie naked beneath furs to sleep.

"You remember my brothers," Erik said, indicating Sigfred who stood to his left and Grim to his right. Though Erik was exceptionally tall, both his brothers were also above average height. Sigfred was as dark as Erik and built like a bear in early winter while Grim was rangy and lean with flaming red hair and a fiery beard.

"Yes. You and your men have traveled long. Sit. Eat and drink. Choose women to share your ale."

Sigfred made a motion to introduce himself to the black-haired lady, but Erik shoved him aside.

"If the King wanted to introduce his new bride, he would have done so."

The King chuckled, a grating sound, and said, "I didn't think you were given to flattery, Erik. This isn't my wife, but my youngest daughter, Bera."

Bera? Though Erik had never met the girl, he had heard rumors about her and they didn't match this beauty. He'd heard she was plain and pitifully shy. This woman was far from plain and anyone who met his gaze, unfaltering, could not be shy. Even if she was as ugly as the rumors claimed, a woman with this kind of spirit could excite a man as much as a rousing battle. At the moment all Erik could think about was tangling with her lush body beneath a blanket.

Unless she was already spoken for, he didn't doubt he would have her before the night was through. He nearly smiled at the thought of her keeping him warm while his freshly washed clothes dried by the fire. The King liked Erik and wouldn't stand in his way if he wanted the girl.

"Will you drink with me, Bera?" Erik asked without preamble, then glanced at the King. "If your father approves?"

"Of course." The King waved his hand. "Go. Drink. Talk. Enjoy the evening."

Bera looked sharply at her father. "But I have work to do after supper."

"Let the other women do it," ordered the King, tugging her onto the bench near his. "These men are our guests and in need of company. Tonight they are allowed the pleasure of female companionship. Erik, you and your brothers join us at my table."

Erik nodded, his full attention once again focused on Bera. When he sat beside her on the bench, she recoiled, then stood and said, "I'll get you something to drink and eat."

Erik's gaze followed her for a moment. She wasn't especially tall but had full breasts, a narrow waist and hips that were made for a man to grasp while rutting long and hard.

Erik moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, then was distracted when the King called to him.

The King's other daughter, Asgerd, approached with food and ale for Grim. She was even older than Bera and still unmarried, though everyone knew that was because the King favored her. She was the image of her late mother – a tall, beautiful blond with curves men dreamed of. She had numerous offers, but all had been refused.

By the way she hovered around Grim, Erik believed at least one offer wouldn't be refused. Grim had no interest in marriage, however.

The men talked of raids, building ships and forthcoming voyages. Some invited women to share their food. Several times Erik motioned for Bera to sit beside him, but

she stood nearby, serving ale and stew when his bowl and mug ran low, but she neither ate nor drank. This was the first time in what seemed like ages Erik had to relax. The past few years had been an endless journey of battles, raiding and trading.

He allowed the woman to continue refilling his mug and soon he became so relaxed from the ale that he forgot about the stench of his clothes or even impressing the King with stories of his latest adventures.

Bera hovered behind the table until Erik finally turned to her and said, "Woman, will you sit and relax?"

The King growled at his daughter and she dropped onto the bench, her spine stiff and eyes ablaze. He grunted and explained, "She is a strong worker and would make a good wife."

"I mean no insult, but she is a little beyond the marrying age," Erik said.

Bera shot him a look of murder and the King shook his head. "Yes. But she will soon be wed."

Erik felt a pang of regret. "She is betrothed?"

"Not yet, but we have had offers and will decide soon," the King replied.

"I see," Erik said softly, a mad thought turning over in his mind. Bera wasn't the only one past the traditional marrying age. Erik wasn't getting any younger himself. Though still powerful in battle and with many productive years ahead of him, he needed to start thinking seriously of taking a wife.

In truth he hadn't considered settling down until this moment. Something about Bera tugged at his heart as well as his loins. This was the kind of woman he could imagine sharing his duties by day and his bed by night.

He smiled slightly, took a long sip of ale and looked at her. Her dark, gleaming eyes fixed straight ahead and she appeared frozen. Perhaps she was intimidated by his prowess. He often had that effect on women.

After Erik had eaten his fill, he took a mug of ale and rose from the table to find a spot by the fire where he and Bera could get to know each other better.

He grasped her hand and she tried to tug away, but he held her fast. Apparently he'd been wrong about her shyness. Though he found it hard to believe a woman of her years hadn't been with a man before, it was nevertheless a possibility.

"Come." He tugged her toward a fairly secluded corner. Except for the master's bed closet, it was impossible to find an adequately private place for coupling. Usually Erik didn't mind, as long as the joining could be performed quickly and with some discretion. This woman was different, though. He needed to handle her more gently than most. For some strange reason, he wanted to please her.

"No, please," she said, digging her heels into the wooden floor and glancing toward the King. "Father!"

"What's wrong with you, girl?" the King demanded. "At least go and talk to the man."

"But—"

"I said go!" the King roared, flinging an empty bowl in her direction. It didn't strike her, but soared past her shoulder.

Bera jerked a bit, but when she turned to meet Erik's gaze he saw defiance and disgust in her eyes. This puzzled him. Still he knew some women had an aversion to coupling. It seemed Bera was such a woman, but like an untamed horse, with the right handling she would come around. Once gentled, she would no doubt give an unforgettable ride.

Gazing at Bera with her blazing eyes, dark hair and womanly curves, he smiled. She would be worth the wait and effort.

He grasped her upper arm and tugged her across the room, picking up a blanket from one of the sleeping benches.



"Here." He wrapped the blanket around her shoulders then sat on the floor. He offered her a drink, but she turned her face away from the mug, her lip curled in disgust.

"Something wrong with the ale?" he demanded.

"I would rather drink directly from a hog's mouth than put my lips to a cup from which you've sipped."

By her choice of words as well as her tone Bera made certain there would be no mistaking her revulsion. Never in her life had she seen such a filthy, stinking brute as Erik Ice Tooth.

Yes she'd known dirty people before. Not everyone bathed regularly, combed their hair daily or favored the use of ear scoops, but Erik was so filthy she was surprised he wasn't crawling with bugs or didn't have birds nesting in his hair. The man actually reeked of manure!

She knew her father was eager for her to marry, but how could he force her into the company of this stinking, hairy, obnoxious—

"Stay thirsty then." Erik shrugged, took a long drink of ale and dragged his arm across his mouth. "But if you drink, it might relieve some of your fears and shyness."

Bera stared at him, aghast. Was he simply ignoring her rejection or was he as stupid as he was dirty?

"I'm neither fearful nor shy," she said. "What I am is discerning."

He gave a snort of laughter. "What you are is spoiled. You are so old yet unmarried because your father hasn't forced you to face the responsibilities of a woman. Once you do, you might find pleasure in it."

Never in her life had Bera been this furious. Even when she'd been a skinny, ugly child laughed at by boys and girls alike, she had never felt such burning rage toward anyone.

“I am yet unmarried because until a few mere months ago no one asked for my hand,” she snapped.

He drank more ale, then glanced at her with what could have been a snarl but might have been a grin. She wondered how such a dirty man had such beautiful teeth. They were even, almost white and none of the visible ones were missing. At least now she knew why they called him Ice Tooth.

“Then why haven’t you jumped at the offers?”

“Because I am still deciding.”

“If you’re still deciding then you can’t be too happy with them. Are they here?” He lifted his chin that was covered in a beard as black and straggly as the hair on his head. Of course most warriors who just arrived from a sea voyage, as Erik and his men had, looked unkempt, their hair windblown. Usually their clothing smelled of the sea, however, not of a dung pile.

“Is who here?” she asked, once again edging away from him. He wrapped an arm around her waist and dragged her close to his side. Her cheek pressed against his wool tunic and she nearly gagged at the stench. It smelled as if he’d donned this particular tunic before the first battle he’d ever fought and hadn’t removed it since.

“The men who hope to marry you. If I had asked for your hand and someone else took you aside to share his ale, it would be grounds for battle.”

“They’re not here,” she said, pushing against him. Unfortunately for her, the body beneath that filthy tunic was as big and hard as a rock. The man was built like a frost giant.

His gaze locked on hers and he touched a calloused fingertip to her cheek and stroked lightly.

“Let me go,” she said, unable to keep the anger from her voice. “Unless you enjoy forcing women.”

He released her abruptly, leaned against the wall and stared at her, one of his eyebrows cocked. "With your disposition, I'm surprised you've had any offers at all, except that you're very beautiful."

Bera slid away from him and drew some deep breaths. Though the air in the longhouse was never as fresh as outdoors, even the aroma of smoke was better than the stench of this warrior.

"I can see why you're still unwed too," she muttered.

"I've had little time for thinking of marriage." He grunted and sipped more ale. His eyes closed for longer than a blink and she hoped he was finally drunk enough to fall asleep. After how much he'd already consumed, he should have passed out long ago. "Too much work to be done. Ships to build. Hunting and looting. Your father would agree I've served him well."

That was her fear. Since moving here, she had heard her father speak of Erik often. For most of her life she had been fostered by a metal worker and his wife who lived in a nearby settlement. Bera's mother had died shortly after her birth and her father thought it best for her to be reared with a strong female influence. The metal worker's wife, Finna, had been a good friend of Bera's mother and had seemed the best choice to raise her. Months ago the metal worker had died and the King had taken Bera and Finna into his home.

Though her father wasn't cruel, he paid little attention to her, but she listened to his conversations with others and knew who his best warriors were. Erik and his brother, Grim, were his favorites.

She hated to admit that Erik had been right in that she wasn't happy with either marriage offer.

"But a man can't live just to serve his King," Erik said. His dark eyes looked a bit hazy, no doubt from too much drinking. Yet he didn't speak like a drunken man and seemed in control of himself. "If I provide enough to satisfy him, then I also have enough to provide a good home for a wife and family."

"I'm sure you do," Bera said, not wanting to encourage him but too cautious to disagree with a drunken man with a chest and arms like Thor's. And by the look of the chiseled muscles in the long legs stretched out in front of him, every part of him was powerful.

Erik looked at her from the corner of his eye and again offered her the mug. "You're sure you don't want a drink?"

"Very sure."

"Then maybe something else might interest you." He placed the ale aside and edged nearer to her.

This time she managed to avoid his grasp and stood, dropping the blanket. "I have to—"

"Yes?" He also stood and braced his hands against the wall, trapping her between his arms.

Bera tried not to gag.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, his brow furrowing. "Are you ill?"

"I think I might be."

"My nearness is affecting you."

"More than you know," she replied, nearly gagging again.

He smiled slightly and leaned closer for a kiss. Bera ducked just before his mouth touched hers. She slipped between his long legs and he spun, wagging a finger in her direction.

"Oh you're slippery as an eel but much prettier."

"How kind of you to notice," she said, then realized her disdain would be wasted on him. "I need some air and can't wait a moment longer."

She bolted across the room and toward the door.

Outside she took deep gulps of fresh air. Leaning against a tree stump, she closed her eyes.

"Bera."

Her eyes flew open and she glanced at her sister, Asgerd, who had followed her.

"Are you ill?"

"No." Bera sighed. "Nearly, but I got away from Erik in time."

"I never realized he was so...potent," Asgerd said.

"He stinks like a dung heap."

"He's certainly not like his brother. Grim carries the scent of the ocean and his eyes look like a stormy sea."

A smile tugged at Bera's lips. Asgerd had never shown much interest in men. She had been content to stay home and care for the King after their mother died. Asgerd was clearly the King's favorite. Though he never said it, it seemed he blamed Bera for their mother's death.

The only man Asgerd ever talked about favorably was Grim.

"I doubt you'd refuse a marriage offer if Grim he made it," Bera said.

"Don't tease."

"I'm not. Why wouldn't he want you? After all, you're the beautiful one."

"There's nothing wrong with you. Erik is certainly interested." A smile played around Asgerd's lips and Bera practically snarled at her.

"If he washed, he'd be a better choice than Harald or Svein," Asgerd said.

"Then you marry him."

"He hasn't given me a second glance. Neither has Grim for that matter."

"Every other man has, though."

Asgerd lifted her chin. "I'm not interested."

Bera sighed deeply. "We should go inside. It's getting cold out here."

When Bera hurried out of the longhouse, Erik stared after her, thinking what a strange little creature she was. Still he longed to kiss her, caress her dark, silken hair and feel her warm curves against his naked body. Perhaps he shouldn't have had so much to drink. No woman had ever affected him like this before.

Though not a man given to rash displays of emotion, he was decisive about what he wanted. Bera was the King's daughter. By observing her tonight she was a willing worker and she aroused him like no woman he'd ever known. He wanted her and meant to have her before he left for home.

He approached the King who was half dozing on his bench. Erik cleared his throat loudly. The King's eyes snapped open. Grunting, he reached for his blade, then caught sight of Erik standing nearby.

"What is it?" the King asked.

"I would like to marry your daughter. I realize there have been other offers but I feel I am your best choice. She will live in security. I will treat her kindly and pay a generous bride price."

The King's eyes widened slightly, as if surprised. "I don't understand it. Up until a year or two ago no one looked twice at the girl. Now there have been three offers for her. Two brothers, Harald and Svein, have asked for her. Both are fine warriors. I fully intended to give her to one of them when they return for my decision."

Harald and Svein. Erik could scarcely believe the King would allow either fool to marry Bera. They didn't deserve a woman like her. Not only were they unnecessarily rough with females, but they were insanely jealous of each other. Most likely they only made offers to see which of them would win the hand of the King's daughter.

Bera would be far better off with Erik and he intended to have her.

"Unlike the others who have asked for her, I won't leave without her," Erik stated. He was afraid of no man, yet had never been fool enough to provoke the King with a statement such as this. In truth, until this moment, nothing had been important enough. He was a strong, skilled warrior and between trading, hunting and the craftsmanship of

his people, he could supply the King with many goods while still remaining wealthy himself. The King knew this as well and the look of anger that sparked his eyes passed quickly.

"The girl has caused a fever in your blood." The King chuckled.

Truer words had never been spoken. Just thinking about Bera's curves made Erik's cock tingle in his trousers. He imagined sheathing it in her hot, wet body. With her, one coupling wouldn't be enough. He wanted her in his bed night after night and he wanted to see her happy. He knew neither Harold or Svein would be good for her, but he did know she would be comfortable and cared for in his home. Once she overcame her skittishness, she would enjoy rutting as much as he did.

"All right, Erik," the King said after a moment. "Let us discuss the bride price."

"Discuss the *what*?" an older woman who had been sewing by the fire now approached.

"The bride price for Bera," said the King. "Go back to your stitching. This is for men to discuss."

"I thought Bera already had offers?" the woman continued.

Erik stared at her hard and to her credit she met his gaze before turning back to the King. "Are you going to ask how Bera feels about him?"

"Finna, I said sit down!" the King bellowed and pointed to her empty place by the fire. "You might have reared her, but she is still my daughter. She will marry whoever I tell her to."

"Father!" Bera shouted from across the room. "What is going on?"

Erik stared at her and couldn't keep from smiling. She had that fiery look in her eyes again. He resisted the urge to adjust his trousers that were suddenly far too small to comfortably hold his cock. The great snake hadn't been this unruly since he was a boy. This woman was obviously made for him.

Bera approached quickly, Asgerd behind her.

"He's about to bind you to..." Finna's voice trailed off and she pointed at Erik. "To *him* for life."

"Father, no," Bera shouted, striding over.

"He is strong and a good provider," the King stated. "He has promised you will be well cared for and we were about to discuss the bride price."

"I hope it includes a washing bowl," Finna said under her breath.

Erik shot her a dangerous look, then somewhere in his mind muddled by anger, desire and ale, he remembered falling into the manure pile. Of course this wench was right in that he needed to wash his clothes, but surely women wouldn't be so petty as to hold something like that against a man?

"Silence!" the King roared at Finna.

Bera gently touched Finna's arm. The women exchanged glances and Finna returned to her place by the fire.

"Father, please. I don't want to marry him!"

"Bera, calm yourself," Asgerd said softly, but the dark-haired beauty was too furious to pay attention.

She glared at Erik, her little nose wrinkled in disdain, and said, "We already have two offers. I prefer one of them."

Erik could scarcely believe what he was hearing. She was *rejecting* him?

"And insult Erik?" the King snapped.

"If I accept him, won't I insult the others?" she said.

The cunning little bitch.

"If they cared so much about my decision, they would have stayed," the King said. "Erik has vowed not to leave without you."

Bera stared at Erik, flames in her dark eyes. "I'll tell you now, you beast, I would rather die, die, *die* than marry you."



If she had been a man Erik would have run her through with his sword by now. He'd seen how she looked at him earlier, her lustful gaze traveling over his trousers. Maybe she thought this type of teasing would excite him?

"If you don't lower your mouth that will be arranged," the King snarled.

"Father, please." She threw herself on her knees at his feet, her head bowed. How could this witch swing from defiant to pathetic within the space of a heartbeat? Yet she seemed to know her father well. Her outburst had angered him, but by the expression on his face this subservience appeased him. "Please. I'll marry whomever you choose, just not him."

"Why?" Erik demanded. "Why not me?"

Her frenzy ceased and she tilted her face up toward him. For a woman who was weeping piteously, she had not a tear in her eye and those very eyes, dark and gleaming, shot flames in his direction.

"I said you were a spoiled child," Erik stated. "And I was right. I withdraw my offer and I pity the man burdened with you." He turned his attention to the King. "My men and I will leave tonight."

He no longer cared about having his tunic washed so he could travel clean in the morning. He'd rather live with the stink than remain in this house where he'd just been humiliated by a mere woman.

"Erik, she's a foolish girl," the King said. "There are other women. Far prettier ones. She's my daughter, but I admit the truth."

"I respect you as always," Erik told him. "But I have paid tribute to you and there is no reason for us to impose upon your hospitality."

The King looked as if he was about to argue then nodded. "Do what you wish."

Obviously he knew the anger of a rejected man. He was saving himself and his daughter as well as Erik further humiliation.

"Come again after winter," the King stated. "You will stay longer then."

Erik nodded, shouted for his men and left the longhouse without a glance at Bera.

## **Chapter Two**

Bera spent a restless night, scarcely able to sleep after the incident with Erik. Every time she thought about how close she'd come to marrying that hairy, smelly beast she shuddered. Almost any man, even those two fools Harald and Svein, would be preferable to him. At least they didn't smell like a dung heap.

Now that she'd promised her father that she would decide which offer she preferred, she had no choice but to select the brother she wanted. Truthfully, she liked neither. They were vain men who cared only for war and money. Yet that wasn't unusual. Thinking she could find a man who cared about love was a childish dream.

It was just before dawn when she rose. Everyone else would be waking soon and she needed to help the other women prepare the morning meal.

She left the longhouse and stepped into the gray mist of early morning. After relieving herself, cleaning her teeth then splashing well water on her face, she brushed and braided her hair. Then she decided to take a short walk. The fresh air felt wonderful after a night in the smoky longhouse and a stretch of her legs was exactly what she needed after such an unsettling night.

Drawing deep breaths and enjoying the brisk morning, she let her feet wander along with her thoughts. Before she knew it, she'd ventured partway into the woods. She was about to head back to the house when someone grabbed her from behind. She struggled and tried to scream, but her captor shoved a piece of cloth in her mouth and tied the ends of it behind her head.

The gag muffled her cries for help. She fought hard and was somewhat gratified when her attacker grunted as her hand struck him hard between the legs. His hold didn't loosen, however. If anything it tightened even more. If the rock-hard chest and

steely arms didn't give her a clue about her attacker's identity, his stench gave him away.

"Sigfred, bring my horse," Erik's deep voice commanded. He used another measure of cloth to tie Bera's wrists in front of her. His arms encircled her as he fastened the cloth and his big, hard body warmed her against the morning chill. Unfortunately she didn't want to be this close to him. She wished to be as far away from him as possible.

Stepping out of the cover of trees, Sigfred led Erik's stallion in front of them.

Bera's heart pounded in terror and she continued screaming in spite of the gag.

Erik shoved her at Sigfred who held her fast while his brother mounted the powerfully muscled horse.

"Give her to me," Erik ordered.

Sigfred lifted Bera, still kicking and thrashing, toward Erik who grasped her roughly and placed her in front of him on the horse.

"I still don't think this is a good idea," Sigfred said. "And Grim thinks it's such a bad idea that he refused to stay. He joined the rest of the men on the way back to the ship."

"I'll deal with Grim later. Now let's get back to the ship before anyone realizes she's missing."

"Think about this, Erik," Sigfred continued. "You're angry and whenever you drink too much at night you act impulsively in the morning."

Erik lifted his sword and touched the tip of it beneath Sigfred's chin.

"All right." Sigfred held up his hands and his lips twisted into a crooked smile. "We take the woman."

Sigfred strode toward a second horse, which stood a short distance away.

His arms wrapped firmly around her, Erik whispered close to Bera's ear, "You should have thought twice before trying to make a fool of me."

Bera threw her head backward, cracking it into his face. Pain spread over her scalp and she gave a little cry, also muffled by the cloth.

Erik grunted and spat a mouthful of blood onto the dirt. He let loose a curse so foul Bera's face burned with embarrassment. She'd heard strong language before, but with his deep, almost growling voice the harsh words seemed worse somehow.

"I'm doing you a favor, wench."

A favor? He was completely mad.

He kicked the horse forward and they rode through the woods.

Bera could scarcely believe this nightmare was happening to her—carried off by a brute of a man with no hope of anyone realizing where she'd gone.

They rode until they reached the shoreline where Erik brought her to the cargo hold on his ship. He released her gag, but left her wrists bound and also tied her ankles.

She said, "Think about what you're doing. If you release me now, I won't tell my father what you've done. It would be as if this never happened."

He curled his lip, his fierce gaze fixed upon her. "Do you think me a coward who's afraid to stand behind his actions? No, beautiful wench. I have exactly what I want."

"You want to steal a woman who finds you completely repulsive?"

Grasping her chin in his gloved hand, he forced her to keep holding his gaze. Strangely, his grip wasn't painful, as if he was deliberately controlling his temper and his strength. "You think I'm bad? The men your father was about to hand you over to are far worse than I am. I've seen them beat women for the pleasure of hearing them scream. If that's the kind of man you want to be bound to, then perhaps I should have left you behind."

"So I should be grateful for being abducted by a stinking he-goat like you?"

He bared his teeth in an animalistic snarl before dropping his hold on her and walking away.

Bera sat as the ship rocked on the waves. She tried in vain to work her hands out of the bonds, but only succeeded in chafing her wrists. A while later, a young blonde warrior with a sparse beard approached. He carried a fur cloak and draped it over her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Erik thought you might be cold,” the youth said rather flatly.

She noted that he and the other warriors, though unkempt, didn’t stink like their leader.

“Once we’re out to sea, he said I can untie you,” continued the warrior. “We can use a woman aboard. No man here can cook anything worth eating.”

So they intended to use her as a slave. If that was all Erik asked of her, she could survive. If he tried to defile her, however...

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Cnut.”

“Well Cnut, if you release me now, I promise not to cause any trouble.”

A crooked smile touched his lips and a look of genuine amusement shone in his eyes. “A fool I’m not. Very soon we’ll be out to sea. Until then you wait.”

He turned and left her alone once again.

Sighing, Bera closed her eyes and rested her head against a trunk.

Cnut hadn’t lied about setting her free. A short time later, he returned and removed her bonds. She rubbed her sore wrists.

“Am I allowed topside?” she asked.

The youth shrugged his broad shoulders. “Erik didn’t say otherwise.”

Bera calmly made her way out of the cargo area and onto the deck, Cnut behind her. The boy took his place among the warriors rowing the ship.

By now it was midmorning. Bera inhaled the crisp breeze sprinkled with seawater and glanced around. Erik stood at the front of the ship, looking fiercer than the wooden serpent carved into the hull.

Though as Cnut had said, they were out to sea, the early morning mist had faded and the shoreline was still visible in the distance. Bera was certain if she jumped overboard, she could swim to safety.

Glancing around to be sure no one was focused on her, she removed her boots and stockings then made her way to the side of the ship and hoisted herself upon the edge.

Bera's heart pounded with the anticipation of hitting the cold water and escaping her dreaded captor.

Then a powerful arm wrapped around her and she gasped. The smell struck her as did the familiarity of the rock-hard body.

*Not again.*

"Are you mad?" Erik growled. "Once you hit the water where did you intend to go?"

"Home, where do you think?"

He chuckled and so did several warriors nearby who had overheard the conversation.

"You find that amusing? I am a very good swimmer."

"In that case I'll let you swim to shore when we reach home."

Again the men chuckled and Bera gritted her teeth with frustration.

"This is my home," she reminded him.

"No longer. If I hadn't taken you, then you would soon be claimed by Svein or Harald. Trust me when I tell you I am the better choice."

"I didn't choose you at all. Nor did my father. By taking me against his wishes you risk the wrath of a king."

Erik tightened his arm around her and held her even closer. Her full breasts rested upon his sinewy forearm. No man had ever touched her breasts. While other women stole intimate moments with their lovers, Bera had remained alone. At first no one wanted her. By the time men showed interest, she had no intention of surrendering herself to anyone without a proper bride price and the security of marriage.

"It's a risk worth taking," Erik whispered closer to her ear. A little shiver darted through her. It should have been from disgust, but the huskiness of his voice stirred her.

Why did he make her heart beat faster? Why did her nipples tighten and heat flare between her legs? The very thought of his unwashed body rutting hers was enough to make her sick, but knowing he risked angering his King just to claim her aroused certain emotions she'd rather not consider at the moment.

"Why not take her now, Erik?" chuckled a tall, ruddy warrior rowing nearby.

Erik's voice, low and husky just moments before, become fierce as he turned to the warrior and said, "Bjorn, do you like your tongue in your head or boiling in tonight's stewpot?"

Bjorn's smile faded and he cast his gaze out to sea.

"I see you're accustomed to forcing others to submit to your will," she said.

"Like any warrior worth his blade."

"But it's not the best way to handle women."

"No. Women are more stubborn and stupid. At least some women are. Some have to be shown what's good for them."

"Good?" she exclaimed, curling her lip.

"Once you've had time to live in my house, among my people, you'll see you belong with me."

"Belong with you? You're the one who is mad." She struggled in his grip.

Grunting with annoyance, he turned her around to face him, keeping his gloved hands on her shoulders.



"Listen to me carefully, if you can hear beyond the wax in your ears," she stated. "I do not belong with you. I will never belong with you. Not if you were the last man in this world and I the last woman."

"When you realize the truth," he said, his intense, dark eyes bearing into hers, "we will return to your father together. He will understand this and make the marriage agreement."

"What part of *never* don't you understand?" she demanded, her voice shrill with frustration.

"It's not surprising that she's turned you out in the cold, brother." Grim approached, his expression solemn. Bera recalled Sigfred saying he didn't approve of Erik abducting her. "Not that I blame her."

"You seem to be a reasonable man," she said to Grim. "Can't you convince him that he's making a mistake?"

Grim glanced at her. Unlike Erik's eyes, his were vibrant blue and his expression almost unreadable. It seemed he was the sternest of the three brothers, whereas Erik was the fiercest and Sigfred the mediator between the two.

"No one can convince him of anything once he's made up his mind," Grim said. "This may one day be the death of him." He cast a hard look in Erik's direction and added, "As well as the rest of us."

"Then you think she would have been better off with Harald or Svein?" Erik asked.

"I think the choice was her father's. Our family has been prosperous. We have good relations with the King and no wish to fight him, at least that's what I believed."

"It's the truth," Erik stated.

"So you put us all at risk because of a woman?"

"If the King fights us, the risk will be his."

"Do you honestly believe you have the strength to fight my father? He is unconquered," Bera said.

“So am I,” Erik stated. “And you will join me. There will be no reason for the King to fight me or me to fight him. You will see.” He reached out and cupped her chin, surprising her yet again by the gentleness of his touch.

“You’re wrong,” she said, holding his gaze. She hated to admit that once she looked past those wild black eyebrows, he had rather lovely eyes. Large and dark yet gleaming with fierce pride.

“While you’re here you’ll make yourself useful,” Erik told her. “You will take over cooking the meals.”

“That’s about the only good thing about this arrangement,” Grim said.

“You will hold your tongue, brother. If you won’t support my decision I won’t stand by while you mock it. If you were so interested in our relations with the King, you’d make an offer for Asgerd. The woman obviously lusts after you and I’m sure the King would be glad to finally marry her off. She’s even older than this one.” Erik jerked his thumb in Bera’s direction.

“How dare you?” she snapped. “I’m sure my sister wants your miserable brother no more than I want you.”

“And I surely don’t want her or any woman,” Grim said, his voice deadly soft. “I live only for the glory of battle. A wife and children mean nothing to me.”

The brothers locked gazes and a hint of fear darted through Bera. She had the feeling they were about to come to blows. Maybe she should be glad if they did. If Grim won, he would most likely allow her to return home. Grim’s reputation in battle preceded him, yet something told her he would not win against Erik.

After a tense moment, Grim said, “It’s your decision about the wench.” He walked away and so did Bera.

It seemed there was no way out of this situation. Unless...

A smile touched her lips. Erik and his men wanted a woman who could cook decent meals. Well he hadn't bothered to ask if she could before he whisked her away from home.

*I hope for your sake, Erik, your stomach is as tough as your sword arm.*

A smile tugging at her lips, she went to find the cooking supplies.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erik stood at the helm of his ship, talking to Sigfred about their plans to trade goods at Hedeby, a large trade town.

"We'll take a few days to see to affairs at home, then we'll leave to trade," Erik said. "When we're finished we'll send a ship to the King with more goods."

Sigfred nodded. "To throw off suspicion about the girl. If we keep good relations with the King, he'll have no reason to think you've taken her."

"I intend to marry her."

"So you've said. If you want her so much I don't understand why you weren't more forceful in negotiating for her. If the King realized how much you wanted her, he would have relented regardless of her wishes."

Erik stared hard at his brother. "I don't explain my reasons, Sigfred. Not to anyone."

Stepping closer, Sigfred lowered his voice to a whisper so no one but Erik could hear his words. "If you're not careful, this woman could be your downfall."

Sigfred's words angered Erik. No man had ever gotten the better of him, yet his brother insinuated a mere woman would do so?

With an angry grunt, Erik pushed Sigfred aside, strode nearer to the edge of the ship and gazed at the churning waves. Cnut approached carrying three mugs of stew. The brothers each took one.

Sigfred took a deep swallow then spat the stew into the ocean and sputtered, "She might be the downfall of every man aboard."

“What?” Erik’s brow furrowed and he sipped the stew. It tasted like poison. He spat his back into the bowl and dragged his forearm across his beard, fearful the rancid stuff might eat through the hair.

All around the ship, men were hurling the contents of their bowls overboard. One or two emptied the contents of their stomachs as well.

Grim, a scowl on his face, strode toward Erik and said, “No man aboard cooks as badly as this. No wonder she’s ancient and yet unwed.”

Erik growled with annoyance and flung his bowl aside. Bera stood at the opposite end of the ship, a faint smile on her lips. One of the warriors—a surly man called Ragnar—approached her.

“Hey wench, is this urine or stew?” he snarled, grasping her arm.

“Get your hand off her,” Erik commanded.

“Have you tasted this so-called stew?” Ragnar asked. “She’s useless as a cook. It seems there’s only one thing she’ll be good for.”

Erik broke Ragnar’s hold on Bera, shoved him hard against the side of the ship and bellowed so that everyone aboard could hear, “Any man who touches this woman will answer to me.”

“Next time you steal a wench, Erik, at least make sure she can cook,” Bjorn called with a chuckle.

“I’m sure we’ll see an improvement in her domestic skills,” Erik said, glaring at Bera. He took her hand roughly in his and dragged her below to the cargo hold.

She struggled all the way, pulling hard against his grip. His stomach clenched and he fought to keep the smile from his face. She was strong for her size. He liked that. Strong women made for better bed-sport. Still she was no match for his strength. He picked her up and sat her upon a barrel.

“Don’t touch me,” she said through clenched teeth, her dark eyes blazing with inner fire that made his cock leap in his trousers.

Erik used his knee to push hers apart and step between her legs.

"I'll make a bargain with you, beautiful Bera. You cook properly and I'll respect your wishes and not touch you on this journey. However if you again serve poison like you gave us today, I'll show you the true meaning of what it is to be slave to a man."

"You disgust me!"

"Do I? Your mouth forms insults," he caressed her lips with his fingertip, "but your eyes speak of something else."

Her lips parted but for a moment no words escaped them. It was all Erik could do not to taste those full pink lips, to thrust his tongue into her mouth and enjoy her warmth and wetness. Other parts of her would no doubt be wetter and warmer.

He wanted to be clean when they coupled, however. No doubt his stench from the manure accident disgusted her as much as it did him. Something told him she believed he smelled this way normally. If she had a more pleasant disposition, he'd have eased her concerns about his cleanliness, but until he was ready, let the spoiled wench live in fear. Besides her feistiness aroused him.

His cock swelled and ached even more.

"I can't tell if you're the most stupid man I've ever met or the most self-absorbed," she said.

He grinned and took her face in his hands. "A woman like you can make a man stupid."

"One day, Erik, you will get exactly what you deserve and when you do I hope I am there to witness it."

"Oh you'll be there, wench." He chuckled and ran his fingertip lightly between her full breasts. "Make no doubt about it. One day you'll willingly give me what I deserve, but I'm a patient man. I find eager women far more enticing than reluctant ones."

Her jaw set, she slapped his hand away from her bosom that now heaved with fury. He could scarcely wait to see her naked. Those breasts were no doubt smooth, luscious and tipped with pink nipples just waiting to be sucked.

“I’ll never be willing,” she said.

Their gazes locked for several moments, then with an indulgent smile he stepped away.

“Cook something we can eat and enjoy or else we’ll continue where we left off,” he said and made his way out of the cargo hold, not bothering to give her another glance.

This woman heated his blood, but he needed to handle her carefully and let her earn her keep. Too much attention wasn’t good for any woman, yet it would be difficult not to lavish it upon one such as her.

Maybe once he had her in his bed the flames would cool. Until then he would simply enjoy the game.

\* \* \* \* \*

As promised, Erik didn’t touch Bera for the remainder of the journey. She cooked decent meals and though she tried her best to ignore her captor, it was difficult. Sometimes she’d glance up to find him staring at her from across the ship. Something in his eyes made her feel emotions she’d never experienced before.

He was a dirty beast who kept his men in control by the sheer force of his seemingly indomitable will. Yet in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, he captivated her.

They finally arrived at the shoreline not far from his settlement. It was late morning and a cold yet clear day. Bera stood near the bow of the ship, gazing toward the beach. There were many other ships – small fishing boats, longships used for battle and cargo ships similar to the one they now rode on. Many men worked aboard them while others completed tasks on the beach, making repairs and loading wagons with their catch to bring back to the village.

Erik came to stand near Bera. Though he didn't touch her, she felt his intense gaze upon her.

"We're here," he said.

She glared at him and a smile tugged at the full lips partially hidden by his straggly beard.

"It's the end of the journey, lovely Bera," he said in a husky whisper that sent shivers down her spine.

That meant their bargain was over. He'd said he wouldn't touch her during the journey as long as she prepared decent meals. Now they were here in his village, among people who were loyal to him. There was no chance of diving overboard and swimming for home and little chance of escaping once he brought her to the longhouse. Maybe she could convince someone to send a message to her father. If he knew Erik had taken her, he would be forced to come for her, if only to defend his honor.

Yet that would mean battle. Men would die because of her, both on her father's side and Erik's. Not that she should concern herself with his warriors, for this shipload of brutes cared nothing for her welfare. Grim was against the abduction, but not for her sake. His concern was going to battle against her father.

Maybe she could work on Grim, get him to see reason and perhaps return her to her father without Erik knowing about it. That seemed an impossible challenge, but at the moment she was willing to try anything and take any risk to avoid the inevitable.

"You said you enjoyed swimming. If you wish to dive overboard and beat us to shore, you have my permission," Erik continued, his sensual grin turning to one of genuine amusement.

"No. I prefer to save my strength."

"Good. You'll need it for later."

He lightly whacked her bottom and Bera closed her eyes, her teeth clenched. If he thought she was going to entertain him in bed, he was mad. Yet how could she fight

him? It wasn't uncommon for men to sate their lust on slaves, and though she was the King's daughter, in this place she was nothing more than a captive. Here Erik's word was law and from what she'd observed during the journey, his men were very loyal.

Grim approached and said, "Come, girl. You'll be in the way when the men unload cargo. I'm taking you to the village."

Bera's heartbeat quickened. Now was her chance to convince Grim to help her.

Once ashore, Grim hoisted Bera onto the back of his horse and mounted behind her. He was as hard as Erik, but thankfully he didn't stink nor did he hold her as snugly as his brother had.

They rode in silence for several moments. Soon they traveled down a gnarled pathway through the forest.

"I know you're concerned about my father's wrath," she ventured.

Grim gave no indication that he'd heard her, so she tried again. "If you return me, I'm sure this situation can be resolved without bloodshed."

"We'd only need to consider your father's wrath if he knew Erik stole you."

Grim wasn't stupid, nor was he easily controlled. If he was, he wouldn't have confronted Erik. Manipulating him wouldn't be easy.

"When others find out who I am, someone might report back to my father."

"Doubtful, since Erik has spread the word among the warriors who traveled with us that you are merely a slave."

"What if someone from the settlement recognizes me? Erik has sent other men to deliver goods to my father. They would know who I am."

"They might, but it's doubtful. I led the party that delivered the goods to your father last year. As I recall you were not at the settlement."

That was true. Since she'd come to live with her father, there had been no shipment from Erik. His men usually made one large delivery each year.



"Even if someone did recognize you, every man, woman and child in our village is loyal to Erik, as they were loyal to our father and grandfather before him. By the remote chance they weren't loyal to my brother, *I* am. I know what you're trying to do, wench, and it won't work."

Frustrated, Bera glanced at him over her shoulder. "He has no right to me. The marriage offer was made and refused."

"I won't argue that point and I would not take such risks for a dark little rabbit like you. My brother must see something in you that I've missed."

Now frustration turned to anger. "It seems Erik isn't the only insufferable one in your family."

Grim snorted. "Not hardly. I suggest you get used to it or else your life here will be unbearable."

"Tell me, Grim, are you married?"

"Why? Are you looking for another offer?"

"Not hardly," she flung his own words back at him. "I'm merely curious to know if some poor woman has been mourning your return."

"Maybe my brother deserves you after all. One pig-headed fool for another."

Bera stiffened, but decided not to respond. So much for luring Grim to her side. She would have to find another plan.

### **Chapter Three**

The woods thinned to a spacious clearing upon which the settlement was built. There were some cottages and storage houses, but most inhabitants lived in the longhouse. Even if she had not known of the wealth Erik provided for her father, she could see by the look of the people and animals this village prospered.

Several men and women greeted Grim as they rode toward the longhouse. Outside, he left his horse to the care of a village boy and guided Bera inside.

Some men were seated on benches that lined the walls. A group of women sewed near the fire over which hung a cauldron of stew.

"Grim, welcome home," said an older warrior who stood and approached. The other men glanced in the direction of the newcomers. Their gazes raked Bera and a few passed comments then laughed in a way she found most unsettling.

"It's good to be home, Olav," Grim said.

"Did you finally get married?" Olav grinned in Bera's direction.

"No. This slave is Erik's."

"Not a bad looking wench. Is he up to sharing her?"

Bera's stomach clenched. She'd been so concerned with bedding Erik that she hadn't stopped to think that as a slave she might be passed around to any man who wanted her.

"I doubt it," Grim replied. "He's taken a strong liking to her. I suggest leaving her alone."

The men who had been leering at Bera turned away.

Olav's smile faded and he said, "I see."

Grasping Bera's arm, Grim guided her toward the women who sat sewing.

"This is Bera. She belongs to Erik. Give her work and treat her well," Grim stated.

The women glanced at her curiously, but didn't speak, except for an elderly woman with pale blue eyes and steel gray hair.

"Welcome, Bera," she said. "I am Helga. This is Freya and Hildirid."

Satisfied that Bera would get along with the women, Grim walked away. He entered the bed closet and emerged carrying a tunic and trousers. Pausing by a bench, he picked up a mug belonging to one of the other warriors and took a long sip. Then he left the longhouse.

"Where do you come from?" Freya asked Bera.

"I am not a slave," she told them. "I am the King's daughter."

The women exchanged disbelieving glances, then chuckled.

"I like a sense of humor," Hildirid said.

"It's the truth. Erik asked to marry me and I—I mean my father—refused, so he abducted me."

"Not that I believe the King would refuse his offer," Hildirid said, "but even if he did, why would Erik want to steal you?"

Bera realized such an accusation made her appear self-absorbed and that hadn't been her intention. All she wanted was for someone to believe her and help her get away before Erik—

"Erik has no shortage of women who are willing to please him," Freya said. "Why would he need to steal one?"

Bera wrinkled her nose. "I would think smelling as he does no woman would willingly bed him."

Now the women looked surprised.

"Smell?" Freya asked. "Erik? He's as clean as any man can be."

Bera couldn't hide her disbelief. Was it possible these women hadn't noticed their master smelled like manure?

“He even has a special little blade he uses to clean his teeth every day,” Hildirid said.

“And he is a man of power,” Freya added.

“And potency.” Hildirid grinned. “Believe me, I would know.”

“You should consider yourself lucky to be here,” Freya said. “Erik and his brothers protect us and provide well for us. Though heavy-handed to those who oppose them, they are kind and generous masters, especially compared to some.”

The other women nodded in agreement. Grim was right about the loyalty of the villagers. If what Freya said was true, then they had reason to stand behind Erik—providing they weren’t downwind, of course.

“You will do well to obey Erik. He is not cruel to slaves, however he won’t tolerate disobedience from anyone,” Freya said.

“And if he wants you in his bed, you’ll soon realize how lucky you are,” Hildirid said with a giggle. “The man is insatiable.”

In spite of her revulsion, Bera felt something else—like a fire burning deep in her belly and flaring through the hot, wet place that so far had known only the stroking of her own fingers. A little quiver of desire rolled through her at the thought of Erik’s big, calloused hands caressing her, of his thumb rolling over her clit and his long fingers exploring deep inside her damp folds.

A smile tugged at Hildirid’s lips. “Perhaps the thought of bedding our master doesn’t disgust you as much as you want us to believe.”

“You’re wrong,” Bera said. “If not for Erik I would be awaiting my marriage.”

“Arranged by your father the King?” Freya smirked.

Bera didn’t reply. She knew arguing with these women would be useless. Grim was right. There was no way out of this situation. Yet Bera refused to give up hope.

Still she joined the women in mending and making clothes. As suppertime neared, they placed aside their needles and cloth and helped prepare the food. They introduced

her to other slaves and villagers and Bera thought they seemed like a pleasant enough group of people. None seemed mistreated or discontent.

Cnut, carrying a pile of clothes, entered the longhouse and approached Bera. He handed her the clothes and said, "Erik wants these washed."

Wrinkling her nose, she dropped the stinking garments onto the floor.

The young man's jaw tightened visibly. "You better do what he tells you."

Folding her arms beneath her breasts, Bera cocked an eyebrow and stared hard at Cnut. "Not that it isn't about time he wash his clothes, but I refuse to do it."

"Come, girl." Helga picked up the filthy tunic and trousers. "I'll show you the path to the river."

"I said —"

"We need to talk." Helga held out the clothes.

After a moment, Bera sighed and took them, holding the smelly garments as far from her as possible.

Outside the longhouse, the air was fresh even if the day was fairly warm. Bera and Helga walked down a path through the trees.

"You're not lying about being the King's daughter, are you?" the old woman asked.

Hope stirred inside Bera. Finally she had found someone who would listen to her.

"I spoke the truth," she said. "I am here against my will."

"Yet you don't appear to be mistreated. I've known Erik since he was a boy and have never seen him harm a woman. His enemies have reason to fear him, but taking advantage of weaker creatures is not Erik's way."

"I haven't been hurt," Bera admitted. "At least not yet."

"Did you dislike Erik so much that you refused his offer?"

"It has nothing to do with liking or disliking. It's because of..." Bera held up the clothes. "It smells like this is the first time the man has ever had these clothes washed. The thought of bedding a man like that —"

"I'm not sure why Erik's clothes smell like this, but I assure you it's not usual."

Bera's brow furrowed. "It's not?"

"If anything Erik tends to be vain and concerned with his appearance."

"This makes no sense. Why didn't he explain?"

Helga glanced at her from the corner of her eye. "Like most men in his position, he doesn't feel the need to explain himself to anyone, least of all a woman."

Perhaps Helga was right. Her foster father had been considerate of everyone, men and women alike, but he was unusual. Most men were like her blood father. Why should Erik be any different, especially being a favorite of the King? She knew her father only admired men similar to himself.

The path ended at a creek running with water from the neighboring mountains. Helga said something to Bera, but she didn't comprehend the words since her attention focused completely on the most irresistible sight she'd ever had the pleasure of seeing.

Standing in the water, shadowed by the overhanging branches of a nearby tree, stood a gorgeous, black-haired giant. His wet, golden-tanned skin glistened and his chiseled muscles rippled as he washed. Moisture gleamed in his curling chest hair that tapered to a slender trail down the center of his sleek belly. It flared out to a wider thatch that disappeared beneath the water along with the lower half of his body. Bera felt heat rise in her face, not because of his naked state, but because she wished the water wasn't quite so deep.

It took her a moment to realize this water-slicked brother of Thor was actually Erik.

"I thought you didn't like him?" Helga whispered, a knowing grin on her thin lips.

"I told you why I felt that way," Bera replied, irritated not only at the old woman's teasing but at her own desire. The last thing she wanted was to give Erik the satisfaction of admiring him like a lovesick maiden. Unfortunately that's exactly what she'd done.

Even now he wore a smug grin. His teeth gleamed against his dark beard, which was neatly groomed, complete with two long, slender braids amidst the loose, dark hair.

"I see you got my clothes," he said.

Curling her lip, Bera threw them on the muddy ground at the edge of the creek.

"Wash them like I ordered, woman," he told her.

Bera's stomach clenched with fury and something even more disturbing.

He continued, "I can stand no more of the stench. Next time I'll travel with a change of trousers so I'll be prepared when my cousin knocks me into a dung heap."

Bera wasn't sure why this revelation pleased her so much, yet she was relieved to know he wasn't as dirty as she'd thought him to be. If something could be done about his arrogance, the brute might actually appeal to her.

That was a lie. Even when she'd thought him filthy, something about him had stirred her passions.

"You should bring a change of tunic as well," Bera said, lifting her chin.

He moved closer and her heartbeat quickened. Her gaze lowered, but he paused, the water still concealing the part of him she longed to see.

"I did, but the other tunic was torn when I was moving trunks in the cargo hold," he told her.

"I'll leave you to your business," Helga said quietly and headed back up the path to the longhouse.

"No!" Bera spun toward her. "Don't go."

"Go!" Erik commanded and Helga continued on her way.

Bera started to follow her, but Erik said, "Bera, you stay. My clothes are still dirty."

She glared at him over her shoulder. "Then wash them yourself."

Turning her back to him, she strode up the path. She only managed a few steps before he pulled her against his big, wet body. She gave a shout of surprise. For a man his size, he moved with speed as well as stealth.

"I'm surprised a daughter of the King is so disobedient." Erik spoke in her ear. The huskiness of his voice and the tickle of his beard sent little thrills of delight down her spine. "You have much to learn, Bera, and I'm going to enjoy teaching you."

"I can learn nothing from you except how to stink like a dung heap. Let me go!" She struggled, but he tightened his arms around her.

"I like you where you are, beautiful wench." His lips teased her earlobe and Bera resisted the urge to close her eyes. No man had ever touched her like this.

In spite of herself, she liked the feel of his body against hers. There didn't seem to be a soft part of him. He was all muscle, long limbs and damp flesh.

Something particularly hard and thick pressed against her. It took her a moment to comprehend what it was, but when she did an unexpected wave of arousal swept over her. Perhaps she'd never been with a man, but she knew right well what it meant when certain parts of them swelled like this. Well...perhaps not like this. Erik's cock felt rather large. The more she wiggled against him in an attempt to free herself, the bigger it seemed to grow.

"You're getting me all wet," she snapped, trying to squirm from his embrace.

"Exactly." He chuckled, one of his hands sliding between her legs and cupping her in a place no man had ever touched.

Bera gasped. Her nipples tightened and passion flared through her belly, settling into that sensitive place between her legs. Her flesh ached and throbbed and she had the wild urge to thrust her hips against his hand. Instead she stomped on his bare foot with her heel.

He grunted in rage, but instead of loosening, his hold on her tightened. "Miserable wench."



"Let me go."

He swept her into his arms and she instinctively clung to his neck.

Bera found her face mere inches from his. Her gaze fixed on his dark, gleaming eyes. His full lips parted slightly and for the first time she wondered how they'd feel against hers.

"That's better," he said, his voice softer. "It's more pleasant if you don't struggle."

"Then why take a woman who doesn't want you?"

His eyes narrowed the slightest bit, then he dipped his head closer to her. His lips hovered over hers, but he didn't kiss her. Bera's heart pounded and she trembled from desire rather than fear. What was it about this overbearing, arrogant bear that made her want the unthinkable?

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"Do you want me to let you go? Think before you answer out of spite. I'm willing to coax you if you're frightened, but don't try my patience."

"What if I simply don't want you?" Even as she spoke the words, she didn't believe them.

"I don't think that's the truth." He brushed his cheek lightly against hers and Bera's eyes closed momentarily. He smelled so clean, fresh and masculine.

"What if it is?" she whispered. "Would you force me?"

"I want a willing woman," he said, his breath warm and enticing on her lips. Her hands tightened around his neck and she lifted her head the slightest bit, yet it was enough to touch her mouth fully to his.

That was all the encouragement he needed.

She might have initiated the kiss, but he took immediate control. His firm mouth claimed her, tender yet possessive. Bera closed her eyes and surrendered completely.

When Erik's tongue thrust between her lips, she opened herself to him. Her tongue, hungry yet tentative, reached for his.

Erik was a thorough and patient teacher. Every commanding thrust of his tongue taught her lessons in lust she never dreamed possible.

With her snug in his arms, he walked back to the creek. A short distance from the water, he placed her on her feet. Bera stood, her legs trembling from desire and anticipation, and tilted her face toward his.

Their gazes locked, he smiled at her, his expression dominant yet tender. She'd never imaged Erik could be like this, nor had she believed any man could make her feel this way. Marriages weren't about love, but about compatibility, wealth and family honor. If the couple was lucky, affection might grow between them. The idea of marrying a man who aroused her body and soul was...

What was she thinking? She had refused Erik. Yet because of his stubbornness, maybe they'd have a chance after all.

His dark, gleaming eyes fixed on his fingers that unfastened the brooches on her dress with surprising ease. A twinge of jealousy darted through her when she considered this was hardly the first time he'd undressed a woman. By the way Freya and Hildirid spoke, he had no shortage of female companionship. If and when she became his wife, that would end, even if she had to scratch out the eyes of every woman in the settlement.

While he undressed her, she looked down, eager to see the cock that had pressed so enticingly against her backside. Her eyes widened and lips parted as she drew a sharp breath of desire at the sight of his thick shaft, textured with veins and flushed a delicious shade of pink. She never imagined a man's cock could be so beautiful, but it shouldn't have surprised her since every part of Erik's body was magnificent. If only she'd realized what those filthy clothes had been hiding, she might have demanded he wash, even if he hadn't been inclined to do so himself.

With the brooches finally unfastened, her dress and other garments came off easily. The fabric pooled at her feet and Bera trembled more from anticipation than from the slight chill in the air. Now that the sun had set, the day's warmth had faded a bit.

Erik wrapped his arms around her and held her close. Closing her eyes, Bera rested her cheek against his chest. The hair covering it was much softer than she'd thought and she gently rubbed her face against it, inhaling his scent. It was so wonderful to be this close to him and not smell dung. That thought made her chuckle.

"What?" he demanded.

Tilting her face to meet his gaze, she asked, "Why didn't you tell me you'd fallen into manure?"

"You never asked."

"That's a stupid answer."

He narrowed his eyes and brushed his nose against hers. "It was a stupid situation."

"If you had just explained I would have understood."

"If you weren't so haughty you wouldn't have judged me by a little dung."

"You are mad. I don't know any woman who would willingly consent to marrying a man who smelled like—"

He silenced her with a kiss and Bera decided the argument could wait until later. Closing her eyes, she gave herself over to him. Her arms slid around him and she splayed her palms over his broad back.

Erik's hand swept lightly over her hips then cupped her buttocks. Little thrills of delight raced through Bera. She'd heard other women talk about the pleasures of coupling, but until now hadn't realized exactly how wonderful it could be. Of course not all women were lucky enough to catch the interest of a man like Erik. He was as irresistible as he was insufferable. The way he roused her passion and her anger intrigued her. For the sake of pride, she should fight him, but gods, she didn't want to.

He squeezed her bottom a bit harder and she gasped, her fingers biting into the powerful muscles of his back. He chuckled softly, though his mouth never left hers. Bera moaned with pleasure as he sucked her upper lip. His hand slid over her waist and up her ribs. The tips of his calloused fingers traced the outline of her breast. That feathery touch tickled and Bera flinched.

Erik cupped her breast and swept his tongue over her nipple. Again Bera gasped. No one had ever touched her so intimately. She'd rarely touched her own breasts. Now Erik's strong, rough fingertips were caressing her nipples in a way that made her pulse race and sent her breathing out of control.

His lips moved from her mouth and ran along the side of her neck. If he hadn't been steadying her, she doubted she could have remained standing. His kisses rained over her shoulder and across her collarbone.

"Erik," she murmured, weaving her fingers through his wet black hair.

He grunted softly, too busy kissing her throat to reply in words. Slowly he guided her into the water. It was cool and she shivered at first, but he tugged her closer, his mouth claiming hers in another urgent kiss.

"You're very beautiful," he said.

"Most men don't think so."

"Most men are stupid." He kissed her forehead then took her earlobe between his teeth and nibbled gently.

His hand disappeared beneath the water and slid between her legs.

Bera's eyes widened a bit and she reached down to grasp his wrist. It felt as thick and strong as the rest of him.

"Trust me," he whispered in her ear and she nodded, once again closing her eyes.

He kneaded where she was so warm and aching. His fingers stroked her plump, tingling flesh then dipped even lower. The tip of one finger lightly teased her entrance, then slid inside, rubbing slowly and gently.

In spite of the pleasure he brought her, Bera tensed. Gods, even her own fingers had never explored this deeply.

He stopped rubbing, but didn't remove his finger. Bera trembled, surprised by how much she liked the feeling of him inside her and this wasn't even his cock. Remembering the size of his shaft, she wondered if it would hurt. Some women told horrible stories of men ramming their cocks painfully into their partners, like wild, rutting beasts.

Erik didn't seem to be that kind of man. Yes he was rough, but the ruggedness that made him such a formidable warrior didn't appear to be something he carried into lovemaking. Thus far he hadn't harmed her and by his size and strength he could have crushed her easily.

Even now his lips traveled firmly, but not roughly, down her neck and shoulder. Those moist, teasing kisses stirred her desire yet also relaxed her. As if sensing this, he slid another finger inside her. Bera spread her legs a bit wider to accommodate him. While his fingers stroked her soft, hidden flesh, his thumb swept over her swollen clit.

Moaning, Bera arched against him.

"This is how it should be, Bera," he said.

"How you want it to be."

Again he chuckled and said, "How I want it to be? You're stubborn. I appreciate that. A woman who bends too easily to her man's will is boring."

"You took me," she reminded him.

"Open your eyes, Bera," he ordered, a commanding edge to his voice.

She obeyed, yet couldn't help staring at him with defiance. His skilled thumb circled her clit faster, then gently swept over its center with upward strokes. Intense pleasure broke over her and she gasped, her eyes closing.

"Keep your eyes open. I want you to look at me."

Taking her lower lip between her teeth to keep from crying out with desire, she stared at him. His face looked as steely as his sword, except for the passion burning in his dark eyes. His free hand grasped her breast and kneaded gently. The rough flesh of his palm teased her stiff nipple to an even harder and more sensitive peak. Bera grasped his powerful shoulders for support. With his hand stroking between her legs and the other fondling her breast, she was scarcely able to stand.

"I want to see your eyes and I want to hear the truth from your lips," he said, his voice so rough with pleasure it was almost a growl.

"What...truth?" she panted, her voice jerky as she neared the edge of overwhelming sensation. Her clit was so sensitive that she knew another stroke or two would hurl her into bliss. And she wanted it. Desperately.

"That you want me as much as I want you."

"Is this another... Oh gods," she gasped, her fingers sinking into his shoulders. Her eyelids fluttered.

"Look at me!" He paused in his caresses and she forced herself to meet his gaze.

Her breathing was out of control and she trembled more from pleasure than from the chill of the water because by now she was actually quite warm.

"Is this another marriage proposal?" she asked.

"I already told you we're going to get married."

"A woman likes to be asked."

"I already did."

"And I refused. Oh!" Bera moaned as he stroked her clit a few more times. The pleasure was so keen she was surprised she didn't burst, yet he was remarkably in tune with her body and knew how to keep her teetering on the brink.

"This is just the beginning for us. Right now I'm giving you a mere taste of how our life will be," he continued, his lips inches from hers. "I'm pleasuring you because it is my wish to make you happy."

"By abducting me?"

"By saving you from a bad marriage to one of two men who don't know the meaning of compassion and who couldn't care less for you. By showing you that I can give you what you need. I haven't forced you. You wanted my touch tonight. Admit it."

"All right I admit it," she breathed, wiggling against his hand. "Erik, please."

The faintest smile touched his lips. "Please what?"

"Please keep touching me."

"Because you enjoy it?"

"Yes." Gods, his fingers were still inside her and his thumb rested against her clit. He'd already stirred her so much that even without stroking she might come from the simple pressure of his hand.

His fingers gently plucked her nipple and Bera arched her neck back. Her entire body felt flushed in spite of the water and her heartbeat throbbed in her ears.

"And why else?" he demanded.

"What else is there?" She tried to keep her voice steady, even angry, yet it was impossible. Instead her words came out like a plea.

"You tell me, beautiful Bera." His thumb swept over her clit just once, but that was too much.

"Because I want you, Erik," she sobbed, clinging to him tightly. "I want you so badly!"

He rolled his thumb rhythmically over her clit while at the same time he bent his head and captured her nipple between his lips. His tongue swept over it and Bera cried out and burst in unimaginable pleasure. This time she couldn't have opened her eyes for any reason. Her body pulsed and surged, thrashing against Erik who never stopped stroking her clit or sucking her nipple until she sagged against him, completely sated.

Bera didn't even open her eyes when he swept her up and carried her out of the water. She languidly draped her arms around his neck and rested her face against his shoulder.

After a moment, she recovered and what she'd done struck her with the force of an arrowhead. So many emotions crashed over her that her mind spun. She should still be furious with him, but she wasn't. He had taken her from her home by force, but he certainly hadn't forced her into what they'd just done. She'd wanted it and she wanted him, but for pride's sake she couldn't surrender to him completely. At least not so soon.

"Put me down please," she said coolly.

He gazed at her, his brow furrowed.

"I said —"

"I heard you. Bera, there is no need to feel ashamed for experiencing pleasure. That was my intention."

Now her anger really stirred. "What makes you think I'm ashamed?"

"You were innocent until I touched you. A woman of your age who was yet untouched is bound to feel uncomfortable the first time she's pleased by a man. That's why I wanted to do it this way."

Bera's mouth opened but for a moment nothing came out. Then she punched his rock-hard shoulder and said, "You arrogant, self-absorbed, not to mention ignorant goat. I said put me down!"

"Ignorant?" He released her so abruptly she stumbled and fell onto her backside in the mud. "What do you mean ignorant?"

"I mean what makes you think I'm ashamed? You're the one who should be ashamed for abducting the daughter of your King, labeling her a slave and forcing her to do...such things."

Now he looked completely taken aback. "Force? What happened to 'I want you, Erik. I want you so badly'?"



"What did you expect me to say? Look how you teased me. A woman would have to be an iceberg to ignore your sly touches."

"Then you admit you enjoyed it? I gave you the option to refuse."

Having no answer for that, Bera did the only thing she could think of to keep her dignity. She kicked Erik hard in the shin.

He grunted, cursed so loudly they probably heard him back at the longhouse and bent to rub his leg. Bera stood and walked toward her clothes.

"What do you think you're doing?" he growled.

"Dressing."

"No. For your insolence you will be punished." He tore her clothes from her grasp. "You may not have these clothes until I return them to you."

"My insolence, you great oaf? You abducted me."

He glanced at her, an arrogant smile on his lips. "Wash my clothes as I told you to, then I'll think about returning yours. Obviously you have not been taught obedience. That will change."

"If my father knew what you've done he could send you into outlawry. He could even have you killed."

"Is that what you want?"

She paused, her gaze sweeping him from head to toe. Not that she wouldn't like to repay him for some of the things he'd done, but she didn't want any real harm come to him. Especially since she had hopes for the future that included him.

"Well?" he demanded.

"No...not that exactly."

"Then wash my clothes."

Bera stared at him, her heart pounding, this time from rage instead of lust. If she spent any length of time with this man, he would surely kill her from emotional

turmoil. One moment she wanted to kiss him. The next she wanted to kick him. Sometimes she wanted to do both at once.

She was already starting to tremble from the coolness of the night and knew this handsome beast would make her return to the longhouse naked. Grudgingly she picked up his dung-stained clothes, walked to the river and began scrubbing them against the rocks.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Erik donning his dry clothes that were piled by a tree—the same clothes Grim had left the longhouse with earlier. Then he sat on a fallen log, his long legs spread apart and his hands resting on his knees. The entire time she knelt by the river, his gaze never left her.

Bera shivered, her nipples hard as pebbles, and finished washing the clothes as quickly as she could. Finally she approached him, her jaw taut with scarcely repressed anger. She flung his wet, but clean, garments at his feet.

“Now give me my clothes,” she demanded. “Unless you want me to freeze to death.”

An irritating smile touched his lips and his gaze swept her, lingering over her stiff, dark pink nipples.

“You’re lovely like this,” he said and reached out to caress one of her breasts.

Snorting with rage, she took a step back.

This only made his smile broaden. He stood, towering over her, and handed her the garments.

Bera dressed quickly, grateful for the warmth of the clothes.

“You’re an entertaining woman. As I said earlier, this is only the beginning for us.”

She glared. “Maybe it’s the end.”

“We’ll see what happens when we’re alone and warm in the bed closet.”

She drew a deep breath. Already she tingled with desire for his touch and his kiss, but she refused to admit it.

"Come," he said and turned toward the path. "It's getting dark and I'm hungry."

Bera realized she was hungry too. Her stomach growled and her mouth watered for a taste of the stew cooking in the longhouse.

She followed Erik. One thing was certain, until now her life had never been so interesting.

## **Chapter Four**

At the longhouse, Erik took his place on the bench toward the center of the room. Grim and Sigfred were already seated there, eating stew from their bowls. Bera glanced at Erik and tried to slip into the shadows, but he called to her.

“Bera, bring food and ale.”

She glared at him, but also noticed how the women as well as some of the warriors watched her. If she spoke back or refused, they would expect her to be punished or else deem him weak. Most, except for his brothers and the warriors who’d traveled with him to see her father, believed she was a slave. Yes he had just treated her most tenderly by the creek, but she didn’t know how he’d react to being insulted in his home, in front of his people.

“She’s hesitating, Erik,” said Ragnar with a throaty chuckle. Though he hadn’t spoken badly to her since Erik had reprimanded him on the ship, there was no mistaking the lust in his eyes whenever he looked at her.

“Maybe because she’s still recovering,” Sigfred said, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “They were so late they almost missed supper.”

“I’ll bring your food,” Hildirid said, rising from her place by the fire.

Bera glanced at her, her stomach clenched with annoyance. As the pretty blond-haired woman stepped past her, Bera rested a hand on her arm and said, “I will get his food. Why don’t you serve Ragnar?”

“Now there’s an idea,” Ragnar said, turning his leering gaze to Hildirid who shrugged and made her way toward the burly older man.

It seemed she didn’t care who she served, as long as she could use her wiles on a man.

Bera wasn't sure why she decided to bend to Erik's will tonight. Maybe because she knew that if she feigned obedience he would protect her from men like Ragnar. Or maybe it was because she found more pleasure in goading him in private. Just thinking about their moments by the creek sent her heart racing and made her damp with lust.

She filled a bowl with meaty stew, relishing the aroma. Then she cut a thick slice of bread, glad to note that Erik's people had the privilege of an oven. The settlement where she'd grown up with Finna and the metal worker hadn't been that wealthy, but since moving in with her father, she had grown accustomed to having freshly baked bread on daily basis.

A pang of worry darted through Bera at the thought of her foster mother. No doubt Finna was worried greatly over Bera's disappearance. Asgerd and the King were probably concerned as well. Erik had promised they would return to them to negotiate their marriage. Hopefully she could convince him to do so before winter set in.

She didn't want Finna upset, especially since Bera was safe. Yes Erik was rough, but he didn't seem to be unnecessarily cruel. Perhaps once they got to know each other better and she explained her concern about her foster mother, he would agree to rectify their situation quickly.

She brought the food to him and as he took the bowl from her hand, his gaze held hers.

"Bring ale," he ordered.

Gritting her teeth against telling him exactly what he could do with his ale, she turned away. Helga stood behind her with a mug already filled. Bera took the drink from the old woman who nodded slightly and nudged her back toward Erik.

He was engaged in conversation with Grim. Something about trading.

"Your ale," Bera said.

Erik turned to her, desire burning in his dark eyes. This stoked her passion and she tried not to wriggle against the wonderful yet frustrating ache between her legs. He took the mug and placed it on the table while at the same time he grasped her arm. She

gasped as he tugged her onto his lap. One arm wrapped firmly around her waist. She glanced at him, emotions once again battling inside her.

“Erik,” laughed one of the warriors seated across the room on a bench, “you’re going to spoil that slave.”

“She’s no slave,” Hildirid said in a mocking tone. “She’s the King’s daughter.”

“She’s the flames in Erik’s funeral pyre,” Grim muttered softly and stood from the table, deliberately knocking over his empty mug. The flame-haired warrior strode out of the longhouse.

Sighing, Sigfred shook his head. “I don’t think Grim will be with us much longer, brother,” he said to Erik.

“Grim is a good warrior,” Erik stated. “But he’s a wild spirit. He will cause no trouble here, but he will go one day soon to claim a place for himself elsewhere.”

“He doesn’t look much like you and Sigfred,” Bera observed. “Considering he is your brother.”

“Half brother,” Sigfred said. “His mother was a slave from a settlement far south of here.”

“Enough about Grim.” Erik smiled at Bera and tightened his grip on her momentarily.

She’d instinctively slid an arm around his neck. Her hand strayed to his thick black hair, still damp from his swim, and she threaded her fingers through it.

Cupping the back of her head, Erik drew her closer for a kiss. When it broke, he reached for his bowl and grinned, “You better eat, woman, and keep your strength up. You’re going to need it.”

Several people who sat close by chuckled at his words and raised their mugs.

Selecting a thick chunk of meat from the bowl, Erik held it to her lips. Bera hesitated a moment, but her rumbling stomach beat her sense of modesty. She took a bite of the meat, savoring the tender, juicy morsel.

Erik tossed the remainder of it into his mouth and chewed slowly, his gaze still burning into hers. He only glanced away to choose another piece of meat and shared it with her the same way.

Enjoying the game, Bera picked up the next piece of meat and held it to his lips, but instead of merely taking a bite, he took her fingers into his mouth as well. He nipped them playfully and rolled his tongue over them. Bera breathed deeply. Her nipples stiffened beneath her shift and this time she couldn't help squirming a bit, not only because of the tingling between her legs but because his swollen cock was pushing against her.

In spite of her hunger, food was no longer the most important thing on her mind. Erik had pleased her by the creek, but hadn't satisfied his needs. He'd promised to do so tonight in the bed closet. More than anything she longed to feel his thick shaft inside her, just as his fingers had been. Except something told her it would be so much better. She wanted to feel her hot, wet flesh pulsing around his magnificent shaft. She wanted to cling to his powerful body and let him pleasure her again.

"Your eyes are like flames," he said, his voice soft and deep. He lifted a hand to caress her cheek. "And your face is flushed."

"It's warm in here," she whispered. "With the fire and —"

He silenced her with another kiss, this one deeper than before. His tongue thrust into her mouth and her tongue met it with ravenous strokes. Part of her felt embarrassed kissing him like this with everyone around, yet no one seemed to care.

When the kiss broke, he took a swallow of ale then offered her the mug.

Bera took it and drank deeply. When she placed the mug aside, Erik kissed her again, taking her lower lip between his and licking away any remaining droplets of ale. Then he sucked gently on her lip and bit it lightly.

His cock grew even harder, pressing against her and hinting of pleasures to come.

A soft moan escaped Bera and she tightened her hold on him. Erik's hand stroked her inner thigh. His thumb slid along her groin and Bera writhed a bit, finding that particular spot ticklish.

Chuckling softly, Erik again teased her with his thumb, then removed his hand from her leg and continued eating.

Bera nibbled at the food, though it took a few moments for her heartbeat to slow and the wonderful, throbbing ache in her clit to subside. She shifted her position slightly on his knee, feeling the damp, sticky sensation between her thighs.

When the meal finally ended, Erik released Bera so that she could help the women clean up while he, Sigfred and some of the other men engaged in a game of dice.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to resist Erik," said Hildirid who had joined Bera in clearing the tables.

"I might have been wrong about some things regarding him," Bera admitted. "But that doesn't change the fact that I'm here against my will."

"As we told you before, we could be serving a far worse master. And remember, Bera, just because Erik wants you tonight doesn't mean he'll want you tomorrow." Hildirid cast her a goading look that raised Bera's ire.

"And you should remember, Hildirid, that not all things are as they appear."

The blond raised her eyes skyward. "You're not still holding onto that story about being the King's daughter?"

A loud thud from across the room interrupted their conversation.

Cnut sprawled on his back, Ragnar standing over him, his hands balled into fists.

"Insolent pup!" Ragnar bellowed.

"I won fairly," Cnut stated, pushing himself to his feet. No sooner had he stood than Ragnar swung at him again. This time Cnut ducked the blow and landed one of his own in Ragnar's gut. The punch seemed to do no damage and the burly warrior advanced on the young man. They circled each other, fists raised for a brawl.



"If the game had gone on longer, I would have won," Ragnar growled.

Cnut, his lip curled. "But the point is, old man, the game is over *now* because I wo—  
"

Ragnar's battle cry cut off Cnut's words. The hulking, gray-haired warrior charged and in spite of Cnut's swinging fists, knocked the youth onto the floor. Several women seated nearby leapt out of the way to avoid the men's rolling bodies.

"I thought you'd know by now to let him win, Cnut." Sigfred chuckled.

On the floor, Cnut sat on top of Ragnar's chest, one hand tight on the older man's throat while he drew back his fist. Before the punch landed, Ragnar somehow reversed their position and punched Cnut. Blood spurted from the youth's nose.

Bera and Hildirid had paused to watch the fight. While it wasn't unusual for men to alleviate boredom by fighting over things like this dice game, she still considered it silly.

Hildirid snorted with laughter and shook her head. "Those two are always at it. Like father, like son."

Raising an eyebrow, Bera said, "I never would have guessed Cnut was Ragnar's son."

"He looks like his mother, but he inherited his father's temper as well as his appetite." Hildirid grinned. Leaning closer to Bera, she whispered, "And they both wield huge swords, if you get my meaning."

Glancing at Hildirid, Bera wondered if there was a man in this settlement she *hadn't* bedded.

Ragnar pinned Cnut face-down on the floor, his arms twisted behind his back. In spite of his advanced years, Ragnar was still as strong as an angry bear.

"Had enough, boy?"

"Why, are you getting tired, old man?" Cnut ground out.

"Cnut, it's time to admit defeat," Sigfred said, still laughing.

Erik strode toward the two wrestling men and punched Ragnar in the shoulder. "Enough. Don't break his arm now. We need him for when we go trading in a few days."

"Not until he admits defeat," the old warrior grunted.

"I won the game. Everyone saw."

"I'm not talking about the game," Ragnar said. "I mean the fight."

"You won, Ragnar. We all saw," Erik said. He straddled the warriors, sliding his arm around Ragnar's neck and cutting off his breath. "Let him go."

"You're stubborn like your mother was," Ragnar chocked out, but finally released his hold on Cnut.

Erik dropped his arm from Ragnar's neck and all three stood. Cnut wiped his arm across his bloodied face. Hildirid filled two mugs with ale and brought one to Cnut and the other to Ragnar. The old warrior downed the ale in a gulp, wrapped an arm around Hildirid and kissed her roughly.

Still wiping blood from his nose between sips of ale, Cnut glanced around the room. "Who wants to lose at dice next?"

Shaking his head, a smile flirting with his sensual mouth, Erik walked toward Bera while behind him Sigfred approached Cnut for a game.

"I've had enough foolishness," Erik said. "It's time to go to sleep, Bera."

The heated look in his eyes told her that sleep was actually the last thing on his mind.

"Come," he said, grasping her hand in his big, warm one and tugging her toward the bed closet.

Bera felt almost dizzy with passion and a hint of fear. Though she longed to feel Erik's mighty shaft between her legs and believed he would not hurt her intentionally, she'd heard from other women that coupling for the first time could be painful. By the

size of Erik's cock, she couldn't fathom taking him inside her without at least some pain.

She also had other concerns. Now that he knew she desired him, would he still keep his promise to marry her? If he wanted to pay her back for refusing him, he could easily bed her and then discard her. Of course that would mean risking her father's wrath, but to a man like Erik, who seemed to take what he wanted whenever he wanted it, would that matter to him? Even the King knew Erik was among his richest, most powerful warriors. What if he could overthrow her father? What if that had been his intention all along and snaring her was merely a way to initiate the battle?

They stepped into the bed closet, a small but cozy room with a bed covered in fur blankets, a locked chest most likely containing Erik's personal belongings and a trunk for clothing. On top of the trunk rested Erik's round battle helmet and on the walls hung various swords, axes and daggers.

Bera walked to the wall and gazed at an ornate gold and silver dagger. The door closed and she gave a little gasp and spun to face Erik. His gleaming eyes fixed on her and he pulled off his tunic, baring his gorgeous torso. Muscles rippled in his broad shoulders and powerful arms. Candlelight flickered across his chest, revealing the contrast of his tanned flesh and the flat pink nipples against the black hair. Shadows from the flames danced over his sleek stomach and lean waist.

The sight of his body stole her breath, but she needed to think clearly. Already he'd touched her heart in ways she shouldn't allow until he made good on his intentions. No matter how much she desired him, she couldn't fully trust a man who had whisked her away from home without consent.

Flinging his tunic onto the trunk, he approached Bera who stepped away.

"What's wrong?" he asked, striding toward her until her back pressed against the wall.

"You know what's wrong," she said.

“All I know is you want me as much as I want you.” He braced his hands on either side of her head against the wall, trapping her between arms that resembled cut stone. “Don’t deny it, Bera.”

“I don’t,” she admitted, holding his gaze and trying not to melt beneath the flames burning in his large, dark eyes.

“Good.” He dipped his head closer and brushed her mouth with a kiss.

His lips felt firm and slightly moist and his beard tickled her flesh. His mouth moved against hers, slow yet demanding. A soft moan escaped her when he sucked her upper lip, then her lower one. Then he thrust his tongue into her mouth, stroking and exploring.

Her tongue caressed his and matched its hungry rhythm. Though Bera longed to embrace him, to press her body close to his and weave her fingers through his hair, she fought the urge.

When the kiss broke, his eyes narrowed as if in question. “What’s troubling you, beautiful Bera?”

“You abducted me.”

“I explained my reasons and I thought you’ve come to accept them.”

“My sister and my foster mother are probably very worried. I’m sure my father is concerned as well. I want them to know I’m safe.”

Erik sighed and closed his eyes. He leaned nearer, so his forehead rested lightly against hers. Bera also shut her eyes for a moment, a feeling of weakness breaking over her. What was it about this man that tugged at her heart and turned her legs to water?

“I understand,” he said.

“Do you really intend to marry me?”

Moving his head back just enough to meet her gaze, he said, “As soon as possible.”

“Before the winter comes.”

Again his head tilted toward her and he spoke against her lips, "That can be arranged."

Bera wanted to believe him. Her heart told her that she had to believe him, yet a little voice in the back of her mind warned against being a fool simply because she lusted after the man.

No. It was more than lust. Everything about Erik aroused her, even his annoying arrogance.

"In five days my men and I leave to trade at Hedeby. When we return, I will take you back to your father and make the marriage arrangements."

This news excited Bera, yet she remained calm, not wishing to appear too eager and trusting.

"Does that satisfy you, woman?"

"That sounds fair, if you keep your promise."

"My word is good."

Their gazes locked, she nodded slightly.

"Now let's see what other ways I can satisfy you," he purred, nuzzling her neck.

Bera closed her eyes and tilted her head to the side, making it easier for him to lick and kiss her neck. Little shivers of delight rolled through her with every feathery touch of his lips and warm, wet swipe of his tongue. Unable to resist any longer, she slid her arms around him.

She wanted to touch every inch of him. Caressing his back, she felt the ridges of old scars and the ripple of muscles beneath his warm flesh. She ran her fingers down the length of his spine and slid her hands beneath the waist of his trousers to grasp his smooth, hard buttocks.

"You're a wanton wench," he growled close to her ear then nipped the lobe.

"I never was before."

Again he stared into her eyes and cupped the back of her head, his fingers caressing her hair. "Now that you are, it's just for me. While I live, Bera, you will belong to no other man."

"And you?" she said with another twinge of jealousy as she thought about Hildirid. "I have heard from these slave women you seldom sleep alone."

"That was before."

"Good because if you think Cnut and Ragnar were fighting, that's nothing compared to what I'll do to any woman I find in your bed."

Erik grinned and tightened his fist in her hair, not painfully but possessively. "There can be no woman other than you. I knew that from the moment I saw you."

His words overwhelmed her and this time *she* kissed *him*. Clinging to his neck, she closed her eyes and slid her tongue into his mouth. He welcomed it but quickly took control of the kiss, pressing her against the wall and cupping her breasts. Bera arched against him and moaned, her tongue responding eagerly to every demanding thrust of his.

Groaning with passion, he raised her dress and the shift beneath then used his knee to spread her legs. She eagerly followed his lead and gave a little shout of pleasure and surprise when he slid one of his long, steely thighs between hers. It pressed where she was so hot and wet and Bera couldn't resist rubbing against his leg.

"Oh Erik," she panted against his lips.

He kissed her again and as he did began unfastening her brooches. This time he fumbled a bit, but she understood why. The passion burning between them was even greater now than it had been at the creek. Bera could scarcely wait for them to shed their clothes. She wanted to feel his naked body against hers and she wanted him to show her the greatest pleasure a woman could know.

Erik stepped away only to yank off his boots and remove his trousers. Her breathing quick and heart pounding, Bera finished undressing as well. She managed to pull off her dress and shift, but had yet to remove her boots before he swept her into his

arms and carried her to the bed. He tossed her upon it, but that bit of roughness only aroused her more. Leaning one knee on the bed, he pulled off one of her boots then the other. He pulled off her stockings, kissing her knee to ankle as her flesh was bared.

When she was finally naked, he tugged the fur blankets out from under her and covered her with them, then climbed beneath with her. He drew her into his arms and Bera went willingly. She clung to his neck and relished the hardness of his muscles and the cushion of his curling chest hair against her soft, full breasts. His stiff cock pressed against her and his long, steely legs entangled with hers.

“Beautiful Bera,” he said, his voice husky. He trailed his tongue along the side of her neck.

Cuddling closer, Bera ran her bare feet up and down his hard, hairy calves. She caressed his back and grasped his buttocks.

Erik kissed her mouth, then her chin. He grasped her waist and hauled her up his body until he captured one of her nipples between his lips.

With a little cry of pleasure, Bera wriggled against him. His wet tongue teased her nipple then his teeth gently scraped over the sensitive peak. Lost in a mist of pleasure, Bera braced her knees against his lean waist, clasping him as she would a galloping horse.

Erik pressed her breasts together and ran his tongue from one nipple to the other. He took one and tugged upon it then nipped the other.

Panting and writhing, Bera surrendered to him completely. He rolled onto his back, guiding her on top of him. The blankets fell off her shoulders, but she didn't care. They were creating enough heat to keep them warm.

Straddling his waist, Bera felt his thick, hard cock pressing against the indentation of her buttocks. She wiggled and Erik grunted with desire. He kneaded her breasts and lightly pinched the nipples. One hand reached up to caress her face and Bera grasped his wrists. She guided his hand toward her mouth and took his finger between her lips.

For some strange reason she found his hands beautiful. They were large and rough from years of carrying weapons and working on land and at sea, but they aroused her greatly. They were such masculine hands yet they'd touched her gently. She ran her tongue over his palm, feeling the harshness of his calloused flesh, then she sucked two of his fingers, the tip of her tongue teasing the tips of each long, slender digit.

He groaned and moved his free hand between her legs. Rising a bit higher on her knees, she moaned softly as he slid his fingers inside her and explored. He withdrew his fingers, now soaked with her essence, and rubbed them over her clit. Bera gave another little cry and rocked her hips against his hand.

Erik tugged his hand from her mouth and trailed it between her breasts. Then he grasped one of the soft mounds and kneaded to the same rhythm as his fingers against her clit.

To Bera nothing else mattered at that moment but reaching the peak of ecstasy he'd pushed her to at the creek. By the pounding of her heart and the marvelous tightening in her belly, she knew it would be soon.

Then he stopped stroking her and placed his hands on her hips.

"Bera," he said, his voice rough with passion.

She opened her eyes and met his gaze.

"Rise up and take my shaft."

Her lips parted, she did as he asked, rising to her knees and moving back slightly. She wrapped her hand around his shaft that was even bigger and harder than it had been at the lake. It surprised her how something so thick and solid was covered in skin as soft as a foal's belly. That contradiction incited her desire even more. Instinctively, she ran her hand up and down the shaft. Erik must have liked the sensation because he closed his eyes and arched his neck, another groan escaping his throat.

She continued stroking him, changing her speed and rhythm until he placed his hand over hers and said in a strained voice, "That's enough."



"I thought you liked it?"

He smiled slightly, his eyes gleaming with desire. "I do, but any longer and I'll be spent before going to market."

Bera smiled. "Oh. I see. And tonight the trading is going to be good?"

"Worth more than a hundred ships filled with gold. Now take my shaft and put it inside you."

For the first time Bera hesitated. He was quite large, but just the thought of feeling that hard yet silken cock inside her had her throbbing with need.

"Don't be afraid," he said, cupping her chin and staring into her eyes. "There will be some pain at first, then pleasure. I promise."

"I'm not sure I understand why..." She closed eyes for a moment. "I heard most men take women while they lie beneath them."

"We'll do it that way as well, but this time I want you to be in control. I don't want you frightened or hurt. I will never hurt you, Bera. That's another promise."

She nodded and her fear dissipated. Erik might be arrogant. He might take what he wanted, but she believed he cared for her. His actions thus far had proved it.

Placing the bulging tip of his cock to her pussy, she paused a moment. Her entrance was very slick and though he was large he slid in more easily than she'd imagined. She released his shaft and Erik grasped her hands, allowing her to lean into them as she continued lowering herself upon him. Gasping with the slightly painful and unfamiliar yet not entirely unwelcome sensation of his cock filling her, she tightened her fingers on his. He was right about the discomfort, but she'd imagined it to be far worse than it actually was.

She drew a deep breath, opened her eyes and found him staring at her with such intensity that a new flood of passion overtook her.

Instinctively, she rocked upon him and soon the discomfort faded, driven off by new and more powerful sensations.

“Oh, Erik,” she breathed, her eyes fluttering shut.

“Beautiful Bera.”

She arched her back and rocked her hips, her breasts thrust toward him. He reached up and kneaded them, his calloused palms and stroking fingers teasing her nipples. Then with a swiftness that almost stole her breath, he shifted their position. Bera found herself on her back, pinned beneath his powerful body. Now he took control of her, or perhaps he had always been the one in control—guiding her. Teaching her the beauty and bliss that only existed between a man and a woman.

His cock stroked into her, stirring her lust and pushing her higher and higher.

“Erik, please,” she gasped, clinging to his neck and wrapping her legs around him.

He kissed her neck roughly as his passion grew, though as he’d promised he never thrust savagely or caused her pain. Pain was actually the last thing on her mind. What he brought was the most intense pleasure she’d ever felt in her life.

Mindlessly chanting his name, she caressed his shoulders and back, loving the feel of his straining muscles beneath flesh now hot and damp with desire. He silenced her with a kiss. His tongue thrust into her mouth, matching the rhythm of his pumping hips.

Bera trembled with need. Clinging to him even harder, she felt like a thread pulled so tight it was bound to snap.

After several more wild thrusts, that thread broke inside her. Her entire body pulsed with pleasure. She tingled from the roots of her hair to the bottoms of her feet.

Tearing his mouth from hers, Erik gave a savage cry and stiffened, his hips jabbing into her drenched, throbbing pussy as he joined her in ecstasy.

He rolled onto his side and pulled her close. Resting her head against his heaving chest, she listened to his pounding heart and relished the feel of their entangled bodies.

After a moment, he reached down and pulled the blanket over them. He brushed her mouth with a kiss and Bera smiled, cuddling close as they drifted to sleep.

## **Chapter Five**

When Bera awoke the next morning, Erik had already left the bed closet. Concerned that she'd overslept, she jumped up, fixed her hair in a bun and dressed quickly. Though some people had already risen, such as Helga who was slicing bread for the morning meal, most were still lying on the benches or snuggled on the floor near the fire.

Bera exchanged greetings with the old woman, then went outside. It was just after dawn and the morning was brisk but Bera enjoyed the cool, fresh air. After washing her face, she filled a bucket with water and brought it back to the longhouse. On her way, she saw other people starting to go about the daily work. She passed by Sigfred who stood in a field teaching two young boys how to fight with their wood swords.

"Where is Erik?" she asked.

"In the storage house with Cnut deciding what we're going to bring for trade in Hedeby," Sigfred replied and pointed to a nearby building.

She nodded, tempted to look in and at least say good morning, yet she knew Helga and the others were waiting for the water. The familiar sound of iron striking iron caught her attention. Growing up in the home of a metal worker, she had heard that sound each day. Glancing toward the forge, she caught sight of Grim standing shirtless by an anvil and using a hammer to shape a new blade.

She ventured closer, a faint smile on her lips as she remembered her foster father. He'd been a good man and though her blood father was King, she'd always hoped to marry a man like the blacksmith. A little thrill shot through her when she realized that in Erik, she might have found a man who combined both their qualities. He was a powerful leader like the King, but yesterday he had proved that he also had a tender side.

Grim paused a moment, his piercing blue eyes shifting in her direction. "What do you want?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking about my foster father. He was a metal worker too."

The redhead turned back to his work, ignoring her completely.

She was about to turn away when he said, "So was mine."

Had she actually found a topic that interested this sullen warrior?

"You have an interest in metal working?" he asked.

"I used to help my foster father sometimes."

Grim snorted with laughter. "Doing what? This is a man's work."

She lifted her chin. "He had no sons and sometimes let me do things girls weren't allowed to. I've made daggers and jewelry."

His eyes narrowed almost to slits as he studied her. Stepping away from the anvil, he offered her his hammer. "Show me."

"You think I'm lying? Why does everyone in this place think I'm lying about everything?"

She dropped the bucket, not caring that some water sloshed onto her shoes, and strode toward him. Taking the hammer, she approached the anvil and set to work. Within moments she became so involved that she didn't realize how many spectators she'd attracted until their laughter nabbed her attention.

Glancing toward the open door, she saw Sigfred, Ragnar and several other men had gathered to watch her.

"Tell me, wench, do you wield a sword too?" Ragnar chuckled.

Anger stirred inside Bera, then she realized his expression was more amused than mocking. Grim approached and examined the blade she'd been working on.

"Not bad," he said under his breath. "Not bad at all. But if you swing this way, you'll have more control." He grasped her hand that still clasped the hammer. Holding down the blade, he guided her motions as metal struck metal.

"What in the name of Thor's hammer is going on in here?" Erik bellowed, shoving his way through the crowd. His brow furrowed and his dark eyes blazed as he stared at Bera, her body pressed close to Grim's half-naked one.

"Erik." Grim released her and stepped away.

"This isn't what you think," Bera said, stepping between the brothers as Erik advanced on Grim. Though the redhead stood his ground, he watched his brother warily.

"What do you think I think?" Erik growled, his hands curled into fists. He was so furious that his bared teeth gleamed against his black beard.

"I think you're wrong about whatever you're thinking," she stated, trying not to look as frightened as she felt. Last night he'd been so gentle, but now he looked as if he could defeat every warrior in Valhalla.

"If you think I think...I don't care what anyone thinks! I know what I saw. Brother, you have gone too far. Outside. Now. And bring your sword. On second thought forget the sword. I'm going to tear you apart with my bare hands."

"Don't be so sure," Grim said in a deadly calm voice. "I don't want to fight you, Erik, especially over something as foolish as a woman, but I will defend myself if I have to."

"You should have thought of that before you took liberties with my woman."

"I did nothing of the sort."

"This is madness!" Bera said firmly, though she trembled. She placed her hands against Erik's chest as he took another step toward Grim. His heart pounded against her palms and the look of rage and jealousy in his eyes struck her to the core. If she couldn't get him to see reason now, what sort of life would they have together? "I am telling you all Grim did was show me a better technique with the hammer."

"What are you doing working metal in the first place?" he demanded. "You're not here to work metal. You're here to—"

“Wash dung out of your clothes?” she shouted. “And warm your bed? I don’t believe this! If you want to kill your own brother for no reason, then go ahead. I’m finished.” She tossed aside the hammer and stomped toward the door, pushing her way past the men who still stood around, gaping at the spectacle. “Out of my way! Have you nothing better to do than stand around like old crones looking for gossip?”

She picked up the water bucket and marched toward the longhouse. She should have gone directly there without making a stop.

Inside, she approached Helga and Freya who stood by the fire, tossing ingredients for stew into a large cauldron.

“What’s wrong?” Freya asked.

“Everything,” Bera said. “I think Erik and Grim are going to fight and it’s my fault.”

Freya chuckled. “The brothers are always bickering. They’re almost as bad as Cnut and Ragnar. They’ll get over it.”

“Why is it your fault?” Helga asked.

“I was talking to Grim about metal working techniques and Erik thought he and I were... Well it simply wasn’t true! Grim has no interest in me and I have none in him.”

“It doesn’t matter. Jealousy colors a man’s vision,” Helga said. “You and Erik are new to each other. Trust takes time to build.”

Trust. She was the one who shouldn’t trust him, not the other way around. He had abducted her.

A short time later, Bera stood working at a weaving loom when Erik strode into the longhouse. The sight of him made Bera’s heart skip a beat. Still she turned her back to him but wasn’t surprised when she felt his hands on her shoulders and the tickle of his beard against her ear as he whispered, “Come with me.”

“I have work to do.”

“It can wait.”

She turned to face him and gave a little gasp. One of his beautiful eyes was swollen shut, the flesh around it blackened.

"Did you kill him?" she whispered.

His brow furrowed. "Are you concerned?"

"Yes, but not for the reasons you think."

"Let's not start that again. Come." He took her hand and guided her out of the longhouse.

On a nearby tree stump, Grim, the front of his tunic stained with blood, sat while Sigfred, one foot braced against the side of the stump, forced a wad of cloth up the redhead's left nostril.

"That's enough," Grim growled.

"I have to keep pressure on it or else it won't stop bleeding," Sigfred told him. "I'm surprised he didn't break your nose."

"So you want to make sure it breaks after all. I said no more."

"All right." Sigfred stepped away, panting from exertion. "I think that should stop the flow." He glanced in Erik's direction and waved.

Grim also turned to Erik, his blue eyes narrowed in a combination of rage and the discomfort of the cloth up his nose.

"All this over a woman," Grim said with disgust.

Erik draped an arm around Bera and held her close. "Some women are worth it."

"I thought you said you believed nothing happened?" Grim demanded.

"I do believe you. If I didn't, you wouldn't still be breathing, even if it is only through one nostril."

"I'd rather have one nostril than be half blind."

Erik's lip twisted in a wicked grin. "I don't know about that. Odin had just one eye, so I'm not in bad company."

"At least he gave it up for the sake of wisdom," Grim said.

“What do you want with me?” Bera asked, wary. If he believed they were innocent yet had still punished Grim, what did he intend to do with her?

“Many things, beautiful Bera,” he said, guiding her toward the storage shed.

“Do you plan on beating me too?” she asked with more courage than she felt.

He glanced at her, his brow furrowed. “Of course not.”

Inside the storage shed, he closed the door behind them and dragged a barrel in front of it. They were quite alone amidst the many barrels and trunks. He sat on a trunk and pulled her face-down across his lap. Before she had a chance to react, he pulled up her dress and smacked her bottom.

“What are you doing?” she shouted, struggling to stand, but it was impossible. He held her down easily and smacked her buttocks again, not painfully, but just enough to smart. “I thought you said you weren’t going to beat me?”

“This isn’t beating. This is pleasurable punishment. There’s a great difference.” Again he struck her behind.

“Let me up, you great oaf! Oh!” she cried when his big hand smacked her firmly.

She clenched her buttocks, prepared for the next whack. By now her ass felt warm and tingly. After the next smack he lightly caressed her stinging bottom and the sensation aroused her more than she wanted to admit.

“You have no reason to do this. Grim and I did nothing wrong.”

“This has nothing to do with Grim,” he said. “I know you did nothing wrong.”

“Then why...” Her voice trailed off as he dipped his hand between her legs. His fingers slid easily into her pussy, which had become quite slick with passion.

“Erik, don’t,” she breathed, her eyes fluttering shut. “Not here.”

“Why? It’s as private as the bed closet.” He guided her to her feet and positioned her in front of him, her back to him. Holding up her skirt, he began covering her backside with kisses. His warm, wet tongue swept over her flesh, made sensitive from the pleasurable punishment.



Draping her skirts over his head, he continued kissing her bottom while his hands caressed her inner thighs. One hand fondled her pussy, his fingertips gathering moisture. Then he stroked her clit. His damp fingers against her already tingling flesh soon had her teetering on the edge of fulfillment.

"Please Erik," she murmured, her heart pounding. "Oh please."

Bera's legs trembled and she wondered if she could remain standing when the fullness of her passion struck. Erik abruptly dropped his hands and straightened. He turned her to face him and Bera gazed at him, relishing the expression of lust on his face. Even the bruised eye didn't detract from his good looks.

Again he lifted her dress and ducked beneath. Grasping her hips, he tugged her even closer. Bera gasped with shock and delight when his hot, wet mouth covered her swollen clit. His beard teased her sensitive flesh as his tongue rolled over her nub. This time, if not for his hands clutching her buttocks, she would have fallen.

She gripped his shoulders, unable to control her moans of desire. His firm lips tugged at her flesh then he began lapping relentlessly, shattering her endurance.

Sobbing with desire, she throbbed and writhed while his skilled mouth continued drawing out her pleasure to the last pulsation.

He pulled back and tugged her onto his lap where she sat, her eyes closed and arms draped languidly around his neck while she caught her breath.

Finally he chuckled and said, "What a way to start the morning. A rousing fight and a tasty woman to slake my hunger."

"Is it slaked?" she teased and cupped the hefty bulge of his crotch. Never in her life had Bera been so forward, but something about this man brought out a wantonness in her she hadn't dreamed existed.

He grinned. "It's about to be."

Erik placed her aside as he stood and unfastened his belt. "Lift your skirts and bend over the barrel over there."

Drawing a sharp breath, Bera did as he ordered. Her nipples tightened and already she felt that stirring between her legs again. From where she leaned across the barrel, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Erik walking toward her. His hands caressed her bottom and grasped her hips as he eased his swollen cock inside her. She was already well slicked from their previous game. Slowly he pumped into her while at the same time fondling her clit. He easily rekindled her passion and soon she was panting and bucking, on the edge of ecstasy.

“Beautiful wench,” he gasped, his sac slapping and hands hot on her hips.

“Oh Erik please don’t stop. I’m almost...I...” Her voice trailed off into hard panting and she once again soared into bliss.

“Bera, gods!” He stiffened, jerked hard and filled her with his seed.

For a moment they remained exactly where they stood, Bera trapped between the barrel and Erik’s rock-hard body. Then he moved away and gently grasped her arm, helping her straighten.

Bera fixed her dress and blew a strand of hair from her face. The bun had come loose during their lustful sport so she did her best to rearrange it without the help of a comb.

Hitching up his trousers, Erik grinned. “You look beautiful like that. Hair messy. Face flushed. Breasts heaving.”

She chuckled and said, “You’d best ignore my breasts or else we’ll spend the entire day in this storage shed.”

“You’re right about that. There’s much work to do before we leave for Hedeby.”

“I’ve never been there,” Bera said. “But I heard about it and other trade towns. It must be wonderful to see all the goods the merchants bring.”

Erik wrinkled his nose. “It’s a filthy pit. Good for business but nothing is better than living in a country home. A farm like this is where I want to raise my sons and daughters.”

"I didn't say I wanted to live there," Bera said. "I'd just like to see it."

"After we're married, I'll bring you."

"Why not this time?" she asked.

"If someone recognizes you and reports to your father before we have a chance to explain—"

"You're right," she interrupted.

If the King found out Erik had taken her, it would be serious. At least if Bera returned with him and they talked to the King together, there was a chance the situation would end in their favor. Bera knew her father wouldn't want to lose one of his most loyal warriors, not to mention one who brought him so much profit.

She smiled. "But after we're married, I'll hold you to your promise."

"I told you before my word is good."

"So is mine," she stated, her smile fading as she held his gaze. "You needn't worry that I'll betray you with any man. Not Grim. Not anyone."

He caressed her cheek. "I know that."

Bera slid her arms around his neck. "Can you say the same about you and other women?"

"I already told you there are no women apart from you."

Bera's stomach fluttered with joy.

He covered her mouth in deep, possessive kiss and she responded with equal fervor.

Then he released her and gave her a gentle push toward the door. "It's time to go."

Erik moved the barrel away from the door and they stepped outside.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a cool morning when Erik and several of his men, including Grim, Ragnar and Cnut, left for Hedeby. Bera rode to the shore to see them off.

“We will be back as soon as possible,” Erik told her. Usually he enjoyed travel, but this time he longed to return home and Bera was the reason. They’d both awakened very early that morning and he’d taken her luscious body before leaving the bed closet. He could still feel her soft, wet flesh throbbing around his cock, drawing out his essence and gifting him with the greatest pleasure a man could know. The taste of her lips and the texture of her stiff, beautiful nipples still lingered on his tongue.

“I can barely wait,” she admitted, wrapping her arms around his neck as he kissed her.

“Time to go, brother,” Grim called from aboard the cargo ship.

Erik kissed her once more then boarded. On the ship, he waved to her and she waved back. He kept glancing toward her until the shoreline faded.

Grim approached and Erik said, “We should turn a good profit. The furs we have are of excellent quality and our craftsmen are the best.”

“It will be a worthwhile journey,” Grim said. “And when we return, you intend to leave with Bera to talk to the King?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure she’s telling the truth about wanting to marry you.”

Erik looked at Grim sharply. “What do you mean?”

“A short time ago she hated the sight of you. Now she’s agreed to marry you.”

“Things have changed between us,” Erik said gruffly.

“Or perhaps you’ve changed. You’ve never been a fool for anyone, Erik.”

“I’m not a fool now.” Erik turned to meet his brother’s gaze. “Maybe you’re speaking out of spite because you had to keep a cloth shoved up your nose for two days.”

“I’ve had far worse scars from battle. That scuffle between us was but a game and you know it. I’m talking about the vengeance of a woman, which is something I know

about. Once she's home, who is to stop her from telling the King the truth about being abducted?"

"We intend to tell him the truth."

"You know what I mean. If you didn't trust her when you saw her with me, why trust her with your life and the lives of our people? If you fall out of favor with the King, there will be bloodshed. You know it as well as I do."

"I did trust her when I saw you together. What I felt was jealousy. Someday, Grim, you might feel the same way about a woman. Then you'll understand me."

Grim shook his head. "I hope you're right about her."

"I am."

Grim walked away and Erik looked out to sea. He had lusted after Bera from the first, but now that they'd started getting to know each other, he realized what he felt was something far deeper. She was a woman he could love. Perhaps part of him already did. His instincts told him to trust her, but Grim's words reached the warrior in him, the man who trusted few and relied on his cunning as well as his sword arm for survival. If by chance Grim was right, there would be trouble.

He shook his head.

No. He was a good judge of people and did not believe she was lying. She was meant for him.

When they reached Hedeby, the first thing Erik noticed was the crowds and the second was the smell. Unlike the freshness of a country village, this town had as many horrible odors as it did wonderful scents. The stench of garbage and the reek of feces from dogs, cats and farm animals wafted on the air along with the enticing aroma of spices from the Far East. The buzz of people talking combined with the clatter of coins. Dogs barked, cocks crowed and the clink of metal striking metal rang from the blacksmith's busy shop.

"Let's get this over with," Erik said.

“As fast as possible,” Grim agreed, for he liked busy towns even less than Erik did. Ragnar and Cnut, on the other hand, already wore uncharacteristic grins and stared around, eager to join the crowd.

Erik’s men set off to make trades. He and Grim easily sold all the furs they’d brought, then they split up to do some shopping of their own. Grim had a taste for eastern spices, so no doubt that’s where he’d be spending most of his coins. There was nothing Erik needed for himself, however he’d told Cnut and Ragnar to select some exotic foods for everyone at home to enjoy.

He also planned on bringing presents for Bera. He’d never had a woman to buy for and wasn’t exactly sure what to get. He finally decided on some beautifully carved combs made from antler, silk imported from the Far East, fine green wool and an amber necklace.

He met Grim and the others back at the ship and after glancing over their commodities gave the order to head out.

They weren’t very far from home when a fierce storm struck. Waves crashed over the ship while wind and rain attacked from every direction. When the storm subsided enough for them to approach the shore, the men were soaked to the skin. They unloaded their cargo as quickly as possible, hoping to make it home before the weather picked up again. Thunder rumbled in the distance and though it wasn’t yet dusk, the sky was dark and menacing.

Erik looked forward to peeling off his wet clothes and climbing into bed with Bera.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bera sat by the fire working on embroidery and trying to ignore her concern for Erik and the other men who might very well be out in the storm. She had no way of knowing when they’d return, but from the way Erik had spoken before he’d left, they should be back any day now.

Freya and Helga sat beside her also embroidering. Hildirid had been with them earlier, but now sat between Sigfred and another warrior, sharing their mugs of ale.

Glancing at Sigfred, Bera wondered why Erik had decided to leave him behind and take Grim on the journey. She'd heard him planning the trip with Sigfred and thought he'd intended to go. She wondered if it had anything to do with the incident with Grim a few days ago?

He said he believed her, but could she and Erik trust each other after such a short time?

"You're thinking of Erik," Freya said.

Bera glanced at her and shrugged.

"I've never seen him so attached to a slave before, or any woman for that matter," Freya admitted.

"Bera isn't just any woman to him," Helga said quietly. "I think everyone sees that. And he's not just any man to her."

"Yes. Anyone can see that as well," Freya said with a knowing grin. "Especially considering how much she claimed to hate him."

"I never said I hated him," Bera stated.

"It seems to me you love him," Freya told her.

Bera shook her head, her gaze fixed on her needlework though her thoughts focused on Erik. "We scarcely know each other."

"The cries coming from the bed closet tell a different story."

"Freya, every woman knows that love and coupling are two different things," Bera stated.

"And a man and woman who couple while in love know the pleasure of the gods," Helga said.

Freya chuckled and even Bera couldn't resist a smile. There was too much truth in Helga's words, yet Bera couldn't love Erik. Not this quickly. Still there was no denying her feelings for him, and not simply lust. She actually cared about the hairy brute.

The door opened and Grim and Ragnar stepped inside, their hair and clothes sodden.

Bera approached them along with Sigfred and Hildirid.

"How did the trading go?" Sigfred asked.

"Well," Grim replied, shoving tendrils of drenched red hair from his face.

"I need ale," Ragnar said, tossing a lustful look in Hildirid's direction. "And a wench to warm me while my clothes dry by the fire."

Hildirid took his gloved hand and tugged him toward a bench. Other men walked in looking as cold and wet as Grim and Ragnar. Their wives greeted them and they dispersed to various parts of the large room.

"Where's Erik?" Bera asked, following Grim to the fire where he began undressing.

"He and Cnut are checking the last of the goods. They'll be here soon."

Bera took Grim's drenched cloak and shirt and spread them by the fire. Erik stepped into the longhouse. His gaze riveted toward Bera and Grim and she thanked the gods the redhead hadn't yet removed his trousers.

She walked toward Erik. Rain glistened in his beard and tendrils of drenched black hair matted to his head and clung to his neck. Bera longed to throw herself into his arms, but hesitated at the look in his eyes.

"I'm glad you're back," she said.

"Are you?" He glanced toward Grim who now stood naked by the fire. Helga handed him a blanket and he wrapped it around his waist.

Placing a hand to Erik's cheek, Bera guided his face back toward her and gazed into his eyes. "I missed you."

He gave a little grunt in reply and walked past her toward the bed closet.



Bera stared after him, not quite sure what to think.

The thunder, once distant, now crashed overhead. Outside wind howled and rain pelted the longhouse. It would be a chilly night and Bera looked forward to spending it warm beneath the blankets with Erik.

She filled a bowl with stew and a mug with ale, then followed him into the bed closet.

Inside, Erik had already removed his wet cloak and shirt. They lay in a tangled heap on the floor. He sat on the bed, pulling off one of his boots. He still didn't speak as she closed the door and placed the food and ale atop the trunk.

Turning, she leaned against the wall and watched him pull off his other boot. He wiggled his bare toes then stretched his arms overhead, his sleek muscles tense. Bera drew a deep breath. Just looking at him was enough to kindle her desire. She wanted to touch and kiss him, but he was acting so strangely.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Erik stretched out on the bed, his legs slightly apart and his arms folded behind his head, accentuating the hard curves of his biceps. His dark eyes roamed over her and he said, "You missed me, eh?"

"Yes." She smiled and pushed herself off the wall to stand near the bed. "Very much."

He took her hand and held it to his lips. He kissed her palm, then her wrist.

"Show me how much," he said.

## **Chapter Six**

Bera took her lower lip between her teeth, her gaze sweeping Erik's magnificent body. Showing him how much she desired him wouldn't be difficult. Though inexperienced at seducing men, she'd come to realize some things were natural to a woman.

She stepped back slightly, her gaze never leaving him, and unfastened one of the brooches on her dress. Erik watched intently as she disrobed, his expression growing hotter with every moment. Finally she stood naked and paused, enjoying the way his eyes roamed over her, lingering on her breasts and the thatch of hair between her legs.

Though he didn't speak a word, his desire was obvious in his expression and the way his cock rose to attention. Bera joined him on the bed. Leaning over him, she brushed her lips across his forehead then his cheek. She paused, her mouth hovering over his.

Their gazes locked and she felt that wonderful, fluttering sensation in her stomach only he seemed to inspire. Closing her eyes, she kissed him, tentatively at first. He grasped the back of her head, his fingers weaving through her hair and caressing her scalp. With a soft moan, Bera deepened the kiss. Her tongue slid between his lips and he opened his mouth, his tongue welcoming hers.

Bera gently bit his lower lip and he groaned with desire. Her knee moved slightly and brushed against his stiff cock. Unable to resist, she reached down and curled her fist around it. She stroked it slowly, savoring the feel of him and the way he pulsed and swelled in her grip. Her free hand caressed his chest, loving the feel of the thick, dark hair over warm flesh and solid muscle. She covered his neck with delicate kisses, but she needed more of that gorgeous chest.

Releasing his cock she shifted her position so she could stroke his chest with both hands while covering it with kisses. Her tongue swept over his nipple then she licked her way down to his sleek belly. The muscles tightened and twitched while she explored. Her tongue tickled his ribs then she dipped the very tip of it into his navel.

Completely lost in the pleasure of touching him, she kissed lower. Her heart raced and her breathing quickened. She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against the curly mass of black hair between his legs. His stiff cock brushed against her and she touched her lips to it. He felt like the finest silk draped over iron.

"Bera," he said, his voice tight with desire. He unwound her hair from its bun and wove his fingers through it as she ran her tongue up and down his shaft.

"Oh Erik, I want...I need..." she panted, unsure of how to put her desire into words. She knelt between his legs and clasped his staff, desperate to taste more of him.

"Yes, you beautiful wench. That's right. Take my head in your mouth."

She did as he ordered, her lips sliding over the bulging knob. She swept her tongue over it, tasting the first drops of his essence that leaked from the little eye. Lost in sensation, she lapped and sucked, her hands holding the rock-hard shaft to keep him steady.

The sound of his breathing and the way his muscles strained as he tried to keep from thrusting too hard into her mouth told her he was on the verge of ecstasy. Bera sucked faster then used her tongue to explore his cock head. When she tickled the underside, he let out an animal-like groan and arched his back. Bera's heart leapt and excitement swept over her. No one controlled Erik, but here and now she had a power over this undefeated warrior.

She continued teasing him until he finally pushed her away. One hand clamped around the base of his cock, he stared at her through narrowed eyes, his chest heaving.

Bera smiled and began kissing his inner thighs.

"Get up here, woman," he growled and tugged on top of him.

She straddled his waist, but this time she didn't need him to tell her what to do. Grasping his steely cock, she lowered herself upon it. Her eyes closed and her neck arched back in pleasure. He felt so good inside her—hot, thick and throbbing. Bera rocked upon him, her breasts thrust forward and her hands stroking his taut stomach.

Erik grasped her breasts, his hands kneading the soft flesh, stirring her desire even more. His thumbs swept over her nipples, then he gently squeezed her breasts. Bera cried out and seemed to burst into flames. She throbbed and shook in ecstasy, her reaction spurring on his.

Shouting her name, his body arched, his hips lunging upward as he erupted in a hot torrent of passion.

Bera melted onto him and they took a few moments to recover. Then she moved slightly to the side, her body still half draped over his. Erik languidly stroked her shoulder and back, then moved from the bed and reached for the leather pouch he'd carried with him on his journey.

"I brought you some things," he said.

Bera smiled and sat up, pleased that he'd thought enough of her to buy presents and eager to see what they were.

He withdrew two pretty combs carved from antler.

"Thank you. They're lovely."

"And this." He held up the necklace and she stared at it.

No one had ever given her anything so beautiful. She touched a fingertip to the honey-colored beads.

"Do you like it or not?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes. I love it."

He nodded, his expression once again stern, and placed the beads around her neck. Leaning back, he stared at that beads resting just above her full, pink-tipped breasts.

A smile tugged at her lips. "The question is, do you like it?"

"What do you think?" he leaned closer and kissed her breasts. Bera threaded her fingers through his hair.

"I also brought you some silk and wool," he said, between kisses. "It's in the storage house. You can have it tomorrow."

"You're most generous."

He straightened and met her gaze. "I am generous with those who are loyal to me."

This disturbed her. Her brow furrowed, she asked, "What are you saying?"

"I believe my words were clear."

"Is this about Grim again?"

"No."

"Then what?"

He covered her mouth with his, the kiss pleasurable yet dominating. When it broke he stared into her eyes and nodded slightly, then he climbed beneath the blankets.

"Come, Bera. The night grows colder and tomorrow I have much work to do. We'll leave soon to see your father."

She felt both relieved yet concerned by his words. Relieved because he intended to keep his promise and in doing so would ease any worry her family had regarding her disappearance—concerned because if her father didn't agree to the marriage, the situation might cost Erik his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the next day, Erik brought the fabric from the storage house and presented it to Bera. She was in the middle of preparing the morning meal with the other women, but she paused when he approached.

"This is yours," he said, holding her gaze.

Bera ran her hands over the dark green wool and the silk that was almost the same lovely brown as her eyes. "It's beautiful."

“I want you to make a dress to take with you on our journey in one week.”

She looked at him. By the smile on her lips and the glimmer in her eyes, she knew the journey he was referring to—the one to the King so they could arrange their marriage.

“I will.”

“Helga will help you,” Erik continued. “Freya and Hildirid too. I want the dress finished by the time we leave.”

The old woman stood nearby with Freya and Hildirid. All three watched Erik and his new “slave” curiously.

“There is far too much fabric here for one dress,” Bera said. “May I do what I want with the rest of it?”

“Of course. Now I must get to work. There’s much to do.” He playfully slapped her buttocks and Bera gasped, smiling at him over her shoulder.

Erik joined Grim in the forge where the redhead stood working on new weapons. Though a powerful warrior, Grim had an even greater passion for creating weapons than he had for wielding them.

While Erik sharpened his blade, Grim continued hammering steel.

“I think you’re wrong to face the King alone,” Grim said. “You should at least take me or Sigfred with you.”

“No. If I can’t come to terms with the King I want you and Sigfred here to defend our people.”

Grim stopped hammering for a moment and turned to Erik. “You should have considered our people before you took the woman. The King will be within his rights to punish you.”

“The King will understand and he should be grateful that his daughter will be mine instead of Harald or Svein’s.”

"Let's hope the King sees it that way and that the woman is worthy of the risk you've taken."

Erik studied Grim carefully. He usually respected his brother's opinion and even appreciated his outspokenness, but lately the tension between them had increased. If Grim didn't leave soon to find his own people to lead, there would be trouble. Grim was a great warrior and Erik didn't relish losing him, but he would prefer to see him leave of his own accord rather than have it come to battle between them.

Grim's reputation was so fierce that many called him a shapeshifter and believed that in the heat of battle he became a ferocious red wolf who walked on two legs. Though Erik knew there was no truth in this, he could not deny Grim's prowess. Defeating him wouldn't be easy and it would be a close fight, but Erik would do whatever it took to keep his place as leader.

However at this time more than ever he needed Grim here. Should the King order Erik into outlawry or seek an even worse punishment, the people would need the guidance of both Grim and Sigfred.

"When do you leave?" Grim asked.

"At the end of the week."

"I hope things go as you want...and not just for our sake. I know what this woman means to you, even if I don't understand it."

Erik knew those words hadn't come easily for Grim. He nodded curtly and said, "I hope one day you will understand."

Grim's lip curled back, almost as animal-like as the shapeshifter he was rumored to be. "A woman will never be my weakness, Erik. I won't allow it."

Turning back to the anvil, Grim pulled back his arm to strike with the hammer, but Erik grasped his wrist, preventing the blow.

Grim glanced at him sharply.

"Don't push me too far, brother," Erik said.

“You look upon the wrong people as enemies,” Grim stated.

“I have been leader here for so long because I can tell my enemies from my friends.”

“Even when they’re wearing a dress?”

“Perhaps, Grim, it’s your vision that’s colored by your misplaced hatred of all females.”

Grim’s jaw stiffened visibly. He tore his arm from Erik and struck the anvil with a fierce blow. The redhead didn’t look at his brother again and Erik finally left him pounding steel.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Erik left the longhouse, having given Bera the fabric, she examined the silk and finely spun wool more closely. Then she and Helga made plans for the dress.

Freya and Hildirid approached.

“He certainly dotes on you,” Hildirid said. “I haven’t known many slaves who received such a gift.”

“What journey is he taking you on?” Freya asked.

“I don’t know,” Bera lied. When she had first arrived, she’d wanted to blurt out her identity, but now she didn’t want to endanger Erik or their wedding plans. Not that she believed anyone here would betray them, but she had to be careful.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say this fabric is fine enough for a wedding dress,” Helga said, casting a knowing look in Bera’s direction.

“If he wants it finished in a week, we’d better get working,” Bera said, skating around the old woman’s insinuation. Helga was the only one who believed her about being the King’s daughter and by now everyone in the settlement must know what she and Erik meant to each other. It wouldn’t be difficult for Helga to conclude that they were indeed to be married—providing her father accepted the terms after what Erik had done.



"What's wrong?" Freya asked.

"Why?" Bera glanced at her.

"You looked upset all of a sudden."

"No. I'm fine."

Freya and Hildirid returned to work while Helga and Bera began making the dress.

"What do you intend to do with the extra fabric?" Helga asked. "Make two dresses, perhaps? There's enough."

"We'll make three sets of scarves and shawls," Bera replied.

"Do you need so many?" Hildirid quipped, tossing handfuls of meat into the cauldron.

"They're not for me," Bera replied. "I thought you, Freya and Helga might like them as thanks for helping me with the dress."

Freya lifted an eyebrow. "Thank you. If I had fabric like that, I'm not sure I could bring myself to share it."

Hildirid turned to Bera with a look of surprise. "I've never had anything made of silk."

"Let's get working." Helga chuckled. "The faster your dress is finished, the quicker we all get to dress like King's daughters."

The old woman winked at Bera who couldn't keep from smiling.

The women worked on the dress for several hours, then Bera and Hildirid went to pick berries for an after supper treat. Erik loved fruit and Bera wanted to make him something special as thanks for the fabric. Bera enjoyed the outdoors and looked forward to spending a few hours outside the longhouse.

Hildirid knew a place where berries grew plentifully. Once there, not far from a vast lake, the women paused to enjoy the view. The water resembled blue glass and mountains rose in the distance. Toward the center of the lake someone was fishing in a small boat.

"It looks like Thorkel," Hildirid said, one hand raised to her forehead to shield her eyes from the sunlight gleaming on the water.

Bera squinted toward the tall, blonde-haired youth in the boat. "I think you're right."

The young man stood and waved.

"Hildirid, there will be plenty of fresh fish tonight," he shouted.

"Good," she called, smiling.

The youth, known for his clumsiness, tripped, nearly toppling over the boat.

"Thorkel, be careful!" Bera shouted.

The boat continued rocking and he tumbled over the edge, striking his head before he hit the water.

"Oh the gods," Hildirid gasped. "Where is he?"

"There!" Bera pointed to where Thorkel's blonde head popped above the surface. He reached for the boat, but apparently the bump on his head had disoriented him and again he slid under the waves. Bera dropped the bowl she'd brought to hold the berries and ran toward the lake. "Hildirid, go get help!"

The other woman took off through the trees. At the edge of the lake, Bera yanked off her boots and stockings and quickly removed her overdress. She plunged into the water and swam toward the boat.

Thorkel hadn't resurfaced, so she ducked underwater and searched for him. Her heart pounded, making it more difficult to hold her breath. Twice she surfaced for air and on the third dive saw Thorkel. She made her way toward him.

All her life she'd been a strong swimmer and she'd once rescued a child from drowning, but Thorkel was much taller and heavier than the girl had been. She reached the surface, careful to keep Thorkel's head above water. After spending so much energy searching for him, the shore seemed so far away. The boat had drifted off and she

wondered if it would be smarter to swim for it. If she did, she wasn't sure she could hoist him into it. She decided to swim for shore.

Moments later, Grim, Erik and Cnut tore through the trees, Hildirid behind them. All three dove into the lake. Erik reached them first and took Thorkel from Bera while Grim swam for the boat.

"Are you well?" Erik demanded.

"Fine," she panted and headed for shallow water.

Erik reached the shore before Bera and Cnut and dragged Thorkel onto the muddy ground. Thankfully the young warrior came to quickly, coughing up mouthfuls of water.

"Are you well?" Erik demanded.

"I think so," Thorkel choked.

"I'll wait with him until he regains his strength," Cnut stated, glancing at Bera. "You'd better get her home."

Bera knelt, shivering and catching her breath. She soon became aware of all three men staring at her. Glancing down, she saw her drenched shift clung to her curves. She might as well have been naked. Heat rose in her face and she instinctively folded her arms over her breasts, covering her stiff pink nipples that poked against the wet fabric.

"Uh...here," Cnut said, holding out her overdress.

Erik tore it from his hand, gave the garment to Bera and positioned himself in front of her, growling, "Look away."

They did so without hesitation and Bera quickly donned the dress, not caring that the shift beneath was still wet.

By the time she finished dressing, Grim had brought the boat ashore and approached the small group.

Erik brought Bera her boots and stockings. As she took them from his hand, their gazes locked.

"It seems you're a good swimmer after all," he said. In spite of the slight smile on his lips, there was no mistaking the look of respect in his eyes.

"Like yours, my word is good," she said.

"Did you hear that, Grim?" Erik glanced at the redhead, wearing an expression Bera couldn't fathom. "Take heed, brother."

Grim glanced at Bera and nodded slightly.

Placing an arm around her shoulders, Erik guided her toward the path home.

"What was that about with Grim?" she asked.

"Nothing important. Now let's get you beneath some furs to dry."

"Beneath furs? In the middle of the day? I only need to change my clothes."

Erik leaned closer and whispered in her ear, "Furs are more fun."

Bera's heartbeat quickened and she smiled. "Yes. I see what you mean."

At the longhouse, Erik brought Bera directly to the bed closet, ignoring curious looks from Helga and the other women.

"Take your clothes off," Erik commanded.

She did as he ordered and he undressed as well. He finished while she was still peeling off her shift. Erik took a towel from the trunk where he kept his clothes. Just as she tossed aside her shift, he sat on the bed and tugged her onto his lap. He used the towel to dry her hair then he gently pushed her onto the bed and covered her with the blankets.

Bera watched him as he stood by the bed and scrubbed the towel over his wet hair. She loved the play of muscles in his body and the way his gaze never left her.

Erik flung the towel aside and joined her in the bed, pulling her close. Snuggling against him, Bera smiled.

"Not only are you beautiful, but you're a woman of courage as well."

"I'm glad Thorkel wasn't hurt or worse."

"That boy is too clumsy for his own good. It amazes me that he never has such accidents in battle."

"I suppose everyone has talents for different things. He's still quite young and might outgrow the clumsiness."

"I hope so. When I think that you might have drowned while trying to save him, I could break his nose."

"Please." She tilted her face toward his and giggled. "It was bad enough when you nearly broke Grim's."

"Still worried about him?"

She couldn't believe he still thought there was something between her and his brother. "Why are you so jealous of him? You're the master here."

"It has nothing to do with power. I realize most women prefer a man who looks like Grim. Fair. Blue eyes."

"I used to dislike my dark looks, yet you tell me I'm beautiful."

His brow furrowed and he caressed her face. "You are."

"And you are handsome enough to take a woman's breath away."

"You believe that?"

"I know it, not just by how the other women talk about you, but because you took my breath away."

His eyes narrowed. "That's because I was covered in dung."

Laughing, she kissed his cheek. "You know that's not what I mean."

They held each other for several moments and Bera's thoughts drifted toward the upcoming meeting with her father. Though she wanted to marry Erik as well as ease her family's concerns, she couldn't help fearing the consequences of his actions. Though she knew he was one of her father's favorites, she also knew how severely her father dealt with possible threats. His suspicious nature and swift punishments had ensured his leadership. What if he didn't accept Erik's offer for her or his compensation?

“Erik, I know you intend to tell my father the truth, but maybe that’s a mistake. We could make up another story. Say that I was taken by other men and you found me.”

“No. We will set this right and I will marry you without lies.”

“I...I fear for you, Erik. And I care for you.”

A faint smile touched his lips. “I’m glad to know you care for me, but I knew from the first we were meant to be together. This will be fine, Bera. I won’t believe otherwise.”

She sighed and closed her eyes momentarily. “I hope you’re right.”

“I am.” He brushed her lips with a kiss. “Believe me.”

Now that the fear of Thorkel’s near drowning had started to wear off, Bera focused on the sensation of Erik’s nude body against hers. The water had cooled them, but now pressed so close, their flesh warmed. Bera rubbed her cheek against his chest, enjoying the softness of the hair covering it and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against her ear. She ran her foot along his steely calf and felt his cock stir when her knee brushed it.

Reaching down, she curled her fist around his shaft and stroked it. He gave a low groan and tightened his grip on her.

“Erik,” she murmured, kissing his neck while her hand continued sliding up and down his cock. She ran her thumb along the underside where he was so sensitive and he groaned again.

“I’d intended to let you recover from rescuing Thorkel, but you’re not making it easy.”

“Easy? Don’t you know by now there are certain things I prefer hard?” she teased and slid down the bed. Nestled between his rock-hard thighs, she clasped his shaft and began licking it from root to crown.

“You wanton beauty,” he breathed, running his hands through her hair then kneading her scalp, his hands rough yet his touch gentle.

Bera closed her eyes and concentrated on his taste and feel against her tongue. She licked him slowly then flicked her tongue against the underside of his cock head.

Until Erik, she'd never dreamed that touching a man could be this pleasurable. She loved the way his cock swelled and twitched in her hand and the way his powerful muscles tensed as his passion grew. She even loved the taste of his essence that beaded upon the little eye.

"Come here," he said, his voice a growl of desire.

He tugged her up his body then rolled her onto her back. Burying his lips against her neck, he teased the sensitive flesh. Bera squirmed with delight. His hand caressed her thighs and slid between her legs. He cupped her soft mound and kneaded.

Moaning, Bera arched into his hand. His fingers slid inside her and stroked while his palm continued massaging her clit.

Bera mewled in protest when his fingers left her, but he braced his hands on either side of her head. Her eyes closed and she clung to him, gasping with pleasure at the sensation of his stiff cock easing into her wet, throbbing pussy.

He thrust into her, his mouth covering hers in a passionate kiss. Bera's hands roamed over his shoulders and back. She trailed her fingertips along his spine and grasped his taut buttocks. Her legs entangled with his and she pressed her heels into his calves as her hips lifted to meet his frantic rhythm.

"Erik, oh my love," she panted.

He met her gaze, his dark eyes gleaming. "Say that again."

"Erik," she said, her heart pounding. She knew what he wanted her to repeat, but could scarcely believe she'd spoken the words once.

"Not that. What came after," he said, his voice husky. He'd slowed his thrusts but she knew by the expression on his face and the tautness of his muscles that he was as close to the edge as she was.

Though she had only been with him a short time, he had already reached her heart. She'd agreed to marry him and do whatever it took to convince her father that they belonged together. Why not admit that a spark of love existed between them?

"Erik, my love," she whispered.

"You're mine, Bera. I knew it from the first. I want you to be the mother of my children. I want my seed to grow inside you."

"I want that too," she admitted. "Please, Erik. Please."

His mouth covered hers in a breathtaking kiss and he pumped into her, hurling her into bliss.

Bera panted, riding the wonderful pulsations and holding him as tightly as she could. With a ragged cry, he joined her in ecstasy.

\* \* \* \* \*

At supper, Bera sat near Erik on his bench near the center of the room. They ate from the same bowl and shared a mug. Grim sat nearby, but she noticed this time he didn't cast suspicious looks in their direction. She wondered if it had anything to do with her rescuing Thorkel that afternoon.

Though the boy suffered no ill effects from the near drowning, his pride had been wounded. Since he'd stepped into the longhouse that evening, most of the other men had been teasing him about the incident.

"Better watch out the next time you go fishing, boy," Ragnar laughed between spoonfuls of stew. He dragged his forearm across his beard and added, "Next time there might not be a woman around to save you."

"I think he just pretended to slip and strike his head like a fool," called Bjorn. "He wanted a taste of Erik's slave."

Erik pulled the dagger from the sheath at his hip and growled, "Maybe you want a taste of Erik's blade? Leave Bera out of this and hope that if you're ever drowning she's nearby."



Helga, who sat a short distance away, grinned and said, "True words."

Hildirid, Freya and several other women voiced their agreement, but most of the men simply chuckled, though none mentioned Bera again.

Unfortunately they turned their full attention to Thorkel.

"I always knew you were still wet behind the ears," Cnut said.

Thorkel's face reddened with fury and his blue eyes flashed. He tossed his bowl aside and stood, drawing his sword. "Would any of you like to back up your taunts with a fight?"

Cnut and a few other warriors stood and approached the boy. Bera's stomach tightened with concern. Though she'd heard Thorkel could hold his own in battle, she doubted he could defeat this group of more experienced warriors.

"Before you accept the boy's offer, remember the last battle we fought together," Erik said. "More fell by his blade than by all of you together. However if you're in the mood for bloodshed, I look forward to the entertainment."

Thorkel and the men stared at each other for a moment, then everyone returned to their meal.

Bera breathed a sigh of relief. Conversations around the room began again and everyone seemed to forget about the near fight moments ago.

After eating, some people curled up on the benches to sleep while others enjoyed a game of dice. The older children gathered around an elderly man who told stories while teaching them how to make carvings out of bone.

Erik and Bera sat talking with Sigfred and Ragnar. Nearby, Grim polished his sword and though he didn't engage in the conversation, Bera didn't doubt he listened. Something about the redhead worried her. She knew Erik respected him greatly and she believed that respect was reciprocated. Still she couldn't see Grim taking orders from Erik for the rest of his life, just as she couldn't see Erik taking orders from any

man. Yes he was loyal to her father, but he lived in his own home where he, not the King, made the decisions regarding his people.

One day Grim would want to lead. She only hoped he found what he needed elsewhere and didn't decide to challenge Erik.

Bera left the table for more ale. She was refilling Erik's mug from a barrel when Thorkel approached.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you for what you did," he said quietly.

She turned to him. It was so difficult to believe this smooth-faced boy was the terror in battle he was rumored to be. He was one of the few, along with Erik and Grim, who didn't tease others mercilessly or make a spectacle of himself seducing slave girls.

"You're welcome," she said. "I'm sorry the others have been making so much of it."

His brow furrowed and he shook his head. "I don't care what they say."

"You're wise beyond your years, Thorkel."

Grinning, he said, "Sometimes I think I'd rather be less clumsy instead of wise."

Bera chuckled and shook her head. "I've heard you're not clumsy in battle. Whatever you do to clear your mind before fighting, try doing the same thing in daily life."

"I'll try that. It might work."

Bera turned to walk back to the table and found Grim staring in her direction. No doubt he'd overheard the conversation with Thorkel. The redhead nodded in her direction.

"Bera," Erik called from where he stood by the entrance to the bed closet. "Come."

"Going to bed already?" Ragnar chuckled.

"Can you think of anything better?" Erik demanded.

"Not really." The gray-haired warrior grinned. He reached for Hildirid who happened to be walking by and tugged her onto his lap. "I might join you."

Bjorn curled his lip. "Ragnar, don't you ever get tired? Give her a chance with a younger bull."

"Why?" Hildirid retorted. "An older bull has more experience pleasing the cows."

Ragnar laughed long and loud and placed a smacking kiss on the blonde's lips.

Bera placed the mug on the table and approached Erik. Resting a hand on her lower back, he guided her into the bed closet and closed the door behind them.

"Hildirid made Ragnar happy," Erik said.

"From what I hear he makes her quite happy too."

"Really? Then the old bull isn't merely bragging."

"Not according to Hildirid."

"Well I'm not an old bull yet, but I've got more skill than a young one and still have good stamina," Erik teased. He pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth in a lustful kiss. "Since meeting you my stamina has surprised even me."

"Has it?"

Grasping her buttocks, he thrust his stiffening cock against her and said, "What do you think?"

## **Chapter Seven**

Wrapping her arms around Erik's neck, Bera kissed him. Their tongues met in a wild dance and their hands roamed over each other's bodies. When the kiss broke, they shed their clothes then reached for each other again. They tumbled onto the bed, Bera on top of Erik, their mouths still locked.

He took her lower lip between his teeth and ran his tongue along it. Mewling with pleasure, Bera grasped his cock and stroked it lovingly. She rubbed against him, her pulse quickening. The heat and dampness between her legs told her she was more than ready for him. She could scarcely wait to feel him deep inside her. No matter how much Erik took her, she still longed for him.

As for Erik, he seemed insatiable and she loved satisfying his hunger whenever he demanded her.

Yet in spite of his obvious arousal, it seemed he was in the mood to make love slowly. His lips trailed along the side of her neck, then he ran the tip of his tongue across her collarbone.

Bera's eyes closed and she sighed with pleasure, loving the warmth of his body against hers and the sensation of his breath teasing her skin. His calloused hands touched her with amazing gentleness in places and a bit roughly in others, but that roughness was most welcome. Erik never hurt her with his strength. Unlike many men, he knew the difference between dominance and cruelty. When he made love, he gave as much pleasure as he took.

How foolish she had been to even consider another man. When she thought about how close she had come to giving herself to Harald or Svein—

But now wasn't the time to think about them or anyone except Erik. In truth it was almost impossible to think at all, not with his tongue flicking over her nipple and his long fingers exploring her lust-soaked pussy.

"Oh, Erik," she murmured, threading her fingers through his thick hair and massaging his scalp. She loved touching him as much as she loved being touched by him. Everything about this man made her tingle all over.

He gently took her nipple between his teeth and tugged on it, making her gasp. Arching against him, she trembled with scarcely controlled desire.

"Beautiful Bera," he whispered against her breast and covered it with soft kisses.

Erik moved lower, kissing her from breast to hip. He guided her legs over his shoulders then slid his hands beneath her and held her buttocks firmly. It was a good thing he had such a snug hold on her, because when his warm, wet mouth captured her aching little nub, she bucked and writhed with need. His velvety tongue swept over her again and again. Bera's heart pounded out of control and her entire body caught fire. When he began licking her with lingering upward strokes she thought she might die from the pleasure.

Her breath came in ragged pants and she couldn't stop moaning. Hopefully she wasn't loud enough for the others to hear. Erik's tongue stroked faster and she no longer cared who might hear her. Passion overtook her and she shattered. Every muscle tensed and trembled and a mist of sweat broke out over her body. She arched against him and probably would have bucked off the bed if Erik hadn't tightened his grip on her bottom. His wonderful tongue didn't leave her until the last pulsation.

Her eyes still closed, Bera lay limp. She felt Erik move and stretch out beside her, lightly stroking her belly and hip. After a few minutes of rest, he slid his hand between her legs. Moaning softly, Bera spread her thighs and opened her eyes partway, watching him caress her. The sight of his hand caressing her most intimate place sent a little thrill through her. He had such gorgeous hands—large and strong, the backs

lightly dusted with dark hair and the veins prominent from years of hard work and wielding weapons.

Bera reached down and took his hand in both of hers. Their gazes locked and for a moment he looked almost questioning. It wasn't that she wanted him to stop touching her, but she needed to touch him as well. She guided his hand to her mouth and kissed his palm. She caught the scent of her own musk and saw that his fingertip glistened with her feminine elixir. He had sampled her and suddenly she wanted to know exactly what he had tasted. She took his fingertip between her lips and sucked upon it.

Watching her sample her own essence seemed to arouse him greatly. He stared as she sucked on his finger, his chiseled lips parted and raw desire gleaming in his eyes.

"Oh, Bera," he groaned. "You beautiful, wanton wench."

All she could managed was a garbled reply, since she was too busy sucking and licking his finger. When she finished with that one, she took another finger into her mouth and sucked that too, then she dipped her tongue between each finger and covered his palm with kisses.

Erik's eyes closed and he lay back, a blissful look on his handsome face. Knowing that she pleased him incited her pleasure and arousal. She straddled him, loving the feel of his stiff cock pressing against her buttocks. Her fingers massaged his steely chest and she relished the sensation of his curling hair against her hands. Unable to resist, she gently pinched his stiff little nipples that peeked through the nest of gorgeous chest hair. He grunted softly and she brushed her thumbs over his nipples, much like he did to her.

She'd never dreamed of taking such pleasure in a man's body, or of having such feelings for a man. Yet Erik was so much more than most men.

Leaning down, she closed her eyes and buried her lips against his shoulder. She nipped it gently and then kissed his neck. It was such a strong neck, but also quite sensitive to her lips and tongue. He moaned with pleasure as she kissed and licked it and she felt the rush of blood beneath his flesh. Pausing a moment, she felt his neck

throb against her lips. Somehow bringing him pleasure, feeling his breath and pulse, aroused emotions in her that extended beyond mere desire. He was *real*—a warm, feeling man who wanted and cared for her. Those thoughts were almost frightening, especially when she considered what might happen when her father found out the truth.

Moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue, she covered his mouth in a gentle kiss. Erik buried his hand in her hair and deepened the kiss, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. Her tongue met his with passionate strokes and she wiggled her bottom against his straining cock.

With a groan that was almost a growl, Erik rolled her onto her back and covered her body with his. Bera ran her hands and the soles of her feet over every part of him she could reach.

Growling with delight, Erik nipped her shoulder, then kissed her. The tip of his swollen cock pushed against her slick entrance and he filled her with a long, slow thrust. Then he pumped to the same rhythm that he thrust his tongue into her mouth.

Bera closed her eyes and lifted her hips, matching his rhythm until it became so frenzied that all she could do was hold him tightly as he pushed her to ecstasy.

While she pulsed around him, clinging to him, he surged into her, meeting her in bliss.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erik and Bera rode toward her father's longhouse. The fear that had been building inside her made her a bit dizzy, yet she took hold of herself. Now was not the time to be weak.

She and Erik had arrived in a cargo ship carrying gifts for her father. He'd brought only a sparse crew that included Ragnar and Cnut. The father and son accompanied Erik and Bera to meet the King.

The villagers stared at Bera in surprise. They whispered among themselves and some called to her. She smiled and waved, making certain they knew she was not only safe with Erik, but happy and well treated. She'd groomed herself carefully before leaving the ship, combing and braiding her hair and wearing the beautiful amber necklace from Erik.

By the time they reached the longhouse doors, her father stood outside, unfortunately flanked by Harald and Svein. Bera could scarcely believe how much the King had changed. He was spotlessly clean and his long gray beard was neatly braided.

"Erik, you have returned my daughter," the King said. He glanced at Bera. "Are you well, girl?"

"Yes, Father. I'm very well." She cast a loving look at Erik.

"I have come to again ask to marry her," Erik stated.

"She belongs to me," Svein growled, drawing his sword.

Harald drew his as well and glared at his brother. "You mean she's mine."

"Silence!" bellowed the King. He stared at Bera. "Where have you been?"

"I suggest we go inside and discuss this," Erik said.

"I suggest you release Bera and turn her over to the man who will be her husband." Harald strode forward.

Svein shoved him aside and said, "That would be me."

"The woman is mine!" Harald punched his brother who nearly staggered into the King.

"Enough! Everyone inside," roared the King and cast a stern look at Bera and Erik. "I want to hear about my daughter's adventures."

The group followed him, Harald and Svein glaring at Erik. He met their gazes and the steely look in his eyes made Bera uneasy. Something told her that terms would not be met without bloodshed. She cared nothing for Harald or Svein, but Erik meant a



great deal to her and she also cared about the welfare of the men who accompanied them. She would hate to see any of Erik's people killed because of her.

Entering the longhouse, the King bellowed, "Finna! Come! Our daughter is back."

Bera looked at her father in surprise. "Our daughter?"

"Thank the gods!" Finna cried, running toward them. Bera met her halfway across the large room. They embraced each other tightly.

"What happened? Where have you been?" Finna demanded. "There was no sign of you. We thought you'd been killed."

"It's a long story," Bera said. Taking Finna's hand, she led the way back to the King and Erik.

"How did you come to find my daughter?" the King asked.

"Father, I want to marry him," Bera said.

The King's brow furrowed. "I thought you said you'd rather die than marry him?"

"You're not marrying anyone but me," Svein told Bera, his lip curled.

"Sorry, brother, but she's marrying me," Harald said.

"I told you I wanted her and that I wouldn't leave without her," Erik said, his gaze fixed on the King. "And I didn't."

It took the King a moment to comprehend Erik's confession. When he did, his face reddened with anger and he bellowed, "You took her?"

"Father, please," Bera said. "It was as much my fault as it was his."

"Then you went willingly?" the King demanded.

"No but once I realized the truth about Erik, I wanted to be with him."

"What truth?" Finna asking, looking as confused as the King and everyone else within earshot.

"That he didn't smell like dung," Bera replied, realizing how foolish she sounded. She and Erik exchanged glances and laughed.

“What’s so funny?” roared the King. “This is a serious matter. Erik, I counted you among my most loyal men.”

“I am loyal. I preferred risking your wrath to allowing your daughter to become the wife of one of these things.” He gestured contemptuously toward Harald and Svein.

“We should take our swords to you right now,” Harald said.

The brothers pointed their weapons at Erik who drew his own blade. Cnut and Ragnar did the same.

“You do and it will be the last fight of your lives,” Erik stated.

“I could have you punished for this,” the King said.

“Or you can consider my offer,” Erik told him. “I have brought another shipload of gifts for you. Furs. Spices. Amber. And I have brought gold and silver for the bride price.”

“Surely you won’t strike a bargain with him,” Svein said to the King. “He is a thief and a liar.”

“You know me,” Erik said, still staring hard at the King. “I pledged my loyalty to you and that has never changed.”

“But you take what you want, Erik.” The King sighed, studying him through narrowed eyes. “Is my daughter the only thing of mine you’re willing to steal?”

“You know as well as I do what sort of men they are.” Again Erik pointed at Harald and Svein. “And you know the sort I am. With me Bera will be protected and not mistreated. If that means anything to you, then you know she belongs with me. If I wasn’t loyal to you, I would not be standing here now.”

“True,” the King said, thoughtfully stroking his beard. “Your offerings are fair compensation for borrowing my daughter, especially since you are willing to take her in marriage. Fine. She is yours.”

“Thank you, Father.” Bera smiled and sighed with relief.

Erik drew her to his side and she embraced him tightly.

"I do not accept this," Svein snapped.

"Neither do I," Harald agreed. "I demand compensation, Ice Tooth."

"*We* demand compensation," Svein added.

Erik curled his lip in an animalistic snarl. "Compensation for what? You are not kin to Bera. You are not betrothed to her."

Harald turned to the King. "This is a slight to us that we will not bear."

"The decision has been made," the King stated. "Everyone in this room has witnessed the negotiations. From now on, Bera and Erik are betrothed."

"Then we go," Svein said.

Harald growled, "And you'd best watch your back, Erik Ice Tooth."

"In that case we'll settle this now." Erik raised his weapon.

"Enough!" roared the King. "Harald and Svein, it is best you go. You may come again after the marriage takes place."

"Which will be soon," Erik said.

"How soon?" Finna asked.

"Tonight we feast," the King announced. "A wedding feast for Bera and Erik."

Svein and Harald, both practically snorting with fury, strode out of the house.

"I will help you prepare for tonight," Finna said, tugging Bera away from the men who continued talking.

"Bring ale first," the King said and swatted Finna's behind.

"Father!" Bera gasped. She had never seen the King act in such a way toward Finna. He had always seemed to respect the close friend of his beloved wife.

"What?" The King grinned. "A man has a right to his wife's backside, and a fine backside it is."

Finna's face turned a bright shade of pink, but she retorted, "Save it for the bed closet."

“Wife?” Bera gasped, glancing from her father to her foster mother. “What...how...Erik and I had intended to ask you to come live with us, Finna, but it seems we’re too late.”

“We have much to talk about,” Finna said. “Let’s get the ale first.”

While they were filling mugs for the men, Asgerd entered carrying a bucket of water. Upon seeing her sister, she dropped it and embraced Bera tightly.

“Where have you been?” Asgerd cried. “We thought you were dead.”

“I have so much to tell you,” Bera said.

Asgerd’s gaze riveted toward Erik and she said, “Erik is here. Has Grim come as well?”

“No he’s home,” Bera told her.

“Home?”

Smiling Bera embraced her sister again. “You’re not going to believe the story I have to tell.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’m happy for you,” Asgerd said after Bera had told her story. Though they were helping prepare for tonight’s feast, they stood apart from the other women who were also cooking. The conversation was private between the sisters and Bera’s foster mother.

“And I’m relieved,” Finna added. “I had been worried by the idea of you marrying either Harald or Svein. After you disappeared, your father felt guilty and decided not to force you to marry either of them. He thought you might have run away because of how he’d been pushing you to marry.”

Bera glanced toward the King who sat drinking with Erik, Ragnar and Cnut. She’d always felt as if he resented her for the death of her mother. Discovering that he actually cared about her welfare came as almost as much of a surprise as learning that he’d married Finna.

"I'm sorry for any worry we caused," Bera told them. "I asked Erik to come here as soon as possible, and he did. What he did seems questionable, but believe me when I tell you he is the best of men."

"It's hard to believe a brother of Grim could be anything else," Asgerd said, her gaze fixed on the eel she was chopping.

A slight smile tugged at Bera's lips. It seemed her sister's passion for the redhead hadn't diminished.

"Tell me," Asgerd continued, "does Grim have a particular woman whom he—"

"No," Bera stated. "Grim shows little interest in marriage or family, but that's not to say his mind can't be changed."

"You've proved that people do indeed change," Finna said, casting a knowing look in Bera's direction.

"And what about you? I had no idea that you and my father had been making such plans."

"We weren't," Finna said, casting an affectionate glance toward the King. "I know he loved your mother deeply and no one could replace her. When you disappeared he was very comforting to me and I was surprised."

"At least you got him to tidy up," Asgerd said. "I remember long ago he was always concerned about his appearance, but after Mother died that changed. You've been good for him, Finna."

"He's been good for me as well. I've been lonely since Halfdane died."

"Speaking of Halfdane reminds me of Grim," Bera said, knowing her sister would be interested in any information about the redhead. Asgerd glanced toward her in question and Bera continued, "Grim is a skilled metal worker. He loves the forge so much that at home he is called Hammerhand."

"Why didn't he come with you?" Asgerd asked, trying to sound offhanded, but Bera knew differently. By the look on Finna's face, the older woman knew as well.

“We weren’t sure how Father was going to react, so Erik wanted a strong leader at home, should he...should he not return,” Bera said. Speaking those last words sent a shiver down her spine. When she thought about the risk they had taken and how close she had come to possibly losing the man she loved, it shook her to the core.

She wondered if her love for Erik was a good thing. Battles were common and men like Erik always ran the risk of dying in combat. While that was the greatest honor a warrior could achieve, ensuring that he would wake in Valhalla, she hated the thought of losing him.

Yet he was a strong leader and a great warrior. There was a good chance Erik would live for many years to come. It was a good sign that the King had accepted the marriage negotiations.

Tonight they would feast and they would make love as husband and wife for the first time. Her sons and daughters would become Erik’s heirs.

“It’s getting late,” Finna said.

“Yes.” Asgerd wiped her hands on a cloth and turned to Bera. “Come. It’s time to prepare you for tonight.”

Bera nodded. She and Asgerd headed for the bathhouse, where Bera would cleanse herself for the wedding night, then don the beautiful new dress made from the fabric Erik had given her. Tonight she would be Erik’s wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

The feast, though quickly planned, was most generous with food and drink aplenty. Erik, Ragnar and Cnut joined the King at his table. Those in the King’s household as well as the other men from Erik’s ship were invited to the meal.

One of the King’s friends, an older man who was nearly as loud as the King himself, entertained the guests with stories of battles.

Erik tugged Bera onto the bench beside him. Slipping her arms around his neck, she thought how handsome he looked. His hair had been combed until it shone like the

wing of a raven and two braids adorned his neatly trimmed beard. He'd brought a fine tunic and trousers to wear for the wedding feast.

Though he laughed and talked with the men, his gaze kept returning to her and he touched her often, making it clear to everyone that when the night was over, she would be his wife.

In spite of her happiness, Bera couldn't help feeling a bit apprehensive about the final act that would seal their marriage. In all the times she and Erik had coupled, they had been in private. Tonight others would see them share a bed and this made her uncomfortable.

As if sensing that her thoughts had taken a worrisome turn, Erik draped his arm around her. Tilting her face toward his, she saw the affectionate look in his eyes and the smile on his full lips that peeked through his black beard.

He leaned closer and kissed her. Bera slipped her arms around his neck and closed her eyes, lost in the comfort of his embrace.

Several men cheered and shouted to the couple.

"I think it's time for you to retire," the King said, then handed Erik his drinking horn. "But first, one more drink."

A slave woman approached and filled Erik's horn, he drained its contents, then placed it on the table.

"Ready?" he asked Bera.

Her heart thrummed in her chest and she nodded.

Placing a hand to her cheek, he caressed it, then whispered close to her ear, "Don't be concerned. I won't let them see anything."

"I doubt we can avoid it," she replied.

"Let me worry about it." He rose and Bera also stood, but found her legs shakier than she'd realized. Asgerd and two young women stepped forward, as it was customary for other women to prepare the bride, however Erik had different plans.

He swept her into his arms and carried her to the bench nearest the fire. Other than the bed closet reserved for the King and his wife, it was the best place to sleep in the longhouse.

He stood in front of her as they undressed, shielding her from the leering witnesses.

Bera's hands trembled as she unfastened the brooches on her overdress. She'd never felt this clumsy in her life. Erik finished undressing and stood naked while she had only stripped down to her shift.

"That's enough," Erik said. He knelt in front of her to remove her boots. She braced her hands against his shoulders and lifted first one foot then the other. He also removed her stockings.

Bera's face heated and she glanced around. Several men stood nearby, their gazes roaming over her curves in the shift. Asgerd stood across the room, her brow knitted and her blue eyes glistening with anger. Bera caught her gaze and forced a smile.

Pulling back the furs on the bench, Erik said, "Get in."

"Wait, Erik, she's still in her shift," called one of her father's warriors.

"You bed women your way. I bed women mine," Erik retorted.

Most everyone laughed at his jest and Bera felt a bit relieved.

She climbed beneath the furs and he covered her, then lay beside her. He raised himself on his elbow, so she lay trapped between him and the wall, his big body shielding her from the guests.

"Are you well?" he asked softly, caressing her face.

She nodded and offered him a tremulous smile. "As long as I have you, I will always be well."

Erik bent and kissed her. His hand slid beneath the furs and swept over her breasts and down her belly. Cupping her soft mound, he kneaded gently.



In spite of her nerves, his very nearness sparked her arousal. Soon she was wet and aching for him. He pushed up her shift and his long fingers teased her, exploring her pussy then rubbing her clit until she teetered on the edge of passion.

Bera tried to keep quiet, but when he finally covered her body with his and filled her with his thick shaft, she gave a little cry of desire. She was so aroused by him that she briefly forgot the others in the room. She clung to him, her legs wrapped around him and her fingers biting into his powerful shoulders. Her eyes closed tightly, she panted, her hips bucking as lust overtook her.

The pulsations rolling through her spurred him on and he jerked into her, groaning with pleasure as his essence poured into her and together they floated on a mist of passion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erik and Bera remained at the King's house for a week, then Erik said he needed to return home. His brothers would no doubt be concerned and he wanted to spread the news of their marriage.

Bera was sad to say goodbye to Finna and Asgerd, but she promised to visit again and Erik invited them to spend time at their home as well.

"I am glad you married Bera," the King said, clasping Erik's hand before they left. "But I must warn you to watch out for Svein and Harald. Neither has land of their own, but they serve their uncle Ketil and most of his men hold them in high regard."

"I know of Ketil," Erik said.

"He has been loyal and I don't believe he would condone an attack against you, but Svein and Harald have led his warriors on many profitable raids. They will have no problem finding supporters should they wish to attack. Watch yourself."

"I will," Erik stated.

"Any attack against you I will take as a personal slight," the King said. "And I will punish accordingly."

Nodding, Erik said, "You have my thanks and my loyalty."

The weather was mild during their journey home and when they arrived their people were relieved that the King and Erik had come to an agreement. The revelation of Bera's true identity caused a stir. Only Helga, who had believed her from the first, cast a pleased and motherly smile at Bera.

While Erik went with Sigfred and Grim to walk his land and discuss the possible problem of an attack by Svein and Harald, Bera joined the women in the longhouse. She stood weaving with Freya and Hildirid while Helga sat nearby doing needlework. Bera noticed the younger women were uncharacteristically quiet.

"What's wrong?" Bera finally asked.

"You're Erik's husband now," Hildirid said. "And I'm but a slave."

"And I the wife of a farmer. Not to mention all the times I teased you about being the King's daughter and it happens you were telling the truth," Freya said. "I wonder how you'll repay me?"

Bera stopped weaving and stared at them in surprise. "I can't believe what I just heard. We have been friends since I arrived and now you want that to change?"

"Few women in your position would accept friendship from a slave."

"Erik doesn't treat slaves badly," Freya said softly. "I don't see why he would marry a woman who is any different."

"He hasn't," Bera said. Their suspicions hurt more than she wanted to admit. Though her time here had been relatively short, she had come to think of this place as her home and most everyone around as her friends. "However I can see that you have changed your opinion of me, though I am still the same woman I've always been. I have offered my friendship. Whether you accept it or not is your choice."

Freya smiled slightly and shrugged. "It's true you were honest with us from the first, but since we thought you a liar it will take us some time to adjust."

"Don't take too long." Bera grinned. "It will be boring around here all day with no one to talk to."

"I suppose an old woman doesn't count," Helga said, looking put out.

Bera turned and embraced her, chuckling. "You always count. You believed me from the beginning and I will always be grateful."

"If that's so, then help me thread this needle." Helga passed her needlework to Bera. "Old eyes, you know."

"And they see all," Hildirid teased.

"And don't you forget it," Helga said.

Threading the old woman's needle, Bera felt relieved. It seemed things were returning to normal.

## **Chapter Eight**

Outside, Erik walked with Grim and Sigfred, inspecting the repairs on one of his longships.

"I don't like the sound of those threats by Harald and Svein," Grim stated.

"Neither do I," Sigfred said.

"We have strong defenses," Erik told him. "And we will keep on our guard."

"Why should we sit and wait for them to attack?" Grim demanded. "I say we strike them first."

"They have no land of their own," Erik reminded him. "If we attack, it will be against their uncle Ketil and I have no quarrel with him."

Grim narrowed his eyes in Erik's direction, his expression almost accusing. "There was a time, brother, when you would meet your enemies head-on and not wait around to be slaughtered."

"I have no intention of being slaughtered. Our defenses should not be so weak that we cannot protect ourselves. I left us a strong settlement. Have you destroyed that in the short time you were in charge?"

Grim's eyes widened and he drew a sharp breath. Baring his teeth, he said, "If you think me incompetent then why trust me with your land?"

"Did you consider that's why I left Sigfred behind to assist you?"

"Fighting amongst ourselves won't help us," Sigfred interrupted. "Erik, you know we're as strong as ever, but Grim does have a point."

"I realize that, however there are other issues to consider. The King and I parted in friendship and he agreed to give me Bera in marriage, but he expressed his displeasure over the abduction. If I attack Ketil to eliminate Harald and Svein, the King might see it

as an attempt by me to take something else of his. Until I have fully regained his trust, I don't want to damage our relationship further."

"That makes sense," Sigfred said. "The King was lenient."

"I'm sure the ship full of goods Erik gave him help that leniency," Grim sneered. "I told you, Erik, that women are nothing but trouble."

"So are brothers." Erik glared. "And I don't have gentle feelings toward a brother as I do toward my wife."

"I have nothing against Bera," Grim said. "She has proven herself. You are the one who has put us in danger and it is up to you to get us out of it."

"As if your temper has never put us in danger," Sigfred pointed out to Grim. "What about a few years back when you started that fight with Olaf Amber Eyes and his six brothers? They almost wiped us all out."

"But they didn't and we ended up claiming their land," Grim pointed out.

"The fight was over a stupid game of ball," Sigfred reminded him.

"The game was just an excuse and you know it. It had to do with him thinking I'd seduced his wife, which again proves my point. Women are trouble."

"And why did Olaf think you'd seduced his wife?" Erik demanded. "Because he found you together in the bathhouse."

Grim's eyes blazed with fury. "*She* came in after *me*. I wanted nothing to do with the wench."

"Right. We dark brothers can't forget that you're the handsome one," Erik said. "Maybe you prefer we call you Grim the Red so that even those women unlucky enough not to know you can at least have the pleasure of dreaming about your coloring."

Grim snorted. "You're worse than a woman when it comes to jealousy."

"You're both worse than women when it comes to bickering," Sigfred stated. "The facts are this. Bera and Erik are married. Their marriage has placed a strain on our

relationship with the King. That means we cannot attack Ketil, so we must be on our guard. To tell the truth, I don't believe Harald and Svein will be foolish enough to attack us. Not only do they risk losing, but the King has said that he will take an attack by them against Erik as a personal slight."

"Everyone knows Harald and Svein are used to getting what they want," Grim stated.

"So am I," Erik growled. "As I warned them before, any attack against me will be their last."

"At least that's one thing we can agree on," Grim said, meeting Erik's gaze.

"Completely," Sigfred stated.

The three brothers nodded and in spite of their differences, Erik knew he could rely on them.

He realized Grim was right. His love for Bera had placed them in a difficult situation, but it was better than her spending a life of toil and abuse as the wife of Harald or Svein.

In truth he would have preferred to attack them directly, as Grim suggested, but he was not in the position to do so if he wanted to keep good relations with the King. Though he didn't want a battle on his soil, it was inevitable, if not by Harald and Svein, then by someone else. It was the way of life.

The attack would not come today, however. There was much work to be done, but tonight he and Bera would spend some much needed time alone.

Thinking about his beautiful wife made his heart soar and his cock twitch. He adjusted his trousers and continued inspecting the ship.

"Erik," Sigfred said. "We missed your wedding, so how about having another feast here? With all the work and travel over the past year, we can use some entertainment around here."

Grim curled his lip in Sigfred's direction. "Any excuse to eat and drink to excess."

"Grim, my brother, you have to learn how to enjoy life." Sigfred grinned at the redhead.

"I enjoy the pounding of iron on iron and the clash of steel in battle."

"That has its merit," Sigfred agreed, a sparkle in his dark eyes. "However the slap of balls on ass or the sliding of my sword of flesh into a hot, damp sheath is even more enjoyable."

A smile tugged at Erik's mouth and he shook his head. At times it amazed him that he was related to either Sigfred or Grim.

His lip curled in disgust, Grim said, "I'm returning to the forge."

The redhead stalked off and Sigfred shook his head. "Grim had better start living. He mistrusts everyone."

"He has his reasons," Erik said.

"About the feast—"

"Yes. Tell the women to plan a feast. Nothing too extravagant though. Winter is coming and we want to save the best feasting for then."

The thought of spending the cold winter nights beneath the furs with Bera made his cock swell even more. His brow furrowed, he grunted and decided he'd best turn his thoughts away from his wife before he burst through his trousers.

*Tonight, beautiful Bera, we'll have a feast of our own.*

\* \* \* \* \*

It was after dusk when Erik returned to the longhouse. The aroma of cooking food made his stomach growl, but he had an even greater hunger for his wife. His gaze riveted toward her.

She had been standing in the corner of the room talking to Freya. Upon seeing Erik, she smiled and nodded in his direction then went to fill a bowl with stew.

Helga offered him a bowl of water to wash his hands and by the time he took his place at the table, Bera had brought his stew and a mug of ale.

Wrapping an arm around her, he guided her onto his lap and she slipped her arms around his neck.

“How was your day, wife?”

“Very pleasant, husband. And yours?”

“Busy.” He picked up the mug and offered it to her. After she sipped, he took a drink then placed the mug aside and reached for the bowl.

“We’re planning a feast for the end of the week,” she said. “Sigfred said you gave the word.”

He snorted. “It was Sigfred’s idea.”

“I think it’s a good one,” she said.

“I have even better plans for tonight.” Erik kissed her and she responded with enthusiasm.

When the meal ended, Erik and Bera sat by the fire with their friends while Ragnar and Cnut gave a recount of the wedding feast as well as Erik’s negotiations with the King. They also spoke in detail about Harald and Svein’s threats. Most everyone liked Bera and their loyalty toward Erik was unfaltering, so they took the brothers’ threats seriously.

It was best that everyone knew about Harald and Svein, for there was no telling if their words had been empty or if they intended to seek revenge against Erik. Not that they had any right to vengeance. As Erik had pointed out, Bera did not belong to them.

Each time she thought about how close she had come to marrying Harald or Svein, a sick feeling washed over her. How could she have turned Erik away without getting to know him? She didn’t condone his abduction, but at least now she understood it. She only hoped it wouldn’t end in his downfall even though things were now settled with her father.



After a couple of hours, Erik and Bera retired to the bed closet. Though Bera had coupled with him many times before, this was the first time they would be making love in their own bed as husband and wife. This excited her almost as much as the very first time he had claimed her.

"You look happy," he said, pulling off his tunic and flinging it aside.

Bera sighed with desire at the sight of his bare chest and arms. She could scarcely wait to lick his flat belly and curl her fingers in his dark chest hair.

"I am. Very happy," she replied.

He sat on the bed and pulled off his boots. His eyes gleamed and a smile tugged at his lips. "I can make you happier."

"I'm sure you can."

Just thinking about the ways he could increase her happiness made her belly clench and her nipples tingle with desire. She undressed slowly, her gaze never leaving his. By the look in his eyes and the way his cock bulged against his trousers, he liked watching her.

She slid down her overdress and lifted her leg onto the trunk where he kept his clothes. Pushing the shift up toward her waist, she exposed her leg, then tugged off her shoe and tossed it aside. The day had been rather warm, so she hadn't put on her stockings.

Erik's gaze lingered over her thigh. His lips parted slightly and she saw fire burning in his dark eyes. She removed her other shoe in the same seductive manner. Then she stood and slid her shift down her shoulders. It dropped to her waist, baring her breasts to his lustful gaze.

She pushed the shift over her hips and let it pool at her feet. Now completely naked, she reached up and tugged the scarf off her head and unwound her hair from its bun. The long, black locks tumbled over her shoulders and down her back.

"You've become quite a seductress," he said in a husky voice.

“Only for you,” she said, casting him a look of unabashed lust.

He smiled wickedly and stood. Placing his hands on her hips, he pulled her close to him and covered her mouth in a demanding kiss. She felt the wonderful pressure of his cock against her and she relished the warmth and wetness of his tongue as it thrust between her lips.

Bera held him tightly, her eyes closed. When he finally broke the kiss, she gazed at him and whispered breathlessly, “I love you, Erik.”

“And I love you, beautiful Bera.” He kissed her again, even deeper than before. In that kiss, Bera felt as if they shared one soul. There was no doubt in her mind that she and Erik were meant for each other. Not that she had questioned it for a long time now.

He stepped away only to remove his trousers. Once he cast them aside, he gently pushed her onto the bed. Lying stomach down, she drew a sharp breath of desire as he trailed his tongue down her spine. His big, calloused hands tenderly kneaded her buttocks and he pressed his warm lips to her lower back. Then he began nipping her bottom, his teeth sinking into the flesh, though not enough to draw blood or even hurt her. He merely teased, arousing her passion.

He slid a hand beneath her and fondled her clit. While covering her buttocks with kisses, he slid his fingers into her pussy and explored.

Bera pressed her face into the blankets and moaned. She squirmed with desire, matching the rhythm of his stroking hands. Erik rolled her onto her back and stretched out beside her. He teased her clit, brushing his thumb over the sensitive nub and making her tremble with desire. At the same time he drew one of her nipples into his mouth. His tongue lashed it then his teeth worried it until it became so sensitive his teasing was almost painful.

“Oh Erik, please,” she moaned, clutching his hand and weaving her fingers through his thick, dark hair.

He groaned in reply and lifted his face to hers. Their lips met and their tongues thrashed against each other in a lustful battle. Erik pulled her closer and grasped her

buttocks. His cock slid into her and Bera moaned again, relishing the sensation. Her eyes opened and she stared at him.

They lay side-by-side, their bodies locked and their legs entangled. At that moment words weren't necessary. The love between them was almost tangible. Their bodies rocked in a gentle motion. They made love slowly, savoring one another, until the passion flared so that they could not longer wait. Erik pressed her onto her back and thrust fast and hard.

Clinging to him, Bera whispered his name over and over until she lost the power of speech and could only moan as rapture overwhelmed her. With a hoarse cry he joined her in ecstasy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bera and Erik were so happy with their life together that the weeks passed quickly. Though there had been no sign of a possible attack from Harald and Svein, Erik and his men kept careful watch over their borders.

When the first snow fell, Sigfred suggested that the threat was probably past, at least for the winter. Erik, however, had no intention of relaxing his guard and Grim agreed. If Harald and Svein were clever, something to which Erik didn't credit them but nevertheless decided to err on the side of caution, they might be waiting for him to lower his defenses.

It was an especially happy time for Bera because she believed, and Helga agreed, that she had all the signs of being with child. As the days passed, any doubt faded and Bera intended to tell Erik the news on the evening of the first feast of winter, which they'd planned for the week's end.

Two nights before the feast, Erik and Bera awoke to shouting in the main room. They leapt out of bed. Bera pulled on a cloak and Erik dragged on his trousers. Barefoot, they stepped out of the bed closet.

"What's the problem?" Erik demanded.

“Cnut was on watch,” Sigfred told him. The younger man was already fully dressed, his helmet in place and his sword in hand. “There’s a large group of warriors headed toward us.”

Bera’s heart pounded and she glanced at Erik who swept past her, back into the bed closet. She followed him and they both dressed quickly. If he hadn’t posted a guard each night, whomever was riding in their direction could have taken the settlement easily while everyone was asleep.

“Do you think it’s Harald and Svein?” she asked, sounding more steady than she felt.

“Most likely. I’m glad.”

“Glad?” she snapped.

“Glad to finally be done with this.” He’d finished dressing and sheathed his sword. Bera picked up his helmet and handed it to him.

As he took it from her, their gazes met. He grasped the helmet, wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her.

“I love you, Bera,” he said. “Don’t worry. You’ll be safe.”

“I’m more concerned about you,” she admitted.

“Don’t be. This will be over before you know.” He donned his helmet and cast her once last glance, his dark eyes gleaming within the metal eye holes. Then he turned abruptly and left the bed closet.

With trembling hands, Bera tied a scarf over her head and hurried to the main room.

“The house is on fire,” Freya shouted.

It seemed their attackers had started the battle by shooting flaming arrows as they approached.

Bera quickly joined the women in trying to put out the fire. The warriors had already left the longhouse to engage in battle. From outside came the sound of shouting and clashing steel.

"We need to fight the flames from the outside," Hildirid bellowed.

She and Bera ran for the door. Outside, Bera glanced around. Several of the nearby cottages were also on fire. Some wounded men and women lay on the ground while others tried to stifle the flames with rags, water and buckets of snow.

Because of the guard Erik had posted, the warriors had surrounded the settlement and now engaged in close combat with their enemies.

"Hildirid, come on!" Bera called, seeing the fire eating away the longhouse roof. The women hurled buckets of snow at the flames. Nearby Bjorn fought three warriors armed with swords and battle axes. He bellowed in pain when the ax swiped his sword arm and the warriors shoved him aside and trampled him on their way toward Bera and Hildirid. Three more warriors joined them.

"No!" Bera screamed, kicking hard as one of the men grasped her by the hair and dragged her into his arms. His mail shirt cut into her, but she was too terrified to notice. The back of his fist lashed across her face, stunning her, and he pushed a gloved hand beneath her skirts.

Then he dropped her suddenly, his eyes wide and mouth open in a silent scream of pain. He turned around, trying desperately to reach the dagger embedded in his back. Thorkel stood nearby, his eyes ablaze and his hands moving in a blur as he flung daggers at the warriors who had breached the defenses. Two men advanced on him and he drew his sword, easily cutting them down.

"Are you all right?" the boy shouted to Bera and Hildirid. He pulled his sword out of the chest of a warrior who had fallen at his feet.

"Yes," Hildirid called, rubbing her bruised jaw where one of their attackers had struck her.

"Thank you," Bera said to the youth.

“Now we’re even.” He grinned, the expression almost terrifying on such a boyish face stained with his enemies’ blood. It seemed Thorkel deserved his reputation as a great warrior after all.

With a fierce battle cry, he ran off to rejoin the fight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erik had charged directly into the thick of battle. The enemy had attacked at the southernmost section of the wall surrounding his land. He and Grim fought back to back, bellowing orders to their men who fought alongside them. Sigfred, Ragnar and Cnut took control of other warriors on the north, east and west areas.

Harald and Svein had managed to raise more warriors than Erik expected, but not enough to win this battle, he vowed.

Both he and Grim alone were forces to be reckoned with, but together they were like a storm of flashing steel. Man after man attacked them only to fall at their feet.

In the distance, Erik caught sight of several enemies cutting toward the longhouse.

“Go, Grim,” he said. “Those men are getting through.”

Grim glanced at a new stream of warriors heading toward them. “You can’t take them alone.”

“I said go! Protect the longhouse. No matter what happens to me make sure our settlement and Bera are safe.”

Without further hesitation, Grim took off at a run, his long legs devouring the distance between him and the warriors nearing the longhouse. Erik heard his brother’s unique battle howl before he was completely swept up in the new rush of enemies surrounding him.

These men were fresh, having waited for a signal from their leaders to attack. Erik’s fury overcame his fatigue and he blocked and countered man after man. A blade sliced his arm and another pierced his leg, but he growled in rage and cut down men on both sides.

Two warriors waited in the distance. Erik kicked aside a man to his left and his blade clashed with another to his right. He made his way toward the two warriors who stood watching instead of fighting. Though their helmets covered most of their faces, he knew who they were.

Harald and Svein drew their swords as he approached.

"Your wife and your land will be ours," Harald said.

"We're going to enjoy rutting her to death," Svein added. "You shouldn't have crossed us, Ice Tooth."

Erik didn't reply. His sword would speak for him. The brothers attacked and he blocked their blows. Then they backed away.

"Now!" Svein bellowed.

Erik grunted as an arrow struck him in the shoulder. Another pierced his thigh.

An archer stood a short distance away. He aimed another arrow in Erik's direction. Even without leg injuries Erik couldn't have reached him in time to stop him from firing.

Before the archer could release the arrow, a battle ax flew through the air and embedded in his chest.

Erik glanced toward Grim who had struck the fatal blow. His brother was already busy fighting another man and Erik had no time to think about anything except Harald and Svein who advanced on him again.

By the smirks on their lips they thought the battle was over. They had him outnumbered two to one and he was badly injured. Already he felt dizzy from blood loss, but if he gave up now, he would never see Bera again. She was the only thought on his mind as he let loose a war cry and met the brothers' attack with a vengeance. He cut through Svein's gut and as Harald tried to avenge his brother, Erik thrust his blade through his heart.

Panting, Erik staggered and glanced around. With their leaders and most of their companions dead, the few remaining warriors headed for the woods. The white snow that had covered the ground was now bloodstained slush littered with bodies of the fallen. Glancing at the arrow protruding from his leg, Erik gritted his teeth and grunted in pain as he broke off the stem.

"Erik," Grim said, approaching him and examining the arrow wounds. "You have to get to the longhouse so we can remove these. Can you make it?"

"Yes. How much damage have we taken?" Erik made his way slowly toward the longhouse.

"Bjorn was killed. Cnut is injured, but Ragnar and Sigfred are well."

"Anyone else?"

"I don't know yet. I can help you to the longhouse."

"No. The others will need you for guidance."

Sigfred strode toward them, his face streaked with blood and sweat. "The fires are under control. Erik, you better get those injuries tended. What of Harald and Svein?"

"Dead by Erik's sword," Grim stated.

"Good. The bastards," Sigfred said.

Erik couldn't talk any longer. If he didn't reach the longhouse soon, he'd humiliate himself by falling on his face.

"Grim, you're in charge," Erik stated. "Sigfred, help him with whatever he needs."

"I will," Sigfred said and placed an arm around Erik. "But first we get you to the longhouse."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bera had never been so worried in her life. Sitting at Erik's bedside, she bathed his feverish face. Though he had defeated his enemies, it had come at a price. Several of their people had been killed and it seemed Erik might follow them. He'd lost much



blood from the injuries he'd received in battle, but the infection from the arrow wound in his leg now threatened his life.

For the past several days Bera had left his side only to relieve herself. She ate little and when she slept briefly, Helga kept watch over Erik.

If only she had agreed to their union right away, or at least accepted a courtship, this might not have happened. Yet deep inside she knew that no matter what she'd done, Harald and Svein would have sought revenge.

Grim stepped into the bed closet, his face taut with concern.

"How is he?"

"The same," Bera said, her voice as weary as she felt.

"This is wrong," Grim said. "Better that he died in battle than here in bed."

Bera glared at him. "He's not going to die. Not from this."

Grim's piercing blue eyes met hers and he shook his head slightly. While Erik had been bed-bound, Grim had taken command with Sigfred at his side. The redhead performed his duties well, seeing to the repairs needed for damage sustained during the battle and making certain that the people didn't lose hope with their leader injured. Grim's attitude remained as stern as always. Erik had clearly trusted him, but Bera wasn't sure she did.

"Are you eager for him to die so you can take his land?" Bera snapped. Her stomach clenched. Perhaps she shouldn't have made such an accusation. Grim had done nothing to warrant it.

"No. I don't want anything of Erik's. I care about his welfare and the welfare of the people here."

There was no missing the taunting edge to his voice.

Bera turned to him and said, "I know you blame me for what happened."

"You didn't ask to be abducted."

Bera stood, her fists clenched. "I care about the people here too, Grim. And I love Erik more than I've ever loved anyone. I don't care what you believe or what you think of me, but I am his wife. This is our home and you will never come in here again and speak of death. Do I make myself clear?"

The redhead's gaze fixed on her and after a moment, he nodded.

"Bera," Erik called softly.

Forgetting about Grim, she sat beside Erik and took his hand. This was the first time he'd spoken in days.

"Erik," she said, her heart pounding. She touched his forehead and sighed with relief. Though damp with sweat, the flesh was cool. "I think your fever has broken."

He opened his eyes and smiled slightly. "I should have known."

"Known what?" She tried to keep her voice steady, which was difficult when she was almost overcome by emotion.

"That you and Grim would fight."

"We're not fighting," Grim stated. "Bera was rightfully telling me to keep my opinion to myself regarding your strength of will."

She glanced at Grim over her shoulder and noticed a slight smile playing around his mouth.

"I will leave you both alone," Grim said and opened the door to the bed closet.

"Grim," Bera called and he turned to her. "What I said before about you wanting this land. I didn't mean it. I was worried and —"

"I understand," he said. "If I made you feel responsible for the attack, I apologize."

"By Thor's Hammer, I must still be drifting in a fever," Erik murmured. Bera and Grim looked at him in question and he added, "I never thought I'd hear Grim apologize for anything."

"Oh he's on the road to recovery," Grim muttered and left the bed closet.

Bera raised a mug of water to Erik's lips and he drank deeply. When he finished, he lay back and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Are you well?" he finally asked.

"I'm fine," she said.

"You look tired."

"That's because I've been taking care of you for almost a week."

"A week," he said and tried to sit up, but he hadn't the strength. He gritted his teeth and stifled a groan. No doubt his injuries, in particular the arrow wounds, still caused him much pain.

"Don't worry. Grim and Sigfred have everything under control. What you need to concentrate on is getting well. This bed has never been so still, my love." She hoped some teasing might keep his spirit up.

"So you've missed me," he murmured, his eyes once again heavy with sleep.

"More than you know." She brushed his mouth with a kiss.

This time as she watched the rise and fall of his chest, she felt renewed hope and thanked the gods that he would live to know the child growing inside her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erik recovered with remarkable speed and though his injuries still needed healing, he was able to take over most of his duties again. About a month after the attack, they received a messenger from the King.

It was dusk and Bera sat by the fire, sewing clothes for the baby while nearby Erik worked on a cradle.

"If it's a boy we could call him Snorri," Bera said. "After my uncle."

"No. Egil is better," Erik stated. "It was my father's name."

"What if it's a girl?"

"I think Snorri is a very bad name for a girl too."

Bera raised her eyes to the heavens and gave a snort of laughter. "You know that's not what I meant."

Before Erik could give his opinion on names for a daughter, Grim entered followed by a messenger from the King.

"What is it?" Erik asked.

"The King wants you to know that Ketil had nothing to do with the attack on your settlement," the messenger stated. "And he wishes peace between you."

Erik nodded. "I have never had a quarrel with him and I agree to continue in peace as we have been."

"The King also requests that Grim return with me. He is in need of his expertise. The King's daughter, Asgerd, has been abducted by a man called Stein the Black and he wishes Grim to take Stein's land and rescue his daughter."

Bera gasped. "My sister has been abducted?"

"Do you know if she has been harmed?" Grim demanded. A look of raw emotion flashed across his face, taking Bera by surprise. Then the expression faded as if it had never been.

"The King sent a spy who reported back that she is alive," replied the messenger.

Grim raised one of his wickedly arched eyebrows and said, "Asgerd isn't in love with her captor, is she?"

The messenger's brow furrowed and he said, "Not to my knowledge. The King is very upset about the situation. If you do as he orders, he is willing to reward you with Stein's land."

Grim's blue eyes gleamed and he looked toward Erik. "Do you need me here?"

"No. Go to the King."

"Grim," Bera said. "Asgerd is... Please keep her safe if you can."

"You have my word on it, Bera," he stated, another strange, almost concerned, look in his eyes. Could it be that he had noticed Asgerd after all? Bera prayed for her sister's

safety until Grim arrived, for once the redheaded warrior met Stein in battle, she didn't doubt who would be victorious.

"The King asks that you return with me as soon as possible," the messenger said. "I suggest we leave in the morning."

"That's not soon enough," Grim stated. "You may stay and rest after your journey. I will leave tonight."

"I will go with you, if Erik agrees," Thorkel said.

Erik didn't hesitate in giving his permission and soon after, Grim and Thorkel left.

That night when Bera snuggled close to Erik in bed, thoughts of Asgerd filled her mind.

"I hope my sister is well," she whispered.

Erik held her closer and kissed her hair. "With Grim going after her, she's as good as rescued."

"I hope you're right. Asgerd has feelings for Grim you know."

"Poor girl."

Bera turned and faced him. "What makes you think he hasn't noticed her as well?"

"Grim has no interest in women, other than a rut every now and then. Sometimes I wish he would take a wife. It would do him good. I know it made a world of difference to me."

A smile tugged at her lips. "Did it?"

"I risked everything for you and you have to ask? Woman, what is wrong with—"

She covered his mouth with hers. He fell silent except for a moan of pleasure as he rolled onto his back and pulled her atop him, their mouths still locked in a kiss as deep as their love.

## **About the Author**

Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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