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The Viking Savior

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Dedication

For my husband, my personal savior.

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Chapter One

Coast of England—1079

All noise ceased as the immense Viking entered the inn. His green eyes surveyed the scene quickly, then his strong legs carried him purposely toward the bar, where Esmeralda Handrian attempted to cover her nudity with the shredded remains of her gown. Was he to be her fate, then? The nuns who had raised her had not prepared her for the possibility of being abandoned by her traveling companions. Penniless and without proof of her identity, she'd been forced to seek shelter at this inn, only to be stripped and bid upon like a common whore.

Eerie silence reigned until the Viking nodded to the innkeeper and tossed him several coins. Behind him, his second in command threw a handful of coins to the gathered men, dispersing them quickly.

"Have her bathed and fed," the Viking told the innkeeper.

"And make sure we're not disturbed until morning."

"Of course, I'll see to it myself." The innkeeper cowered before the Viking's fierce stare, and then scurried away to do his bidding.

Esme gripped her dress, biting her tongue to keep from crying out in distress. She wanted to scream that the Viking had no right to buy her, but knew this was not the time. Her only chance was to try and convince him that there had been a misunderstanding and try to persuade him to help her.

To her surprise, he swept the white fox cloak from his shoulders and wrapped it around her half-naked body. She stared up at him, stunned. She hadn't expected kindness. A maid came up beside her and tried to pull her away, tugging at her hand when she remained frozen in place, staring up into the Viking's startling green eyes. He met her gaze for a long, strange moment then waved his hand in an arrogant command for her to be dragged upstairs to the inn's finest chamber.

Esme bathed in the shallow tub provided, rushing to take advantage of the scalding water before the Viking came for her. The maid helped wash her long sable curls before retreating, leaving her alone in the chamber. Taking a seat before the large fire, she raced to stitch the torn bodice of her gown while the heat dried her hair.

A tray of food sat on a long wooden table in the center of the room, untouched. Though she was starving, she didn't want to put herself any further in debt to him.

She flinched when the heavy door pushed open, and the Viking ducked through. He was so tall; he had to duck to enter the room. As he straightened to his full height, she pulled the cloak tighter around her shoulders, desperately wishing she'd managed to finish mending her gown.

As he shut the door behind him, his hungry gaze swept her from head to toe. She flushed, and a curious warmth bloomed with her. For one strange moment, she wondered what it would feel like if he held her, kissed her, or even touched her intimately. The idea both intimidated and thrilled her.

Ashamed, she dropped her gaze. The nuns would lock her away forever if they knew what she was thinking.

Ulrich Valda hadn't planned on buying a maid for the night, but the moment he'd seen her, he'd known she wasn't in her element. Normally he wouldn't have cared. He'd use his purchase and set her free in the morning. But he'd been stunned by her fear and innocent appearance. When he'd entered the inn, she'd tensed and set her shoulders bravely before looking him directly in the eye.

He dropped the bar in place across the door, refusing admittance to any outsider. Her whole body jolted when the wood made contact. He was in no hurry; he had all night to do as he wished with her. Noting she hadn't touched the food provided, he sat at the table, poured himself a cup of mead, and watched her wordlessly.

They'd come to an impasse.

"You look much better cleansed," he commented wryly.

"Of course I do!" she snapped, obviously affronted.

He couldn't hold back his laughter. "Ah, so you do have a voice. You've not touched the food."

"And owe you more? I think not. And let's get this straight between us from the beginning; the innkeeper had no right to sell me to you. I simply came in to ask for help and he ... started auctioning me off, he—" She cursed low under her breath as she pricked her finger with a needle. She put her finger to her lips.

"What is your name?" He didn't try to hide his obvious appraisal. Her story might have some merit. Her pampered hands were not those of a working maid.

"Would it matter?" Obviously frustrated, she drew in a deep breath before lifting her gaze. "You were the highest bidder."

"Was my bid not high enough?" He laughed as she calculated her next move. "It matters not. You're mine for the night. Might as well eat, the food's been bought."

He nodded toward the table, and she finally moved closer to it, selecting only an apple from a tray before quickly moving back beside the fire, trying to hold his cloak closed over her naked body. She ate the fruit quickly, as if she hadn't been fed in months.

"Now, what is your name?" Ulrich moved from the chair and poured a second cup of mead, handing it to her. He topped off his cup and sat back, knowing he made her anxious. Standing abruptly, he took the core from her fingers and tossed it into the fire beside her.

"Esme. And you are?" An edge sharpened her voice.
"I'm Ulrich Valda."

Comprehension swept over her features. "Ah, the Viking trader, I've heard stories of you, sir. Are they true?" She softened, curiosity filling her fine, dark eyes.

"That depends on the story. What do they call you besides Esme?"

"Esmeralda, sir. Esmeralda Handrian." She seemed frustrated when he showed no recognition. "Esmeralda Handrian—as in Lord Gehard Handrian's niece. Surely you've heard of him?"

He frowned. "Anyone who knows the coast knows of Lord Handrian. His trading center is run well, fair prices for goods."

She only nodded her head at his words.

"If you are his blood, what have you done to disfavor yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"You had to have done something to wind up being bid on in the inn tonight."

"I did nothing, sir. And if you'll let me explain, it's not as you might imagine."

He inclined his head for her to continue, and she finally sipped from her cup.

"I was on my way home from the convent. We left three days ago, and my companions were paid to see me home. Only yesterday morning I awoke to find they'd abandoned me, taken the horses and all our supplies, including my clothing and money."

"Why not stay at the inn where you spent the night and send word ahead to your uncle?"

She looked at him as if he was a complete dolt. "I would have, except that my companions forced us to go further than the planned stop last eve, making me believe we could make this inn by night fall. We couldn't and were forced to camp. When I awoke they were gone and so was everything else we had with us." Her slim fingers rose to stroke the back of her neck. When she saw him watching, she dropped her hand.

"I see."

"Do you?" She stood, glaring at him in the dim light.

Ulrich wondered if she realized the portrait she made, her hair glowing in the firelight, her long slender legs peaking

from his cloak with each step she took, her slim fingers holding the wrap closed around her.

"I knew it was only a half day's travel to this inn. It seemed wiser to make my way here, closer to Uncle. But in the last year, the innkeeper has changed. He did not know me and wouldn't allow me time to explain before the men started bidding on me. You walked in and—" She shrugged. "I'm not going back to the convent. Anything I find further on my journey would be better."

They were both quiet for a while, and Ulrich finally tried a different approach. His mind reeled with possibilities, now that he knew who she was. Lord Handrian was not a man to anger if you wanted to continue trading in his port. If this was truly his niece, he'd best tread carefully.

"You did not appreciate your schooling?"

"It's not the schooling I dread; it's the monotony of time, sir. I didn't always board at the school. While my father was alive I lived at Handrian. I was free there, to ride and wander the fields, to shop the docks and stroll among the traders. I had friends and we were happy, we laughed..."

He groaned silently. She was beautiful, and Ulrich didn't need a beautiful, spoiled woman on his hands.

"Why send you away?" He shifted in his chair, watching her every move. She was a bit thin for his taste, but she was young. She'd fill out with a few years behind her.

"My uncle felt it best. He wanted me educated. I don't think he understood taking me from one life and putting me behind the convent walls would be so..." She stood and started pacing once again.

"Stop wandering, girl. You make me tired watching you. Come closer so I can see you clearer."

She hesitated then sat beside the fire once again.

"I'm not an animal," he snapped, losing his patience.
"Come here!"

With a defiant lift of her chin, she slowly approached him, leaning over his chair to bring her face close to his. When he lifted his hand to touch her, she pulled back quickly, moving to the other side of the room. He laughed at her retreat, thinking it was a good thing her uncle had put her in a convent. She was beautiful and strong-willed, a temptation to any man's good sense.

Best not to let himself get involved with Lord Handrian's niece. Better men than he had been tied to the land because of women who weren't nearly as beautiful as Esme. He'd not let her beauty bind him to the mistake of his lifetime.

A woman of Esme's background would be expected to marry a man who would enhance her stature. Ulrich was not that man. On the other hand, he accepted that her plight had become his. If she was truly Lord Handrian's niece and he didn't help her, his trading days in Port Handrian would cease.

Esme knew if she stayed close to the Viking, she'd want to touch him. He was larger than life to her. The stories she'd heard of his conquering ways had always amazed her. He'd found trading to his liking and was successful beyond anyone's dreams. He was known to be fair when dealt with fairly and quick to conquer when angered. All she wanted to do was touch him, to feel the width of his shoulders under her fingers, to know what his blond hair felt like against her skin.

The entire time she'd been in the convent, her private dreams had always been about the fair-haired, green-eyed warrior who would come and take her away and make her his own.

Now that she stood in the same room with such a creature, confusion vexed her mind. What was right and what her body told her she wanted were two different things. Suddenly she wondered if she might not have both—Ulrich for the night and a way home. For the first time since waking that morning and finding she'd been abandoned in the woods, she smiled.

Nobody would ever have to know she'd let him touch her and teach her what it meant to lay beside a man. The idea made her tingle in lower places, and her skin heated at the idea of his touch. Esme thought about all the time she'd spent in extra prayer after asking the nuns a question about sex or love and laughed aloud at the irony of the situation.

Ulrich would have the final word, but at least her mind would be clear that she tried to keep herself pure. If she wasn't holding the cloak closed around her she would have crossed her fingers in hopes he'd not heed her next words.

"Ulrich, please take me home to my uncle. I assure you he'll reward you well."

"I travel in the opposite direction. It's impossible."

"Then send me home with several of your trusted men. They'll be rewarded for their time and trouble."

"Why should I believe you really are his niece? You could be lying."

"How dare you call me a liar? You have no reason to believe otherwise and besides, once we got to his castle, what would you expect me to do if I wasn't his blood?" She began

to pace again, mumbling under her breath. She didn't care if he made out an occasional phrase. She cursed the fates that had hindered her journey and given her a strange gift she shouldn't accept.

"Somehow I don't think Lord Handrian's niece would speak as you do."

"You don't know anything about me, only that you think I'm some whore you can buy for a night's pleasure." And that was her quandary. She wanted to be with Ulrich but as a lover, not as a paid whore.

She gathered up her gown and brought it to him, dropping it on his lap. "Here, does this look like the gown of a street whore? No, look at the fine weave and quality of the stitches. Ulrich, please see me home and you'll be rewarded, I swear to you."

"I can't do that. I've done what I can for you, girl. I've taken you away from the drunks downstairs, given you a bath and food. On the morrow, I head inland."

"A horse, then. Loan me a horse, and when you travel back to the city he'll be returned and you'll be rewarded."

"And what if you come upon another innkeeper who doesn't believe you are who you say? What then?"

"Don't you see? That's my point." In her utter frustration, she forgot to hold the cloak closed, giving Ulrich glimpses of her body under his furs. It occurred to her she should feel uncomfortable about the situation. After all, the man was a virtual stranger. But for some reason she didn't care that he saw her body. Perhaps she was offering herself silently with her actions.

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[&]quot;With you as my guard, no one would dare..."

[&]quot;Dare what, Esme?"

[&]quot;Dare to treat me as they did today."

Chapter Two

A sharp knock ended their discussion. Ulrich sent Esme to open the door, allowing the young boys to bring in fresh bathwater. She said nothing, just watched quietly from beside the fire until they had finished. Ulrich rose and barred the door, moving easily around the room as he pulled off his belt, placing the saber near the edge of the tub. He stripped off his tunic and sat.

"Come help me with my boots." His sharp tone made her move without question. He held back a smile, knowing she was annoyed with him, because her muttering grew louder.

"Are all men as rude as you are, sir?"

"Rude? You think I am rude? What about the men downstairs? It's not too late to send you back down to them. If you're so uncomfortable here with me, take your leave and good luck."

Esme sat back on her heels, her eyes wide with panic. He studied her intently, then laughed to let her know he was teasing.

"Oh, you make me so mad, Ulrich." She continued to pull at his boot, this time her words cursing the whole male population. "There," she said, as she tried to close the cloak around her again, tossing his other boot under the table. "I'll take my leave if you want to bathe." She slowly rose, and he reached to catch her arm.

"And where will you go, Esme? Downstairs, dressed only in my cloak?"

"I can't stay here."

Ulrich knew she was deciding how to best handle the situation. He had to give her credit; she was feisty and had courage. Although he would have preferred a bit less of her edgy mouth. He said nothing, only stood and dropped his trousers, watching her face as she stared at him. Her mouth fell open slightly, forming a perfect oval. Heat rushed through him, ending at his cock. He throbbed at the idea of having her mouth around him.

Esme wanted to turn away, knew she should, but was frozen in place, mesmerized by Ulrich's body. His shoulders were incredibly wide and his muscles tightened with each movement. A light line of short, blond curling hair swirled along his chest and down to his waist, ending in a halo around his thick, pulsing member.

Esme had seen animals mating, knew the basics of loving between adults, but she'd never seen a man's penis. And this man, she somehow knew, was a specimen above the rest. She wet her lips with her tongue and pulled her hand back quickly when she realized she'd moved to touch him.

Had Ulrich not laughed, she might have. Embarrassed by her brazen display, she stood quickly and moved to the fire, keeping her back to him. She could hear him moving behind her, then his body slipped into the tub, sending water splashing over the edge.

"Come and wash my hair, Esme."

"So you can make fun of me some more?"

"No, so you can look all you want. That is what you want, isn't it? Have you never seen a man before?"

Again, she thought of him being her first, of him teaching her his ways and likes. The idea grew, and she silently acknowledged how much she wanted him to touch her.

"Of course not. I've been in a convent. Haven't you been listening to me?" Her voice held exasperation. She shook her head and threw her hands up in defeat. As she did, his cloak opened wide around her, giving Ulrich his first full view of her body. Embarrassed, she turned her back to him.

"Your words warn you away, but your eyes tell me the truth, Esme. Your hand reaches to touch me, to explore me."

Glancing over her shoulder, she gazed at his large body squished into the tub. His head rested on the back rim, his arms hooked over the sides. His knees were above the water line, and she drew a breath. He was right; she did long to touch him, to feel the strength and heat of him.

"Come and help me, Esme. You see how small this tub is, how restricted my movements are." His lips curled into a serene smile, and she narrowed her gaze.

It was a long time before she slowly moved behind him and reached out to take the soap floating on the water before him. Snatching the soap as if it might bite her, she reluctantly loosened her grasp on his cloak. He closed his eyes when she pushed him forward and down, letting the water wet him again. When he rose, she worked the soap to lather and spread it across his chest and shoulders.

Esme knew this was wrong and didn't care. Her experience in the inn earlier had taught her a hard lesson—just because she expected to be treated well didn't mean it would happen. Somehow with Ulrich she felt safe, protected. Yes, she

reminded herself, he had bought her, but he could have used her already and he hadn't. Indeed, he'd gone out of his way to make her comfortable. He'd given her food and the bath, and he hadn't raped her the minute he entered the chamber. She understood her lot could get worse, so she decided to just take what she could, as he would eventually do. At least, when she was back at the castle, she'd have a grand adventure to remember and hopefully cherish, not that anyone else could ever know.

Esme wanted to explore him with a strange openness she didn't know she possessed. She should feel shamed for her thoughts about lying naked with this man, a man she'd only known for a few hours. But perhaps it was natural for any woman to want to explore a man's body when they were together privately. She refused to question her wants further or to allow the nuns words to enter her mind.

Ulrich loved the way Esme's hands felt against his skin, her fingers competent yet soft against him. Though she'd finished cleansing him, she continued to massage his scalp, relaxing him further. He leaned forward slightly, baring his back. Without prompting she moved lower, her touch harder at his shoulders.

Ulrich decided he'd let her get used to his body before he took her. It made no difference to him, but it would to her. Having her comfortable would mean the difference between sex and rape, and she'd had a rough time during the last few days. He didn't want to add to her distress.

He'd teach her what the nuns wouldn't.

Ulrich slid under the water, rinsing away the suds and rising with a shake of his head, flinging water everywhere, including on Esme. She sat back quickly to escape the wetting, but her efforts were in vain. Too much water had come out of the tub with his movement, and she was wet from head to toe, again.

"Damn you, Ulrich. I just dried my hair!" She moved back to the fire, pulling her curls forward and rubbing them between her hands. The cloak fell behind her shoulders, leaving him with a complete half-view of her body. Full firm breasts rode high, her waist narrowed to almost nothing then smoothed to wider hips. Her legs were long, her thighs strong. Her skin glistened in the firelight.

He moved from the tub and used a cloth to take most of the moisture from his body, joining her beside the fire to dry his hair, his large fingers combing it as she combed hers. Neither said a word. Instead, he continued to stand naked beside her, knowing she was watching him through lowered lashes.

"Not all men are endowed as you, are they, Ulrich?" Her voice was a mere whisper. Her face heated, but he didn't laugh at her.

"All men are equal yet different."

"Yet you're a standard above, aren't you?"

"Some might say that."

"May we speak openly, Ulrich?"

"Yes, Esme, I'd prefer it." He moved to the table and poured more mead into the cups, offering her one, which she took, cradling it as she brought it to her lips.

"What are your plans for me tonight?"

"What would you like them to be?"

"I'd like to be home, safe and warm, but that is not my reality." She took a sip of mead. "I'm realizing how much I owe you, yet have no way to repay you."

He lifted one eyebrow at her comment, and she smiled. "All right, I admit I could be worse off."

He laughed at her, leaning one hip against the table edge.

"What I mean is—" She searched for the right words.

"What happens in this room tonight, Ulrich, nobody must ever find out."

"So, now you're resigned to my bedding you. What made you change your mind?"

"I believe I have no say in the matter."

He lifted his left shoulder. "What would you like to happen tonight?"

"I'm not sure what is supposed to happen. That's the point, Ulrich." She wrestled with her conscious and seemed to lose several rounds.

"Esmeralda, if we make love tonight, I won't be telling stories in the morning. As to what and how, I would think it's a natural process."

"To you maybe, you know the process."

"And you want to know, but don't want to ask?"

"That's just it. I do want to know, have wondered for years."

"Come here, Esme." He stayed propped on the table and waited for her to slowly rise, her hand pulling the fur tighter around her. When she reached his side, she stood tall, and a

shake of her head sent sable curls floating in the air around her shoulders. He took the cup from her other hand and placed it aside.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked quietly, grasping her chin and directing her mouth toward his. She didn't answer yet didn't pull away. Slowly he lowered his lips to hers, the contact a mere whisper of touch. Again and again he kissed her until Esme pressed against him, forgetting to be timid as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

As his kiss deepened, her hands advanced, stroking his back and sides while letting him stroke his tongue against her lips. She gasped for air and parted to him, accepting the tip of his tongue into her mouth. Ulrich wanted to push harder, faster and take her at once, yet he knew tonight wasn't about what he wanted; it was about showing Esmeralda the ways of loving.

Slowly he ventured deeper, probing her mouth until she started to spar with him, her tongue tangling against his as her fingers tightened on his skin.

Ulrich wound his hand through her hair and tugged her closer. It broke the kiss, and she stared at him, trembling. She seemed to wrestle one last time between saving herself and taking what she wanted. He knew he'd ultimately won out when she leaned back against him, tentatively putting her lips over his.

He waited, making her take the initiative, giving her control of the embrace. His cock hardened further when she sighed and sucked his tongue between her lips. He pulled her between his thighs, leaning her against him. She trailed her

hand down his belly, and he surged against her when she didn't pull back. He wanted to take her under him across the table and push quickly inside her but didn't, that would come later.

He moved his free hand to her waist and spread his fingers wide, almost encompassing her. Slowly he brushed his fingertips along her skin, down to her hips and up her back, over and over while he taught her to kiss him, taught her the art of sensual play. There was no longer hesitancy, only an open need she forgot to hide. She sighed as he closed his fingertips around her breast, her nipple already budded, yet hardening further under his touch. Esme pushed her body forward, filling his palm while she urgently sucked his bottom lip between her teeth.

His other hand left her hair and dropped to her belly, his palm flattening against her, holding her under his touch, feeling the heat her body created. She was moist already, and it was easy to slip his index finger lower, her heat easing his way as it disappeared under a shield of soft dark curls.

As he stroked gently, she started to move over his hand, pushing against him with a groan to move further. He continued the frustrating miss of the touch she needed and it was Esme who pulled away, taking his hand and moving it fully between her legs, leaning into him. Her lips pressed to his, she sucked his tongue deeply into her mouth and was rewarded with the tip of his finger entering her slowly then pulling back.

Esme pulled back when he removed his finger, and he watched her face. Her whole body heated when she realized

what she'd done, how she'd positioned herself against him, how she'd moved his hand to find her elusive release, uncaring of propriety. She apparently wanted the culmination of years of wonder. He slipped inside her gently and withdrew, then again and again, never leaving her direct view.

Her head dropped back on her shoulders and she shut her eyes when his other hand kneaded her breast. A groan worked its way through her. She cried out when his mouth covered her nipple, his tongue whirling around it. The excitement he created caused her to forget her training and take from his hand and his lips. She glanced to his face, her smile the acceptance he'd been waiting for.

"Relax, Esme, just let go," he whispered and went back to suckling her. His finger drove higher inside her, his thumb gently circled her clit, and she rewarded him with her first unmistakable, shuddering release. She tightened around his finger and moistened further, pulsing several times. Esme dropped her head to his shoulder. He could only describe her reaction as stunned.

Ulrich pulled his hand from her, drawing his finger along her lips, his tongue quickly following. She groaned at the move, accepting it without question, one arm reaching around his neck to hold on while he repeated the process, moistening her lips then sucking them clean, tangling with her tongue, her taste mingling between them.

Taking her other hand, he moved it lower and closed it around his throbbing penis, his hand holding hers to his skin, slowly moving it back and forth. He knew she felt his pulse

when her breath caught in her throat. Her fingers now willingly encased him, his hand going back to her breast.

"Ulrich, what happens next?" Her words were muffled, her lips against his throat as her tongue swirled against his skin.

"That depends, Esmeralda. Should we continue?"

"Yes, Ulrich. I'll die if you stop now."

"Will you, Esme?" He laughed and slipped his arm behind her knees, scooping her up against him and moving to the bed.

Standing her beside it, he reached to untie the cloak, letting it fall to the floor. Esme moved back, sliding to the center of the large space, coming to rest on her heels. He stretched out flat beside her on his back, his penis standing tall and hard anticipating her attention.

Ulrich watched her lick her lips a second time and he bobbed at the sight. Her eyes widened, and he reached for her. Esme locked her hand over him, fisting him as he showed her earlier. Her fingers started to slow the pace, to slide over his heated skin, feeling it throb against her palm.

"Esme, I'll come soon, do you understand?"

"I'm not sure. What will happen?" He noted her eyes never left his cock; he was mesmerized by its response to her touch.

"I'll spout like a fountain."

She was too serious, too determined to finish him, his hand covered hers, slowing her pursuit.

"And after we've rested, we'll start at the beginning," he told her, pulling her mouth to his, letting her hand pump him until he could hold back no longer.

He groaned against her lips, and she moved beside him as tall spurts of liquid pumped upward, landing on his belly and legs. He gave no instruction; she simply slowed her movements, finally stopped when he lay calm against her hand. Esme trailed her finger along his belly, taking his cum on her fingertips, bringing her finger to her lips, tasting him. Ulrich watched her and groaned, his cock pulsing toward hardness once again.

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Chapter Three

Esme lost all hesitancy about her nudity; proper behavior was long gone. This time with Ulrich would be something she never forgot, so she decided to make the most of it. She took a rag to the bathwater and cleansed his body, then returned with two cups of mead. As she crawled up in the bed beside him, she watched him intently.

"What's on your mind, Esmeralda?" He lay relaxed on the bed, one arm behind his head, the other holding his cup. She started exploring his large, hard body with her hand, testing the texture of his skin and the muscle beneath it. A touch near his hip made him jolt, and her fingers tracing along the back of his leg made him groan. Heat built deep inside her, making her feel heavy with a peculiar need. Her breasts were full, her nipples hard, aching for attention.

"Is that all? I mean, isn't there something else we can do?"
"There are many different things we can do together."

"Like what?" she teased, moving to lie beside him. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer along his length.

"Well, we can get some sleep or we can start at the beginning."

Esme liked that idea better. She put her cup aside, taking his away too.

"Kiss me, Ulrich; make me feel like you did before."

"It comes with a price, Esme."

"Which is?"

"My touch to your skin, where and how I want it."

"Anything," she told him before his mouth covered hers. It was a long time later, after he'd suckled her and kissed her body from head to toe, after he'd used his fingers to stretch her, and after she'd climaxed a second time that she pulled away.

"Can I touch you again?" She slipped down along his body, her head resting on his lower belly, her finger running along his length from tip to base and back.

"Yes," Ulrich managed, surprised when her head lowered over him without prompting. She created tortured magic around him, her hesitant moves becoming bold and her hand adding to the combination.

He throbbed and pulsed for her, her tongue lapping at the drop of clear liquid that rose with her movements. Ulrich pulled her up to him, taking her mouth under his once again as he slipped her under him. Ulrich ultimately slipped down her body in an intimate kiss.

Esme climaxed on his tongue, her head thrashing from side to side, her fingers tightened around the bedding. He didn't wait for her to recover, he moved between her legs, now widely spread, pressing at her opening. His mouth to her breast, he sucked hard as he pushed inside her, deeper than anything ever before. He hesitated at her resistance, then pushed further, freeing his way to take her completely. She let out a gasp but froze under him only for a second, then seemed to become lost in his movements.

Her body took to his immediately, her hips jutting to accept him, to take the thrusting movements and to push for more.

"More," she whispered, and he filled her with his release.

Her muscles tightened further around him, a vice-like grip pumping him dry. He let his weight down onto his forearms, dropping his head to her breast, his tongue lightly teasing her nipple. He gathered his breath, moving in her without moving above her and was rewarded with a pulse from inside her.

There was no real conversation, he simply lifted up and began slowly stroking against her, in and out, until she was writhing under him, her hands pulling at his hips to hold him tighter. Ulrich dropped his hand to their joining and she groaned, her breath in short pants as he stroked her internally and externally. He felt her clamp over him, holding him for several seconds before going limp under him.

Her knees fell aside; her hands dropped from his hips. Pulling from her slowly, he moved beside her, his head propped on one hand, his other stroking her belly, occasionally dipping lower between her sable curls to draw out more of her moisture.

His tongue ran along her belly to her navel, across the concave space between her hip bones and back to the start. Over and over, his fingers continued to slip in and out of her. She lay beside him, her eyes closed, accepting his touch. Just when she would have relaxed completely, his large finger slipped deep inside her, and she groaned softly.

Esme closed her hand over his, slowing his motion, shifting his hand to cup her mound. Her long slim fingers grasped the

one probing inside her and moved him slightly. She flexed over him, her inner muscle making the involuntary move. Again and again she milked his length, finally pushing harder against his palm, holding him in place with her hands tightly over his until she pumped with abandon, finding her climax.

Slowing under him, her hands fell away, and she turned her head away, apparently embarrassed at how she'd used him. Ulrich slowly turned her face back toward him, watching her intently. They lay calm for a long time, quiet, as he traced his fingertips along her belly, and she ran her hands over his arms and chest.

"My goodness, Ulrich. Is it always like this?"

"I'm afraid not, Esme. Sometimes it's violent."

"Which is what would have happened if you'd not come along and purchased me."

"It's one possibility; we'll never know."

"I know, and this was much better, Ulrich. Thank you," she whispered, before rolling against him, hiding her face against his chest.

* * * *

Ulrich watched as Esme ate with abandon. After their loving they'd laid quiet for a time until her stomach started to rumble loudly. With laughter and tenderness, he moved her to the fire, washed her stained thighs and sat her on the table, pulling the food closer to her.

"Tell me about the convent. Why was it so bad, Esme?"

"I suppose if I'd not known any other life it wouldn't have been so terrible, but I was ten when I went, and I'd known freedom and laughter. The nuns frowned at laughter!"

He laughed, trying to picture her behind the convent walls.

"I haven't climbed a tree in eight years, nor swam in the ocean. It was the little things I missed so, but uncle was convinced it was best for me. I had no choice."

"And now, you're going home for good?"

"Yes, I turned eighteen and finally talked uncle into letting me come home. I'm to become the mistress of Handrian Castle."

"You don't seem very happy about the position."

"The situation brings up other matters which I'd not realized years ago. Only on this journey home, my chaperones were talking—"

"Go on. They obviously frightened you." Ulrich moved closer to her, his hands on the table bracketing her body. "Tell me, Esme. What did they say?"

"That uncle is getting old, and I'll have to marry of his choice to continue the hold on Handrian." Esme wound her hands around his neck and held on tight. "It will never be like this with anyone else, will it, Ulrich? What we did tonight, no other man will make me feel this way."

"Of course one will. The right one." He pulled from her embrace, using the pads of his thumbs to wipe away her tears. "Esme, this happens all the time. Marriages are arranged. It would be best to try and get along with your husband." He pulled back and gave her a rueful smile.

"Somehow I feel sorry for the man who will become your husband, Esmeralda."

"That's not fair, Ulrich. If I had a choice it would be easy."
"But you don't, Esme."

"Ulrich, if I'm to have no say in my future, will you do something for me tonight?"

"What?" He watched her intently, wondering what her mind was conjuring up.

"Love me so I won't forget. Love me so when I'm old and grey I'll have something to remember and smile about." Her words became strangled, and he pulled her to him.

"Esme, no matter what, I can't change the course of your future."

"I understand, Ulrich. Truly I do. But for tonight..."

"For tonight only."

Her mouth dropped over his, taking what she wanted. Ulrich rose at the sucking motions her mouth made over his tongue, and he lifted her to him, her legs wrapping around his waist. Turning, he sat on the table with Esme still straddling him.

"Anything and everything, tonight." Ulrich didn't need to test her lips, her heat rode against his belly. It was easy to encircle her waist and lift her over him, impaling her on his cock.

She stretched around him, fitting him like a wet leather glove, tight and pulsing against him, the initial burn turning to an enticing fever. He made no movement until she was seated against him fully, then he simply lifted her hips a bit and let her slide down again.

Esme groaned aloud, then told him to go faster, deeper and harder. She took her breasts in her hands, pushing them together, offering both nipples to his mouth to suckle just before he pulsed inside her, taking her to a place of floating darkness that was warm and safe. It was easy enough to lift her from him and turn her over the table top. Pliant from her climax, she let him mold her body over the table, left her arms extend before her as he moved behind her, entering her warmth and being swallowed into the sweet darkness.

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Chapter Four

Esme gloried in the new position, which allowed Ulrich to penetrate her deeper than she'd ever thought possible. She pushed back toward him on his inward stroke, taking him even higher.

Ulrich cursed under his breath, "Damn you, Esme, for knowing how to make me come, and damn me for buying you for the night. And I curse the fates that will take you from me in the morning."

That was the phrase that stayed with her, the one she'd remember always. For one short moment in time, the Viking warrior, Ulrich Valda, had wanted her.

Learning already when his breath shortened he was nearing his release, she pulled out from under him and dropped before him, taking his cock in her mouth, sucking him between her lips until he spilled on her tongue. Esme knew she'd surprised him and didn't stop to think about it further. All that mattered was the bond they'd forged. Refusing to release him, she continued to lick him clean, savoring the tangy taste of their combined essence, knowing no other man would ever taste or smell so perfect. Esme wouldn't allow herself to think about doing these things with anyone else.

She rose between his legs, her arms draped over his shoulders, her brown gaze locked with his until he lowered his head to take her nipple between his teeth, starting them at the beginning.

Ulrich had been right. She was sore, but it was a delicious soreness, something to be savored and remembered always. How his sizeable fingers opened her, how his bulbous cock stretched her to accommodate him at whim, making her body weep around him. Even Esme was ready for a rest after their last joining, her limbs aching and her mind bewildered.

Ulrich rested his hands on the table top. She silently bet he'd never expected her to become adventurous, let alone unprompted, but she'd had years to wonder. He pulled her up along his body, taking her mouth to his in a kiss that sealed their fates even though he wouldn't admit it or accept it. Swept up against his body, he moved back to the bed, drawing the covers over them both.

"Sleep, Esme. Morning will be here soon and you'll be sore."

"I don't care, Ulrich. Hurt me," she told him with a bluntness that seemed to surprise and please him from the smile on his lips. "If I'm to leave you tomorrow and never see you again, send me away with an ache in other places besides my heart."

"Esme, I can't."

"I know you can't come home with me, and it's where I have to go." She lost her composure, crying openly for just a minute before gaining control. "I'm sorry."

She rose from the bed, returning with a cup of mead, and then retreating to stand before the fire. The distance allowed her time to come to terms with her situation, and she refused to allow maudlin thoughts in the room with them tonight.

"I suppose you need time to recuperate?" Her face was turned away but she heard him moving behind her. "Do all men need time in between?"

Ulrich turned her by her shoulders, studying her face intently.

"I think that was a dare, Esmeralda."

"Oh no, Ulrich, surely if you're tired..." Her wistful voice trailed off.

"Why you little..." Ulrich pulled her to him roughly and started to laugh when she couldn't smother her smile any longer. "Taunting a Viking can be dangerous."

"How so? Tell me. Show me." Her fingers lifted his hand to her breast.

* * * *

Later, Ulrich joined Esme in front of the fire, where she stood staring pensively into the flames.

"Ulrich," she whispered. "Will you come and see me the next time you come through Handrian?"

"I don't know, Esme. It might work to your disadvantage. What if you're settled and married? You might even like your husband."

"I can't believe that a possibility right now, but even if it became one, that still wouldn't stop you from calling. You are a trusted family friend who saved me from a fate worse than death. Of course you'd be welcome at our table."

Ulrich smiled at the naive outlook she opted to take, knowing inherently that any man who married Esmeralda would never want to see or hear of him, ever. If the case

were reversed, he'd not let the man through his doorway, let alone near his wife a second time. He sobered at the thought of a wife, lest it be Esme.

Moving through the darkened room, he dropped several logs on the burning embers. He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. When she went to hug him he turned her, holding her back against his chest, his hands biting into her shoulders to hold her in place.

"Esmeralda, I shall never come and see you," he told her quietly but forcefully, bending to press his mouth close to her ear. "I shall make it my mission in life to avoid it." She tried to pull away, and he held her harder. "If you were mine, I'd never let you go, but you're not. I can't have you; we live in two different worlds. You must believe you'll have a good life or you'll be defeated before you begin. Don't let that happen to you, Esme. Please promise me you won't give up before life starts." His words brimmed with emotion, and he wondered if she realized how much it cost him to talk with her this intimately.

"I promise, Ulrich." There was a long pause before she spoke again. "I've decided to view you as a gift I could only keep for one night."

"That is a wise outlook. May I adopt it too?" He was back in control, no tremor overtook his words.

"If you like."

He swept her hair from her neck and saw a bruise. "How did this happen?" His lips rode over the mark, making her shiver against his chest. "It's new, Esme. How did you get this?"

"Last night, when they took the chain from me. I wore a silver pendant; it had been my mother's from my father. It was gone this morning with everything else. I suppose that's what woke me, them tearing it from my neck."

"I'm sorry," he whispered, letting his tongue flick against the mark a second time. "What did it look like?"

"It was a small oval with flowers carved in the surface and a large 'H' in the center. The edges of it were worn smooth from my fingers holding it each night."

Ulrich said nothing, but promised himself he would find her pendant if he could. He knew for certain he'd find the hired companions who'd robbed and abandoned her. And when he did, he wouldn't turn them over to Lord Gehard Handrian until he'd had his say.

Her hips moved against him with each flick of his tongue, and his cock nudged between the cheeks of her ass, taking her movement as an invitation, lengthening against her.

"Esme, come back to bed." Taking a step back, he waited for her to turn and moved with her to the bed, following down beside her, the palm of his hand to her belly.

"In the morning, I'll send you home to your uncle's with a guard of my best men. But you must understand I can't go with you."

"I know, Ulrich. I appreciate you getting me home and saving me tonight." Her hand drew lazy patterns across his chest. "I just wish we could spend a little more time together."

"That is exactly why I won't see you home or ever see you again. You deserve a better man for your husband." She went

to argue, and he pressed his hand over her lips. "Don't squabble with me, I know of what I speak. Not much of what I have done in this life has been for the good, rather my own good first. I don't apologize for it. It's who I am. But I pray you never learn the whole truth. Some of the things I have done are worse than anything you could image, so don't bother to try. Just know your future holds a man who will love and protect you far better than I ever could."

"But you've done both those things tonight. I see that as good, not evil."

"Another man will challenge you on that some day, sooner than you may think. Don't you realize I've broken you, taken your innocence?"

"It was mine to give, Ulrich. And if I'd been left to those men downstairs, it wouldn't have been my choice. I don't have any shame about lying with you, only regret it can't be longer." Her hand slipped down his stomach and encircled his cock, moving down closer, watching it grow with her ministrations.

His hand lazily dragged through her hair, along her hip line and dropped to her moist curls.

"If I can't have you, I wish I could have this," she said, laughing aloud as she fisted him several times.

"That is impossible. It stays with me," he teased back.

"Maybe a cast of it then? Candle wax?" She sat up quickly, glancing around the room before Ulrich realized she was serious.

He picked her up at the waist and dropped her over him, her mouth near his cock, her pussy open over his lips. Esme

forgot about candle wax impressions with the stroke of his tongue on her lips, letting him explore her thoroughly, wrapping hers around his erection. The sensations were different and he smiled as she moved over him at her pace, using him to her satisfaction until he slipped his finger inside her, then a second. She renewed her efforts on his cock, taking time to explore his sack to suck his skin between her lips.

Esme froze over him when he slipped a third finger inside her anus. Ulrich decided she'd never imagined anyone would touch her there. Somehow it made her hotter, wetter, and she swallowed him whole, sucking him deeper down her throat until he finally tensed, letting his fluid splash into her mouth. His fingers changed rhythm and his tongue did too, pushing her into the oblivion of darkness. Her body was quaking as he moved her off him, rolling beside her, tucking her against him. Now she had a fresh stinging to remember him by and he wondered, if they had more time...

"No matter whom I marry, Ulrich, you will always be my first." Her voice dropped lower, and he felt her finally relax into a light sleep.

Ulrich watched her, studying her face, memorizing every detail of her profile. He'd let her go but not without regret. That was dangerous for him; he made no attachments to people or places.

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Chapter Five

Ulrich woke Esme with his kiss and his touch as daylight forced its way into their space. The fire had burned down; a tray of fresh bread and fruit sat on the table.

"It's morning, Esme. We have to go." His lips strayed to her throat, his tongue moving against her in a pattern that had her hips moving in unison. She reached to him, found him semi-aroused and used her hand to bring him to full attention.

"I'll leave quietly, Ulrich, when I'm done with you." She pulled away and crawled down the bed to rest against his thighs. Her fingers and lips brought him to the edge, and she backed off, boldly crawling up his length, dropping herself over him. She let out an involuntary cry as he stretched her, and he stilled her movement with his hands on her hips.

"You're sore, Esme. This won't help."

"I don't care, Ulrich. I told you last night, hurt me if you must, but don't let me go without everything you can give me." Closing her eyes, she let her head drop back. He captured her nipples in a tight grip as. Esme let her hand drop between their bodies, massaging against them both until he pulsed inside her.

"I'll never be this full again. You know it, and so do I. Please Ulrich..."

She fought for the elusive finish, hoping he wanted it too. His intention had been to let her go but they would share one last time together. His hands held her steady, and he pulled

her down to his chest, his mouth finding hers, his hands setting their pace.

She loved him with no fear or regret, only a need to be pushed for. She allowed him to slip her under him one last time. He pulled her legs up onto his shoulders, using the position to plunge deeper, her body accepting him, pulling him tighter for more, arching to take him deeper.

"More," was the word that edged him further, a simple whispered, "More," and he gave her a sly grin, using his hands and weight to push her legs wider, stretching her muscles in different places.

"Esme, wrap your fingers around me," he told her and she did as he asked, her free hand moving to her own breast, tugging at her nipple until she cried out from the combined sensation of her hand on her breast and his cock inside her. Ulrich thrust one last time and came deeply inside her. She held him for a few seconds longer before letting him go.

"Good morning, Ulrich," she whispered, suddenly embarrassed by her actions, burying her head against his chest.

"Good morning, Esmeralda." He pressed his lips to hers, kissing her deeply, pulling back only when there was a knock at the door. "Hot water is here. It's time, Esme."

She nodded; pulling the covers over her as the boys brought in hot water. When they were gone, Ulrich lifted her to the tub and gently laid her in the water, his hands moving all over her body in an effort to cleanse her, yet wound up slipping inside her one last time, his fingers filling her while his thumb circled her. She dropped her head back against the

tub and took what he offered, one last hint at heaven on earth. She groaned and came around his fingers, sucking him deeper, holding him inside her.

* * * *

It took an amazingly short time for Ulrich and Esme to ready themselves, dressing before one another with ease. Ulrich wished he had a new gown for her to travel home in instead of the repaired garment she wore. She deserved beautiful things, a thought that made him realize his choice to send her back was right. Four of Ulrich's men waited on horseback when they exited the inn.

Ulrich circled her waist with his hands, lifting her easily onto the back of a waiting horse, his fingers biting in to hold her one last moment. He reluctantly pulled his cloak tighter around her throat and stepped away.

"Thank you, Ulrich," she whispered, since their audience afforded them no privacy. "I have only one regret."

He raised an eyebrow at her comment and leaned closer.

"My one regret is that I didn't get to cast your cock in wax so I'd always have a reminder of you."

He laughed aloud, and she smiled too. Though she seemed unable to hold back her tears, she didn't let them fall. He wasn't usually surprised by people; usually they were unreliable and selfish. His one night with Esmeralda Handrian had lightened his heart. It made letting her go all the more difficult, yet he knew there was no choice.

"Make it a good life, Esme. Do it for you and for me."

She leaned slightly down and pulled him to her, uncaring of their audience. "I love you, Ulrich Valda, my Viking warrior. I'll never forget you." Esmeralda kissed each of his cheeks in turn and then straightened, nodding to the men waiting beside her. Ulrich slapped the horse's back and they headed slowly away from him.

She glanced back only once, with a small wave of her hand. He fought the urge to call her back and did his best to relegate her to a place in his memory where no one could take her from him.

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Chapter Six

Ulrich rode his horse hard up the hillside, watching Esme from a distance. She rode well, holding her mount steady. He'd not been prepared to find her in men's trousers and tunic, riding the fields. Her sable hair was plaited down her back and her tanned cheeks blushed when he approached. She slowed her horse, waiting at the rise for his approach.

Though seven years had passed since he and Esme had parted, he'd spied upon her several times in the marketplace, watching her with her tow-headed son, so he'd known she'd still be beautiful. He'd known he'd still feel the same when he saw her, so he had no choice but to answer Handrian's invitation. The years had been kind to her. She was a woman in every sense now, not a young maid fresh from the convent.

He hardened at the sight of her, still slim and soft-looking, and he wanted her wrapped around him and his cock. He didn't stop himself from staring at her mouth, remembering all the amazing things she'd done to him. He shifted on his mount and drew a deep breath.

Just the idea that someone else might have touched his Esmeralda since he'd last held her in his arms made him physically sick. His stomach soured, and his hands went clammy against the leather rein. He'd heard the tales of her short lived marriage, but hadn't wanted to believe them. He'd seen the boy, and was torn between wanting the child to be his and praying he wasn't. He felt an overwhelming jolt of

jealousy, unfamiliar to him in the past. Never before had he been jealous of a woman. Of a ship yes, definitely. But never had a woman affected him like Esmeralda. She'd haunted him all these years.

The most troubling part of the matter was that he held the power to change the situation, yet knew he wouldn't. Everyone knew Gehard had called a group of men here in order to choose a new husband for his niece, but nothing had changed. He was no more willing to tie himself to a woman now than he'd ever been. Still, he'd had to come. He'd had a masochistic urge to see her one more time and hopefully influence Gehard's choice to her benefit.

Esme felt an intense gaze upon the back of her neck and turned in the saddle to find Ulrich watching her from the top of the hill. Her breath caught in her throat as she drank him in, the years falling away. She had known he would come. An invitation from Lord Handrian wasn't ignored, under any circumstance. She had tried to talk her uncle out of his plan, but she'd met a stone wall, and had ultimately left him to his will. It was her uncle who decided Ulrich would be the perfect choice for her. They'd argued for weeks, to no avail. She'd wanted Ulrich to come to her of his own will, not forced by her uncle's power.

Still, she hadn't been prepared for him to show up today, when she was out riding in laborer's clothing. She'd spent years dreaming of the next time she'd see him, and in her dreams she was always dressed in her finest gown, her hair shining like her smile. Instead, she was in desperate need of a bath, just as she'd been the first time they met.

She waited for him to cross the distance between them, using the time to study him. When he reached her side, he grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips.

"Thank you for coming, Ulrich. I tried to talk him out of this folly but was unable to make him see reason." She stared into his green eyes, thankful her first words to him weren't I love you or stay with me.

All the years of lust and wanting were laid bare before them. It was a powerful, silent moment. Esme pulled her hand back when she realized some of the villagers were watching them from the fields.

"I've spoken with your uncle, Esme. I'm afraid I've disappointed him greatly by refusing his offer."

She gave him a faint smile, unable to look away. His words pained her greatly, though she'd expected no more. She studied his face, noting the small lines around his eyes and mouth, how the golden locks at his temples had softened to grey. His body was still large and firm. She wanted to reach out to him, but knew she shouldn't.

"You still blush, Esme, after all this time. You've become more beautiful with age. I didn't think it possible, but you have."

"I've thought of you often, Ulrich," she told him, blushing a second time. "Time has been kind to you too, I see."

They headed back toward the castle, bypassing the town's trading center, using the time alone to be together, even if it was just a ride.

"So, have you climbed any trees lately?" Ulrich asked with a grin.

"Actually just last week, with my son. It's a fine art, you know, learning which branches to trust and which to avoid."

"He is a lucky child, Esme."

"Thank you, Ulrich. I agree he is special indeed." She'd borne Eric eight and a half months after she'd returned to Handrian. She'd labored two days and nights to birth him and had known even before they'd laid him in her arms that he'd have his father's golden curls and hazel eyes. She and her uncle had concocted a story about a brief marriage that had left her a tragic young widow.

The need to tell Ulrich that he was a father gnawed within her, but somehow she managed to hold her tongue. It wouldn't do any good to tell him the truth now, when he'd already decided to leave. And she'd never use the child to try and hold him.

As they neared the castle, Ulrich slowed their pace. "I can't help you, Esmeralda. Even though your uncle thinks it would work, we both know it wouldn't. I'm not a castle man."

"I know that, Ulrich. It's just that he's getting older and knows that if he passes while I'm believed a widow..." She glanced at him, and he only nodded his acceptance. "He knows I'll have to marry either Olin from the north or Terril from the south to keep control of Handrian until Eric is old enough. No matter what happens, this place will change. I pray it's for the good."

"Which would make you a better husband and a better father?"

She laughed at him and leaned forward, stroking the horse's strong neck. "Neither. Olin is young, rude and

pompous. Terril is old, fat and cranky. Neither is an influence I want for my son or for our trade. You know Handrian's reputation, Ulrich. We trade fairly and try to stay at peace with all. Siding with either will change the flow of the area. Both will tarnish our people."

"Which is why your uncle sent for me, figuring I'd keep the status."

"Something like that. I did try to make him see you're not a man who could be tied to any one piece of land, that your life is aboard your ship, trading in far places." She didn't add that he wouldn't want to stay with her forever either.

"Yet, he still held out hope."

"Believe me, he is not fond of either Olin or Terril. Now the decision will be which is the lesser of the evils. I suppose Terril. He's older and won't expect as much from me as Olin would. And of the two, his trading areas are the lesser of the corrupt."

"I agree he is the lesser of evils. I'm sorry I can't help you, Esme. If I could, I would," he said, staring directly at her.

"I understand, Ulrich. And I thank you for humoring an old man." They wandered further off the path until Ulrich directed them back. She tried not to show her disappointment. With a deep sigh, she sat taller, setting her shoulders.

* * * *

Esme cursed aloud in the hallway outside the solar when she heard Eric and Ulrich laughing together. She'd taken extra care with her appearance tonight. She wanted to be dressed like a lady, not a farm worker, the last time he saw

her. She stood in the doorway, listening to her son's animated tale, and watching Ulrich with his son.

Does he know, she wondered. Would he admit it if he did? None of it mattered.

"He saved my mother from a fate worse than death," Eric said, his voice rising with excitement. "I'm still not sure what that fate was, but mother assures me my father saved her, and she fell instantly in love with him. They married right away but he had to go to sea on one last journey."

"Did you ever get to meet him?" Ulrich asked softly.

"No, it took too long for me to be born. But I know my mother loved him. She cries sometimes, especially when she doesn't know I'm there."

"Women are a separate breed, young Eric. Sometimes tears are cleansing in a strange way for a woman."

"That's what she says. But she's sad."

Esme stood riveted to the spot, waiting for the rest of their conversation. She knew she should put a stop to this. Any bonding between them was bound to only hurt worse in the long run, but still she hesitated, her heart breaking for all that could never be.

"Can I tell you something, Lord Valda?"

"Of course, but why not call me Ulrich?"

"May I?" Eric gave Ulrich a huge smile. "I'd hoped when you arrived you might marry her. She will have to marry soon; my uncle is not well. Olin of the north is nasty and cruel. He treats me like a baby, sending me from the room. And Terril is so old and fat, and he smells. He forgets I'm

around and treats me like I'm a hardship to him. He says my light hair is barbaric."

Esme waited for the child to make the connection and was relieved when he didn't.

"And what do you say to that?" Ulrich asked gently.

"The first time he said it I kicked him in the shin, but mother made me apologize.

After that, she tries to keep me away from them both."

Ulrich let out a hearty laugh; obviously enjoying the boy's words. She watched him study the boy's features. Eric was a combination of Ulrich and Esmeralda. His hazel eyes were shaped like Esme's, but his chin and jaw line were definitely Ulrich's. His hair was a combination of Ulrich's blond and her sable, resulting in his soft sandy curls. The boy was large for his age, just as Ulrich must have been.

"Maybe that would be best. Keep your distance from both men and spend time with your mother alone."

"I suppose, but both men make her sad."

That was enough; she had to intervene before this got out of hand. She cleared her throat to get their attention. Eric slipped from the seat and ran to her, his arms wrapping around her hips as she lifted her hand to sift through his sandy curls.

"Are you entertaining our guest?" she asked her son and was rewarded with a wide toothless grin.

"Yes, mother. I like him. Can't we keep him as a husband?"

She smiled at him with genuine affection before shaking her head no.

"But he talks with me, not at me. Can't we keep him, please?"

She saw Ulrich hide a smile and knew he found it amusing to be likened to a kitten or a pony.

"As I explained earlier, Lord Valda is a friend who has come to pay his respects. He's not here to marry me." It twisted her inside that Eric had to deal with the situation at all, let alone feel so deeply.

"But-"

"Eric, it cannot be. Don't wish for something that won't happen."

"Yes, ma'am." The child looked away and scuffed one foot against the slate floor, but he hadn't let go of her. His small hand still rested in hers.

"Now, say good night and head to bed. It's late, and we have kept uncle waiting long enough."

"Good night, Ulrich," he said then turned back to Esme with a stubborn look. "He said I should call him that."

"All right." She smiled with a nod. "I'll check on you later." Dropping to her knees and gathering him to her, she hugged him tight. "Sweet dreams," she said and kissed each cheek.

"Sweet dreams, mother."

When the boy's nursemaid stepped forward to escort him to his room, he went with a wistful look on his young face and a rather dramatic wave. Ulrich gave a soft laugh as he disappeared around the corner, but then his heated gaze fell upon Esme.

She'd dressed for him in dark green, the gown square at her neckline, hinting at her cleavage. The long straight

sleeves covered her slim arms, and skimmed her belly and hips. Her hair was curled down her back and a thin veil was laced in place with pearls.

"You look lovely, Esmeralda." Ulrich met her in the doorway, bringing her hand to his lips, holding it a moment too long.

"Thank you, Ulrich, and thanks for humoring him. He tries to be so adult sometimes; I wish he could just be a child for a bit longer."

"You've done a fine job with him. He obviously adores you." Her cheeks heated at the compliment and they turned toward the corridor. She knew if she stayed with him any longer in the empty solar she couldn't guarantee not touching him.

"He tells me you're still quite good with trees and swimming." He laughed, and she relaxed. Perhaps she would be able to get through the interminable meal with Lord Gehard and her other suitors after all.

* * * *

After the meal, Esme stopped to check on Eric and was surprised to find Ulrich pulling his white fox cloak over the boy. She stood in the doorway watching and pressed her fingertip between her teeth to keep from sobbing. It was a sight she never thought to see and knew she'd never see again.

Ulrich rose and turned to her, his arms open wide. There was no hesitation; she went to him willingly, taking all she could from his embrace. Remembering where they were, she

pulled back, but left her arm around his waist, reveling in the feel of his arm around her shoulder.

"I hope you don't mind about the cloak." Her words were a mere whisper. "When he was four he took a fever. It was ... I almost lost him, Ulrich."

He stiffened when she said the words and pulled her closer.

"No one knew how to help or heal him. That last night his little body was so chilled; I didn't think, just took the cloak from my bed and wrapped us both in it."

Esmeralda let out an uncontrolled sob, her fist going to her mouth to cover her cry. Ulrich tightened his grip on her, waiting for her to continue, as though he realized how hard it had been for her to raise the child alone.

"The next morning he woke early. He'd always asked about the cloak, and I'd told him it was his father's. That morning he told me the cloak was magic, that his father had helped heal him. He's slept with it on his bed ever since. It's become his most prized possession; I never had the heart to take it from him."

For a long time they simply stood side by side watching the product of their loving sleep soundly.

Then Ulrich leaned down, brushing her ear with his lips. "Where shall we go, Esme?" he whispered, as he inhaled her spicy scent, remembering what happened so long ago.

"My chamber is next door."

They left quietly, but Ulrich paused to take one last look at the sleeping child. *His son.*

He followed her inside her bedchamber and waited while she barred the door. The fire burned brightly but he noted she paused to add extra logs before turning to him.

"Would you like wine?" she asked, moving to the side table and filling a cup before coming to his side.

He took the cup but didn't drink; instead he glanced around and put it aside on a nearby table. Turning, he again opened his arms, and she ran to him, jolting him with the impact of her body.

"Oh, Ulrich, how I've missed you all these years," she whispered before drawing his mouth to hers.

Esmeralda kissed Ulrich, and he remembered their first night vividly. Her hands flowed over him as if their time apart were irrelevant.

Turning from him, she walked toward the large bed. Along the way, she pulled the veiling from her hair, and his hands followed hers, getting tangled in her hair, turning her to his mouth.

Her slender fingers pulled his hard cock from his trousers. Esme dropped before him and tortured him with her magic lips until he pulsed against her tongue.

His hands bit into her shoulders, pulling her up to his mouth. They sparred as if there hadn't been a span of over seven years since their last kiss. Ulrich's hand's lifted the bulk of her gown, slipping her undergarments aside. He pulled her down over him, impaling her on his cock in one smooth motion. She was tighter than he remembered, and she pulsed around him as she kissed him, her hands fighting to get his tunic off, to feel his skin against her palms once again.

Tearing her mouth away, she cursed as she tried to get his shirt off. Ulrich stilled her hands and made her look at him.

"Relax, Esme," he said, but his lips tipped into a smile.
"Ulrich please, I need ... more!"

His eyes flashed, and he pulled the offending garment off, tossing it aside. He took her hands in his, dragging them along his chest.

"Yes," she whispered, her mouth pressed to his shoulder.
"More..."

He swelled inside her. Her response was to clench around him. To have him inside her again was a dream she never thought to feel happen. The tingling of his push inside made her body give way and accept him, fuller than she remembered—an exquisite stretch within her. Ulrich moved his hands to her waist, lifting her slightly, only to let her drop over him. Time and again he repeated the process, and her kisses turned into little nips at his skin. Knowing his resolve was waning, she moved her hips back and forth over him, not lifting off.

The change made them both groan, and Esme sucked a patch of his neck between her teeth. "Please," she whispered, taking his earlobe to her mouth. "Ulrich..."

His hands moved her only slightly faster, and she froze above him. His finish came a stroke later, his cock pulsing within her body, filling her. Esme dropped her arms around his neck and held on tight. He hugged her close to his chest as they both tried to find their breath again.

"I've missed you, Ulrich." Esme didn't elaborate. There were no words to describe how hollow and deserted she'd felt all these years.

"I've missed you, too, Esme. Sometimes, I think that night was a dream." He crushed her even tighter to his chest.

"I do too, occasionally. Then I think of Eric." She realized her slip and stopped talking, trying to pull away from him. His hands clamped against her back and held her to him. Settling against the wall of his body she savored the time in his arms, committing each caress to memory.

"There was no quick marriage as the rumors said?"

"Only in Uncle's version." Esme pulled back, smiling at Ulrich, her shoulders rising up in an expression of compliance. "I felt it best at the time to let him have his say and knew it would be better for Eric as he grew. An assumed widowed mother is better than an unmarried one. I hoped you'd understand."

She knew he saw the heaviness in her eyes, the strain of raising her child alone, of the situation she found herself in now. Still she knew he couldn't help her, wouldn't stay to become her husband.

"I do, Esme." Neither said anything for a long time but neither pulled away.

"If you took this gown off, I could appreciate you better, Esme."

"Could you?" she asked. "I suppose you'd do anything to get me off your lap!"

They both laughed as she finally moved away. He'd gone soft a long time back but was still embedded inside her. Esme

retrieved his wine and sipped from her own as she moved about, undressing before him.

"I have a confession," he said, not looking directly at her.
"I saw you with Eric in the market when he was a baby. You both looked so happy. I asked about you and was told you'd been widowed."

Esme paused, waiting for him to continue.

"I didn't approach you because I knew I'd not be able to stay."

"I have a confession, too. I'd keep away from the market when I knew your ship was harbored."

With unspoken agreement, they put aside Eric and her marital status. When she'd rid herself of the heavy gown and undergarments, she pulled on a thin silk wrapper. Ulrich sat beside the fire, finally naked, and she didn't hesitate to drop to the hearth beside him, her hands going to his strong thighs, making lazy patterns against his skin, watching as his cock rose at her touch.

"It's been so long, Ulrich. Tell me what you want."

He laughed bitterly. "What I want, Esme, and what I deserve are two different things. For now, I want to be embedded deep within you, then we'll discuss the rest."

Effortlessly he reached for her and drew her up beside him, walking the few paces to her bed, dropped her unceremoniously in the middle, then followed her down.

He paused to pull her wrapper from her legs and slid inside her as if they'd been lovers for decades. He knew how to love her, how to make her feel, where to move and just the right touch to make her quiver. Ulrich sucked first one nipple than

the other through the silk, leaving a large wet mark outlining her hardened nipples. Esme's hands pulled it away from her skin, baring herself to him, spurring him on.

She'd changed, Ulrich thought. Her breasts were fuller, yet only slightly lower, and her nipples were darker than he'd remembered. Her belly was still flat but her hips had adjusted to birthing his son.

He'd often wondered how she'd aged. He'd hoped she'd grown fat and ugly, and he'd be able to walk away with a clearer conscience. Having seen her matured only made him want her more. The familiar ache in his being started to surface, and he forced it away. He'd take what Esme gave willingly and not give himself in return.

He'd told her years before he was his first priority, which still hadn't changed. Couldn't change or he might find himself land locked. A chill ran through him, and Esme tightened her arms around him, pulling him closer to her warmth, unaware of his selfish thoughts. He felt a strange hollowness only experienced once before, the day he watched her ride out of his life.

He didn't tell her how her image haunted his days and nights, how no other maid had ever satisfied him the way she did. And still, he knew he'd take this glimpse of time with her and leave.

"How long can you stay?" Esme asked, her fingers dancing against Ulrich's chest, stopping to run along each rib. His hand stroked her arm, holding her tight to him.

"I have tomorrow, but must leave on the morning tide the day after."

"Does that mean I can have you to myself for a whole day and night?"

"If you wish," he whispered. He was rewarded with her moving her hand to his chin turning him toward her.

"I wish, Ulrich, oh how I've wished..." Her lips dropped over his, taunting him with the tip of her tongue until he opened to her. They moved together as if they'd loved each other all these years.

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Chapter Seven

Early the next morning Esme, Ulrich and Eric rode the fields and higher into the hills, stopping beside a fresh spring that grew from a small waterfall further up the mountain. Esme sat in the shade of an old oak tree, watching her son and her beloved splash and play in the cold water. Seeing them together was heart wrenching in too many ways to define so she chose to view them, remember it all, knowing the short time they spent together would probably be the only time.

Ulrich wouldn't choose to stay, and she doubted he'd come back again. Once she was married, he'd refuse any further invitation. In fact, she thought, with a resigned smile, he'd go out of his way not to see them again. But she wouldn't let the knowledge spoil their day. She wished she'd worn britches so she could be slogging in the cold water with them. She'd opted for acceptable lady-like attire and was envious of her men. It had been Ulrich's suggestion to take Eric with them on their ride, which had surprised both her and the child.

Lunch arrived before she was ready, because it meant their time was already half over. Sated from their meal, she suggested Eric return to the castle with the servants. He needed to rest in the afternoon so he'd be able to see Ulrich later. He never questioned her, just mentioned she'd be well guarded by Ulrich.

Esme held back a sudden surge of tears when Eric hugged Ulrich. He accepted the child with open arms, whispering he'd

see him later and would look after Esmeralda. For long quiet moments they watched the rest of the party ride away, disappearing into the distance. The fact they were alone in the forest wouldn't remain private, but Esme didn't care what the gossips said.

When they were finally gone from sight they both moved back under the tree. Esme leaned against it, and Ulrich rested his head in her lap. She sifted her fingers through Ulrich's blond hair, marveling at how much the texture reminded her of Eric.

"He's a fine boy, Esme. He has fear but within limits. I'm glad you didn't coddle him."

"How could I?" she asked with a smile. "It would have been like trying to coddle you!" It was an accurate statement.

"I could think of a few times when you could talk me into it."

She slipped further down, curious. "Tell me when and how?"

Ulrich grinned at the subject change.

"I've always imagined swimming with you, yet you say the water's too cold."

"Ah, yes. Did you think it would have been a good idea with Eric here?"

He glanced at her quickly and nodded, obviously understanding their play could have gotten out of control.

"However, now that we're alone, if you'd be so kind as to unlace me, sir, I'd love to swim."

She turned away, presenting him with her back. His large fingers fumbled to free the laces. Before she could move

away, he drew the top of her gown off her shoulders, exposing her breasts and turning her to his lips. She sighed and held his head to her breast as he pulled her skirt up, finding her under the layers of material. With a deep groan, he bunched the cloth toward her waist to gain access. Only after pulling her undergarments away did he return to her breast, stroking her with his hand. Esme ground her pussy over his hand, making it her tool instead of his.

Ulrich hadn't been a saint since their last meeting, and he'd enjoyed himself on occasion with a willing maid. But none of them ever truly let go with him, didn't truly trust him the way Esmeralda did. She allowed him to dominate her body and soul freely, in turn making him more excited than he could remember.

Her lips parted, her mouth dropping open. When he slipped a finger inside her, a small groan of delight worked its way through her. His mouth anchored at her nipple. He brought her to the edge then pulled back several times before letting her fall safely into his waiting arms, her release leaving her breathless.

"Ulrich, how I've missed you."

"Come, Esme. Let's swim in the heat of the day." He knew she wanted to hear he'd missed her too, but couldn't say the words aloud. Knew if he did, his future would be sealed.

He couldn't let that happen, no matter how much he loved her. He'd accepted the fact that he'd fallen in love with her years before but he refused to believe he'd be content to stay on land and be a husband, even for Esme. He'd give her what he could, a few hours where he'd make her feel alive, and in

those same hours he'd take what memories he could, knowing they'd have to last him a lifetime.

It was easy to lift her over him in the water, to let her body float above him while he was buried deep within her. The position left his hands free to fondle her breasts, her nipples now hard raspberries from the cold. He was able to suckle her and impale her at the same time, which he did, much to her delight and his. She was still so tight around him, encasing him with her body.

Later, they lay under the tree, slowly making love a second time. When the sun lowered in the sky, they knew it was time to leave. Begrudgingly, he helped to lace her gown, the process taking much longer than it normally would have. Neither cared. Ulrich mounted his horse and settled her in front of him. Esme reached around and managed to free him from his trousers, her hand smoothing over him in rhythmic motions.

"If you keep that up, Esme, we'll not get back to the castle tonight." He pressed his lips to her neck, his tongue riding over the scar, now just a thin line, where her chain had been pulled from her neck. He'd taken off the charm before arriving at Handrian. It was his original intent to see it returned to her, but he had kept it as a talisman for himself all these years, Esme never far from his heart or his mind.

His thoughts were altered when she shifted, the horse stamping his foot in annoyance. Only after she'd arranged her gown over his legs did Esme rise higher, slipping Ulrich's erection inside her. She sat slightly tilted forward, and his left hand gripped both sets of reins, his right around her waist,

holding her tight to him, letting the horse's movements do all the work.

Their lazy ride toward town was anything but, and he knew her hip movements would end their journey soon, so he moved his hand to her breast, clamping over her, wanting the feel of him tightly encasing her. Their ride turned into a sensory exercise in control until they were nearing the populated area when he knew they'd have to separate. Reluctantly, he used muscle control to move inside her and to finish them both.

Ulrich understood he'd aged the same seven years that she had, yet when he was with her, his stamina was that of a man years younger. She made him feel anything was possible; it was a feeling he knew he'd relinquish but not without regret. His hand dropped from her breast and moved back to her waist, shifting her over him several times until she pulsed around him, forcing him to follow with his release. Esme dropped back against his chest, her head on his shoulder. At the top of the rise, they rested for long minutes before she slowly moved away from him, taking her mount.

Esme didn't have to tell Ulrich how erotic it felt to have his seed dripping from her while they rode, spreading onto his thighs. It was a memory he'd savor for himself, knowing such an act would never happen again.

* * * *

Ulrich had spent time with Eric before the evening meal and again Esme found them in the solar, both laughing at

something she couldn't hear. As she entered, they both stood, acknowledging her appearance.

"What have I missed?" she questioned, feigning a concerned look.

"Ulrich has been telling me of some of his journeys. To foreign ports and lands. Some of them don't even know how to speak our language."

"Can you imagine!" she said with a genuine smile.

"Yes, and..."

"And?"

"And we talked about my wanting to protect you."

Esme chose to remain as calm as she could, sinking into the chair closest to her.

"But Eric, I'm supposed to protect you, at least until you are older."

"That's what Ulrich said too."

She glanced at Ulrich and then back to her son.

"He say's it's a wise young man who knows which times to be a child and when it's time to become a man."

"That sounds like a wise way of looking at it. You know, Eric, you are just six and it's all right for you to just be a child. Soon enough you'll age, and these days will be behind you. Best to enjoy them when you can and keep the fond memories."

"Yes, mother. But sometimes it's hard."

"I know." Ulrich took the seat beside her and drew Eric's hand in his. "You must trust your mother to guide you these next years. When the time is right, you'll both know and you'll rule Handrian with a wise head."

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Chapter Eight

No meal was ever longer, Esmeralda decided. Time slipped from her grasp, and she couldn't change the outcome. She'd tried to put Eric at ease as well as Ulrich had, knowing the child was wise before his years, hoping to insulate him from the drastic changes that would happen soon.

When she was able to leave the feast, she hoped Ulrich would join her as soon as he was able. In her chamber alone, she used the time to prepare. Her hair was combed out in long waves down her back, a golden silk wrapper her only covering. The fire was built and burning brightly, heating and illuminating the space. Candles were lit to enhance the light. On the table lay food and wine, cheese and fruits for their taking. At the other end lay a cloth, folded over several items. She didn't have to wait long; one rap on her door and Ulrich was inside, dropping the bar to insure their privacy.

"Come sit by the fire, Ulrich. It's been a long day."

He joined her, taking the wine she offered, settling into the large chair. Esme dropped to the floor in front of him, her head cradled against his thigh.

"What would you like, Esmeralda?" His voice was hoarse with choked back emotion.

"I'd hoped you'd ask," she said.

"Esmeralda?"

"Relax, Ulrich. Isn't that what you tell me? I'd never hurt you," she said, but a small laugh escaped her lips. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." His answer was quick, truthful. He'd opened a doorway. Her eyes flashed with recognition and she licked her lips.

"There's something I want from you tonight. Is there something you want from me?"

Both were quiet while he mulled over the idea. The strange smile on his lips made her wonder what he had in mind. It didn't matter; she'd do what ever he asked of her.

"One thing we've never tried," he whispered.

"Tell me," she said, leaning forward to hear his words.

"Later. Tell me what you want of me first." She knelt forward, her hands taking his straining cock from his trousers.

"I promise not to hurt you," she said again. She pumped him several times, then she closed her hand tighter. "You'll think I'm demented, Ulrich but I'll ask anyway. I want to ... I want..."

"What do you want Esme?" His eyes had become intense, and she drew a breath then squared her shoulders, looking directly at him.

"I want a cast of you. When you leave, at least I'll have a memory of you."

Ulrich stood suddenly and started pacing the length of the room. He made no move to cover his erection straining forward from his clothed body.

"I've thought about it for years, Ulrich. The process would be very simple."

Ulrich stopped beside her and bent down, lifting her up as he stood. "You're not jesting, are you, Esme?"

"No, Ulrich. I'm dead serious." They stared at each other for a protracted time before he let her go.

"How?" he finally grunted.

"First we need to lose these clothes." Esme led him to the seat, helping him undress.

While pulling at his boots it was easy to lean forward to take a taste of him occasionally. While he finished stripping, she cleared the large table, leaving only the folded cloth at the far end.

Ulrich watched her with detached fascination, understanding this was something she'd truly thought about all these years. She'd said it in jest their first night. Now it would become a reality.

Pressing a full cup of wine into his hand, she propped him against the side of the table, fetching water from the kettle near the fire, mixing it with cold. Than she dropped before him, rising to her knees, taking him in her mouth. For a long time she bathed him with her tongue and lips before using the warm water and soap to lather him. The soft cloth against his skin made him more aroused.

The glint of the straight edge made him drag a breath but her small giggle was lost as she became quite serious, carefully shaving all the pale golden hair from the base of his cock. When she was satisfied, she moved lower, painstakingly shaving his testicles and the surrounding area.

This was truly a first for Ulrich. While he'd experienced many different women in different cultures, they were the only ones who went hairless. No other woman had touched him in this manner. A strange hesitancy formed in his belly,

but he knew he'd not stop her. The cloth again moved over him, replaced by her hand and lips. Esme continued to love him, apparently forgetting about the project at hand.

"You feel so different, Ulrich, to my hands and my lips."

"And you feel different too, Esme. I'm much more sensitive to your touch." It was a warning and a truth.

"I'll be careful," she promised. "Come lay on the table for me."

Her intent became clearer when she had him stretched on the table. The room filled with the smell of cloves from the oil she rubbed between her palms. Starting at his shoulders she massaged every inch of his body, top to bottom, than had him roll over and started again. He was quite serene by the time she told him to turn back. The wine she kept refilling his glass with helped.

"Esme, this feels very strange," he started, only to have his words cut short by her kiss. By the time she pulled away he was breathless and relaxed. He felt the leather being slipped over his wrists but didn't move to stop her. Only when she pulled the bonds tight did he startle. Her hand came to his chest, stroking him gently.

"Relax, Ulrich. I won't hurt you. The bonds are just to keep you from—" She turned away and didn't finish her though.

"Keep me from what?" he said, his voice deep and on edge.

"From pulling away." Her hands and lips went back to his cock, stroking and sucking him to distraction.

Just when he thought she'd let him find his release, she backed off. Ulrich tried to see how she had him bound but

could only see the straps form around his wrists and slip below the table. Her touch changed, she was using something warm and silky at the base of his cock. More oil, he realized, knowing the scent would always remind him of what he let her do to him this night.

"Ulrich, close your eyes and breathe deeply." It was the last thing he saw, for when he closed them she draped a cloth over them. "I won't hurt you, Ulrich. I couldn't. Just trust me, relax and feel," she soothed near his ear before going back to fisting him.

He felt something hot and tried to move. Again and again the strange drops of heat dripped against him. Though he'd thought he'd lose his erection, the process only hardened him further. All the while she spoke to him in a soft low tone

"Your cock looks silken in the light," she whispered. "Feels like it. I've never seen you so hard before."

He allowed her to continue unchallenged.

"The wax doesn't hurt, does it?" she asked, not waiting for him to answer, layering more as she spoke. She continued telling him how he looked to her with his cock oiled and surrounded by wax.

Starting at the base she slowly built up a thick layer of wax around him; her fingers stroking his exposed skin as she worked. Time lost all meaning for him. He knew what she did, but being blind was erotic in a way he'd never experienced. Being bound was another. Trusting Esme was a given. All through the process, she kept whispering to him.

"I think of your cock almost every night, Ulrich. How you filled me and stretched me. How you moved inside me

without moving outside. How it felt to have your seed drip from my body to warm my thighs."

Ulrich groaned at her words, his cock throbbing. The layer was getting higher, her fingers only touched his bulbous head now. Her tongue distracted him from the hot wax as it dripped around him. Oddly sated, he knew he'd take her the way he'd dreamed all these years when she was through. As the wax hardened, she'd add another layer. Only when he was fully encased did she step back, moving her tongue to his nipple then to his neck and his lips.

"Relax, while the wax dries," she told him.

While he could hear her in the background, it was easy to forget the outside world, accepting only what happened inside this chamber. He tested his bonds, and she laughed.

"You're at my mercy now, and I'll release you when I'm done."

Her strange laugh had him trying to rise from the table, her stroking hands stalling him.

"We're almost done," Esme told him. "I'm adding another layer of oil to the outer wax." She didn't hesitate to use more along his thighs, massaging the oil into his now hairless skin. The movement soothed him, and he relaxed back. She added another layer of oil.

"When I'm done, I'm going to take you inside me and use your cock to my will." Her hands skimmed his belly, warm and soft, reassuring. "I'm going to fuck you until I can't cum any more."

Ulrich didn't know how long he lay there, didn't care any longer. Her words, her caresses, her taunts of want and

desire had him heated like never before. It was over before he realized, and her fingers gently loosened the wax from the base of his cock.

She'd let him relax and his erection had ebbed, slipping free of the candle wax, leaving a perfect impression of his erection within the layers. She'd moved away from him, and he heard her moving in the background but didn't ask what her movements were. Ulrich was so relaxed the warmth of the cloth cleansing his hairless penis surprised him, and he would have jumped again if not for his bonds.

"Are we finished?" he managed to ask.

"Not by any means, my lord. No, now that I have you, I want something else from you."

"It would be easier to comply if you untie me," he said, hoping to take back control of the situation. Ulrich was not a man to be out of control and his compliance with Esme made him realize just how much he was willing to give her of himself. Never would he have imagined letting a woman tie him and use him, let alone shave the hair from his body.

"In time, Ulrich. In time."

Ulrich waited for some unknown punishment but found only her weight being eased over his erection. She rode him with abandon, and it frustrated him to be blindfolded.

"Esme, let me watch you."

She only groaned aloud, flexing her inner muscles to squeeze around him. He was close to the edge, his climax fighting to force its way deeper inside her. She pulled from him without a hint of warning. Cool air enveloped him once again. She moved up his chest, dropping herself over his

mouth, riding his tongue to her completion. With her movement the cloth shifted from his eyes, giving him a full view of her straddling his head. Her fingers tugged at her nipples, her head was thrown back, her hair tickling his chest. Esme used Ulrich's tongue and lips as her instrument to find her release, taking from him, using him.

He felt her shudder over him before tasting the drops of moisture from her body. Esme rose from him and dropped back over his cock, now straining harder than he'd ever known. She slipped along his chest and kissed him, sucking his tongue between her lips with the same motion her inner self tugged at him. He didn't try to hold back any longer; instead he closed his eyes and let himself abandon all restraint, climaxing deep within her.

For long minutes she lay on top of him. His seed slipped from her to his thighs, mingling with her release. Ultimately it was Esme who moved from him, retrieving the warm cloth to cleanse him. When he thought she'd release him she surprised him again.

"Turn over, Ulrich," she whispered, and he clumsily complied.

"Esmeralda?"

"Relax, Ulrich," she taunted, using the scented oil again to rub along his whole body. From his shoulders to his now aching arms, she stroked his back and sides, his buttocks and his legs, all the while whispering to him.

"I'll never forget how you feel against my skin, inside me and out. I'll take this memory to my grave."

Esme's touch enveloped him, and he followed her orders to turn back. His cock was filling again; her massage only enhanced the want. While concentrating on every other part of his body, his cock waved for attention, only to be dismissed.

When he thought she was done he was surprised to feel her mouth encompass him once again. Her fingers teased him, weighted his sack and her mouth suckled each side. He came when her fingers stroked over him lower, hinting at penetration. When he settled she finally released his bonds, bringing him a cup of wine to sip while she again cleaned him.

"Esmeralda," was all he managed, before pulling her to him. "You've thought about that all this time?"

"I wanted something to remember you by," she said, not holding back her smile or laugher.

It was a long time later, after they'd sampled the bread and cheese that Ulrich lifted her into his arms and drew her to the table.

"But—" Before she could get out anything else, he laid her across the wood, pulling back the silk that covered her. When she was naked, he spread her legs and watched her eyes widen. "What do you want, Ulrich?"

He knew she was trying to relax, visibly taking deep breaths.

"All of you, Esme, all of you," he repeated with a now sinister smile. His hands worked over her body as hers had massaged his. His touch was deeper, harder and he tried to control the strength he used. He too touched each leg and

arm, missing the touch at her core. "Were you sore when you left me the last time?"

"Yes. It was a delicious kind of sore though, a burning reminder of how you'd touched me." Her voice was breathless, and he hardened again. "Make me miss you tomorrow, make me remember you—"

"You'll be sore when I leave tomorrow." Ulrich drew her to him, slipped his arms under her, carrying her to the bed. He propped her in the center and dropped between her legs, his fingers and mouth on her. She moved with him, used him and found a small release. While she was trying to catch her breath, he turned her easily, pulling a few pillows under her hips, leaving her exposed and propped. His cock slid inside her easily, and she shifted beneath him to accept him deeper.

Ulrich pulled from her and moved back to bathe her with his tongue. His hands took hers, stretching them forward. She didn't complain or question when he bound her wrists together with the same leather cord she'd used on him. As he alternated between thrusting deep inside her and laving her, she closed her eyes and let him have her. His hands touched her all over, as did his tongue. Slipping inside her, he used his finger to fill her anus, waiting until she became accustomed to the sensation.

"God, Ulrich. I feel so full, too full, almost."

"Want me to stop?" he asked, hoping she wouldn't say yes.

"No," she managed. "More."

He groaned aloud and slipped from her body, taking his tongue to her one more time. When he moved behind her this

time, he reached to her hands, dragging them under her before letting her drop back onto the mound of pillows. With one push he was inside her again, his finger in her ass, his mouth to her ear.

"Touch yourself, Esmeralda."

She groaned at his request but he felt her fingers gently moving along her pussy, occasionally coming in contact with him, pausing to rub him on the backward stroke.

He leaned forward, whispering for her to do it again. Her movements became emboldened and on one backward pull he left her completely and grabbed her by the hips, pushing into her anus with his cock.

His hand came to cover her mouth and the scream that might escape. Firmly embedded inside her, he leaned down again, asking, "Are you truly full now, Esmeralda?"

She sighed under him, shifting her hips to take him deeper. Ulrich wasn't sure how she'd react to his cock being buried in her ass, but had dreamed of taking her this way since she'd left him.

He fucked her fast, then slow, watching his cock slide in and out, her body grasping at his every move. He never dared dream she'd accept him fucking her ass, but now he knew he'd underestimated her. She shifted under him, and he almost pulled away, afraid he'd passed her limits.

"Ulrich, untie my hands." Her voice sounded urgent to his ear.

"Only if you still rub yourself."

"All right, but I need..."

"What do you need, Esmeralda?"

"I need more," she managed.

He stayed locked inside her, her skin glowing in the firelight as he lifted her toward his chest, slipping off the binding. He took her right hand and dropped it to her pussy, and she didn't pull away. Only now she used her left hand to hold herself at a better angle just before she tossed her head, her hair settling over her back and buttocks, his cock protruding from her. Esmeralda shifted back against him, using her right hand to gently stroke his sack.

"Tame me, Ulrich. Take me so I'll never forget this time with you."

Ulrich drew a breath and backed away only slightly before letting his weight force himself back inside. This time her body rose to meet each of his thrusts, managing to take the experience beyond anything else he'd ever sampled or imagined. He knew he hurt her, knew she was stretched like never before, and the idea spurred him to go faster and harder.

"Give me your hand," she pleaded and drew his fingers to her mouth, between her lips, sucking them with the same rhythm he thrust into her.

The visual image was engrained in his mind, and he emptied inside her. Esme still writhed under him, and he used his free hand to drop under her, slipping two of his large fingers inside her pussy while she was still embedded on his cock. With only a few short strokes she came with a shudder under him, collapsing against the bedding, her body covered in a thin layer of sweat.

Ulrich lowered his body with hers, taking his hand from her first before pulling from her completely. He came to rest beside her, exhausted and sated like never before. She made no attempt to move, rather settled beside him, an exhausted sigh all she could muster.

Than her voice, low and almost weak uttered, "Thank you."

Ulrich pulled her body to him, cradling her along his length, holding her tight to him. "Thank you, Esme," he whispered, forcing himself to say no more, afraid of what he might agree to if asked. She didn't ask anything of him, only drew his arms closer around her and let herself drift into a light sleep.

It was still dark when he woke her, taking her slowly one last time, watching every expression her face made as he moved over her and in her. There was no tearful good-bye, rather an acceptance he understood. She dressed quickly as he did, walking with him to Eric's room. He knew she watched him from the doorway but didn't deny himself one last touch of his hand along the boy's forehead, pausing to pull his cloak further over the small sleeping form. Her tears fell silently. When he turned to her she shook off the moment, using her hand to wipe away the tears.

"Esme," he whispered, taking her in his arms one last time.

"Thank you, Ulrich, for my son and for coming to see us. I know you won't come back, but I'll never forget our time together." Tears flowed down her face, and his tongue wiped

the salty moisture from her cheeks. Drawing him back to the corridor, she pulled him to her body.

"Make it a good life, Ulrich. You truly deserve to be happy."

He opened his mouth to speak, but her fingers rose to cover his lips. "I know your future's not here with me, I accept that. But I'll never forget you."

Ulrich watched her pull forward with courage he didn't possess himself.

"Go now, please, before I lose my will and beg you to stay." Her smile defused his angst and he only nodded. Walking beside him to the main hallway, she drew his hand to hers, taking his palm against her cheek. "I'll not see you any further, Ulrich. It won't do for the servants to see me this emotional at your leaving."

"I do love you, Esmeralda, as no other woman in my life."

"Thank you, Ulrich. I love you too and I'll always have you in my heart." Tears fell and she didn't try to sniff them back, instead, she leaned up and kissed him on each cheek, adding, "Travel safe, Ulrich. You are always in my prayers."

With those final words, she turned and moved away, down the long corridor, her head high, her back stiff. She hesitated only once but didn't turn.

Ulrich forced himself to traverse the stairs, heading directly to the main door and out into the keep. He turned back only once, just beyond the walls of the castle and could see her standing in the solar opening watching him go. He raised his arm and saw her do the same. Turning around, he spurred his horse to move him quickly away from temptation.

The next morning, Ulrich stood at the helm of his ship, his once all important ship that ruled his life. The sea was his only master and he'd not change that. Not even for Esmeralda Handrian. Nor for his son, young Eric, who tried to be so adult at a mere six years. His hand automatically rose to his throat; his fingers taking the silver pendant between them.

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Chapter Nine

Six months later, Ulrich stood in the doorway to Lord Handrian's private study, watching the scene unfold before him. Esmeralda stood tall, her head high, listening to the two men before her bickering. Young Eric stood beside her, his angst apparent as he listened to the two men.

"I have no choice but to take the boy, but I'll not have a bastard baby in my home."

"I don't want it either!" the other man shouted.

Eric ran toward them, pausing with his hands on his hips. "Don't talk about my mother or me that way!"

"Get him away from me," the older man said offhandedly, expecting his order to be carried out, that the child would disappear.

Esme cleared her throat, and Eric turned toward her. With the slightest nod of her head, he moved back, yet didn't take his eyes off either man.

Knowing the older fat one was Terril from the south and the young, rude one was Olin from the north didn't help the situation for Ulrich. He'd held neither man in high regard before he ever met Esmeralda. Having known all this time that she would wed one of them had weighed heavily on his mind.

"Drown the bastard when it's born, and we have a deal, Esmeralda." Olin's eyes glinted at her, and Ulrich's skin crawled.

He'd managed to stay away for six months, six long months that he forced himself to stay at sea, away from the gossip he'd hear in port. Only it was all a waste of time and energy. He'd known deep inside him the day he sailed from port that he couldn't bear to never see her again.

That he couldn't and, more importantly, wouldn't let either man touch his woman. That was what she had become, his woman. From the first time he laid eyes on her in the dingy inn so many years ago. The look on her face, the loathing in her eyes and the fear she tried to hide were not too dissimilar from the look she held now confronting Terril and Olin.

He knew he would change that look. His gaze dropped to her rounded belly, as she stroked it protectively. They'd made a second child; he'd be here to see this one born. Only his most trusted men knew of his plans and only because they would take over his ship, running it for him while he supervised from land, from home. A home he would make with Esmeralda and Eric. Jarvis would take the helm on her next journey.

"This is a waste of time. I've told you both before; I'll not marry either of you and never are you to consider harming one of my children. I'd like you both to leave." She tossed her long sable curls and set her jaw, daring anyone to ignore her wishes.

"What's this about harming my children?" His voice surprised everyone in the room.

Eric bolted to his side, his arms spread wide to accept Ulrich's embrace. Kneeling to see the boy better, Ulrich smiled at his son, proud of his attempts to protect his mother.

"Not to worry, Eric. I've come home for good. This situation is over."

"Who are you?" bellowed Terril.

"He's my father!" shouted Eric. Both men looked to the other and started to mumble to each other. They realized who he was, knew his reputation.

"He can't be your father. Your father's dead or run away long ago," Terril said.

Eric pulled from Ulrich's arms and stormed back to Terril. It took Ulrich's calling his name twice before he turned, obviously disappointed he couldn't get in his shot. His little hands were fisted, his stance balanced on his feet. Ready to take on the world.

Ulrich smiled and finally glanced to Esme.

Esme stood poised, refusing to let her surprise over Ulrich's unexpected appearance show.

Her heart flipped several times, for the situation she was facing and now, finding Ulrich Valda standing in the room, ready to defend her honor. Terril and Olin were no longer a consideration, and she sighed with relief. For long seconds she stared openly at Ulrich, her hand grazing her belly as she watched him approach. His large hand automatically reached to her, taking hers under his. How she'd dreamed of a moment like this but never allowed herself to believe it would happen.

"Esmeralda, is there a problem?" His question sounded so strange to her ears she almost laughed out loud. He pulled her closer, taking her lips under his in a demonstrative show.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get back sooner. But you learned to accept the ways of the oceans long ago." He smiled at her and she only nodded, afraid her voice would give away her emotional state.

Slipping his arm around her shoulder, Eric moved beside him, his other hand dropping to the boy's shoulder.

"Eric, I'll handle this. Thank you for taking care of the castle while I was away. You've done a good job, son." The boy's young cheeks glowed at the praise, and he hesitated to leave.

"I'll meet you in the solar before the evening feast, as we usually do." The adults watched him all but skip from the room. Ulrich moved to close the door after him.

"Esmeralda, why would Olin or Terril dare to consider harm to my children?"

"They both came to bargain for my hand, not accepting that I am already taken."

"I see. Well, both of you can see the situation is beyond your control. I'm home now and with the passing of Lord Handrian, will stay."

"You can't do that. I'm supposed to take her—" Olin snapped.

"Yes, you would take her, in all manners, including her land. No, neither of you has any right to be here other than to offer condolences on the loss of Lord Gehard."

"You can't walk in here and claim her." Olin seemed to be stunned by the turn of events, Terril weary.

"But of course I can. We've been married since the day she left schooling at the convent, eight years ago." He glanced at her and she blushed, allowing both men to see the exchange.

"They said your husband died. What trick is this?" Terril obviously figured he'd found a hole in the story, and Esme knew the loss of land weighed heavily.

"No trick. I never said my husband died, only that he was away. What gossip has assumed is not my business to correct. As you can see, he's very much alive and well."

"But the baby," Olin spat.

"A product of my last visit," Ulrich replied.

"I don't believe you, either of you. Why haven't I heard about you and Esmeralda before?"

"Because it was none of your business. The arrangement Esme and I have between us is private. You both know I've been back at least twice a year, every year. I've traded in your ports."

"Why keep it such a secret?" Terrill's hands moved to his waist, and Esme likened his stance to young Eric's earlier.

"It was no secret between those involved. And as to outsiders—" He glanced at Esme, and she nodded, "We didn't want to change the status of trading amongst us. It was better for all involved to continue on as we had been."

"Can you prove this marriage?" Olin asked.

"Of course, but not to either of you. You don't matter." His tone implied he truly believed the words he spoke. In a show of defiance, he pulled the silver chain from his neck and replaced it around Esmeralda's. "Thank you for my talisman, wife. It has served me well through my journey."

"I thank you for bringing it back to me safely," she whispered.

Both men recognized the silver necklace from the portrait hung over the fireplace in the main hall. It was of Esme's mother and father when they wed, the silver disk prominent around her throat.

"Well, I believe this ends any of your claims. Know this, from now on; if either of you think to make trouble for my family or our port, believe me, I will make you regret it. My suggestion is for you both to go back to your respective ports and never travel here again unless by invitation."

There was a heavy knock on the door and Jarvis, Ulrich's second, appeared in the doorway, several men behind him. He moved directly before Esmeralda and bowed, then brought her hand to his lips.

"My lady, an honor to see you again. You are well?"

"Yes, Jarvis, we both are. It is good to have you back in Handrian."

"Ulrich, shall we see that Olin and Terril get back to their ports without incident?"

"That would be appreciated. Both of you have been warned. Handrian will continue to trade fairly without hidden agenda. You would both be wise to see your ports followed suit. We have an opportunity to open our ports to the world. Let's not let rumor and poor behavior sully that trade." As he turned to Esme, she smiled and took his hand.

"Ulrich, shall we go? I'm sure you're tired from your trip. I'm anxious to hear of your journey."

They left the stunned men without looking back confident of Jarvis' leadership. He gave a curt nod of his head and they both headed toward the door, followed closely by Ulrich's guard. They waited until both men were saddled and their parties readied.

Terril leaned down toward Jarvis, his words quiet. "Tell me the truth, and I'll reward you well. There never was a marriage."

"On the contrary, Lord Terril. I myself was there and given the honor of seeing Lady Esmeralda home while Ulrich continued with his trade, as arranged with Lord Handrian."

"Come along, Terril," Olin grunted. "You'll not turn any of Valda's men. They're too well paid."

With a reluctant nod of agreement, both men headed from the keep, all eyes on them as they left. As soon as they had cleared the gate, there was a loud round of applause and cheering. All of Port Handrian took a deep breath and let out a sigh of relief as the interlopers left.

* * * *

Esmeralda and Ulrich stood at the solar window, watching the exchange. One of the servants spotted them and set up a second cheer for Lord and Lady Valda. She turned to him and leaned her head on his shoulder. Ulrich's hand moved over her belly and felt the jolt of the baby's kick. She laughed aloud at his surprise.

"Come to chambers, husband."

"With pleasure, wife."

They spent their evening with Eric, then slipped away toward Esme's private chamber. Once the door was bolted behind them, he moved to the table, resting his hip on the edge. He watched as she slowly moved around the room, lighting candles and pulling back the bedding. She stripped as she went, eventually pulling on the golden silk wrapper he remembered taking from her body. The belt rode higher over her belly, and he didn't stop the urge to pull her between his legs. With her back to his chest, his hands explored her body as she relaxed back against him.

"Tell me, Esmeralda. What did you do with your wax mold?" His lips were to her throat, playing against the silver chain that now encircled neck.

"I'd rather show you," she said, pulling his hands up to her breasts, pressing his fingers over her swollen nipples.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," she murmured and turned in his arms, taking his mouth to hers in a kiss that started their reunion.

Lying sated on a thick carpet before the fire, he laughed when she scurried away only to return with her hands behind her back. Her body was naked to his gaze and his touch. Esme had never looked so erotic and feminine.

"Well?" he asked and watched her blush as she moved beside him, slowly bringing her hands forward, opening her palms to show him her prize.

Ulrich grunted aloud when he saw the two replica phallus she held. The copies were cast from the mold she made six months earlier.

"Now that you're back, I can be completely full, Ulrich, and all by you." She watched his eyes widen at the idea and laughed aloud. "Oh, Ulrich, how I've missed you," she whispered, leaning forward, taking one of the molded cocks to her lips, laving it completely before handing it to him as she stretched along side of him.

"Fill me, Ulrich. Make me yours," Her eyes slipped closed as he nudged the cock against her pussy lips, watching her open for him. "Your real cock to my lips, Ulrich, that's what I want first."

"Esmeralda, I don't think it's a good idea for me to leave you alone for any length of time from now on. You come up with the strangest ideas," he teased, feeding her his cock in two places at the same time.

"Your real cock is the best, Ulrich. Don't take it away from me, and I'll have no use for the molds."

"That sounds like a challenge, Esmeralda."

"Yes, it does rather," she said, the glint in her eye apparent. "Are you up to the task?"

"I'll let you know in twenty years."

"Thirty," she said, just before she swallowed his real cock between her lips.

The End

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Author Bio

Having been born and raised on Long Island, New York, my husband and I were both eager to leave the urban lifestyle behind us and explore our future. With his encouragement, I'm living my dream of writing romance novels full time. Our new rural setting allows us to enjoy time together and gives me guiltless hours to let my imagination go and indulge my other passion. When I realized my works consistently tended toward the erotic, I gave myself permission to explore places in my mind I might not venture in real life.

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