

ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*



Baron's Right
ERYN BLACKWELL

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Eryn Blackwell

Passion ignites between a cautious healer and a battle-weary knight.

Acelwyn is an independent healer, a woman with her own mind who swears she'll never be at any man's mercy. Roidan, a great warrior, appreciates his new land, granted to him by the king—but nothing fires his blood, his passion, as does the sensual healer he vows will be his.

Though Acelwyn is attracted to the new baron, she's more interested in keeping him alive and staying out of another man's clutches. Roidan vows to protect her from all harm; he wants no other to have her. A man of hearty appetites, he initiates her into sexual pleasure. But will passion be enough to keep Acelwyn tied to him? If not, he'll keep her anyway — as is the baron's right.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorasave.com

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ISBN 9781419927263

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Edited by Helen Woodall

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication April 2010

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Dedication

This is for my friends who know all my secrets and still love me anyway. Or, at least, they say they do.

Chapter One

The night was ripe with violence, heavy and thick in the air. Acelwyn knew it was coming. The entire village knew the Wolf was coming, the Saxon lord. The new baron would arrive at any moment, and the old baron—a Dane, barricaded behind his walls—would not last. Battles were a constant way of life here on this barren shore of the North Sea. If it was not the Danes fighting the Saxons, it was the raiding Vikings.

The old baron would undoubtedly die—he had after all pledged his loyalty to the new King Alfred, and then had tried to plot and overthrow the new king. His lands had been stripped from him, and upon hearing that news, he'd killed the king's men and was now barricaded behind his walls.

Not that she cared. The old baron was a wicked, evil man, who preyed on the young village women. He'd sold his own niece to Valmor, the merchant, who in turn made a hefty price off the girl's virginity to some Viking.

Poor woman.

Acelwyn shivered and pulled her mantle tighter around her, warding off the chill that blew in from the sea. Here in the village of Dakar, it always seemed cold, especially this time of year when the fickle goddess of weather would send sheets of ice and snow, or rain and hail, depending upon her mood.

From this position, she could see across the cove, to the land, at least a day's ride by the cliffs, on the other side of the giant horseshoe shape. Boats were faster. The quay at the bottom of the cliffs already teemed with more activity than normal. Ships from the new baron lay anchored at the docks. Which one was his she knew not, as all appeared the same. Five in all. Men scurried about, some local, some new in unfamiliar tunics and armor. On the wind she could vaguely hear the sounds of bustle, of the horses being unloaded, of the carts being filled, of armor clanging. From here she could easily see

that the army unloading was not meeting any resistance and they wouldn't until they reached the fortress – and perhaps not even then.

There was no land bridge on this side connecting them to the mainland, not like some of the other isles the soldiers spoke of. No, here there was just the sea. She could glimpse the shores of the mainland through the moonlight. She glanced up and knew before morning there would be a fog off the coast, slowly rolling in. She closed her eyes and breathed deep, the wet scent heavy on the air, different from the briny scent of sea. The fog rolled off the mainland and always carried with it the scent of dark rich soil. She often wondered what life would be like on the mainland, but preferred life here – here with those around her, whom she cared for, and for the few friends who didn't shy away from her.

Most didn't.

But some did. Some still thought her strange, thought of her as a witch even as those same ones often came to her and asked for her help, for her to heal them, or cure their ailments.

What would the new Baron to Draco's Isle think? Would he be a good leader?

She'd heard the tales of his prowess in battle, his determination and ruthlessness. These things were not uncommon in ones who achieved power. Whether or not he might have compassion or mercy, let alone justice or honor would remain to be seen.

The goddess knew the old baron had none of those attributes. No, the old baron enjoyed his ruthlessness, his debauchery too much to be concerned with higher morals.

She heard a harness jingle, the sound of a horse's hoof as it moved along the path behind her, just at the edge of the trees.

Should she turn?

Or stay as she was?

The wind gusted and billowed her cloak around her, pulling the long strands of her hair across her face.

He thought he'd imagined her. That lone figure, long red hair flying wildly, as he'd watched the unloading of the ships from a place just below this one, hidden by a rise and several trees. As he'd turned to head down to the docks, something, some feeling, had prickled the back of his neck. He had looked at the rise of land above him and seen her, the woman on the cliffs with the long dark hair.

Lust tugged and hardened his cock so that riding was actually uncomfortable. He frowned and shifted.

Who was she and what was her purpose here? If she were with someone, had a man, did he not wonder where she was at this late hour? Did he not keep a tight rein on her?

Perhaps she was a widow. Or a lone woman...

He smiled.

Whoever she was, she was his. If she belonged to this land, she now belonged to him.

She moved, glanced back over her shoulder toward him in that moment and the moonlight glinted off her pale complexion. He had no idea the color of her eyes, or if freckles danced on her fair skin. From here, her profile, almost hidden by a hooded cloak she had pulled around her was perfect, a straight nose, a long face. She was a tall woman from what he could see.

"Do you always stare at women?" she asked, her voice soft, husky on the night breeze.

He narrowed his gaze at her and dismounted, his horse prancing to the side as if he too was not sure of who or even what she was.

He shushed his steed and patted his neck. "We'll see if she's of merit," he whispered.

He thought he heard her snort, but couldn't be certain.

She still did not face him, but continued to look out over the bay where his boats were moored.

He stopped beside her, not three feet from her. He glanced over the edge, surprised to find it such a steep cliff. It had not appeared so from below.

"You shouldn't be up here alone," he said.

She pushed her hood back and met his gaze, one pale brow raised. "Some would say you should not be here at all."

Ah. He tilted his head, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword, not from defense, but habit.

Another breeze blew from the sea, briny, twirling around them so that her scent—floral and spices—enticed him. He took another deep breath, pulling the fragrance deeper into his lungs.

"What do you think?"

She continued to stare at the activity below. Finally, she answered. "I think men are men. They crave power and control and curse anyone who gets in their way. They take what they will, never worrying about destruction they may leave behind."

Such vehemence.

"Opinionated, aren't you? Do you find broad definitions fit all situations?"

She chuckled and it was as dark, as elusive as her scent in the moonlight.

"I deserve that. Perhaps not always. No." She turned to him then, her gaze lingering as she studied him. "Well, you must rank high among the new baron's men."

It was his turn to be amused, surprised and amused. "What makes you say so?"

She motioned to the activity below. "You're not below following orders, unloading the goddess only knows what."

"Supplies," he defended.

"At least the new baron isn't an idiot," she muttered.

He bit his bottom lip, wondering at her audacity. He wondered if he'd normally find this amusing. Probably not, but damn he was tired and glad to finally be here, to finally have roots of his own. Even if it was on this spit of land at the ends of the earth.

Far from fighting, for the most part. Though he'd have to protect and defend the people and this land from the occasional Viking raid.

"Few have called him so," he answered her.

"And lived?"

He frowned. "I..." He didn't want her to know who he was just yet. "I do not believe the baron is the type of person to strike another down for an opinion."

She shrugged. "You fight under his banner, you would not be one to say different, would you?"

He relaxed his stance and turned to her more fully.

"Perhaps not. Tell me of this land. I know from what was told to the baron that this is good land, but has been poorly used by the current baron."

She tilted her head, the wind pulling at the strands of her hair, dark red as wine in the moonlight. "So you can report back to your liege?"

He glanced at the keep atop the rise. "Are the rumors true? Does he hide behind his walls? Behind his men?"

She snorted. "The baron, the old one, has hidden behind many things all his life."

He frowned. "You do not like him?"

"It has nothing to do with like. If one is to be a leader, he must lead, he needs the respect of his people. If that is lacking, everything else is merely an illusion, duty and obligation out of fear." She waved her hand toward the hills behind them. "Tell your lord to listen as he rides in. There will not be laughter, no children's voices singing, or giggles. Women stay hidden for good reason and their men work in silent fear knowing the penalty could cost them the lives of those they love."

He said nothing for a moment, wondering if she'd say more. He loved the way her hands moved as she spoke, the way her graceful neck beckoned, the way she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Her scent was intoxicating.

"King Alfred wants the allegiance of the people here," he said. "Will they give it?"

She shook her head. "I know not. They've followed the old baron before because there was no other choice." She met his gaze with a fierceness, an intensity he had seen in the old ones, in what his mother had called the wise ones. "Tell your baron to give them a choice, to give them a reason to want to pledge to him and thus to Alfred. If they don't, then force them. Force is, after all, what they are used to."

"But not you?"

She laughed, but it held no humor. "I've never had a choice. I go where I'm led, where I'm told. What choice do I have after all?"

"And who leads you?"

Instead of answering, she took a deep breath and pulled her cloak closer to her before stepping back and away from him.

"I need to be going, before I'm missed."

He didn't like the fact she was out here alone, but he found the fact someone might be waiting on her to warm his bed even more irritating.

Irritating? Hell.

"Who's awaiting you?"

She shook her head and took another step back toward the trees.

"Wait," he commanded.

She hurried to the edge of the tree line and turned back to him. "Be better than what is here. These people deserve that."

"Who are you?"

She hesitated for just a moment. "I'm found in the last hut near the stream. I'm the healer."

With that she hurried into the trees. He started to follow her. She should not be out in the middle of the night. He did not know these woods, the people or anything about this damn place.

His place.

Dakar, on Draco's Isle.

A horse snorted near the edge of the trees, not far from the trailhead, which he'd followed to this rise.

"We haven't been here but an hour and already you've found a comely wench," his lieutenant said, riding out into the open cliff top. He dismounted. "I know it's been a while since you've lain between a pair of silky thighs, Roidan, but even you I thought would get the lay of the land first." He chuckled. "Then again, perhaps that is just what you were doing, eh?"

He ignored Cyrus, still looking at the place in the trees where she'd disappeared. Perhaps he would go after her. Perhaps he would find her tomorrow.

The healer?

She'd never given her name.

He liked to know the names of the women he bedded and by all that was holy, he'd know hers and soon.

"What have you learned?" he asked Cyrus.

"The locals were more than happy to help us. At first they seemed afraid, a timid lot to be sure. I think it's more a lack of trust in leadership," he muttered.

Roidan wasn't surprised.

"They helped and lent a hand when asked and when I left Darren to see if anyone had assassinated you," Cyrus said, sarcastically enough, though Roidan caught the edge of aggravation in it, "several of the men were offering to help. Over all I think they're happy to see us. Everyone wanted to know what type of man the new baron was, though none came right out and asked that question."

Had she? He couldn't remember. She'd warned, she'd told him to tell his baron what was needed here, but she hadn't come right out and asked what type of man he was.

It didn't matter. This was his land now, these were his people. He'd never been one to rule through fear when other options were more profitable. Not always doable, but profitable. Fear was often the last measure in his opinion when one could see other options were needed. But fear often served its purpose too and he wasn't above using it if he had to.

Here, though, the people needed...

Hope.

Well, this was his hope, his bit of land, his place to make his mark, he realized.

He would not let the king down. Friend or no, the man was king and he would make certain this land thrived, both in profits, through its bounty and its people.

"So who was she?" Cyrus asked.

He turned back and looked down onto the docks. "A healer."

"A voice like hers – she can heal something on me anytime," Cyrus joked.

"You will not go near her," he snapped.

For a moment Cyrus only studied him. Then he grinned and shrugged. "As you will. A healer. Well, that might come in useful, though we'll hope not too soon."

Neither said a word.

Finally, Cyrus asked, "So when do we attack?"

He sighed, rubbed the nape of his neck and looked up to the darkened keep where some fires were still burning along the ramparts.

"They know we're here. They're waiting for us."

Chapter Two

Acelwyn pulled the herbs from the rack above, tested them to see if they were dried enough to use in the tincture she needed to make for the ague, in case any needed it. She knew her stock was running low.

Outside the birds chirped and sang, people bustled about. For the most part, no one had been by this day. Lottie, the young girl who often helped Acelwyn, had stopped in earlier to help gather watercress from the stream.

As she poured some of the steaming water into the jug, over the herbs, she thought again of the new baron.

More specifically, his man who she had seen the night before. He'd been handsome, even she could admit that. His square, strong jaw, grown with at least a week's worth of beard had darkened his countenance. His eyes had seemed dark, unwavering. He'd had a high brow and seemed of a sharp mind – a rare thing that, at least in males.

His voice, deep and calm, had soothed her, as nothing had in a long, long time.

She'd lain awake half the rest of the night thinking of the blasted warrior. Then when she'd finally fallen asleep he haunted her dreams, his hands on her, his arms around her, his mouth whispering dark promises in her ear that had made her awaken to find herself wet with desire and wanting...wanting...

She'd never wanted to lay with a man before, didn't want to lay with her betrothed – a local merchant who was old enough to be her father.

This man, this warrior had stolen within her and made her see why women did stupid things with men, actually *wanted* to be with them.

To lie naked with one such as he...

Her breasts grew heavy, her lower belly tightening, and she felt the arousal in her body.

"Goddess, I'm an idiot." She capped the jug and set it to the side, knowing it would take several days until the solution would be complete.

Focus. Now what else was she about to steep today? Oh, yes, coltsfoot.

After checking, she noticed she needed more coltsfoot to replenish her stock. She'd have to go to the meadow, along the tree line to see if any were ready to gather yet. It would be useful when the weather got cold and many caught a chill and cough.

Which would take her beside Othgar's cottage. The merchant would not be put off for much longer, but mayhap she could find a way to stall, just a bit.

As she made her way along the dirt path, her leather bag slung carelessly over her shoulder, she thought again of the warrior. Mayhap he would prove useful. Mayhap he was even a close friend of the baron's. Though she could not imagine being a close friend of a lord, it could happen and if so, if she were close to the warrior, perhaps they would side with her and stop the marriage to Othgar. Granted her father had taken the bride-price and signed the contract before he died, but she did not want to marry the horrible man. He hurt women, she'd seen it, had felt the weight of his hand on herself all too often.

But could she do it? Get close to the baron's man in hopes that one of them might help her? What did she really have left to lose?

"Where are you going?" Othgar boomed from his doorway, another man standing there talking to him. It was someone she didn't know. Another of the new baron's people.

"I'm gathering some herbs."

"You will come here."

She didn't answer to the bastard yet. "I'm busy. If you have need of me, you know where I am. I shall return later."

“Acelwyn!” he shouted.

She kept walking, hoping the baron’s man would keep him occupied. As she left the town and started toward the trees, she knew she’d escaped but Othgar would be angry later. She’d embarrassed him in front of another man. He’d make her pay for it. She knew this without a doubt. His anger and pride ruled him. Then again, he was always angry.

The breeze blew her tunic against her. Once upon a time it had been blue, but now after so many washings, it was rather gray.

The sun had burned away the earlier fog and the day promised to be beautiful. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. As she rounded a curve in path, beneath a rise, she heard shouting ahead of her.

Cautiously, she looked to see what the commotion was and saw many of the new baron’s men.

They were near the tree line, not far from her. The old baron’s men were there as well fighting the new men. Steel sang against steel and yells rent the air.

She hated fighting. Blood flew from a blade in a high arch above the men and she shuddered.

The man she’d seen the eve before stepped from between several of his comrades, helmetless, his chainmail glinting in the sun.

A sound above her drew her attention. She glanced up and saw the old baron himself behind a boulder, notching an arrow, his attention fixed on the other group of men.

No. These were good men. She wasn’t sure how she knew this, but the lack of those bemoaning the new baron’s arrival was a start. The fact no women had been forced was another.

Carefully, she picked up a stone, weighed it. Yes, it would do.

The old baron's gray hair blew in the breeze. He didn't see her, never saw her as she crept up on him from the side. She could hear his muttered ramblings. Coward.

He couldn't face the new baron, so he hid behind a rock and tried to kill the man's men?

Just as she was within reach of him, he sighted the arrow.

"No!" she screamed and threw the stone. It caught him in the arm, just as he released the arrow, ruining the shot.

He hollered and whirled on her. Her foot slipped on the rocks and she knew she'd never get away. His hand grabbed her arm hard.

The older man's eyes, icy blue and cold as the northern sea, glinted at her. "You dare?" he hissed.

He raised his arm and she knew what was coming and had only enough time to try to raise her own arm.

Pain exploded along her arm and she fell, the rocks cutting into her hands. Her head slammed against something and a thousand bees filled her ears.

The old baron stood over her, pulling his sword free.

Someone roared, several someones. The ground rumbled.

Death. No one went against the old baron.

"Stupid wench," he muttered, standing over her.

Warmth splattered over her, even as spots danced in front of her eyes.

Move. She needed to move. She tried to scoot back, but pain shot through her head and her arm and she bit back a moan.

A hand reached for her and she moved away.

"You're all right," a voice said.

On the ground beside her the old baron stared, his mouth moving, blood bubbling from his lips. She tried to move back again and hissed at the pain.

“Look at me.” Firm fingers gripped her chin and turned her face away from the bloody, dying baron staring at her toward the voice...

The voice...

She knew that voice, she knew those eyes, dark as night and staring at her with something shifting in their depths.

Acelwyn stilled.

“Can you hear me?” he asked, his voice gruff.

She blinked, blinked again and wished the sound in her head would go away. This man, the arrow!

“Are you all right? Did he hit you?” she asked, sitting up, running her hands over the chain mail. There was a bloody gash along the side of his neck. “I didn’t get to him in time. I didn’t stop him from releasing the arrow.”

“He hit you, woman and seems to have knocked you daft.” He brushed her hands off and tilted her face one way then the other.

She jerked her head to the side and bit back a curse. *Damn but that hurt.*

“What hurts?” he asked. “Cyrus, my horse!” he barked over his shoulder.

She realized then other men stood around them.

“I’m fine,” she said, pushing his hand away again. “Don’t touch me. You’re bleeding.” She used the cuff of her tunic to wipe some of the blood away from the gash in the side of his neck. “And lucky!”

If the gash had been just a bit deeper, he’d be dead. As it was, it was torn, jagged and still seeping more blood than it should be. She pressed the edge of her sleeve to the gash and he hissed.

“Be still. It’s still bleeding.”

“Woman you’re covered in blood,” he said again.

“He could have killed you,” she said, seeing the old baron again notching the arrow.

"If you had been but a second later, he might have," the man said, his fingers circling her wrist, stilling her ministrations. Shock hummed along her system from the simple touch. Heat speared straight from his fingers to her lower regions. She shuddered.

"You need a helmet, or a neck guard or some such," she muttered, focusing on the gash. "He could have speared your skull instead."

His fingers squeezed. "Bastard almost skewed you and you're reprimanding me?" A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Don't *ever* do something so foolish again." He said it quietly, but he might as well have yelled it.

"The gash should be tended to. It could become putrefied," she whispered.

Another man squatted beside them even as others pulled the old baron's body away.

One of the men said something, she could hear more voices, but her attention was focused solely on the man before her, staring at her.

"Who are you?" they both asked at the same time.

She smiled and stopped, the movement hurt her face. "I hate when men hit me in the face," she muttered.

"Men shouldn't hit women period," he said.

"But they always do."

"Not all men."

She said nothing to that. Most men she knew did what they pleased and didn't care if the women liked it or not. She took a deep breath and caught his scent on the breeze, sweat, man and...lemon? Perhaps he was right and she was daft.

"Come let me help you." He moved closer to her, made as if to pick her up as if she were a child.

"I don't need your help," she said.

He ignored her and picked her up anyway. "You are the most contrary woman I've met."

"Then mayhap you've not met many. I'm perfectly able to walk." The cut in his neck still bled, the entire collar of his tunic was wet and red. "You're going to pass out from the loss of blood and as tall as you are, that's a long fall." He only cocked a dark brow at her.

"Do you always talk so much?"

"Being as how you are carrying me, I find I'd rather not be dropped when you do pass out. You'll be like a felled tree and I'll have no choice but to fall with you."

"A felled something," one of the men muttered.

One corner of his mouth twitched.

He passed her off to another man, mounted a deep-chested warhorse and took her back into his arms.

The woman in his arms was contrary as a monk in a harem. Already the side of her face was swelling. He didn't like it.

Something about her pulled at him. Perhaps it was the fact she was nothing more than a comely wench. Lord knew her mouth alone was made for sin. He could just picture those wide plump lips wrapped around his cock, those wicked green eyes flashing up at him, his fingers tangled in her hair as he pumped into her mouth.

Blast it.

He shifted, but it did little good to relieve the raging hardness of his shaft.

Cyrus was staring at him, then at the woman, then back at him with a raised brow. "We need to get you back to the camp, before the baron tries something else," Cyrus said.

"The baron is dead," she said on a sigh.

"What?" both he and his lieutenant said.

She motioned to the dead man who had dared to touch her and had attempted to end his own life. "The baron of old. I dare say the people will not mourn his passing and will hail you a hero." She shrugged. "Or most will."

He stared down into the most amazing eyes, as green as the moss on rocks. A shifting color that seemed both dark and bright at the same time. Her dark red hair was in a braid this day, strands coming out to dance in the soft breeze. Freckles. So she did have them, splattering over her skin as many fairer ones did. She licked her lips.

"Mayhap your baron will tell the people of the news? Many worry about a long battle."

He highly doubted that.

She seemed to read his thoughts. "Well, perhaps long is the wrong word. But they do worry. The old one liked to take his anger out on his people."

He didn't say anything, merely nudged Tobias around on the trail.

"Shall we take the keep?" Cyrus asked him.

Perhaps they wouldn't have to.

She was already shaking her head. "If your baron announces the death of the old baron first, the gates will be lowered in welcome."

"By his soldiers?" Cyrus asked, clearly incredulous.

She shrugged and her breath caught. He noticed the tightening around her mouth. "If not, come find me later at my cottage and I shall take you in the secret way."

Great. A secret way.

"Who knows of this way?" he asked.

She frowned. "I don't know, a few. Those of us who have used it before."

"Then I'd hardly call it secret." Too many. They'd seal it.

No one else said a word, they were waiting on his command. She had no idea who he was. He shared a look with Cyrus and nodded to the men scattered around the clearing. Then he nudged his steed down the path she must have come.

"You said when we met you live in the last cottage?" he asked her as she rested against him.

"Yes, the last cottage."

"Alone?"

She took a deep breath. "For the most part."

What the hell did that mean? If she was a village whore, then he'd make her his own. And why the idea of her a whore tightened his stomach, he knew not. She'd not be the first whore he'd have bedded, or shared, stolen from another and left. The idea of her having many lovers bothered him and he didn't like that anymore than the idea of her and another.

Saints above knew he *needed* a woman.

Just as they rode into the village, people stopped what they were doing and stared at them.

"Acelwyn!" a voice thundered.

She tensed in his arms.

An older man, bald and given to girth stood near a doorway.

"Who is he?" he asked, leaning down and whispering in her ear.

She sighed, never taking her eyes off the approaching man. "Othgar the merchant." On a deep inhalation, she said, "Sadly, my betrothed."

"Your what?"

She turned her head to look up at him. "My betrothed. Before my father's death he sold me to Othgar. I've managed to delay the marriage due to the fact Othgar's been away."

The man's face clearly said he was angry as did his fisted hands on his hips. "Come down from there, woman!"

When she made no move to dismount, not that he'd have let her, the man's face mottled. "Now!" The man then turned to him. "I know not who you are, but this woman is mine. Release her or I'll tell the baron of this."

He only stared at the man, then said, "The new baron will only find you irritating."

The man's eyes turned sly as he looked up to the path behind them. "But the old one does not. Acelwyn! Now!"

She was so still, she was barely breathing, but she shifted – to dismount or she was uncomfortable, he knew not. He cared not. Roidan tightened his arms around her, letting her know he wasn't about to let her go.

"Do you want to go to him?" he asked, whispering again in her ear, running a hand down her arm though his other held the reins.

He watched Othgar and knew the other man would kill him if he could.

She only shook her head.

He nudged his horse forward until he was directly in front of the officious Othgar. "The old baron is no longer an issue."

"We'll see about that."

"He's dead."

Whispers started around him, then buzzed.

Othgar stepped back. "You lie."

The hiss of a sword leaving its scabbard told him his men were behind him. "Men have died for less insult to me and mine."

"Who are you?"

He ran his gaze over the other man and clicked Tobias forward. Othgar had to move aside or be trampled.

As they passed him, he looked down at the merchant and only said, "I find you irritating."

Understanding flashed in the man's beady eyes and Roidan smiled and knew it held no amusement.

He tightened his hold on the woman before him and followed her directions to her hut at the village's perimeter. The stream flowed before them, to dump into the sea several feet below.

"You are unprotected here," he said. From above, men could attack from the rocks and *craigs*. The stream would not allow her to hear their arrival until it was too late and she was too far away from the others for any to hear her screams.

He noted all of this as he dismounted and then reached up for her, setting his hands at her waist.

She sat there, in her colorless tunic staring at him with those wicked green eyes. "You are the new baron."

He didn't answer her.

A vee formed between her brows. "Why did you not tell me?"

He shrugged and pulled her from the horse.

"I can walk."

"You repeat yourself." He carried her into her hut, and paused at the threshold. Herbs hung from the rafters, some dried and brittle, some drying. Jugs stood on the table near a window on shelves. There were jars, jugs, containers everywhere.

"You truly are the healer?" He set her on her feet.

"You truly are the new baron?" She pulled away from him and walked to the table, pulling out a chest and taking herbs from it. She dropped them into a mortar and ground them with the pestle. She motioned to a chair. "Sit so that I may clean your cut before it becomes poisoned."

"I always like a firm woman."

She smiled at him.

He did as she asked, first removing his chainmail with her help, and all the while, he watched her. The way she moved told of grace, of knowledge. Her hands were not those of court ladies. Hers were nicked with scars, would fight off assassins apparently, yet were long-fingered and elegant. He shook his head and hissed as the gash in his neck iced pain through him.

She poured a foul-smelling liquid over the herbs and continued to mix them. Then she picked up another jug and cloth and brought them to the table, removing steaming liquid from the fire.

“What is that?”

She picked up the mug of steaming liquid and wet the cloth. “This is only water.” The woman stepped between his spread thighs so that she could tend to his wound.

He bit down when she began to clean the wound. “I have my own healer.”

She leaned close and he saw the vein in her neck pulse. The shelf of her jaw beckoned him to lean in and gather her scent. Flowers. Herbs. Spices. He knew what she smelled like. She swallowed, her eyes sliding to his.

“This is a serious cut.”

He grunted and held her stare. Her teeth nibbled on her bottom lip, pulling the plumpness into her mouth.

He leaned toward her and set his lips to hers.

She stilled, froze, but he didn't care. If she wasn't interested she could push him away.

“I want you,” he told her.

“I-I...” Her eyes closed and he gently tasted her lips. Like the rest of her, her taste reminded him of flowers, of wildness, of enchantment.

He gripped her waist, small, but not tiny. He shifted and pulled her closer, his thumbs meeting above her belt, woven leather with a small bag hanging from its side.

Her chest rose and fell and he wondered what her breasts looked like. What they would feel like against his chest. Would her nipples be dark or pale pink? Would freckles dance over the rest of her body as they did down her neck? He wanted to find out.

She pulled away and nibbled again on her lower lip. Her hands rested on his shoulders, one kneading the muscles there. He wondered if she was even aware of what she did.

"I shouldn't be doing this," she whispered, then leaned in and kissed him. This time her mouth was open, inviting.

He jerked her to him and slanted his mouth over hers, tasting along the corner of her mouth before delving inside. Her lips fused with his, all that fire in her exploded into him. Desire, hotter than he'd known before, licked through his veins. Her mouth moved on his as demanding as his on hers, dueling for control.

No woman had yet controlled him, but part of him wanted to see where this would lead, how far she would go.

His fingers danced up her ribs, traced the outline of her breasts. She sucked the air from his lungs. Roidan smiled against her mouth. "You like my touch." He ran his fingers back and forth beneath her breasts, sighing as she pushed herself against him, wanting more. Her tongue danced with his and her taste became intoxicating.

"We should stop," she said as she nibbled his lips.

"Who taught you to kiss?" he asked.

She chuckled and the sound brought forth the image of tangled limbs in the dark of night.

"I don't want to stop, do you?" he asked as he licked a trail from her jaw down her neck, just to the edge of her tunic.

She shook her head. "No, but...but..."

He pulled back. "But what?"

She looked to the door and the glow faded from her eyes, the blush from her cheeks fading to paleness. "I can't have you."

He grabbed her wrist and pressed her hand to his straining cock. "Wench, you can have me any way you want."

The blush started at her neck and painted its way up her pale skin. Fascinating.

He tightened his hold on her wrist and she winced.

"Sorry," he muttered.

She shook her head and drew her hand away, rubbing her arm. He frowned.

"I didn't mean to hurt you." Sometimes he didn't realize his own strength.

She smiled. "You didn't. The old baron—"

He took her hand in his again and pushed up the sleeve of her tunic. Already a bruise had formed along the bone of her forearm. He gently rubbed his thumb back and forth over it.

"I don't think he broke it," she said.

"It still pains you."

She shrugged. "So do many things. Now sit still and behave, I need to clean your wound."

Instead he leaned in and kissed her again. "I want to do other things."

She pushed back on his shoulder. "You need to be still."

He did as she asked and took a deep breath. All he could smell was her. "Tell me of your betrothed."

"Othgar?"

"You have more than one?"

A rueful tilt of lips. "No. I'd rather not have one at all if I had a choice."

"It might depend on the choice," he said softly. She picked up the other jug and the foul scent hit him again. "What in all the saints is in that?"

“Does it matter?”

“If it goes on me it does.”

“This and that. Be still.” She paused for a moment. “This might sting.”

Sting. It felt like the fires of hell had been lit in a small area of his neck. He hissed, bit down and glared at her. “My own healer will stitch it.”

“As you wish. Make certain he cleans it again before he does and that he properly cleans the needle and—”

“Madam, I’ve survived battles with him tending me and went on to fight more.”

She said nothing, merely continued to apply whatever stank to high heaven.

He could hear his men outside the walls. He could also hear Othgar yelling about his betrothed.

Her fingers stilled and she straightened. He noticed her hands trembled as she glanced at the door.

He didn’t want her here, alone to tend for herself. “There are gardens at the keep?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes, but they’ve been sorely mistreated.”

As had most things here. “You’ll come and tend to them.”

She frowned at him, tilting her head.

“You’ll come and tend to them. It isn’t a request.”

“Move aside!” Othgar yelled.

He felt the tension in her. She turned and looked at him. “You want me to tend the gardens?”

He nodded and motioned to the plants hanging around. “Yes, and to set a store for healing purposes at the keep.”

“People come here.”

He held her stare. "If they want your ministrations they can find you at the keep." Where she'd be better protected.

She took a deep breath. "Just to tend the gardens?"

"Mayhap me as well." He stood and cupped her face in his hands, running his thumb over her bottom lip.

"Acelwyn!" Othgar yelled, striding around the hut. He would be at the window in a moment.

Roidan heard Cyrus' deeper voice.

"I don't want to go to him," she whispered.

"Then you have a choice to make."

Chapter Three

A choice? What was the choice in that? Really? A man who saw her as a possession or one who saw her as merchandise.

Yet one seemed more...gentle? No that wasn't the word. The new baron seemed more agreeable than Othgar. Even crowding her hut with his size, in his blood-splattered battle gear, the man was gentler than her betrothed. She should know, she'd been at the end of Othgar's fist more than once. Marriage to him would be a nightmare.

But the baron? As his mistress?

She studied him, even as Othgar yelled again.

"That bitch is mine. I'll allow no one to take her from me, new baron or no. I've the contract to prove my ownership!" His voice carried and she winced. "Now move aside."

She blinked and looked at the baron's chin. "Who are you?"

"Who do you think I am?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, I just know you're not Othgar."

He chuckled. "So anyone other than him would do?"

She shook her head. "No, that's not what—"

He brushed his thumbs over her cheekbones. "I know what you meant, Acelwyn. I'm Roidan, son of Stephen."

"Ruler of Dakar now," she muttered. "The Wolf."

Something hit the wall of her cottage and she jumped. If she stayed here, Othgar would get her. "Will you uphold his contract?"

He stared at her, his dark eyes intent. He didn't answer her. But then again, mayhap Othgar would no longer want her if he knew she'd been with the new baron.

"As long as I make you happy, will you keep him away from me?" she asked quickly, her words tripping over each other. She licked her lips, her heart slamming against her ribs.

Othgar's yell was muffled this time, but she didn't turn her attention from the man before her.

The corner of his eyes crinkled as they narrowed. "Aye."

"Then I suppose..." She took another deep breath and then said, "Then I suppose I had best learn how to keep you happy." Glancing around her cottage she said, "I will need to move some of my things, and until a proper place at the keep is ready for me, I want to be able to come here. I need to restock many of my supplies. And—"

"Not alone. I'll send one of the men with you, so you'll have to wait until there is someone who can accompany you."

She frowned.

Othgar yelled, startling her. "You can't keep her away from me forever, curse you all!"

She'd been on her own for so long she'd forgotten what it was like to have someone worry about what she was doing, to have someone watch out for her.

Leaning up, she played with the ends of his hair at the nape of his neck. "Thank you for this chance, thank you for keeping him from me." She closed the distance between them even as he dropped his head to meet her. The kiss started out softly, but soon grew to more. His mouth was hot on hers, making her want him. Want him in ways she knew a woman wanted a man.

Not in a way she'd ever wanted one, but she knew it in the deepest part of her.

One hand held her face while the other moved down her torso, her body, skimming as if she were water. It shouldn't have felt as good as it did, but it did. By the goddess did it. It was if he knew some hidden secret about her that remained even a mystery to herself.

She could still hear the men outside, their voices muffled. For one moment, she worried about them, what they might suspect.

He cupped her breast, weighed it, caressed it, his thumb circling around the center. Around. Around. And around. She didn't care who stood outside her cottage. She didn't care if Othgar himself wondered at what she and the baron might be doing.

Oh goddess that felt wonderful. The material, slightly rough, grated along her skin. She broke away from the kiss as he tugged the edge of the tunic down baring her breast to him.

"A deep pink," he muttered, just as his mouth lowered. "I'd wondered."

He picked her up and set her on the table as if she weighed nothing. Something rolled onto the floor but she didn't care what it was. All she cared about was him.

She could smell him, spices, the lemon, sweat and something else, something that called to the woman within her.

"You will listen to me," he told her as his tongue traced a pattern on the slope of her breast.

"W-what?"

"When it comes to your safety, you will follow my orders."

His other hand squeezed her other breast. She nodded. "As you will."

He smiled, not in teasing amusement, but that smile that men had that said they knew they had just won something.

His tongue flicked out over her nipple and she hissed, then moaned as he gently closed his hot, wet mouth over it, sucking her deep.

"Oh the goddess!"

His chuckle vibrated against her, then she felt the cool air on her legs as one of his hands skimmed up the inside of her thigh. When had he done that?

"What are you doing?"

"Teaching you to keep me happy," he said, his voice gruff as he moved to her other breast.

No one had ever really touched her there. Othgar had tried one night. The image flashed darkly in her mind and she tensed at the feel of a warm male hand high on the inside of her thigh.

"I-I—"

"Shhhh," he whispered, licking a path back up her neck to her mouth. He wedged himself more fully between her thighs, widening them, pushing her tunic up. "I will not hurt you. I only want to give you pleasure."

His mouth hovered over hers then only gave her teasing nibbling bites.

"I don't know about pleasure," she whispered against his mouth, licking his lips.

His eyes were heavy-lidded. "Has anyone?" he began, moving his fingers higher and higher.

She really couldn't think. What had he said?

"Have they?"

"Have they what?" she whispered against his mouth, his small licking bites.

"Has anyone ever touched you thus?"

"Othgar."

He stilled, every line in his body going taut, she felt it.

"But, that is, he just wanted me to know he could do... He didn't... It wasn't like..."

He huffed out a breath. "It wasn't like?" His fingers began to move again and this time they brushed lightly over the juncture of her thighs and she trembled, turning her head into his neck, kissing the pulse there.

"It wasn't like this."

"What was it like?"

“He just wanted to feel me, to show me who I belonged to and what he had the right to do...” She shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about him. I didn’t like his touch.”

The baron’s chest swelled as he inhaled, his fingers dancing and sliding over her. She tensed for the pain, but other women had told her that it didn’t always hurt.

“Relax,” he whispered against her mouth, kissing her even as his fingers twirled below. She felt those long fingers part her, slide against her, and flick over a spot that...

“Goddess!”

He smiled that grin against her mouth. “I’m Roidan. Say my name.”

He played more, and all she could do was hold his stare, trying to follow the movement of his fingers swirling between her thighs.

“You are so wet and ready, Acelwyn. You were made for pleasure.”

She didn’t know about that. Actually, she didn’t care. He kissed the edge of her ear, sending shivers dancing over her skin. “You will scream for me. Say my name.”

He pulled the lobe of her ear between his teeth and she couldn’t think. “Your name?”

“Roidan.”

“Roidan. Roidan.”

He slid a long, thick finger into her and she gasped. “Ooohhhh.”

“My name,” he said, pulling the finger back out. She didn’t know where to put her hands. So she leaned back, splaying them beside her, holding her up. He nudged her legs wider and she helped him, feeling the roughness of his clothing against her naked inner thighs.

“Roidan,” she moaned as he thrust deep into her, touching her as she’d never been touched before.

“Ah, that’s the way I love to hear it. Heavy with passion, whispered on a woman’s plea.” He thrust again and again, then he leaned over her and pulled her nipple into his

mouth, sucking hard as he plunged his finger deep. She felt so stretched that she looked down between them to his fingers coated with her own cream and realized he'd added another finger.

"Roidan! Yes! Yes! More!"

"More? You want more? Careful what you wish for, you just might get it." He stroked her deeper, twisting his wrist, pressing some hidden spot at the top of her slit and she screamed.

"Roidan!" Lights shattered behind her eyes, bright bursts of pinwheels of colors and still he stroked her. Her body clamped down on those fingers, tight. Tighter. Again and again and again.

Her heart thundered in her chest, so that all she heard was her own heartbeat. His fingers gentled in their stroking until he pulled softly away. She watched as he brought the digits to his lips, inhaled deeply and then holding her stare, licked her essence from his fingers. "Acelwyn." He leaned in and kissed her. "You will keep me very, very happy."

Chapter Four

Roidan looked at the woman splayed before him on her table like an offering. His cock throbbed with unrelenting lust. Leaning into her, he kissed her long and hard, wrapping his hands in her hair to keep her still for his kisses.

Her mouth opened for him with no urging and he smiled when her tongue dueled with his, when her teeth nipped at his lip. She jerked back, licked where she bit and muttered, "I'm sorry, my lord. I didn't think."

He cupped her face, his fingers running along both sides. "I find I don't want you to think. I thought of you all bloody night woman. You haunted my dreams. I could smell you on the wind and almost came here last eve."

"For?" she asked with a small smile.

"For more than you'd probably have wanted."

Her wicked green eyes reminded him of the secrets that emeralds held. A small smile tilted one side of her wide, lush mouth.

She shifted so that she was closer to him. Nipping at his jawline, she said, "Oh, I bet I could have come up with a few ideas, my lord."

He took a deep breath and wondered yet again what he was thinking. There were things to do, but he'd been awake most of the night with a cock as hard as a pike, and her in his fantasies.

What he wanted to do was to slip into her hot, wet, slippery sheath and just lose himself for a moment.

Slowly, she ran her tongue around her bottom lip moistening it.

"Is my pleasure lesson over, my lord?" she asked.

He inhaled deeply, smelling her arousal, hardening even more. Her bottom lip was wet beneath his thumb. His eyes followed his digit back and forth.

Her tongue darted out licking his thumb, before she closed her lips around it and sucked.

His breath hissed out and he closed his eyes.

"I've had thoughts about these lips of yours," he muttered.

Her tongue swirled around his thumb and she let go. "Really?" Her arm came up and wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer to her. Her mouth devoured his. Her other hand ran from his rib cage, down the front of his tunic to his rock-hard shaft.

"Are you..." She nibbled his lips, sucking his bottom lip into her mouth. "Going." Lick. Then she stroked his cock through the material. "To share." Kiss. Stroke. "With me?"

He jerked her closer to him, tugging her tunic.

"You're very adventurous for one claiming innocence."

"I am. Just because I spurned others' advances, doesn't mean I haven't wondered, haven't been curious."

"Have you now?" he asked. "So I'm the man who gets to satisfy your curiosity?"

She frowned. "I admit I'm nervous, but not fearfully so." Her eyes rose to meet his. "You said you would not hurt me, should I not trust you?"

He studied her for a moment. "I don't know that you do trust me, but you might." He wanted to see and taste her breasts again. Muttering another oath as her fingers closed tighter, he grabbed the collar of her tunic and ripped it, baring her breasts completely to him. He knew from having his mouth on them earlier they were smaller than he'd imagined but he hardly cared. Sighing, he leaned in and kissed his way from her collarbone down to her lightly pink-tipped breasts. He studied her, noting the freckles splattered across her skin and the streaks of blood still smeared on her.

Dipping a cloth into the water basin she'd used on him, he wiped the blood from her and finished ripping the stupid tunic from her.

"I find I don't want any of the old baron on you."

"I hope you have a tunic I can borrow. I only have one more."

He kissed her, hard, demanding, wanting only to be inside her. Wanting her mouth around him. Wanting his mouth on her and not knowing which to go for first.

Bugger it.

He watched his finger for just a moment on her breast, watched her shudder as he closed his fingers on her nipple and tugged. Her nipples were pale, pale pink, just like the rest of her.

Roidan looked up into her eyes. "I cannot wait. I don't know if now is the..."

Her fingers closed on him again.

He sighed. "I warned you. I don't know if I can be as gentle as you might need me to be."

"I don't care," she wiggled closer to him. "I feel like something is burning beneath my skin. I just... I want..."

He bit down and kissed her nipple before pulling it into his mouth, sucking it high and tight against the roof of his mouth.

"Oh the goddess."

He pulled harder and lightly caressed her other breast. She shuddered.

Feeling between them, he played and tugged on her nubbin as he suckled and pulled on her breast.

She moaned, jerked and panted.

He looked up at her eyes, which were glazed, unfocused.

Moving to the other breast, he gave it the same attention, only this time, he nibbled on her tender flesh.

"Oh please, Roidan."

"Please what?"

She shifted. "I don't... I don't..."

He raked his nail over her nub and rimmed her slit, already soaking his finger from her warm cream.

"That's it," he said. "You want me, don't you, Acelwyn?"

He let go of her breast and kissed her, tilting her head deeper allowing him more access. He thrust two fingers into her and felt her shudder, as she cried out against his mouth. Her long-fingered hand clenched on his cock and he groaned.

"Please, pleaseohpleasepleaseplease," she begged.

Smiling, he licked her bottom lip. "I'm going to slide into this hot little cunny of yours, Acelwyn." He pulled his fingers out and then slowly stroked them deeply back in, staying away from her erect nubbin. She writhed, moved, tilted her hips. "With my cock."

She stilled, her eyes gazing up at him. Slowly she nodded. The pulse in her neck was fluttering. He kissed it, pulling the skin between his teeth. He felt her fingers dig into his arms.

He quickly shifted clothing, all but tearing at the laces of his breeches. Finally, his engorged cock sprang free, liquid already seeping from the end.

In. Her. Now. He had to feel her, warm and hot and...

"I don't care," she hissed. "I just want... I just need..."

"I know what you need," he whispered against her ear.

She shifted closer and he asked, "Have you ever had a man?" He pulled her to him, brushing his cock back and forth wetting himself with her hot, slick cream.

She shuddered and moaned. He bit off a curse at her heat.

"Have you?" Then he remembered what she'd said of the other man. "Has Othgar ever had you thus?"

She shook her head.

A virgin, just as he'd suspected. A piece of his brain all but yelled at him to pull away.

He ignored that voice and said instead, "Hold on tight to me."

Watching her, noting the way her eyes were bright, excited, yet hazy with passion pulled low in his gut.

His spine felt like it was on fire and he wasn't even in her yet.

He was large, but then she wasn't exactly tiny.

Roidan fitted himself at her entrance. Saints, she was tight, but he already knew that from readying her with his fingers. He paused, just inside her when he felt her maidenhead and surprisingly intense pleasure speared through him.

"Look at me," he growled.

Her eyes rose to meet his. Her fingers bit into his shoulders and her breath panted out.

"You belong to me." He nudged forward and she winced.

Covering her mouth with his own, he thrust fully into her swallowing her scream. Her hands beat at his shoulders, pushed against him, but he stayed right where he was. Surrounded by her scorching heat, her engulfing slickness and by the saints had he ever been in a tighter cunt?

In a moment, she stilled and he felt her inner muscles quiver against him. He shuddered and held on tightly to his control. The idea that he should have at least waited until they were on a bed skittered through his lusty brain.

"You're so big," she whispered.

"You're so tight." He looked at her, saw the tears on her cheeks and kissed them softly away. "'Tis done."

"So it is. Is that all?"

Is that all? Women loved being in his bed. He couldn't help but laugh and laughing shifted him inside her.

She hissed, then moved and moaned, her eyes widening.

"Oh no, my little enchantress, that is not all." He slowly withdrew and then stroked gently back in, gauging her reaction.

She shuddered and moaned, her throat arching back, exposing her neck. He licked and kissed his way along the column, feeling her moan against him as he stroked again.

"Not nearly all. Merely the beginning."

He kept his movements slow and easy, or as easy as he could until finally she lifted and moved against him.

"That's it," he whispered to her.

They finally found a rhythm that had her moaning, begging, whispering. He thrust harder into her hot little sheath, tighter than a damn glove and she rose to meet him.

He laid her back on the table, leaned over and latched onto her breast, suckling her as he thrust deeply inside her.

Her cunt rippled and he felt her thighs tighten around him.

"Roidan. Roidan... Ohhhhh..."

He kept pumping into her, watching her as she flew apart. He thrust and stroked as her climax ripped a scream of pleasure from her that echoed in the small hut.

He held his release as long as he could. His balls were so tight against him he couldn't see straight and still he pumped.

Her cry of release went on and on as her sweet cunny milked his cock, tighter, tighter and so blasted hot.

He roared and thrust as deep as he could, his balls nestled against her ass as his climax fired down his spine, his cock deep, pulsing and pulsing into this woman who stole his breath.

He collapsed on top of her and lay there trying to decide if he were alive or not.

Her small hand fluttered in his hair, raked the nape of his neck and he grunted and shivered. "You keep touching me and I'll end up taking you again."

Roidan propped himself up on his elbow and gazed down at her to make sure she was all right.

Her lips were swollen and smiling, her eyes were closed and a pretty pink blush stained across her cheeks.

He ran his fingers through her hair. "You're not staying here tonight."

"I'm not?" she whispered.

"No, you're sleeping in my bed."

She giggled. "That's fortunate. I was hoping it wouldn't be on a table."

His chuckle turned into laughter. "Wench."

She couldn't hide her wince as he pulled out of her. He saw his seed glistening and mixing with her virgin's blood. Reaching over, he poured fresh water into another basin and wetted a cloth stacked beside it.

Acelwyn couldn't think. What had the man done to her mind? Every muscle in her body tingled and trembled.

No wonder so many of the village women giggled when speaking of the act. Or why so many widows liked to find a man to keep them company.

Suddenly an act she'd always thought of as natural took on a whole new meaning. Which she supposed was rather stupid.

The baron of the land had just taken her maidenhead and she'd simply handed it to him.

Or bartered it.

In exchange for his protection.

She frowned, wincing as she went to sit up.

"Stay," he commanded, his voice soft, one hand splayed low beneath her bellybutton.

"Why?"

He arched a brow at her, wrung the cloth out and then set it against her before she realized what he'd intended.

Mortified, she tried to sit up, push him away and close her legs all at the same time.

He shook his head and pushed her back, stayed between her thighs so she couldn't close them and only said, "Just be still for a moment. You tended to me, now 'tis my turn."

She could feel a blush starting at her toes and all but flashing over her entire body.

Laying an arm over her eyes she didn't utter a sound as he pressed the cool cloth against her most private flesh.

The trickle of water filled her ears as she imagined him wringing it out again. She thought he might move away, instead he pressed it against her again.

"Your entire body is blushing," he said and she could hear the grin in his voice.

Since she couldn't think of anything to say, she ignored him. Thankfully, he didn't press the issue. After repeating his process several more times, she heard him say, "There. I think that's better."

Still she didn't lower her arm until she felt him shift between her thighs. He bent down, as if studying her.

And not a single thought came to mind on what to say. She couldn't close her legs because he was between them and...

He leaned over, blew on her and then lightly kissed her where earlier he'd –

"What are you doing?" she said, sitting up, despite what he might want.

His dark eyes held hers as he straightened. "Another time."

She frowned and wondered what he meant.

Sounds from outside suddenly filtered through her brain. Othgar was still arguing with the soldiers and...

She'd completely forgotten about the man.

"Oh." She glanced at the open window.

Had they all heard? Of course they had. It wasn't like she'd been quiet, had it?

"You're mine," he told her – he too could hear Othgar's angry tirade.

She shivered at the rage she heard in the old merchant's voice.

"I protect what is mine," he told her.

But was she really his? She'd bartered her innocence for protection. It was hardly as if she were the lady of the keep.

Bartering for sex.

She knew what that made her, she just wasn't sure how she felt about it.

"I'll be back!" Othgar roared. "That bitch is mine."

She shivered again and decided that she didn't care what being with Roidan made her, as long as he kept her away from Othgar.

Then another thought occurred to her. Licking her lips she stared at him.

"Did you hear me, Acelwyn?" he asked.

Not knowing what to say, or rather how to say it, she only nodded.

His fingers ran through her hair again as he watched her. "I wonder what is going on in that mind of yours."

She sighed and pulled the edges of her tunic together. "I was..." She cleared her throat. "I was wondering if you..." She blew out another breath. "What will your lady think? I mean, I don't want to cause problems in your new home and –"

He pressed a finger to her lips. "I have no lady of the keep that need concern you."

Relief stupidly flowed through her as he pulled her closer for a kiss. "Do you think you will enjoy learning to please me?"

She could only smile and kiss him back. "I don't know, mayhap it will become a chore."

He laughed against her and the knot that had suddenly settled in her stomach loosened.

Chapter Five

Roidan listened to his men talking. They'd taken the keep with little to no trouble. The gates had been lowered and waiting for them. No one raised a blade or bow, no one even spoke as he and his men had ridden into the bailey several days ago. The inside was hideously messy, something he could not abide. Living without a roof over his head was something he and his men had done for years. They'd stayed in several places where he would rather not lay his head. The keep was currently one of those places. He refused to sleep under its roof until it was properly cleaned. Village women and several men had been working for days. He didn't have time to oversee every little aspect so he left Cyrus in charge – who immediately gave most of the responsibility to a woman. The only woman seemingly competent that Cyrus knew, was Acelwyn.

Cyrus had said since her house was neat and organized and clean, he'd leave her in charge. They all like cleanliness. The fact she'd saved his life was also high praise from his lieutenant. Roidan knew it didn't hurt that she was so comely either. The added benefit that most seemed to respect her helped ease his and his men's way into the local life.

The men's laughter bounced around the inner courtyard along the trestle tables. She'd ordered the tables brought outside and the women had spent the day scrubbing them down until the wood shone through. A giant fire pit had been built and fish had been roasted over it.

Not a huge feast but enough to satisfy – at least his hunger for food.

His hunger for something else was much harder to quench.

And that something suddenly laughed.

Acelweyn.

He could not take his eyes off her. She moved with efficiency as if she didn't want to waste any time—something he too admired. Her movements were not necessarily unlike that of a warrior, yet they were. With Acelwyn, it was as if she danced to a tune only she could hear.

Graceful.

Sensual.

His cock hardened and he shifted.

Cyrus shook his head.

"What?" he asked.

"You've got it bad, my friend."

He grunted. Mayhap he did.

"If her screams of passion are anything to judge her own talents by, I'd have to add you're one lucky bastard and the men are envious."

He turned his gaze to Cyrus. "If one of them so much as touches her—"

"I've already given that decree. We need the men we have, not you losing your head and running one of them through." He tilted his head and studied Acelwyn along with Roidan. "If I had that in my bed—"

"Who said anything about a bed? There's yet to be a bloody bed."

Cyrus chuckled. "Indeed. Fine if I had that lovely bit over me, under me, beside me, on top of me, I'd happily lose my head all day long."

Roidan grinned.

"And all night too."

As if she knew they were speaking of her, her gaze rose from beneath her lashes and locked with his. A slow sexy smile tilted the edge of her lips.

"I've always wondered if women sit around and instruct each other in those little actions."

She smiled more and he smiled back.

Her gaze was caught by someone else and she served them something from her tray.

He frowned and realized Cyrus was talking. "What?"

"I said I always wondered if women sit around and instruct each other in art of flirting."

He shook his head.

Cyrus waved his dagger toward Acelwyn. "The come hither looks beneath lashes, the slow curving of lips. We mere males fall for them each and every time, do we not?"

He had no idea what the man was blathering about. "I don't want her serving anyone," he muttered.

Cyrus' brow furrowed and he looked from Roidan to Acelwyn. "Yes, well, as we are short on those we'd trust to feed us, I figured it prudent to put someone in charge who was friends with the locals and someone we had influence with. Thus far, no one has poisoned us and if anyone knew how, it would be she."

That bit jerked his attention back to the man seated beside him. "You've been too long in battles of treachery, my friend."

Cyrus scoffed. "Just because they have sweet, wet cunnies does not mean they don't have devious minds that could be the ruin of a good man, or his life for that matter."

"I'll take my chances, thank you."

Cyrus chuckled. "Woman like that, I probably would as well."

Roidan saw her glance at him as she set the tray down and said something to one of his soldiers before she strode toward the corner of the keep. The gardens were around the side of the building.

Twilight settled easily on the evening.

He stood to follow her. To Cyrus he said, "We'll be in the garden, make certain we aren't disturbed."

Cyrus grunted.

Something about the woman called to him. He wasn't some squire or stable lad with his first crush. He was a warrior.

One gifted and admired by the king himself to fortify the defenses in the north.

She glanced back over her shoulder and again he caught that tilt of lips before she disappeared around the corner.

He'd had the woman every night since he'd first had her on her table. And still she was like fire in his blood.

Perhaps Cyrus was onto something.

He watched her in the shadow of the keep. Already the gardens had been changed, her hand on them visible to him.

Before there had been weeds and dead vines. Now it looked cleaned, paths were starting to show through and the dead vines had been removed and piled to the side.

"You've been hard at work here," he said, leaning against a tree and watching her as she kneeled and pulled at a plant.

"Yes."

He ran his gaze over her, noticed the way her long fingers deftly snapped several leaves off a plant, the way her head tilted just so, as if she were thinking of something and trying to find the words to say whatever was on her mind. He'd noticed she'd done that quite a bit.

Still unsure of him.

"The keep should be ready for you, my lord, on the morrow."

"Hmm."

She turned and looked at him then and again he was caught in those wicked green eyes of hers.

"Why did you come here?"

"The men were eating, I was not needed and wanted to have just a bit of time to tell the garden it is coming along nicely."

He rubbed finger along the side of his mouth. "Tell the garden?"

"Oh yes. We should always give thanks for that which the earth gifts us." She took another leaf off and twirled it between her fingers. "Not to do so is just wrong."

A woodland nymph? A wood sprite? A creature whispered about around the campfires. She spoke to the garden, healed with plants and potions, smiled at him and he lost his head.

"Come here, Acelwyn."

She frowned and turned, tilting her head. He could almost hear her ask, "Why?"

He waited, held his hand out.

She rose and came to him, placing her hand in his. He sat, leaning against the tree and tugged her with him, settling her between his splayed thighs.

"Tell me about your garden."

She leaned to the side and tilted her head back, looking up at him. "M-my garden?"

He ran his hands over her arms. "Yes, your garden, nymph. Tell me about it."

His hands circled her waist and pulled her so that her back leaned against his chest, her legs bent between his.

"Well, I borrowed one of the girls from the village who sometimes helps me—Lottie." She sighed. "It isn't nearly done yet. It's been neglected for far too long to fix in a few days or even weeks, but I think we're making good progress. Many of the plants have been found again and can breathe."

"Breathe?" he asked as he trailed his hands over her stomach, rubbing softly.

She shifted and he smiled, stilling his hands—at least for a moment.

"Yes, breathe. They were being strangled by the vines and overgrowth. Some things will have to be replanted, the beds changed out so that the ones that have been fallow can be replenished and ready for new growth."

He pulled her back tighter against him and sucked in a breath as she brushed against his hardened length. "Growth?"

Slowly, he circled his fingers up until he caressed her breast. Lovely, lovely breasts. He wanted to see them in the cooling air, but didn't want to take the time to strip her. Some other evening...

"Yes, growth. You need new growth for things to..." She trailed off and squirmed against him, pressing her breasts into his hands.

"Things to...?" he whispered against her ear, tugging on her hardening nipples.

"Ummm."

"For things to what?" he asked again, licking her ear.

"To live, to thrive," she whispered.

He licked a trail down behind her ear to where her neck met her shoulder. He kissed the tender skin there and she sucked in a long breath and shivered.

"Thriving is good," he said against her. He released one breast and slowly pulled her tunic up, raising it inch by inch. Long pale legs, the muscles more defined than in most women he'd bedded. But then Acelwyn was like no other woman he'd ever met, or been with.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, turning back to look at him.

Her mouth was just inches from him.

"Playing," he said, drawing the hem higher and higher, up her thighs, higher still.

Her eyes darkened. He could swear they did when desire stole up and grabbed her. He'd watched the way her eyes did that when he'd taken her previous times.

"Playing?" she asked.

He lowered his mouth to hers and whispered against her lips. "Playing, Acelwyn. We're going to play." He gathered the material so that it lay high against her stomach. If he could, he would have pulled the top of her tunic down and expose those seeking nipples.

Roidan nibbled, licked and kissed his way into her mouth. She opened and moaned.

He gripped first one of her legs, then the other and placed them over the tops of his thighs. Then he spread his own, opening her to him, to the night air, to herself.

"I want to play. I want you to play."

She reached behind her, toward him.

"Not with me," he said, raising his eyes and looking down at her. "With yourself."

Her brows furrowed.

He took one of her hands in his and placed it on her thigh, under his. Watching her eyes, he drew their hands up, noting how her breathing got faster. Oh yes, they'd enjoy this.

"I'm betting, my nymph, you're wet," he said leaning down to kiss her mouth. This time he wasn't gentle, he devoured her mouth, causing her to gasp, arch and push her hips closer to their hands.

Her cunt was hot and slick with her essence. He grinned.

"See?" He pulled his hand back and her juices glistened on his fingers.

Her hand had stilled.

"Touch yourself," he said, against her ear.

She licked her lips. "But—"

"You'll enjoy it," he tempted.

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. "But won't that be... I mean, won't you..."

"I'll enjoy watching you bring yourself to pleasure." He took her hand again and guided it to the juncture of her thighs. With his other hand, he caressed her breast through the worn material of her tunic. When he grasped the bud between his thumb and forefinger, pinching it just a bit, she hissed. Her fingers beneath his trembled and explored.

Roidan rested his chin on her shoulder and watched her fingers become slick with her juices.

She panted.

"See what you feel like to me?" he said softly. "Slick and wet, and this here." He twirled his thumb with hers and pressed hers to her erect little nubbin.

She moaned.

"Just begs to be touched, doesn't it?" he whispered.

She arched again and he felt her fingers slide beneath his into her tight, hot sheath.

She moaned again.

"That's it." He shifted again and spread his legs more, opening her more to the evening air.

Her fingers slid in and out of her.

He wanted to close his eyes, lest he lose what control he had.

But he didn't want to miss a thing. He wanted to watch her desire build, watch how she reacted, watch as she brought herself to passion.

"Roidan! Roidan! Roidan!"

"I'm right here."

"It's not the same." She shook her head back and forth. Her breath coming faster.

He chuckled darkly. "I should hope not. I'm a hell of a lot bigger than your fingers."

And yet, it was a beautiful sight. Acelwyn spread before him, learning to pleasure herself, learning the feel of pleasure and he was the one teaching her.

Her hand moved faster, the other was biting into his forearm. Still he played with her breast. Her hips began to move, to seek, to want.

Her breath chopped out. "I can't," she said almost on a wail.

"Ohhh I think you can." He watched, leaned over and set his teeth to her neck, and pinched her nipple.

She felt his teeth on the skin of her neck.

Oh she was so wet, so slick. And the feelings. Different from what he made her feel, and yet the same.

Yet *not* the same.

That brightness, the relief was just out of reach.

Acelwyn was beyond caring who might see, who might hear.

"Please, please, please."

His thumb found hers, flicked over her nub just as she pressed her fingers deep and she flew apart, yelling into the garden.

She could hear him, his voice reassuring her, almost. Wanting something. Saying something.

Her mind could not work it out just yet. Not yet. What was he saying?

She didn't care.

She shuddered again and slumped back against him, trying to draw air into her lungs.

But then he moved.

Before she realized his intent, he had her on all fours before him.

She looked at him over her shoulder as he raised the back of her tunic up over her hips.

That look in his eye. She knew that look, had learned when his eyes became intense he only wanted one thing.

Acelwyn wanted to give it to him.

Without a word, while his eyes locked to her, he undid his braies. Then that magnificent cock sprang free. She shuddered and turned back. With her arms trembling, she bent and rested her forehead on her forearms.

He growled behind her and slid his hand over her hip, his fingers sliding lower and straight into her slickness.

She moaned and arched again.

“Am I wet enough for you?” she asked. “Or do you need me to play with myself some more?”

“Wench,” he said chuckling and slid deep into her.

She sighed and wondered how this time between them would be. Sometimes he was gentle, sometimes he was not. Often demanding and other times coaxing.

“I want you,” he said, withdrawing and thrusting harder into her.

“You’re having me,” she said over her shoulder.

His hand tangled in her hair, pulling her up a bit. Then he gripped her shoulder and held her still for his onslaught.

Oh. The. Goddess. Her fingers sank into the soil, leaves crushing beneath her fingers. She had to hold onto something.

There was nothing gentle about him this time. This time, he was like the warrior he was, plundering, taking, conquering.

He pulled her back into his thrusts, his growls and moans deep.

She thought fleetingly of anyone hearing them.

He stroked harder into her and she couldn’t think at all.

All she could do was feel.

Feel him long, hard and deep inside her.

He moved forward on his knees, spreading her legs even more and she shivered as the cool air hit her heated flesh.

His other hand reached around to the front of her and strummed the small bundle of nerves they’d played earlier.

“Roidan.” Thrust. “Roidan!”

She moaned his name with each of his powerful strokes.

Then he found that one spot. That perfect spot inside her. Over. And over. He stroked until she thought she would burst into flames.

"Please! Please! Please!"

He shoved into her harder and faster.

His fingers on her nubbin began teasing, milking the small bit of skin.

"Ooohhhh!" She pressed back against him, again. Again. And again.

He thrust deep, yelling, and she joined him, screaming to the early stars, her fingers digging into the soil beside her. She flew apart, flew back together and shattered.

She had no idea how long they lay in the garden, but torches were lit when she was aware of the cool evening around her. Of his heat to the side of her. At some time he'd pulled them over to the side so that she lay more on him, than he on her.

Glancing around, she smiled. "The garden thanks you."

He grunted, his awakening gaze from the corner of his eye, questioning.

"The garden," she whispered, leaning over to kiss him. "It thanks you." She shrugged. "Us."

"And how do you know?" he asked, pulling her tighter against him.

"I just do. The plants will be great this year."

"Um-hmm." Then he grinned. "I helped in the garden."

She raised a brow at him and propped her hands on his chest, her chin on her hands. "Fertility ceremonies have been forgotten by many."

"I was thinking more of the seeds I planted."

She rolled her eyes.

"The garden I personally plowed."

She slapped her hand on his chest. "For shame."

He chuckled and ran a hand through her hair.

"My lord?"

"Roidan," he corrected. "I tire of hearing my title unless my cock is buried inside you." He frowned. "I like to hear you speak my name at other times as well, Acelwyn."

She could feel a blush staining up her cheeks. "Roidan." What had she been going to ask him?

His hand still stroked over her hair, softly now, not demanding. She wondered if he even realized he was doing it. He had a tendency, she'd noticed, to touch her thus. Not always when they'd made love or afterward, but sometimes as she walked by, or stood beside him when he was talking with one of his soldiers or the people here.

What would it be like to be his, completely?

Then again she was.

But what if she were more than his healer? More than a willing wench to warm his bed, as she'd heard one person say.

"What is on your mind, nymph."

What had she – Oh yes.

"Roidan, I love sharing your tent with you, you know that." And she did. Since that first night, she'd lain every night with him on his furs in his tent. It was wonderfully warm in there.

He stilled beneath her and his eyes met hers, his narrowing. "You're not going back to your cottage, Acelwyn. It isn't safe there. That blasted merchant is still making his displeasure known."

So he was. One day on a trip to her cottage with a soldier as guard, Othgar had bowed, and snickered, "My lady."

And others had started to call her that as well. Not in the regard that Othgar had, but in deferring to her opinion on things. Like the keep and which bedroom Roidan would want. Things to stock in the cellars. How to replenish the garden. Which day was to be wash day. She'd begun by asking Cyrus and he'd told her that was woman's work, make a choice, Roidan wouldn't care. So she had made decisions that should not by right be hers. She told each person that she was Acelwyn, not a lady.

Most nodded and stopped. Some did not.

But she was not the lady of the keep, even if, at odd times, like now, she could almost wish she were.

"Did you hear me?" he said, lifting his head.

She patted his chest. "Yes, I heard you. That's what you thought I was going to ask? To move back to my cottage?"

"Well, then spit it out, woman."

She tapped her fingertips on his chest. "You are impatient, did you know that?"

He said nothing, just continued to stare at her with those intense eyes.

"I was wondering, since the keep is almost ready, do you think it possible to sleep there on the morrow's eve?"

His eyes were wary. "I suppose so. Why?"

She leaned down and kissed his lips. "Because, my lord, you promised me a bed and I've yet to sleep in one." She rolled over onto her back. "The table. Another table. The riverbed – though I don't suppose that counts as a bed. The stable, the garden..."

She giggled when he loomed over her. "Eager are we? To be bedded?"

Deep lines bracketed his mouth when he smiled.

She cupped his face. "Well, to be bedded, yes, I've yet to see what that is like. You've gardened, me, or would that planted?"

"Plowed," he told her chuckling.

"Riverbedded."

He kissed her. "The wall near the buttery. Don't forget that one."

"So I was what? Buttered?"

His deep chuckle rumbled from his chest. "Oh definitely you were buttered."

"Ah yes, but this one here in the garden..." She kissed him and kissed him some more. "Though did I mention there was actually a bed at my cottage?"

"Nymph." He kissed her and laughed.

Yes, she could get used to this. Used to him.

But did she dare?

Chapter Six

The keep had been cleaned, and was much improved. However, there was still much in need of repair. Then again, most things here were in need of some sort of repair Roidan was learning. The old baron had not treasured his responsibilities. And though he'd been pleased with the king's gift of this land, he now realized there was work aplenty in store for him and his people.

He glanced at the maids' furtive glances, the cook's mulish expression and the odd assortment of men, part laborers, part soldiers, who attended the keep.

His own men were a vast contrast.

Already he and Cyrus had decided they would need to repair the upper floors. At least his room that he shared with Acelwyn was clean and ready to use – and use it they had.

His men though were still sleeping outside as the men's quarters were not yet completed. Normally, he'd be sleeping outside with his men, but Cyrus informed him he was a lord now and must act the part. He'd managed not to hit the idiot. The fact that Acelwyn was inside with him made any argument he might have used pointless. He wanted to make certain the villagers had what they needed as winter approached. Roofs needed to be thatched, walls repaired, food stores replenished.

At least there was an abundance of fish. Still listening to the men report the morning's events, he glanced around and noticed Acelwyn was not in the hall. He listened a few more moments and then Cyrus said, "If I tell you she's in the garden will you pay attention?"

Acelwyn all but flew into the hall.

"Look what I found, my lord."

She held some twig with green sprigs shooting out of either side up for his inspection.

“I’ve absolutely no idea.”

Her eyes were bright with excitement, as they got when he had her just to the point of arousal. He’d brought her for his own pleasure yet found he almost enjoyed hers even more than his own. There was a freshness, a newness about their passion, about her own passion that seemed to awaken some primal part of him.

“Demulcents. I thought the keep was without this. We had none last year and several fell ill. I had to hike into the mountains to find more and was afraid—”

“You did what?” he interrupted.

Cyrus coughed, or tried to cover up his mutter. Roidan had no idea what he said and didn’t care.

She tilted her head and the sunlight slanting through the windows shot gold and red fire off her burnished hair. “I went into the mountains?”

“Alone?” he asked quietly.

She frowned and licked her lips.

“Does it matter, my lord? It was some time ago and the villagers were dying.”

“Which means, yes. Have you no sense, woman?” he asked, leaning closer to her and twitching the sprig of herb from her hand. “I don’t care if half the village was dying, you don’t go out alone.” The mountains? He and his men had not made it that far inland yet. She’d told him there were two more villages under his guardianship a day’s ride into the hills. Hell, anything could have happened to her.

The frown deepened between her brows. “Shall I become hysterical now at the fact you might have been harmed in any past battle in which you fought?” She tried to grab the herb back, but he held it out of her reach and stepped closer to her, staring down into her upturned face.

“I don’t like hysterical women, or foolish ones.”

"And I don't like overbearing men, or foolish ones."

A throat cleared and he shot a look to his lieutenant.

Cyrus looked from one to the other, a grin tugging from behind his mustache. "And I don't like listening to squabbling children. So I shall go about my duties and see about hiring manageable help here at the keep."

Roidan only arched a brow at his friend.

"If you check the village, ask for Margo. She'd be an asset to the keep. She's a widow with young mouths to feed." Then she realized that perhaps they did not want her input. It was one thing for her to give her opinion when working with the villagers, or overseeing something and the lord of the keep was not there, or his second-in-command. Looking down she twisted her sleeve.

Roidan's hand on hers pulled her attention to him.

"Forgive me, my lord, I only thought to help," she muttered.

"And have I ever seemed as if I would not welcome your help?" He shook his head. "Acelwyn, you've helped me and my men tremendously in smoothing our way here, and in so doing, you've worked tirelessly to help the villagers."

Relief curled through her, 'twas the truth, he often asked her opinion on things.

"A widow?" Cyrus asked.

"Yes, a widow," she answered. "Her husband was killed on the whim of the old baron. She is also an excellent cook and likes things neat and clean."

The last was all Roidan needed to hear. "Go. Ask if she'd like to cook here and be in charge of the kitchens."

"Bathlan won't like that. He prefers to prepare your meals."

"Bathlan has a strong back and is needed elsewhere."

Cyrus gave one last grin, shaking his head and said, "I'll be off then. And leave the two of you to fighting over a weed."

They both watched him leave.

Roidan looked back at her. The bright excitement of her eyes was replaced by a wicked flash of angry fire. Yet she appeared so bloody calm.

The only time she lost that cool composure was when she lay under him. He loved to fuck this woman, to feel the warmth of her cunt wrap tight and wet around his cock. And at the same time, he knew it was more than that. He'd had more women than he could honestly remember and none of them had ever kept him up at night, nor had he ever been worried about the fact one of them might cut her hand on a broken shard of pottery. He'd never worried if another woman might accidentally poison herself, not that he'd have wished ill on any of them, he'd simply never thought of it. Never wondered if some obscure plant was dangerous to the healer handling it. Plants and herbs to healers were swords to warriors. No this was all new to him. This woman tied him in bloody knots. There was something about her. Not just the fact she fit him like a damn glove, or that she was passionate enough to try anything he asked of her. No. It was beyond the fact. She pulled at him. When he was with her, all problems seemed to simply melt away, as if she took all his cares and worries and pulled them from him as they made love.

She crossed her arms over her chest. He noticed she still wore her old faded tunic, now mended. He wanted to see her in silks. Hell he'd given her another tunic to wear and she'd thanked him. He'd yet to see her in it.

He leaned in and held her stare as he cupped the back of her neck. "We're going for a ride."

She reached between them and caressed his cock boldly. "Don't we always?"

He gripped her hand. Then changed his mind. Wrapping his fingers around her wrists, he tugged her along behind him, past the battlements to the bathing huts. The first thing he'd repaired and made certain were in working order. He liked to be clean. Liked it when his women were sweet-smelling and clean as well. The Nordic habit of bathing was not one that many practiced unless they were Vikings and the old huts told

of the influence at some time. It hardly mattered. They were there, the bathing huts would be used and they'd just been finished yesterday.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked. "I'm not finished weeding the garden."

"I thought you got a girl from the village to help you?" he said as he reached the hut. He pushed the door open and saw to his delight that it was still warm from his earlier use that day. He'd planned to bring her here tonight, but the woman made him crazy enough to forget reason.

"You need not do all the work yourself," he told her, pulling her into the hut and closing them in the darkened space. The coals from the fire pit glowed faintly orange. He took the ladle from the water bucket and poured it over the still warm rocks. Steam hissed and filled the air.

A bench sat near the fire pit. "Come here, Acelwyn."

She stared at him in that moment. This strong proud warrior. For someone who knew the art of destruction, he was an incredible lover.

She pulled at the ties of her tunic and loosened them, slowly baring only one shoulder.

"Yes, my lord?"

He stood his ground and watched her with those dark hooded eyes. Desire swirled between them as surely as the smoke and steam.

"Here," he ordered yet again.

She grinned and slowly walked toward him. "I ever aim to please, my lord."

He only arched one brow.

Stopping several feet away she slowly bared the other shoulder and shimmied until her tunic pooled at her feet. Slipping off her shoes, she stood before him bare.

The skin across his face tightened and a muscle jumped along his jaw. So in control. She wondered if the day would ever come when he lost control. When it was she who held the reins. She'd have to ask one of the women what could make a man lose control.

She watched as he undressed and stood before her gloriously naked. His muscles rippled and bulged. His dark hair hung to his shoulders and she loved the feel of it, the texture of it between her fingers as he made love to her.

Goddess, she loved it when he made love to her.

She walked to him, wrapped her arms around him and jerked him down for a kiss. He allowed the kiss, allowed her to ravage his mouth with nips and nibbles. Yet he was still tense.

"What's wrong?" she asked him.

His eyes bore into hers. "I don't like the idea of you in danger." His hands rubbed down her arms, back up to cup her breasts. His eyes feasted on hers even as his words and mind were on his worries. "I don't want you going out alone. I find I hate the fact you could have been—"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. It was last year. I am perfectly capable—"

He jerked her to him and stared down into her eyes. His hand slapped her ass and then he rubbed the area. "No you are not. You're mine. You do not leave this keep without an escort." He swatted her again on the other cheek, then caressed her.

Acelwyn tensed and trembled. He was angry.

"Understand?"

She only nodded.

"Good."

He reached under the bench then and produced a blanket, which he tossed on the ground. "Lie down."

She gave him a look and complied with his wishes. He'd taught her so much about pleasure and for the most part the man was very easy to get along with. If he just weren't so overly protective. It wasn't like she couldn't do things for herself.

However, she wasn't about to say that just now. For some reason, she knew she should just stay quiet and see what he wanted next.

Already, just looking at him, listening to his dark voice like honeyed gravel, made her wet, ready. She simply wanted him.

She'd never known desire before this man and now desire fired through her blood.

He lay down beside her, running his hands over her. The heat in here was almost stifling. Already sweat glistened on their skin. Leaning toward him, she took his flat nipple in her mouth and laved it.

His hand fisted in her hair keeping her to him.

"Lower," he growled.

She glanced up at him from between her lashes. He lay back and watched her. Slowly, torturing him, she licked and kissed her way down the rock-hard muscles of his torso, rimming the edges with her tongue.

"You're taking too long," he muttered.

She smiled and whispered, "What did you tell me? Anticipation is often savored? I'm savoring, my lord."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "As long as you can take it as well."

She laughed and wondered when her laughter had acquired such a seductive sound. "It is a fondest hope, my lord, that you'll make me beg."

"Oh, I'll make you beg," he promised.

"As will I you," she moved lower and rimmed his navel with her tongue and then lower, allowing her hair to cover her movements.

His hands fisted at his sides, his proud cock stood waiting. Her hair brushed over it and he hissed.

Grinning, she tossed her hair over her shoulder so that he could watch her. Her eyes locked with his, she slowly leaned down and licked the very tip of him.

His eyes narrowed.

She played, licking down one side, then the other, around the tip, pulling just the head of his cock into her mouth and playing it with her tongue. "Acelwyn?" he growled.

She let her hand wander up his thigh and she cupped his balls. "Yes?"

He shook his head. Laughing, she opened her mouth and took him in. She loved the taste of him, musky, man and lemon from the soap he used. She loved that she, a woman, could reduce this powerful warrior to begging her.

Not a new game between them, she'd learned in the weeks they'd been together how he liked to be played. How to take him deep into her mouth and her throat without gagging? It didn't always work but she was getting better.

She took him deep then deeper, moving her head up and down his long, thick shaft.

His hand gripped her skull. "Oh the saints. Yes! Yes!"

With her other hand, she pressed his hips down and played with the sac behind that lovely shaft. And then she skimmed her nail along the tender skin just behind his balls.

He trembled, groaned, his hips rising up and almost throwing her off.

She let him go with a pop. "You're not letting me have fun."

His eyes blazed at her.

This time she looked around and all she could find was his belt. She got up, but he caught her ankle. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Patience." She shook him off, grabbed the belt and came back to him. "Hold this when you want to move." He'd done this to her as well.

Cursing, he grabbed the belt and twisted it around his hands, and lay back. She dropped to her knees beside him and said, "Now let me play and be good."

"Or?" His deep voice made her tremble, made her wetter.

Her mind went blank. "I'll think of something."

Then she leaned down and took him into her mouth again, keeping her fist wrapped around the base of his shaft. She used her hands and her mouth to drive him to a growling, groaning tightened mass of man. She twisted her fist and pulled down as she was sucking up his shaft. He'd taught her the art of contrasts. Again and again. Her other hand was busy caressing and playing with his sac. A sensitive place on him she'd found by accident.

Acelwyn twisted again and sucked harder. "Ahhh... Damn... Woman..." She did it again.

Making him beg made her want him that much more.

She shifted, wanting to tease.

"Don't you dare," he said, his voice growling deep and threatening. Ignoring him, she thrust her fingers into her own wetness, but then decided she'd rather touch him. Then she reached up his body and traced her essence on his chest. He grabbed her hand and leaned up, licking her fingers.

"Acelwyn please. Please."

She let go of the base and took him as deep as she could just as he thrust. Once. Twice. He roared as his seed shot and pulsed from his cock. She swallowed down every last delicious drop. Finally, she licked her way back up his shaft and lay beside him, snuggling into the curve of his body, laying her head on his shoulder.

His breath still shuddered out.

Then he moved, rolling and pinning her to the blanket. "You are going to pay for all that."

She only grinned up at him.

With his eyes blazing promises and threats all at once, he took the belt in his hands. She wondered briefly if was going to use it on her, but then discarded that idea. Roidan wasn't into pain, or hurting her.

So what?

Then he leaned over and she reached for the belt, thinking she would hold it as she had in the past. He swatted her hands away and wrapped it around and around her wrists, tightening it and she realized he'd tied them together.

"Roidan!"

"Shhhh..." He leaned over and kissed her. "Relax. I'm not going to hurt you." She trembled. "I'm only going to make you beg, then beg some more and then..." He kissed her long and deep, ravaging her mouth. "Then, my own, I'm going to make you scream."

She shuddered. Already wet, she could feel her cream trickling down the crease of her ass.

"Now close your eyes and feel."

For a moment, she held his stare then closed her eyes.

His mouth, hot and wet closed over a breast. She loved the way he sucked her breasts. He savored, cherished and seemed to want to swallow her whole. When he tweaked one nipple and pulled the other hard against the roof of his mouth, she moaned. He liked to play with her breasts, she'd always thought they were small, but he seemed to like them just fine. He kissed and laved his way down her torso, rimming her bellybutton. He squeezed her hipbones and she squirmed. He bit and nibbled, his hands and fingers busy until she just wanted him to touch her. His strong fingers rubbed along her calves, trailed lightly along the sensitive backs of her knees.

She bit her lip. She wouldn't ask yet. She might be new at this, but damn. If he didn't touch her soon...

He kissed his way down the inside of one thigh, his tongue twirling across the inside of her knee.

"Roidan?" she asked.

She could hear the grin in his voice. "Yes, my own?"

She sighed in answer.

He chuckled and continued on, down one leg, up the other. It was both relaxing and not.

Suddenly, he pushed her legs apart, but instead of feeling his mouth or his fingers, she felt something else.

Cool water trickled over her and her eyes shot open. He'd dipped his fingers in the cool bucket of water for the steam stones. And he was letting the cold water trickle on her heated flesh.

"We're going to have to experiment with other contrasts when winter comes."

She shivered.

Then he shifted, lay down and placed her thighs over his shoulders. His eyes locking to hers, he opened her with his fingers and ran his tongue from above her nubbin to the soft skin below her slit. She moaned and closed her eyes.

His mouth and tongue tortured her. His teeth nibbled on her nether lips, pulling a cry from her, even as his fingers played around the edge of her slit. She needed, needed...

Goddess she could feel herself pulsing.

"I love the way you taste," he said against her. "Love the way you get wetter just from me talking to you." One long finger slid inside her as his tongue still played along her stretched skin, around and around and around her nub. "I love the way I can tell something I say excites you because your pretty little cunny just creams for me."

He chuckled again. "Like now."

His hot tongue was there licking her up, spearing inside her and she trembled. "Oh, please, Roidan."

"Please what?" he asked, slowly taking his time. She wanted to grip his head to her, wanted to rise against his mouth, but he held her immobile. She realized with her hands tied as they were, she would not be able to do more than pull his hair.

She squirmed and he shook his head from side to side and clamped a hand on her hip. "No, be still and let me have my way."

She didn't want to be still, she wanted to play.

She squirmed again. "I don't want to..."

His fingers pierced her, even as his tongue did. He played to his content until she was writhing, and still that shining edge was just out of reach.

He stroked her deep, shallow, stopped and withdrew, over and over and over. His tongue laved deeply inside her, around that lovely nubbin, even as his fingers played their wicked game.

She could feel her own wetness between her legs, all but soaking her.

"Oh please. Please. Please."

She arched and still he anchored her.

Her eyes locked on his as he raised his head. He pulled his drenched fingers from her core and held them up to her. "Look how wet you are."

Then he lowered them again. Holding her gaze, he rimmed her slit, slid his fingers down and rimmed something lower.

She trembled, stilling.

He did it over and over. Rimming her slit, then rimming her ass.

Her nerves were on fire. Her breath panted out and if she didn't... If he didn't...

Her eyes locked with his, she begged. "Please, Roidan."

"As my lady wishes."

Those wicked fingers still rimmed, still played in her wetness, but this time, one slid long and deep inside her just as one pressed slowly and surely into her ass.

She closed her eyes, crying out. "Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Roooooiaannnn."

His fingers slid deep. One in. One out.

She squirmed. "I can't. I don't..."

His teeth latched onto her nubbin and he sucked deep just as he pressed both fingers deep.

"Ohthefuckinggoddess!" she screamed, as wave after wave of pleasure lightnined through her. Over and over and over. The wave just kept cresting.

She didn't know when he turned her over, the pleasure was still coursing through her.

He pulled her ass back to him, until she was on her hands and knees. He pressed between her shoulder blades and she lowered her forehead to rest on her bound hands. He thrust into her, so far and deep, so bloody good.

Short sharp jabs, then long, slow, deep ones.

All tore moans from her.

"Again! Again!" he groaned.

Roidan rocked against her. Bound as she was, she was like an offering from the gods, just for him.

He reached below them and gathered her thick, honeyed cream, coating his finger again. Her ass was still slick from his earlier teasing.

This time he gripped the globes of her ass and pulled them taut, seeing that pink little fissure again. He gathered more cream and watched as it bloomed, having learned already the pleasure that awaited. He swiped more of her essence around that tight rosette and then speared two fingers steadily inside that tight sheath, feeling the unused muscles vise on his fingers.

“One day,” he said, leaning over and whispering in her ear. “I will have this ass as well.”

He thrust deep with both his cock and his fingers and she screamed. Her muscles rippled and tightened around his fingers and cock, jerking him into one of the hardest orgasms of his life. He pumped and thrust, roaring his release as he poured himself into her.

As he took them both to the blanket, he realized this was a woman he wasn't letting go. She might not know it yet, but she was his.

Chapter Seven

Roidan cursed as he pushed his horse up the last hill to the village. Someone had attacked his people. He'd left his bed, and the beautiful woman in it, before dawn when word had reached them. Smoke swirled black and bitter in the air. He wondered who had attacked his people.

Men lay scattered and dead. A woman's blank eyes stared up at him, her clothing torn. Children's cries rent the air as he and his men rode into the chaos.

His men's muttered curses echoed his own thoughts.

"Why would anyone attack this village? For the sheer sport of it?" Mathimus asked, shaking his head, fury in his voice. He climbed off his horse and moved some scattered rubble away. A small child huddled in on herself against the wall, blood running down her face. Mathimus was his healer. The man was already gently wiping the blood away from the child's face.

"I want to know who did this, who harmed these people," he said to his men. Then he pulled his sword free. The talking he heard died, the crying continued, but those watching, the villagers, all quieted and stared at him with vacant, yet angry eyes. Eyes he'd seen across war-torn lands. But he'd be damned if he would ever see that look in the eyes of his people again.

"I am Roidan!" he shouted. "I am the new baron and I swear, this atrocity shall be avenged." He looked to an older lad and pointed his sword at the boy. "You, boy. Tell me now what happened."

The boy licked his lips, looked around and slowly stepped forward. "You're the new baron? We were told you were defeated."

"By whom?"

"The men who came here. Men loyal to the old baron."

“What reason did they give for this massacre?” he asked, climbing off his horse and motioning to the young man.

The boy stepped closer. “Are you truly the new baron?”

Roidan only stared at the boy who finally looked down. Then he took a deep breath and met Roidan’s gaze again. Brave lad, this one.

“They gave no reason. They came late in the evening, and starting attacking.”

“Did you fight them?” he asked, seeing the welt on the boy’s face, the gash in his arm.

Those eyes flashed with dark memories. “I fought off one who tried to follow us, so he wouldn’t alert the others.” Red blush stained the boy’s cheekbones. “I didn’t know what to do.”

No, he supposed simple farmers would not know the ways of fighting. “Others?”

The boy tilted his chin up. “Children. As many of them as we could. A few others and I tried to get them away, to the caves near the falls.”

Roidan nodded. “And did you succeed?”

The boy swallowed. “All but one. My sister took an arrow.” He turned and pointed to a hut that had survived the burning. “I came back to try to help her and found her.”

Mathimus strode up to him, carrying the small body of a child who only stared off into space. “Roidan. I need help. Send someone for your comely healer. There is much work here to do.”

He nodded. He looked at the lad. “Can you ride?”

The boy nodded. “Yes, my lord.”

“You will ride down to the main village, the keep, tell Cyrus the baron sent you. I want my healer, and two more men. The rest are to stay and guard the keep. Can you remember that?”

The boy nodded.

“How far are these falls?”

"Not too far," the boy said.

Roidan motioned with his sword. "Show me the way so we may get the children shelter and make certain they are all safe."

Acelwyn watched the horizon from the battlements. One of Roidan's soldiers stood sentry.

There was no sign of Roidan or his men. She wondered what was happening. One minute he'd been teasing her about lovemaking as he was wont to do and the next a soldier had come running saying there was smoke upon the ridge. From here she could see the black smoke. It took almost a day to reach that village higher up in the hills.

She had said she needed to go.

He'd told her to stay here. When she'd tried to argue that people could be hurt and a healer would be needed, he'd countered with the fact he wanted her safe and he had his own healer who also knew how to fight off dangers. He'd taken Mathimus and left her here. To keep her safe.

She still hadn't decided if she were more irritated or comforted, which made no sense, but then it had been a long, long while since anyone had tried to take care of her, really take care of her.

She'd already packed her satchel with herbs she'd used before when fights broke out. She still needed something from her own hut, but as yet, had not ventured down to get it.

But if she were needed, would there be time to stop?

She'd have to go. The herb only grew seasonally and the harvesting had not yet occurred this year and even if it had, the tincture took several moons to set. She needed that tincture. It would help relieve pain and allow the wounded to sleep.

Making a decision, she knew she'd have to hurry. She knew that either Roidan or his men would come soon. She'd be needed and she wasn't going to sit and wait for someone to take her to her own hut.

She might sleep in the keep, in the baron's bed every night to be more exact, but the little cottage was still hers.

Acelwyn hurried from the ramparts, down to the gates. The soldier there wouldn't let her pass.

"But I need to leave. I'll only be gone a moment."

"I've my orders, milady."

This guard was young, but he clearly knew where he stood.

"I need something from my cottage."

He moved to block her way just as a cry rent the air. Lottie lay sprawled on the ground near a wagon.

"I think I twisted my ankle, Acelwyn," she called out.

"Why were you running, Lottie?" Acelwyn asked.

She glanced quickly to the guard and motioned toward the gate with her head. Acelwyn knew her young friend enough to suspect there was probably no twisted ankle.

The young guard however did not know that. He blushed when he squatted beside Lottie. "Acelwyn. I forgot I left the potion simmering at the cottage. I was hurrying to check on it and hope I hadn't burned it to a bitter brew, it will be good for nothing then." Lottie's big blue eyes filled with tears and she tucked a stray blond curl behind her ear. "And now I've gone and twisted my ankle. Will you go check the potion for me?"

Without another word, she raced away, hearing the guard hail her. She turned and waved with a smile. "I'll be right back. No harm will come to me. Help Lottie inside, please and I'll bring her a draught for the pain."

Seeing her opportunity, she picked up her skirts and raced down the hill, her cloak flying out behind her. If she didn't hurry, the young guard would more than likely send out several more to make certain she was all right.

Just a moment was all it would take. Then she'd have her tincture and more herbs in case she was needed. And she'd be back at the keep before Roidan would return so he'd only hear about it after the fact.

The man was so possessive.

To be alone for just a few moments would be heavenly.

She hurried along the path, bypassing the entire village and hurling her own door open. Just as she stepped inside, the door shut behind her and meaty arms circled her.

She arched against their hold, crying out, knowing before he said anything who held her.

"I knew I'd get you alone sooner or later. I'm happy to see that little harlot came through for me," he said behind her, hot and sweaty in her ear.

She tried to twist away and got as far as her table. But it did no good. He grabbed her and spun her around, slamming her back against the table. Jars and jugs tumbled and broke on the floor, spilling their precious contents.

They grappled and she opened her mouth to scream, but his cuff cut her off mid-yell.

She tried to grab a jug hanging above her, to slam onto his head, but it was just out of reach and only swung part way off its hook.

"I like the fight in you, I'll admit, it's what drew me to approach your father. But listen well, my girl. You'll obey me in all things before too long or suffer the consequences."

He twisted her around, a thick forearm squeezing across her throat.

She reached back and raked her nails down his face, digging deeply.

He cursed and spun her around, his fist slamming into the side of her face. Pain, hot and bright burst behind her eye. Acelwyn stumbled into the shelves, herbs, jars, containers wobbled and fell around her, some breaking at her feet. She would have fallen if not for the fact he tightened his hold on her arm and hit her again.

“Bitch. I’ll teach you to whom you belong. You are mine.” He hit her again. And again, all the while keeping a bruising hold on her arm to hold her up.

Pain exploded in her head. In her cheek. He pressed her against the wall, his fingers twisting painfully on her breast.

She cried out and bucked against him.

“He’ll kill you for this.”

“The baron?” He shook his head and smiled his gap-toothed grin. “He’ll be too late. You’ll be mine by that point.”

He stepped back and she tried to kick him, but he only laughed and shoved her.

“You were sold to me. I don’t like to share what is mine and I’ve endured all I can thus far.” His putrid breath puffed across her face as he leaned in, his girth pressing her harder against the wall.

“The baron won’t let you do this.”

He laughed. “If we’re lucky the baron won’t return and even when he does,” he pressed harder, twisted a hand in her hair until her neck was bent back, “it won’t matter. You’ll already be mine.”

“I won’t.”

“Oh, but you will. A man like the baron won’t take leftovers from the likes of me.”

She tried again to twist away, but he turned her and slammed her head against the wall.

Stars burst behind her eyes, the walls tilted, swam and the blackness swallowed her.

* * * * *

Voices filtered through first. Pain pulsed hot and heavy in her head.

Someone moaned. Her?

She tried to move and realized she was lying on the floor.

Breathing through her mouth, she carefully pushed up, pain biting through her ribs and tried to look around.

The world blurred around her.

"See, she wakens. We can get started." Othgar's voice slurred down a tunnel to her.

"But, sir, she must recite the holy vows."

"I've silver enough. Just sign the blasted decree and be done with it," Othgar bit out.

"I cannot. She must say the vows," another voice said.

His voice was deeper than Othgar's, but clearly the man couldn't stand up to him.

"For enough silver, you'll say she said the vows."

Silence met her.

"N-no," she muttered.

She tried to find the other person, the other man. The floor was not hers. There was wood on this floor.

Othgar's cottage. Or his ship?

Please, his cottage, not his ship.

Just then the floor pitched, slightly.

Ship. Curse it. Where were the guards? She should have stayed at the keep. None of this would have happened if she'd just stayed at the keep.

Maybe Othgar would let her go back to her cottage. Would anyone be looking for her just yet?

How much time had passed?

Nausea rolled through her stomach, cold and greasy. Her head beat with her heart, spiking pain through her and she moaned again.

Her entire body quivered with pain.

Silver clinked in the bag that Othgar tossed on the table between him and another man.

"The baron will kill you if you do it," she tried to say. Her lips weren't working properly. For some reason she couldn't see right, and realized that she still wore the cloak of dark blue velvet Roidan had given her. The cowl was deep enough it fell forward on either side of her face, obscuring her peripheral vision and hiding her from others.

Blood on the floor beneath her caught her attention. Her own blood.

Copper seemed to coat her tongue.

They would be looking for her. She knew that. Either the young guard or Cyrus himself.

"My lord, I do not want to cause problems with the new baron," the priest tried again.

Othgar's heavy footsteps crossed to her and his hand gripped her already sore arm and jerked her up. "This one is the baron's whore. I'll make an honest woman out of her. How is that a bad thing? I'll be saving her harlot's soul."

The priest mumbled something. She tried to focus on him, but the world still blurred and shifted around her. She tried to shake her head, but the pain halted any ideas in that direction.

Shivers coursed through her.

"Is what he said true? Are you the baron's...?"

Could he not say it? Whore? Harlot? "Lover? Yes, I am the baron's."

Othgar's fingers bit harder into her arm and she winced.

Had she ever hurt this badly before? Probably and as a healer, she knew it would only get worse.

"Then you should say the words, my child. It is not too late..." The priest said more, but she tuned him out. The man had already made up his mind. And she heard the jingle of the coins again. He must have pocketed them.

"Who's to know if no vows are said. She'll obey me, I'll provide for her." Just sign the decree before the baron's men come. So that we may be away from this place."

The priest muttered something else.

"Please," she begged. She would not be married to this man. She would not.

But the sound of a quill on parchment was unmistakable.

She wondered what would happen when Roidan found out. Would he even still want her?

And why would he?

Tears filled her eyes but she refused to let them fall. No. No. No.

Shouts and yells filled the air.

"Hold in the name of the baron!" a voice commanded.

Cyrus. Please.

The priest looked at the parchment, to her and then to Othgar.

Footsteps sounded on the wood of the ship. Swords clashing filled the air.

"Are you honestly fighting the baron, fool! To fight us, is to fight the lord of the land, Baron of Dakar," Cyrus said. "We will speak to Othgar the merchant."

The covering to the cabin they were in was jerked aside, she heard it.

Bowing her head, she couldn't look at him.

"You're too late. We are wed. She is mine," Othgar proclaimed.

Cyrus said nothing, but she heard his footsteps as he walked to the table. "Is this true?"

She couldn't answer. Tremors shook her.

"Did you vow to wed this man?" he asked. His boots, laced up to his knees stopped just in her line of vision. The edge of her kirtle touched the tips. "Acelwyn?"

She could only shake her head. Then she licked her lips, tasted again the blood. "N-no, my lord, Cyrus. I-I-I did not."

His sigh could have felled a tree. "Release her."

Othgar jerked her closer to him and she moaned. "The marriage decree says otherwise."

Acelwyn kept her head down. But she could see Cyrus' fingers tapping on the hilt of his sword. "Father?" Cyrus asked.

She had the feeling he had not turned his attention from them.

"I just signed the decree. It's for the lass's own good. She's better a wife than a whore."

Several people sucked in breaths.

"How much did he pay you?" Cyrus asked quietly, his body shifting so that he faced Othgar even more.

"M-my lord?" the priest stammered.

"How much," Cyrus said pleasantly, pulling his dagger free and stepping closer to Othgar, "did this cretin pay you to sign that decree?"

Silence met them.

"A-a bag of silver," she whispered.

"Ah. Take them both," Cyrus ordered. "Place them in the dungeon. The baron can decide what's to be done upon his return."

He was putting her in the dungeon?

Othgar jerked her and she stumbled, falling, her breath hissing out. Pain bit from her ribs and she only wanted to curl up. Her cloak billowed around her. A scuffle

sounded around her and she tuned it out, focusing all her energy on not passing out, or vomiting.

"Take them to the keep," Cyrus said, just to the side of her. "Was the marriage consummated?"

She cringed. She shook her head, not sure if anyone were paying attention to her or not.

"Yes," Othgar yelled.

"No—" the priest said.

"No," she whispered at the same time.

"Though it should be. She's living in sin!" the priest yelled. "I was trying to help the poor girl."

"She's mine! Mine, damn you all!" Othgar cursed and yelled. "See if he wants her now," he hissed. "See if the mighty baron wants her after I was done with—" His words strangled off and she turned her head, the cowl keeping her obscured from the looks of others. She saw Othgar held against a wall, Cyrus' dagger pressed against his neck.

"You insult my lord's woman." Cyrus' words were low, calm, and scary.

The hair rose on Acelwyn's arms. She shivered and then winced, the tremors stinging pain along her ribs.

Oh the goddess, she hurt. Carefully, she tried to stand.

One of the soldiers was there and took her hand, helping her slowly to her feet.

"Neil," Cyrus said.

"Yes?" the soldier beside her answered.

"See the lady back to her cottage, quickly. We must gather her supplies and meet the baron at the village."

"Yes, sir."

She stood there swaying and tried to walk upright, but her ribs were already pulling. Acelwyn stopped near Othgar, then she leaned closer and looked him in the eye.

His bore into her, dark with hatred and rage.

“I’ll never belong to you. You may do as you will to me, but I will *never* be yours.”

She let two other soldiers help her from the ship. The world was still fuzzy and sounds echoed to her, as if she were underwater. Things just weren’t right, but she hardly had time to worry about that.

If she complained or said anything, Cyrus might decide not to take her to the baron, even with his orders.

She had to get away. Roidan might be angry with her. She was married.

Or was she?

It hurt to think.

She just had to get away, the idea of being here, alone with Othgar – her husband – was not acceptable. She shivered.

“You are all right, milady?” a soldier – Neil? – asked.

She didn’t answer. She merely concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other along the dock until they reached the shore. Horses stood waiting. This was going to hurt, she imagined. No help for it.

“Could you help me up?” she finally asked, after wondering and knowing she could not mount the horse alone.

“Of course,” the soldier answered, cupping his palms together for her to place her foot in.

Still her ribs pulled and she bit off the moan.

“Milady?” he asked, mounting the steed behind her.

She only shook her head and held onto the saddle’s pommel.

He clicked the horse and they quickly rode to her cottage. She glanced up to the ridge, noting the sun was lower in the sky. It would take the rest of the day to get there.

Neil reached up to help her down but she waved his hands away, averting her face and sliding down. She stood leaning against the saddle for a moment and then carefully made her way into her cottage.

Jars and jugs lay scattered and broken on the floor. Blood smeared across the white of her wall near the shelves. Neil cleared his throat. At least she thought it was he. She had no idea, couldn't remember what Cyrus had said. She wished Roidan were here. Tentatively, she touched the flesh around her eye, surprised at how swollen it was. No wonder her face hurt, or that she couldn't see properly.

Satchel. She needed her satchel and it was at the... No, it lay there on the table. Someone must have already retrieved it.

"Cyrus came with it, thinking you were here, where you should not have come alone, milady," he said, reproach in his voice.

She stopped and slowly turned. Looking him straight in the eyes, watching his widen, she said, "Do you think I haven't realized the error of coming here?"

His mouth opened, he shut it, and color rushed into his cheeks. Finally, he lowered his eyes. "My apologies milady. I—"

"Be useful and help me. I find I cannot move quickly."

"As you wish. Though in my opinion, you should be back at the keep, waiting on a healer yourself."

"No one asked your opinion," she snapped. "I need verbena. Do you know what the dried—"

"Yes. My mother was a healer herself."

"Good, get it, place it in this jar." She righted one on the table that was empty. Filling her satchel with what she thought she might need. Oils, leaves, herbs and salves. She tried to find her bindings and realized they were at the keep. "I need strips of

material, and my supply is at the keep for the most part. I know not if these will be enough." She shoved what she had into the leather bag. She was forgetting something.

"Let's go," Cyrus said, striding into the cottage. She'd jerked her hood back into place, but not before he stopped in front of her and went to push it off.

"Leave it. Leave me be."

"Milady, if we had let you be, you'd be sailing on the evening tide."

His hand pushed the hood back and his eyes narrowed, darkened and he cursed in another language. French if she were not mistaken.

"Roidan will kill me."

"So don't tell him. He'll see me soon enough." She grabbed her bag and pulled her hood back into place.

"You should be in bed. You need a healer."

"As I told your young erstwhile soldier here, I did not ask your opinion. We are, however, ordered to get to the village, perhaps we should do that?"

He tilted his head. "Had you but followed orders and remained in the keep, we'd have been on our way hours ago. We've been searching for you well over two hours."

"Cyrus, I'm tired, I can't see straight and we've a long ride ahead of us, can you berate me on the way? At least 'twill pass the time."

He hissed, raked a hand through his hair and held his hand out to her. "Come. You are right and berate you I will."

"Good, by the time Roidan sees me I should be numb in the ears, body and brain."

Chapter Eight

Roidan paced as he waited. He knew the boy had made it. He'd seen a party traveling up the mountainside near sunset. They should be here any moment. Why had they taken their sweet time in replying to his summons?

He raked a hand along the back of his neck, wondering again who of the baron's old regime had harmed these people. His people. He'd bloody well find out. Justice would be served.

Two of the brigands had been found near the falls and quickly dispatched. The people who had hidden were already helping his men rebuild their homes, take rubble away.

Funeral pyres were burning for those who still believed in the old ways.

Others wanted their loved ones buried in the Christian way.

He'd been away almost three days from the keep. They'd started out late in the evening, spent yesterday here and he'd sent the lad down to get his men.

He hoped it wasn't a ruse to get him away from his home.

"My lord, they're coming up the rise now."

He turned and left the ruined hut he'd been in. So many homes to rebuild. His men would help.

He looked to the side and saw an old man trying to drag a log to God only knew where.

Glancing at the approaching riders, he cursed and went to help the man carry the log to his own hut to support the roof as the other was half burned.

Thatching would be replaced. They'd be up here at least a week, mayhap longer. It was already turning colder.

By the time he got back to the clearing, the horses were there and his men were scattered about. All except Mathimus.

“The healers are healing,” Cyrus said.

“What are you doing here? I wanted Acelwyn and two others. Instead you’ve sent three plus yourself. Who guards the keep?”

“The keep is well guarded, the dock is guarded as well and the dungeons are guarded with locks.”

He frowned, too tired to mire his way through Cyrus’ riddle.

Roidan scanned the crowd, the dark shadows hiding the one he wanted to see.

“Where are the healers?” he finally asked, interrupting Cyrus and whatever the man had been saying.

“Did you hear what I just said?” Cyrus asked, disbelief in his eyes.

Roidan rubbed his eyes, and rubbed the stubble on his face. “No. I’m so tired I can’t see straight. The people here...” He bit off an oath. “They were attacked with no warning, with no provocation other than I defeated the old baron. I want peace not more war.” He sighed. “Saints be, we’ve earned that at the very least.”

Cyrus opened his mouth, shut it and said, “There’s something we should discuss.”

“Not now. I need to think. There is so much to be done here if the people are to survive the winter and I’ll have to choose someone to stay up here to guard the village lest another attack happen. Winter is coming and I know not what their supplies are, or what all they will need. Eight roofs are completely destroyed. We need to replace those plus—”

“This is something you’ll want to know, before you see it,” Cyrus interrupted. “’Tis the reason I came on this lovely venture even knowing of your wrath.”

He stopped and gave his second-in-command his full attention. Crossing his arms he waited.

“Acelwyn...” Cyrus took a breath. “Hear the whole tale, swear it before I tell you.”

He wasn't going to like this. Taking a deep breath, he nodded.

"We looked for her everywhere and finally decided to try Othgar's vessel." Cyrus raked a hand through his hair as he concluded the maddening tale. "I was worried the bastard had already sailed."

One comment stood out to him. "Blood on her wall? Was it hers?"

Cyrus only stared at him and nodded before he continued. "He'd bribed a priest to..."

Dread settled deep, twisting his stomach. "To?"

Cyrus licked his lips. "To marry them, my lord."

Something tightened in his chest. He tried twice before he got the words out. "And did they?"

Cyrus took another deep breath and pulled a piece of parchment from his tunic handing it over. "The marriage was not consummated."

Fury licked through him. Had she wanted to marry the bastard?

No. He shook off the thought as soon as it whispered through him.

He bit down and opened the parchment reading through the Latin quickly. "Where is she?"

"It wasn't her fault."

"Is she or is she not married to another?" he asked, softly.

"The priest was bribed, even he admitted it. She never said the vows and—"

He waved the parchment at Cyrus. "But this says otherwise. Are you certain it is the only copy?"

Cyrus closed his eyes. "There's more."

"More?" Saint's bones. "How much *more* could there be?" Anger slid hot and thick through him. Why hadn't she listened to him? A yell across the way made him turn.

He saw the dark cloak on the ground, knew that cloak. He'd given it to Acelwyn. His heart lurched and he watched as Mathimus picked her up.

Roidan swore and strode toward Mathimus who disappeared with her inside Roidan's tent before he'd reached them.

Cyrus was right on his heels. "You need to listen to me before you see her."

He ripped the flap away.

Mathimus turned from his crouch beside the figure on the pallet. "Why the hell did you let her come?" he snarled. "I do *not* need another patient."

Roidan froze.

Her face was a mottled mess of swollen bruises. The entire side of her face a dark angry purple, one eye swollen shut and both of them black.

He didn't remember crossing the floor or shoving Mathimus out of his way.

"That merchant did this?" he growled at Cyrus.

"Othgar? Yes."

"Is he dead?"

"Nay." Cyrus sighed and shifted, raking a hand through his hair. "Nay. He awaits your pleasant company in the dungeon."

"Good."

Silence settled around them and he watched her shallow breaths and then her eyes fluttered.

Mathimus was cursing and mixing something in a small container on the other side of the pallet. "What has she been given this day, what herbs? Do you even know?"

Cyrus waved a hand. "Something from that satchel of hers, she thought it would help with the pain. I'm not so sure it did."

"She should be back at the keep resting. Not riding a horse and tending to those here." Mathimus' large hands cradled her head and his fingers deftly felt for... "He beat her around the head. Has she passed out thus before?"

Cyrus nodded. "I tried to get the woman to stay, but she's as stubborn as Roidan and yes. She passed out twice on the way up here."

"Did she rouse easily?" he asked, carefully checking her face, her teeth. "Did you check her for broken bones?"

Cyrus shifted. "The last time we could not rouse her as easily. And yes, I checked her for broken ribs as she kept favoring her breathing and holding her side." Glancing at Roidan he clarified, "I checked her injuries when she was passed out as she wouldn't let anyone touch her before that." He cursed and stepped closer. "I think she might have a couple of ribs cracked, or at least badly bruised."

"Did you check?" Mathimus barked.

"I just said as much!"

Roidan took her hand and brushed his fingers along the back.

"She wouldn't let anyone touch her," Cyrus said more softly. "Granted she rode with me, but I wasn't about to terrify her more. I figured I'd let Roidan deal with her when we got here. I did berate her and probably yelled at her a few times."

"A few?" she whispered, frowning.

Cyrus looked at him with a raise of brows. "She said by the time I was done on the long ride, she'd be so numb in brain and body that your words would merely bounce off her."

Roidan didn't smile, didn't think a bloody thing was funny. He carefully brushed a strand of hair away from her forehead, where a large knot stood out. "You should be at home."

"I was just resting a moment," she told him, squeezing his fingers. "I'll be all right. Not the first time Othgar's —"

He felt the muscle tick in his jaw.

"Never mind," she said.

"Just resting," Cyrus said. "Like you were just resting beside the stream?"

She frowned and looked over Roidan's shoulder and said, "Do you have to tell everything?"

"I had to reset your nose, which the bastard broke, and wondered if Roidan would run me through for dragging you up here."

"You couldn't have stopped me. What were you going to do? Beat me?" She closed her eyes.

No one said anything.

"Nay, milady. Never that," Cyrus told her.

She opened her eye, the other too swollen to even shift. His hands shook, Roidan noticed. "So quiet," she said, her hand cupping his jaw.

Still he said nothing. Could say nothing. He would not allow her to go back to that bastard. It would be nothing if he allowed the marriage to stand. Others had in the past. But he was not others.

"The priest thought it would be better for me to be a wife than a whore," she whispered.

Words caught in his throat. He carefully leaned over, kissed her softly on her lips and stood. He motioned to Mathimus and left the tent.

"Give her something, for the love of God. I don't want her hurting," he bit out.

Mathimus wiped his hands. "A beating like that one? Nothing will take the pain away."

He shot his own healer a look.

"But I'll find something to help her."

"I don't want her helping with the care of the others," he said, staring into the dancing flames of the fire. "She stays in the tent, resting."

"*She* doesn't want to rest," she said just behind him. He whirled even as she continued, "I can't lie there. It hurts. As long as I'm moving it's not as bad."

He bit down. "I care not what you want. You'll stay in my tent. You are mine."

Something crossed her face. "I am *not* yours. I am *not his*. I am mine. Mine. Me. Myself. Othgar didn't care what I wanted either."

He took a step closer to her, wanting to plow his fist into a tree. Or Othgar's face. Very, very quietly, lest he yell at her, he said, "Do not *ever* compare me to that swine."

"Don't insult the swine," she said, pulling her cloak tighter.

Saints be, he didn't know if he wanted to kiss her, fuck her, or strangle her.

"Don't insult me."

"Same here, my lord."

Sighing, he turned, stared at the flames. "If you want to help with the healing here, you'll go and rest now."

"But—"

He turned his head and stared at her, her eyes, so bruised he couldn't see their color. Her face so battered, her freckles were invisible.

"He will die slowly," he whispered.

She heard him.

"And what will that prove?"

He opened his mouth to answer her and then shut it.

For a long moment they stared at each other. Finally he said, "You were married this day, correct?"

She flinched. "I do not consider—"

He held up the decree.

"If you want to credit it, then I suppose by lies and deceit, none of my own, I am wed."

He studied her, the way she stood hunched over. "When you are better I claim *jus primae noctis*."

"Beg pardon?"

"The wedding night. I claim the wedding night, as is my right as landlord."

Acelwyn went to tilt her head, but thought better of it. "Why?"

Because you're mine.

He wasn't stupid enough to say those words yet again.

"Because it is my choice. My right as the baron."

"And here I thought you had nothing in common with the old baron."

He did not rise to her bait.

Roidan watched her as she slowly walked to him. He tensed, ready to catch her if she fell.

He wasn't expecting it. She grabbed the decree out of his hand and tossed it into the fire. "No."

He couldn't help it. He laughed. "You are a devious wench."

Carefully, he pulled her to him, holding her gently, lest he hurt her more.

"I am no man's possession."

He didn't say anything.

Mathimus handed him a cup. "She needs to drink this."

"She's right here. What's in it?"

Mathimus only glared at her. "Things you need. Drink it."

Sighing, she lifted the cup. Roidan noticed her hands shook and he helped her drink it. "S'all right, love."

"Can we sit down?" she asked.

"No." He carefully lifted her, cradling her against his chest. "But you can lie down."

"I don't want..."

"Right now, if you are to help anyone, you must help yourself, or you'll be no use to a single soul here." That wasn't exactly true.

He knelt beside their pallet and eased her down.

"Stay with me, please," she whispered, her eyes already lowering.

"I must speak with Cyrus and Mathimus first."

He turned and walked back outside.

"So she's no longer married?" Cyrus asked.

He looked at his second-in-command. "She was never married."

"Still plan on claiming that wedding night?"

"Of course. And don't think I'm not angry with you."

Cyrus held up his hand. "Oh I've no doubt you are. It was my duty to protect her and I failed."

"Fascinating as this is," Mathimus said, "you two can go rounds later. Someone needs to sit with her and try to wake her up in a few hours. She needs to rest, but with her passing out and head wounds..."

"I know," Roidan said.

"We'll take care of things out here," Cyrus said.

"You should have kept her at the keep."

"Yes, that worked out very well. The woman is wily."

Roidan said nothing to that.

Cyrus grinned. "So will I be a witness to your wedding?"

He shoved his second-in-command and went into the tent.

"Acelwyn?" he whispered, sitting down on the pallet of furs beside her.

He softly brushed her hair away and listened to her shallow breathing.

By God that man would pay for what he'd done to her.

Carefully, so as not to disturb her, Roidan slowly undressed her. He cursed and muttered at each new bruise he found. Dark patches bloomed along her rib cage and back. Invisible fingers bit across her arms. Angry purple marks screamed at him from the pale mounds of her breasts.

His hands shook as he checked her legs. There were no bruises along her thighs nor did he find any other signs she'd been forced.

He covered her up to her chin and sat back, propping one arm on his upraised knee. Never again. Never again would anyone treat her so.

Never again would she be so abused. Or terrorized.

She was his.

She always would be.

Sounds woke her, birds and people moving around. The tent was still dark, and chilled. Her head ached abominably. She barely moved her toes first and then her fingers. At least Othgar hadn't stomped on them. By the goddess she was cold. But heat covered her left side. She tugged the furs and realized her right side was uncovered.

And she was unclothed. Frowning, she stilled and then tried to scoot closer to the warmth. Roidan's arm wrapped around her and she hissed at the pain that snaked from her ribs.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I forgot." He propped up on his elbow and studied her.

His eyes were tired.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"I'm naked. Did you stake your claim of..." She couldn't remember the term he'd used last night. She tried to shift, the soft furs warm and soothing against her abused skin.

A slow grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Oh, beloved. If I'd claimed a wedding night from you, trust me, you'd bloody well remember it. No matter what herbs Mathimus gave you."

Slowly, she blew out a breath. "I knew that. I mean. You wouldn't..."

He sobered. "No." He brushed a finger softly over her cheekbone. "No I would not. Will you tell me what happened? I've pieced bits together from what Cyrus said, and what he said you said, but—" He shook his head and a muscle ticked in his jaw.

"I left the keep. Got caught. Othgar was mean. I was married by a dishonest priest. Cyrus came. We traveled up here."

He sighed and she was always amazed at how his sighs to her were both irritated and amused.

"We will wait here all morning, if we must," he told her, leaning down to kiss the tip of her nose. "I'll have my meetings with my men with you bare beneath the furs."

"Is that supposed to instill fear within me?"

He only stared at her with those wicked eyes of his.

She closed her eyes. "Fine."

So she told him. Told him haltingly at first, then faster, anger and fear lacing her words. She faltered when she spoke of being attacked in her home, of waking up on Othgar's floor, of the fear and hatred and not knowing what to do, realizing that no one was listening to her.

"I was never so happy to see anyone as I was to see Cyrus," she admitted, her eyes still closed. "I just wanted away."

She felt his warm finger brush a tear away that had leaked beneath her closed lids. She didn't open her eyes.

"I just wanted you," she whispered. "That's why I came. I know these people need my help but I just didn't... I couldn't. I just wanted—"

"Shhhh," he told her, gently pulling her into the curve of his arm. His warmth enveloped her. "It'll all work out."

"Because you said so?"

She felt him grin against her forehead. "Of course."

"So arrogant."

His hand softly caressed her back. "So much trouble."

"If I could move without passing out from pain, I'd show you just how much trouble."

His muscles tensed. For a moment, he didn't say anything. She heard him swallow. "Are you in much pain? What can I do?"

She started to lie, to shrug it off. Instead, she said, "Nothing. Sleep sometimes helps, but even then it's always there."

"How do you know?"

"This isn't the first time. I'll live."

If she thought he'd stilled and tensed before, it was nothing compared to what he did now. He was like a statue beside her, not even breathing. She tried to see him, but her head really hurt and her vision was blurring again.

"It will be the last," he whispered savagely.

She patted his chest.

In a few moments he rose, careful not to jar her. She listened to him dress. If she kept her eyes shut, at least her head and eyes didn't hurt as badly. "You're going to rest today. In this tent. I'll get what you need from Mathimus."

"The people—"

"Will be fine," he interrupted. "You may not. Do not make me order guards on you."

She caught herself before she shook her head and only waved her hand at him.

A few minutes later he was waking her up and coaxing her to drink something. Whatever Mathimus used was fast. The gray rose up, swirled around her and sucked her deep into the blackness. As long as she didn't hurt.

* * * * *

Several days later, she lay in their bed at the keep. She didn't remember coming back.

Mathimus healed with fabulous herbs, something that he had shipped from their travels. Her bruises were still dark, though some had at least faded to a greenish hue.

She had no idea of the day. She vaguely remembered Roidan and Cyrus both urging her to drink broth and something else. Whatever it had been had allowed her to sleep through all but snatches of the journey home.

She looked to the window. Sounds from the courtyard floated up.

She heard someone yell. Had that sound woken her up? She tossed aside the covers and carefully pulled herself up. Again someone yelled and a low voice rumbled after it.

She knew that rumble, that deep voice.

Looking down, she was glad she was dressed. Shuffling to the door, she opened it but Neil and another one of the soldiers stood sentry outside her door.

"Milady. The baron said you are to stay in your room and not come out until he comes up."

"Oh, he did, did he?" she asked softly.

God, she was still so tired and weak. She hated to be weak. But her legs trembled and she put a hand out on the doorway to lean against it.

"Perhaps, milady, you should go back and rest?" the other soldier ventured.

Instead of answering she shut the door and shuffled over to the window, her legs trembling with the effort. She pulled back the heavy shutter.

The courtyard was lit with torches.

In the center was a whipping post, chained to it was Othgar.

She sighed and slumped.

His arms were tied above his head. He'd been stripped to the waist and his back was weeping blood from the dozens of lashes that had fallen on him.

Roidan stood back from him, a whip dangling from his hand. "No one shall touch mine or me again. Let this be a lesson to all."

"She was mine first," Othgar hissed, rage still cloaking his words. "A part of her will always be mine."

Roidan dropped the coil of leather and drew his sword.

She opened her mouth, not sure what it was she was going to say.

"Liars belong in hell," Roidan answered and ran the man through with his sword.

No one moved for a long time. She shivered and tried to breathe. Roidan turned and looked up at the window. She saw him motion to Othgar and then say something quietly to Cyrus. Without another word, he cleaned his sword, sheathed it and started back inside.

She thought about closing the window, about crawling back in bed, but she did neither of those things. Instead, she watched as they lowered Othgar from the pole and tossed his body into a wagon. What would they do with it?

"He'll be buried," Roidan said beside her.

She hadn't heard him enter. She didn't turn.

"I should feel bad for him," she murmured. "Part of me does, I suppose."

"What?" He stepped into her line of vision and turned her from the window. "I wished you had slept a bit longer."

"I shouldn't wish the man dead," she whispered. "I'm a healer."

He pulled her closer and shut the shuttered. "You feel what you feel."

"But..."

"He harmed you. *No one* is allowed to do that," he said against her hair. Then he pulled back, and kneeled before her. "No one. Ever. No one shall harm you as long as I have breath."

"Why?" The priest's words came back to her. The priest. "Is the priest—"

"I sent him away. Told him if he ever came to my isle again I'd kill him, man of the cloth or no. I do not want to rule through complete fear as the old baron, but I will allow no one to believe they can dare to harm mine and not pay the consequences."

"But—"

"But nothing. You are mine to protect." He gently pressed his lips to hers. "And you owe me a wedding night, I believe."

She scoffed. "No I do not. I wasn't married and even if I were, I'm now a widow."

"No you weren't and if you were, you aren't for long."

She frowned and tried to reason through what he said. "What? What do you mean?"

"You are mine." He pressed his finger against her lips. "I know, I know. You are your own. No man's. Yes, I know. However, the fact remains that I see you as mine."

"Most men don't kill for their whores," she said.

His face tightened. "You are *not*, nor have you ever been, my whore. I dislike that word."

"Never been with one? I find that hard to believe."

"That is not... That is to say..." He huffed out a breath, closed his eyes and was quiet for so long she wondered if he'd forgotten what he was going to say. Before he opened his eyes, he said softly. "You are, without a doubt, an exasperating woman. But you are my woman. Mine. I want no one to ever doubt that, to question it, nor dare my wrath again."

She frowned and studied him, shaking her head.

"I want a wedding night, my own, with my wife," he told her, leaning closer.

Chapter Nine

She shook her head.

He nodded.

“But... You can't... I'm not... Proper... You need... Ladies...and...”

He grinned. “Yes you can, yes you are, proper is subjective and I know what I need, thank you.”

She shook her head again.

Roidan sighed. “I can convince you...”

Her heart started to trip and skip. Married? To the baron? Was he serious? Did she dare believe him? “Did you take some of Mathimus' drinks? I've no idea what he puts in them, but...”

“You don't think I can?”

She couldn't keep up. “Can what?”

“Convince you?”

She didn't answer and instead only asked a question herself. “Why?”

“What?”

“Why do you want to marry me?” Was it out of pity? Had he heard one of the villagers refer to her as *my lady* and it was just easier? And why did it matter?

“Because it is my choice to do so,” he said. So arrogant.

She could only stare at him. What did she honestly know of being a lady of the keep? Of being any lady?

“I'm a healer. I heal. I don't know how to be a lady, your lady.” She shook her head and tried to understand.

"Stop fighting this, Acelwyn," he whispered against her lips, brushing his fingers around the center of her breasts.

"Stop that," she said, batting his hands away.

"I've missed you."

"There are other women you could—" She stopped. No, she didn't want him to go to other women. For anything.

As if reading her mind, he arched one brow and grinned. "I didn't think so either." Then his grin slid away. "Nor will there be any other men for you."

"But..."

"No other men."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

He kissed along her jaw. "Try to think of a good argument, my own, and I'll see if I can't counter it."

She shivered and tried to push him away, but he was having none of that.

His tongue traced her jaw and he licked her earlobe before pulling it between his teeth. She shuddered.

"Stop. I can't..."

"Hmmm?" he asked her, his hands gliding carefully over her. She imagined he'd take her quickly or slowly as was his wont.

Part of her was too tired, too sore and just didn't want...

His finger lightly circled around and around and around her nipple, hardening it until it pressed against the material of her tunic.

"You can't what?" he whispered, leaning in to press his hot mouth over her breast. She could feel the heat of him through the material.

She tilted her head back. "Um...what?"

He stilled, pulled away and gently led her over to the bed. She tried to take a deep breath and winced. Always conscious of her, he softly growled. "You are still too hurt."

"Maybe."

He eased her down onto the bed and helped her to remove her tunic. His eyes narrowed as they moved over her. And she could not stop herself from trying to cover herself.

"Don't," he commanded, his voice deep, low. "Never cover yourself from me."

He gently tugged her hands away.

She only stared at him.

"I want you," he said, tracing one of the bruises on her breasts. "But I don't want to hurt you."

She didn't answer.

He pressed against her shoulder and she lay back on the bed, the soft furs tickling her back, the backs of her thighs, her bottom.

He loomed over her, still in his tunic. A small smile tugged one corner of his mouth. "Tonight I will pleasure you."

She frowned. "You always pleasure me."

"Shhhh..." He glanced around, strode to his trunk and rifled through it.

She watched him until he stood with a length of red material in his hand. He wrapped it around his hands and jerked, pulling it taut. "Yes, this will do." Smiling wickedly at her, he prowled back to the bed. "Now I want you to hold onto this, above your head and don't let go."

The length of the fabric wasn't very long. Like a sash or scarf. She did as he had done and wrapped it in her hands, pulling the slack taut, but pain jerked along her ribs so she let it go. "We'll see." At his frown of concern, she said, "Now what?" But desire had already unfurled and teased low in her belly.

"Now." He leaned over and kissed her lightly on her bruised lips. "Now you simply lie back and close your eyes, enjoying what I do to you."

She tilted her head and looked at him.

"Trust me. And when you want to move, want to touch, you may only tug on your pretty red scarf. Or maybe we'll do that another time?"

"And?"

His grin danced in his eyes. Watching her, never taking his eyes from her, he licked a hot tempting trail down her stomach.

She shivered. His hands tugged her gently, so that her hips lay on the edge of the bed. She heard the clunk of his sword, his curse and then he tossed his weapon aside.

His eyes still on hers, he stepped between her knees, forcing her thighs apart and then his hands spread her wider.

Acelwyn began to tremble just from his watching her, studying so private a place on her. She licked her lips. "Like what you see?"

Hot eyes rose to hers and then he dropped to his knees between her thighs. "Remember what I said, you may only tug on the scarf. If you can't, if it hurts, just don't and if this is too painful for you yet, tell me so I'll stop." He frowned again and then shook his head. "Perhaps we'll wait a bit—"

"No. No, we are not waiting. I've waited all I want to wait. I'm fine. I might not jerk on this red scarf, that might have to wait. I'll try not to move though, but if I do?" she whispered, as his mouth began to kiss from the inside of her knee upward, his fingers drawing and tracing patterns on her tender skin. She shivered.

When one finger traced between her thigh and hip, she squirmed.

"No. No moving," he chided.

She didn't want him teasing and playing. She just wanted...

He took forever to get where she wanted him. First with his fingers drawing patterns and circles so slowly up the inside of her thighs until he only brushed the outer edges of her lips. When she tried to spread her thighs wider, he nipped at her thigh with his teeth. "You moved."

Her muscles began to tremble and he hadn't even really *touched* her yet.

Then she felt his fingers glide gently along her mons to separate her folds and hold them open for him. The cool air blew across her followed by his warm breath. She moaned.

He drew one long finger down her, from her nub to just below her slit. Over and over and over.

Then he drew circles on the most tender skin of her body. "Oh... Oh... Roidan," she hissed. Around and around, small circles, bigger ones, she followed his circles, always close but never entering, never flicking over that one...

Then his mouth was on her, hot and wet, fire and liquid and she shuddered, moaning, the red cloth forgotten.

She wanted him. Wanted him... "Please..."

His mouth nibbled and nipped, his tongue...that wicked, wicked tongue laved and licked her. His own moans vibrated against her and she would have twisted away but he'd locked her in place with his strong arms.

"You moved," he said, the words trembling against her.

She was so close, her breath panted and her ribs bit, but she didn't care. She just wanted him. Wanted more. Wanted.

He slid one long thick finger into her, his eyes never leaving her, then another. Back and forth. In and out. In. Out. His eyes still on her, he leaned in and set his teeth gently to her nub before he bit down, sucked hard and thrust his fingers deep inside.

She screamed, forgetting the stupid sash and would have bowed up if her ribs hadn't pulled and kept her still better than any strip of cloth would have done.

"Roidan! Roidan! Ohhhh..."

Still he kept her on the edge. Kept her trembling, wanting, begging, pleading...

She couldn't breathe. Her ribs bit into her every time she tried to draw a deep breath. Panting, she tried to think, to say, to...

"You want to come?" he asked, lifting his head from between her thighs, her juices glistening on his chin.

Every muscle in her body shivered. "Please."

"Say you'll marry me."

"That's..."

He circled her nubbin and she moaned. Oh please. She had to. She tried to move away from his hand, but he didn't allow her any quarter.

"Say it. Say the words I want to hear."

"You're insane," she muttered.

He thrust his fingers into her, curling them deep inside and she closed her eyes as she cried out.

"I'm determined." He thrust again into her. "I want you." In. Out. In. Out.

"Then have me."

"As my wife."

Her eyes slid closed. He meant it. "Fine," she bit out. "Yes."

His fingers buried deep, he leaned over her and kissed her mouth, and she tasted herself on him.

"Say it. Say you're mine," he whispered hotly against her ear.

She sighed. "I'm yours. I have been since that moment I first saw you."

His fingers thrust harder, deeper faster, his thumb rubbing circles on her nubbin until she wrapped her hands, red scarf and all, around his neck and rocked up against his hand as he kissed her.

Bright lights pinwheeled behind her closed lids, and lightning shot down her nerves, jumped to her muscles and screamed through her very soul. She shattered, clung and floated...

“I still don’t know why you want me as your bride.”

He lay behind her on the bed, holding her close. “Because you make me laugh.”

“So does Cyrus.”

“But you’re prettier than Cyrus and I don’t think Cyrus would garden with me.”

She laughed, her side aching from the exertions.

“I think about you too many times through the day.” He kissed her shoulder. “And I don’t like it when you’re not beside me in bed.” His hands spanned her stomach. “And because I love to hear you laugh, to see the sun shining like fire in your hair and I want to see what our children will look like.”

She liked that one. Snuggling closer she said, “Is that all?”

“Wench. How about this, I’m the baron and my bride is my choice.”

“And the bride?” She kissed his wrist.

“I’d like it if she chose the baron.”

“So you won’t force her to choose?”

He nuzzled her neck, his fingers gliding lower. “Force? No, not force. Maybe coerce.” His tongue licked a hot trail behind her ear. “Or seduce.”

She grinned. “You’ve already done that.” But he’d never harm her. And she loved him.

“Hmmm. Pretty words.” She looked into his eyes, brushing her hand along his hair. “And since I love you, I suppose it’s the proper thing to marry the baron. I just hope the baron made the right choice.”

His eyes locked to her as she carefully turned to look at him. He leaned down and kissed her, whispering against her mouth. “Oh, the baron made the perfect choice. Completely perfect, as is his right.”

About the Author

Eryn Blackwell is a naughty alter-ego who hates doing dishes and spends her time in Texas with her family. When she's not writing, she's complaining about staying in shape (or rather, getting in shape), bemoaning the fact her list of things to do around the house keeps growing, and wishing she were snow-skiing or sitting at the beach.

Eryn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascafe.com.

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