

# BRENNNA LYONS

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## RAISED TO BE HIS OWN

*Even before she learns that men don't attack women in the streets,  
she'd drawn to one particular Warrior . . . Gaffin.*

*Raised To Be  
His Own*

An erotic novella by

Brenna Lyons

*Published by Phaze Books  
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Edited by Kathryn Lively  
Cover Art © 2011 by Anastasia Rabiya

First Edition January 2011  
ISBN-13: 978-1-60659-588-6



Published by:  
Phaze Books  
An imprint of Mundania Press LLC  
6470A Glenway Ave., #109  
Cincinnati, OH 45211

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**Note to the readers:** Strange things happen when you're doing re-edits on an older work. In this case, I was reading Jörg's plans for Anna and Erin in the release of *Veriel's Tales II: Losing Regana*, and the following what-if struck me.

Knowing there were many beast wars and a "Veriel" in each war, what if a former Veriel came to a similar moment...the moment when he would attempt to steal back his lover and her female child to a Warrior? What if he managed to take the child and raise her, but the mother was left behind or killed, insuring that he could tell the young Warrior woman anything he wished of her past, her nature, and the nature of their connection? What would happen when she reached maturity?

Welcome to that vision.

**Brenna**

# *Glossary of Warrior Terms*

*Beast-* Beasts are what humans erroneously refer to as vampires. The stories humans tell are obviously not correct, but you can't expect a human to get everything right.

*Blutjagd-* The "blood hunt." Warriors crave battle with the beasts, as the beasts crave blood. Warriors are tied to beasts in that they sense many of the beasts' special powers. A Warrior can feel the use of coercion, feeding, and other controls of humans. They also feel other Warriors engaged in *Blutjagd*, the death of beasts and Warriors in their range, and the presence of nearby beasts that are not fully ghosted. Rigorous battle training will quell the *Blutjagd* for short periods of time.

*Elder-* One of the original beasts, the Stone stealers who were damned for their crimes against the Stone and the Warriors. The elders are gifted with powers turned beasts are not, including the ability to reproduce with a *Blutjagdfrau*, the ability to turn other beasts, and the inability to be killed by anyone but a Warrior.

*Endspiel-* The point in printing when a Warrior must either seal printing or go insane. A Warrior who feels printing may not progress should break printing long before this point. Note that they are rarely smart enough to do so.

*Fluch-* The Warrior's curse, passed from father to son or daughter. The *Fluch* may be removed from a daughter but never a son. If the *Fluch* is not removed in the *Zeremonie der Freiheit* by the time the menses begin or the *Zeremonie des Schutzes* is performed before freeing, the daughter is cursed to become *Blutjagdfrau*, a female Warrior. Because elders target *Blutjagdfrau* as mates, Warrior fathers will go to any lengths to free a daughter not marked by the Stone.

*Ghosting-* A talent that both beasts and Cursed Warriors learn to harness. Ghosting can hide the physical form of Cursed Warriors or beasts and all they hold or carry from each other and humans. In a lesser strength, it can "blur" the image of the user so that humans do not note the passage in particular but still see a person there, which avoids accidental collisions. Even a ghosted beast cannot hide uses of power that a Warrior can track. Warriors sometimes ghost in tandem to remain visible to each other but not other Warriors or beasts.

*Krankheit-* The "sealing sickness." In the final stage of the transformation between human and Cursed Warrior, at or about the sixteenth birthday in

males and a year after the start of menses in females, the sickness strikes. The young Warrior will suffer nausea, vomiting, a high fever, disorientation, dizziness, and may become incoherent. It is usually the only time in a Warrior's life that he or she becomes ill, save morning sickness in a *Blutjagdfrau*.

*Printing*- Like imprinting, a Warrior becomes tied to his mate for life. He cannot choose another if she's lost, cannot be unfaithful while she lives, and cannot ever divorce or otherwise dissolve the union. A printed Warrior is the most stable of men, unless his mate or children are endangered or lost. Then he will suffer the printing madness and may have to be killed by his house. Likewise, a Warrior who breaks printing, even early printing, will suffer for it. A Warrior who breaks printing too close to *Endspiel* will face the madness.

*Veriel*- The Mad Elder. The Destroyer of Lives. The Mad Deceiver, who led the traitors and freed the elders from the Stone. The most hated and hunted of all the beasts. Fixated on one woman, he would destroy the world to own her. At least, that's what the stories say of him.

*Warriors*- Also called Cursed Warriors, *Krieger der Nacht*, *Soldat der Nacht*, or Sons of the Stone. The Warriors were an ancient race of protectors who spawned the beasts and now are driven to hunt their former brothers to extinction.

# *Chapter One*

Ragath strolled out of her rooms and through the nearly-deserted keep. It was early, and she'd risen for the night before most of the household again.

One of her stomachaches had woken her. She'd asked Jonus about them, but he'd assured her many women suffered fleeting aches as they matured. There was no cause for concern...troublesome, but not dangerous.

They seemed to be occurring more often of late. She shivered in nervous energy; Jonus said that meant she would soon be ready to become his bride in more than name.

She nodded to one of the maids diligently performing her duties, either an early riser like herself or one who performed her duties in the day so as to remain unseen and out of the way.

All of the servants were female. Ragath had asked Jonus about it once, and he'd supplied that women weren't safe with more than one man about. Men were, by nature, destined to prey on unprotected females, to kill to take women from other men.

The only way to safeguard a woman was to send her into her future husband's keeping as a child, completely isolating her from other men, not even transporting her from household to household as she grew enough to be sexually appealing. What they could not see, the other males would not covet.

According to Jonus, Ragath had been in his care since infancy. Certainly, she had no memories of her mother and father. Jonus's household encompassed the whole of her memory.

The women in his employ had acted as nannies, wet nurses, and later as maids and confidants. Her every need was met, her every whim catered to. According to the maids, her clothing was the finest they had ever seen.

When she suffered her blood, her clothing was heavy enough and dark enough to hide the unsightly blood rags and any stains that might occur. When she wasn't, like now, her clothing was sheer, exposing her body to the man who would be her husband.

He hadn't touched her sexually yet, but that would come soon. She'd suffered her blood for four years, which meant she was of age for him to exercise his rights to her bed.

Ragath didn't fear the bedding. It was a natural step in a woman's life, and Jonus was an appealing male. Of course, she'd never seen a male besides him for comparison, but still he appealed to her.



What more could a woman ask for? Since females were not exposed to groups of men and permitted a choice in marriage, being attracted to your mate was all any woman could hope for, and the gods had granted Ragath that boon.

She headed for Jonus's rooms. There was nowhere in his household she was forbidden to tread, and the same applied to him. Only the servants had boundaries.

A strange sound stopped her short just outside the archway to his rooms. She worked at it. It almost sounded as if Jonus was in pain. Concerned, she hurried inside—and stopped short again.

The servant was one of her confidants, a girl only a year older than Ragath herself. At the moment, she was laid out on Jonus's weapons table, her legs circling Jonus's predictably nude body, her back arched to facilitate Jonus's suckling mouth latched onto her breast.

For a moment, Ragath stood there, hurt, betrayed, her emotions warring. Fury won out, and she launched at them, her fists clenched tight.

*I will kill them. How dare they!*

Jonus moved so fast, she could hardly track it. In the next moment, Ragath was pressed to the wall, Jonus's body crowding hers, his hands fisted around her wrists, like the time he—

She forced that thought away. It was one of the few times he'd exercised his rights as lord of the keep and her body over her, and it was an experience she did not want to repeat.

His breath came in hot, little panting breaths that caused a disconcerting reaction in her traitor body.

"Leave us," Jonus ordered.

The skittering sounds would be the damned servant collecting her clothing and making good her escape. Her footsteps hesitated, and Ragath turned her head, glaring at the other woman. At least the bitch had the good grace to look pained and remorseful.

Jonus motioned his head sharply, and the servant fled, holding her gown to her body.

The moments passed in silence. Finally, Jonus addressed her.

"You wished to see me, Ragath?"

"I most certainly did *not* want to see you like that," she snapped back.

He sighed. "I have told you about men," he reasoned. "Men have hungers."

"Men are vermin. Men are insects."

Jonus smiled. He laughed at her insults. "Yes, we most certainly are. You are barely of an age to bed, Ragath. Be reasonable. I must have a way to sate myself until you accept me."

She wanted to deny it, but he had a point. How many times had she been told that males lacked control when faced with females? How cruel was it to see her daily, from the time she was an infant, and know he had to wait to touch her? How else could a male survive such a thing besides taking other females to his

bed until he was free to claim his bride?

“And when I do accept you?” she challenged. “If men are such vermin, with no control when presented with the female body, will you continue to bed the servants, when you have mine?” If he said yes, he would certainly never have her willingly. Why should he?

His smile disappeared, and he shook his head solemnly. “When I have you, I will have no want or need of the others. You have my vow on that.”

“But...” There was something left unsaid, she was sure.

He flattened his body to hers, letting Ragath feel the weight of his erect cock against her belly. “I will need your vow that you will be mine always.”

She shook her head, confused by that pronouncement. “I am yours, Jonus. My parents struck the deal with you long ago.” Even if she refused him, which was simply not done, where would she go? How would she? The bars and gates alone would trap her within the keep.

“No. *You* must choose. You must give your vow. The day you do, I will stop taking other women.”

Ragath worked at that without return. What difference did her vow make? The deal had been struck without it. There was no way to rescind it. Females weren’t permitted to show their faces outside the keeps, save when one was transported to her husband in infancy. What difference did her vow make?

“Your choice,” Jonus repeated. “Are you prepared to make that choice?”

A sudden and unexpected fear made her lightheaded. Why had no one told her the question would be asked? Even knowing it was a foregone conclusion that she would be Jonus’s, saying the words frightened her.

He nodded, his jaw tight in fury she could see like a dark cloud around him. “Then I will continue to seek out other—”

“No.” The word was out before she could stop herself. She had no right to order Jonus about. He was her future husband, her master. He was lord of the keep and her body.

One brow went up in challenge. “You mean to accept me?” he asked calmly.

Gods, what a choice! “Why do you need that vow to bed me?” Perhaps if she understood his needs, it would come easier.

A smile curved his lips, and his cock jerked against her. “I do not need it to bed you.”

Ragath shook her head. “I do not understand.”

“I can bed you at any time you wish it.”

“But—”

“A man has needs, Ragath. The only way to meet them all is to vow to be mine...and only mine...for all time. Until that time, if needs arise that you cannot or will not fulfill...”

She pulled at his hold, intent on striking him for saying something so hurtful. He held her easily, without exerting effort that she could see. She wasn’t certain why she still tried to strike him. It wasn’t as if she’d ever succeeded

before.

“Will you choose to fulfill...some of my needs?” There was something dark and seductive in that.

Ragath considered it. “On one condition.” She nearly winced at what she was saying. There had never been conditions between them before.

He tilted his head, his interest seemingly piqued by her choice of words. “And that is?”

“You will ask me for what it is you...need. If I cannot or will not provide it, you are free to seek it elsewhere, but not without asking me first.” Her heart ached at the idea of refusing him, of sending him to another to sate what she should as bride sate, and it pounded in terror at the idea of making a vow to be his forever, though she had no idea why it would.

“Agreed.” There was no hesitation in his answer. “At the moment, I need to taste. A woman’s mouth, her breasts, her...sweet sheath. Will you offer me that?”

Her body reacted fiercely to the mental image his words created for her. “Yes. Taste.”

His head tilted and came down, his mouth playing at hers. He’d kissed her hands, forehead, and cheeks before. He’d brushed his lips against hers before she retired to bed every night since her blood started to flow.

This was different. His lips were soft; they played at hers as if seeking something she couldn’t name.

He pulled back minutely. “Open for me.”

She hesitated, confused by the request. Ragath parted her lips, shivering at his breath warming her mouth.

Jonus did the same, and his tongue emerged, dipping into her mouth, stroking her lips. Ragath captured it between her lips, stealing a kiss.

He moaned at the move, sliding his tongue free as if enjoying the sensation as much as she did. “That is right. Play with my mouth. Explore.”

Encouraged, she repeated the move with his lower lip...then the upper. Ragath dipped her tongue between his lips, and Jonus snaked his own around it, setting off a firestorm of need.

In the next few heartbeats, their mouths meshed, lips wide open. Their tongues dueled and danced.

His hands loosened and left her wrists, caressing down her arms. When he cupped her breasts in his big hands, she took advantage of the freedom to lower her arms around his neck.

Her knees weakened in the passion washing over them. As if he could feel it, Jonus pulled away, guiding her further into the room.

Jonus didn’t take her to his weapons table, as she’d feared he might. She was forbidden to touch the table or anything on it, and his displeasure when balked was a fearsome thing.

He took her to his bed.

His mouth left hers, and he started working the gown up her body. Her

nudity wasn't a shocking thing. She was nude for her physical training, for sleep, and bathing. Jonus was not unwelcome at any of those activities, though he'd never shared her bed, to her knowledge. This was the first time she'd been disrobed with the idea that Jonus would execute his rights as husband.

The material slid over her head and extended arms, leaving her skin to skin with him. Ragath clenched her fists for a moment, reminding herself that he'd seen her nude form for her entire life.

Jonus tossed the gown away, and he lifted her to the bed, following her down. She'd been to his bed from time to time. When she was a child with nameless nightmares, she'd been encouraged to seek out his bed for comfort.

There was nothing comforting in this. It was hot and harsh, exciting and frightening.

Jonus took his time, sampling her lips...then the depths of her mouth. Sometime during the latter, a meal appeared silently on the bedside table. Part of her burned in jealousy that it might have been the same servant he'd been so engaged with; another hoped it was, so the bitch would see that Jonus was hers alone.

Left to her own devices, Ragath would have ignored the food, but Jonus demanded she eat. He watched her, his gaze hot with the promise of more. When she offered him food, he begged off, claiming he'd indulged earlier. All the while, the tension rose between them, the need to have him continued. At last, her stomach protested the idea of more. Not that she was full. Rather a strange ache and tremble made the thought of eating when she might be in Jonus's arms unpalatable.

As if he read the thought from her mind, Jonus turned her beneath him again. His lips parted hers, his kiss making her lightheaded.

Time lost all meaning. Ragath resorted to ordering what passed between them in rare moments of lucidity.

His mouth on her breasts brought her off the mattress and hard against him. Somewhere between there and the disconcerting play at her naval, the second meal arrived. She managed a few bites and a glass of wine, then she invited his kiss again.

Jonus was unhurried in his tasting, and her body rioted for more. Her breathing caught in her lungs at the first stroke of his tongue between her thighs. It escaped on a rush at the second.

Then he was everywhere, suckling at the forefront, tracing her woman's seam, licking from front to back. Strange sounds escaped her throat, and Ragath reached for him.

Her heart skittered at Jonus pinning her wrists to the mattress. Fear faded in light of his continued attention to her rising pleasure. Ragath forced her hips up, encouraging him.

His groan vibrated against her; the sensation tightened muscles all over her body and stilled her breath. The next suck on the sensitive bundle released that

breath in a shout of surprise. The tension inside her rebounded, tightened, loosened again, more powerfully with each movement. Her head spun, and she moaned out her confusion. What was he doing to her?

His mouth left her, and Jonus snapped an order for someone to leave them. Ragath whimpered, her mind working at the truth that he'd spent the night tasting her, another corner arguing that it couldn't possibly be the late meal he'd been turning away.

He returned to her body, tasting more avidly, forcing her to a more powerful response than the last time. Her inner muscles clenched on emptiness, and she felt every finger-width of the channel Jonus would soon fill.

As if the thought summoned him, he levered himself over her, holding his weight up so his cock bobbed between them. Ragath stared at it—curious, frightened, ready yet not.

*I should. He has given me such pleasure.* And her channel was empty and aching for a filling.

*No. It is too soon. Wait. The time is coming.* Ragath didn't doubt it. It wasn't time to take him to her body.

Jonus grumbled a harsh curse. He knew. Would he seek out another female to do what she was uncertain about?

At a loss to stop him, she touched his cock. She'd only done so once before, when she'd been very young. At the time, it had sent Jonus into a rage, and she'd fled to her nurse's arms in confusion. This time, his hungry expression attested that the tension in his body was sexual in nature.

Encouraged, Ragath stroked him. Jonus shifted his weight, brought one hand to hers, and repositioned her hand. Once her fingers circled his girth, he guided her and squeezed her hand tighter where he needed it to be so, his breathing going ragged and his eyes red in arousal. When she'd learned what he wanted, he released her and left her to bring him pleasure.

His sounds were harsh, and his hips started moving. Ragath stared at him, stunned at his fierce hunger.

"Harder, Ragath. Make your hands tight as your virgin sheath will be."

She complied, and his eyes slid shut. His hips sped, and her body responded to it. Would he thrust into her as avidly? Cream flowed from her at the thought.

His hair swung wildly around his face, and his expression hardened. Then he roared, his male fluids splashing against her stomach and breasts. Ragath stared at it, shocked at the sight. There was so much, much more than she'd thought there would be.

"We will bed fully soon, Ragath," Jonus promised.

She nodded, touching the slick of his seed with trembling fingers. This was what would give her a child? What magic was there between a man and a woman?

Jonus used the linens on his bed to wipe the precious fluid away. Then he lifted her and carried her to her room.

The servants scrambled to do his bidding. Jonus passed Ragath into their hands with orders to bathe and feed her. Then he turned to leave.

“Wait,” she called out. She’d refused to take him into her body. Was he off to sate himself in another? Perhaps in that damned servant he’d been playing with earlier?

He turned, offering her a smile. “Be at ease. I simply have business to deal with, Ragath. Sleep well.”

“Will you join me?” It was a question she’d never asked before.

Jonus hesitated, for the first time in her memory seemingly uncertain. “Perhaps... I am weary, Ragath. Perhaps...another day would be better.”

She nodded, feeling dismissed as she rarely had with Jonus.

He paused, shook his head as if to push away an unwelcome thought, then walked away.

“Lady Ragath?” one of the older servants called her.

She turned, noting the water being poured into the tub for her. All things considered, a bath might be the best thing. Ragath always thought best at the restful moments.

It was the perfect temperature, cool but not cold. Everything in her life was perfect.

*Not everything.*

Again, the servant’s face was in her memories. Jonus often sent servants away to other duties in his holdings. If she asked, would he send that one away? But, he left the keep on business. Even if he sent the girl away, what was to stop him from sating himself in her when he was away?

*My vow. He said he would take no others, if I gave the vow.*

*Not yet. The time is not right.*

That meant accepting that he might bed others until she gave it. It was an imperfect solution.

Then again, if life were perfect, how boring would that be?

On that thought, she settled into the tub and closed her eyes. It had been years since she’d bathed herself, most likely since she’d started to bleed. It was Jonus’s opinion that a lady should have to do as little for herself as possible. Hers was a life of leisure—reading, practice, and music, while others did the work. Bathing herself was something of a guilty pleasure.

Her servants had told her males sometimes chose to dismiss servants and bathed their brides themselves. Her heart ached that Jonus hadn’t chosen to do so tonight.

She chided herself. Jonus had business to see to. He’d spent the entire night with her and would likely forego some of his sleep to see to the business he’d neglected.

*What business is it?* Perhaps he had to order troops or the overseer of his fields. Ragath had seen neither of those things, but she’d heard Jonus speak of them. Like everything else in her life, scores of others toiled while she amused

herself...and Jonus.

Soft cloths stroked at her sensitized skin. The scents of herbal soaps and food tantalized her senses.

And it struck. The pain knotted her stomach as it rarely had, an intense, breath-stealing fist. She pitched forward around it, grunting, her teeth and eyes clenched tight.

The movement sent water splashing to the floor, and she shuddered. A wild need to run gripped her, but she couldn't walk like this, let alone run.

*And where would I run? Why would I?* There were no answers to those questions.

"Lady Ragath!"

Hands pulled at her, and she shook her head. It had to ease. It always eased.

"To the bed," one of the older women ordered. "Before she drowns."

That might have seemed extreme any other time, but this time, Ragath wasn't certain it was. The pain was worse than usual, and she was lightheaded in response. Hands supported her and started to lift Ragath out of the water.

The pain intensified, a searing in her gut that doubled her fully. Her tenuous control in the face of pain shattered, and Ragath screamed. Tears pooled in her eyes and ran down her face.

It ended. Her muscles unknotted, and she went boneless in relief. The servants lifted her to the floor and wrapped her in a length of cloth.

Whispered conversations made no sense. The smell of food turned her abused stomach, and Ragath sent it away in a rough voice.

Probably at a loss for something better to do, they dried her and settled Ragath into her bed. Suddenly, Jonus joining her wasn't so important. She needed the sleep rushing toward her.

## Chapter Two

The gut wrenching feeding nearly doubled Gaffin. He'd never felt it so acutely, and he wondered if it was the elder that made it so prominent in his senses.

Hirum met his gaze in the tandem ghosting the entire hunting party shared, pale, giving in to the need to curl around the sensation. So, it wasn't just Gaffin experiencing it.

Ebol's voice brought his head around, and he tried to focus on it, panting through the pain.

"The prisoner is our aim. She will be in one of these two rooms."

Gaffin stared at the rough map of the complex the former minion had provided, though he'd memorized it long ago.

"There will be no locks or doors to slow us once we are inside. The Mad Deceiver has forbidden such things, which will work to our favor."

The thought of the girl being held by the beast raised a fresh edge of Blutjagd in him. The servant hadn't been able to supply her age, and Gaffin's mind had locked on the image of a child becoming a woman.

"The main force will take this room."

*The beast's lair.* They had to send their oldest and best that direction, since the information on hand said the beast never shared the girl's bed.

He fisted his hand in a new spike of fury. *But, it said the young one sometimes shared the beast's bed.* Only the fact that there had been no sign of her maiden's blood kept him in control. Perhaps the Destroyer of Lives hadn't taken her barrier yet.

"Gaffin, your team will take the girl's room. If she is there, remove her as quickly as you can."

"Consider it done." If it killed him, Gaffin wasn't leaving the keep without the girl. The fact that the beast had perpetrated this tragedy so long was a stain on all of them. It would continue not another day.

Veriel had been careful to take his blood away from this stronghold...until recently. By all accounts, the elder's control was slipping. He was getting sloppy, making poor choices, from a strategic standpoint. But why?

The servant had postulated that every day the girl refused his advances, the beast became more dangerous. Such a thing made no sense. Beasts didn't need permission to take what they wanted. If it was not offered freely, they took it with a full measure of pain...or they used their formidable powers to seduce one



to agreement. The girl's refusal would be a minor annoyance to the Mad Elder.

The feeding pain increased markedly, and Gaffin doubled with a gasp. Around him, the other Warriors did likewise.

The sound of a woman screaming in pain escaped the walls and gates of the keep. It was tortured, and it stoked Gaffin's need to hunt. He prayed the beast wasn't killing the girl to keep her from being freed or taking what he wanted in pain, as Gaffin had so recently postulated.

The pain subsided abruptly, and the screaming did likewise. Gaffin looked up in shock. He was on his knees, but he didn't remember crumbling. His face burned. He'd never succumbed to a beast's feeding that way before. Only the fact that three of the older men and one of the younger had as well calmed him. Whatever that was, it was powerful.

They waited for the sun to rise fully, then made their way to the gate the servant had indicated. She waited for them there, her face tense.

"The girl?" Ebol asked urgently.

"Asleep in her chamber."

Gaffin breathed a sigh of relief and then straightened. If she was in her chamber, she was his to free. It was a duty he would not fail at.

"The beast attacked her?" Niklus, his father, asked.

The servant hesitated, offering the key to Ebol. She shook her head. "No. A confidant of the girl's...another servant. But do not trouble yourself. She is dead."

"You saw it?" Broden inquired.

She hesitated. "No, but the master never lets one live that causes the young one pain."

Her acceptance of that fact was chilling. How many servants had caused the girl pain that she knew this?

"Yet he allows the young one to hear the screams of the other?" Hirus huffed. "Does that not harm her?" There'd been no coercion indicating that she might be in some unnatural sleep of the elder's making.

The servant's brow creased in confusion. "One he kills never has time to scream. The scream 'twas of the girl you seek."

"She saw it then," Gaffin grumbled. She would be terrorized. What woman faced with such things wouldn't be? What else had he expected?

Again, the servant denied it. "She knows when the master kills. He cannot hide it from her. Even in one of his sleeps, she feels the kill...or the feeding."

"Sensitive," one of the other Warriors gasped.

Gaffin didn't try to identify which one it was in his shock. It explained everything. It certainly explained why a beast would wish to possess the girl. If she could sense the beasts, she could sense the Warriors. It would be a tactical advantage to possess such a prize.

Broden and Ebol shot hard looks at Gaffin, and he bowed his head in response. If she was a sensitive, he would lay down his life to save her the least discomfort. None of them would leave the keep without her.

“And the beast?” Ebol asked the servant.

“I do not know. I could not excuse looking.”

Ebol traded the amulet for the key, and the servant scurried away, her blessing already intact.

The Warriors didn’t waste time. Sacred weapons in hand, they entered the keep. Chances were, the beast was sleeping in his chamber or gone to ground, but without sunlight inside the keep, he could rise to challenge them.

They would take any minions that resisted them silently and free the girl. Gods willing, they would either not encounter the elder at all or would send him to the Stone’s punishment. That was why they’d come with so many in the first place.

\* \* \* \*

Ragath opened her eyes at the noise from the archway. So, Jonus had returned from his business to join her. Perhaps he was worried by of her attack of stomach. Surely the servants had told him this one was worse than the others.

Her eyes took a moment to focus on the shape in the archway. Her mind took a moment longer to identify it. For a hand of heartbeats, they stared at each other, Ragath in stunned disbelief.

He moved, and she scrambled up the bed, holding the sheet to her body. *What a male cannot see, he will not covet.*

*Gods, what do I do if he covets me?*

Her mind spun sickly. How had the male gotten into the keep? Had he come for her? Where was Jonus? What would Jonus do if he took her away? What would Jonus do, if the male sated himself in her?

He took another step, his hands up in a calming gesture, words that made no sense crooning from his lips.

*I have to escape him. I cannot let him fixate on me.*

That in mind, Ragath vaulted to her feet, bolting for the archway with the sheet trailing behind her.

He had her wrapped in his arms before she made half the distance. Ragath screamed, beating at him, trying her best to escape his lecherous intentions.

The sheet slipped away, and she let it fall. She had to escape, naked or not. But to where? There were no doors she could bolt within the keep. All of those were placed to isolate them from the outside. She couldn’t run there.

“Ani. Raga.”

The endearments stopped her in her tracks. How would he know them? They were what Jonus called her for pet names. Not even her own parents would know that.

Once she stopped fighting, the strange male set her on her feet carefully and eased his hands away. Ragath turned to him, taking a shaky step back.

“How do you know those names?” she demanded. “Who told you?” Was

there a traitor in the keep? Was that how he gained entrance?

He cocked his head to one side, his brow furrowed. Sounds that she was sure were words left his lips, but none of them were words she knew. Ragath bit her lip, working at that. Whatever language he spoke was not what she did. She'd never known there were multiple languages.

He tried again, and she shook her head hopelessly. She didn't even have enough of his language to tell him she didn't understand him properly.

He motioned up and down her body. When she stared at him without comprehension, he sighed and motioned to the shelves of clothing.

Ragath backed to them, wary, unwilling to give him her back. She reached around blindly and pulled down a gown. It nearly tore in her haste to get it on, and her breathing came in harsh gasps of air. The last thing she wanted was to be trapped in the fabric when he moved again.

His eyes widened, and he gaped at her. At a loss, Ragath looked down at herself. It was one of her fine gowns. Surely, he'd seen one before. She glanced up at him, shaking her head to indicate that she didn't understand.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin took a calming breath. The gown she'd donned did nothing to cover her. That meant it did nothing to calm his raging lust.

This was no child. She was a woman, young but ripe and ready to be bride to some lucky man. Though he had no doubts his Warrior brethren could control their urges as he did, he could hardly travel with her unclothed this way. There had to be something more appropriate on hand.

He went to the shelves, and she retreated to the bed again. It wasn't an image he needed...her nearly nude on a surface built for sex.

*I am stronger than my curse.* That in mind, he pulled gown after gown down, grinding his teeth at the number of them that were the same material she currently wore. Surely, there was something that would cover her properly.

His muscles relaxed at the sight of a heavy gown. He carried it to her and motioned for her to put it on.

She took it from his hand, her nose wrinkling in distaste. The look she shot him said that he'd offended her somehow, though he couldn't imagine how. She held the garment over the floor and let it drop in a show of disdain.

"Gods alive, I cannot take you out like this," he pleaded.

There was no reaction from her. As he'd guessed, she didn't have knowledge of their language. The damned beast had certainly created an awkward situation.

*Think! There had to be a way to get her to clothe herself.* She wouldn't wear the heavy gown. Perhaps she would wear something else.

He started to strip off his tunic, and she bolted for the archway again, her eyes wide and full of terror. Gaffin caught her to his chest, pinning her to his

body with the arm he'd freed from the tunic while he peeled it off one-handed.

She wriggled against him, which succeeded in bringing his cock up. Her sob caused it to shrink again.

*Thank the gods!*

Gaffin dragged his tunic over her head, and she stopped struggling in shock. She stared up at him, looking much more the child than the woman he knew her to be.

He threaded his free hand through the closer arm hole and circled her wrist, guiding her arm back through. She hesitated then pushed the other through on her own. Gaffin offered her a smile and released her.

She didn't move away from him. Instead, she smoothed the tunic down her stomach and thighs. After a moment, she pulled the edge to her nose and inhaled his scent. There was no reaction to that, one way or the other.

*I have to teach her our language.* There was no question about that. First and foremost, he had to learn what the beast was calling her.

Gaffin patted his chest, drawing her gaze up to him again. "Gaffin," he stated. He motioned to her, waiting for her reply.

She hesitated. Her small hand pressed to the hollow between her breasts. "Ragath."

He started to nod.

"Raga," she continued. "Ani." Her head cocked to one side as if questioning him.

*That is why she stopped fighting me. She recognized the words.* He nodded grimly.

"Gaffin," Hiram called out.

Ragath startled, hiding herself behind his body. She trembled, and her small hands circled his arm.

The other Warrior scowled. "Can you not control your curse better than that?"

She peeked out at him, and Hiram's jaw dropped. So, he felt the connection as well.

"Who is she?" There was a note of awe in his voice.

"Raga. The beast called her Ragath."

There was a moment of stillness. Then he went to one knee and bowed his head to her.

Ragath looked up at Gaffin in surprise. She ducked behind him again, her trembling more pronounced.

"She does not speak our language," Gaffin confided. "I may have to remove her by force." It was better to warn Hiram in advance, he supposed.

The younger man vaulted to his feet, offering a hand to her, as if she would accompany him without question. Ragath moved further around Gaffin's body with a squeal of distress.

"Gods only know what she's been told about us," Gaffin breathed.

\* \* \* \*

*Good gods! Two males?* A horror show of possibilities cascaded through her mind. Would they both expect her to sate them? The idea of Gaffin claiming her and taking her from Jonus was shocking enough, but this was more than her mind could handle.

Gaffin turned to her, taking her arm gently. He motioned toward the archway.

She shook her head, tears pooling in her eyes. There was a world of men out there, males who had no self-control when a female came into view. What would happen to her if she left the safety of the walls?

He grumbled something fierce and then scooped her over his shoulder, one large hand pressing down on the small of her back and the other gripping her ankles so she couldn't kick him. Ragath screamed in terror, beating her fists against his back. Tears escaped her eyes and wet his back.

Both males made soothing sounds. The other tried to touch her, and she swung her fist around, catching his cheekbone. He recoiled from the force of her blow.

Gaffin's snap turn made her dizzy. Whatever he said to the other sent him several more steps away. Then he turned and kept walking.

They passed the first gate, and Ragath choked. At the second, she reached out for it, desperate to stop them. Gaffin sidestepped, and her fingers skated off the metal bar closest to her.

"Stop. Please, stop," she begged them. The fact that they didn't understand her didn't matter. Ragath had to make them understand.

The intense light burned her eyes, and Ragath squeezed them shut in response. She reached out blindly, trying to find a handhold, anything that would keep Gaffin from taking her out of the keep and into the world of lecherous men. There was nothing.

Footsteps approached at a run. A sensation that announced Jonus was angry followed.

*No. Not Jonus.* Or, at least, not just Jonus. The feeling came from several directions at once, indicating that more than one person was angry.

Voices rose around her, a chorus of decidedly male voices. Her heart stuttered in response. The words flew fast and furious. Two were repeated several times, the pet names Jonus had for her.

She subsided into tears. There was no escaping this many. That was a given.

Gaffin settled her on her feet, wiping at her face with a soft cloth.

Ragath opened her eyes a slit, trying her best to focus in this damnable light. Shapes took solid form from the misty whole, and she counted them in mounting terror.

*Nine. Oh, gods! No.*

She scrambled closer to Gaffin. He'd stopped the second man in her room from touching her. Perhaps he would do the same for the others.

*Assuming he is the strongest among them.*

Her knees shook, and her head ached in the combination of crying, light, and the stresses of the night. Her breathing went ragged, and darkness took her. The shouts of distress faded away.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin lifted Ragath to his chest. She'd retreated to him at every shock. Until she stated her mind, he would assume her choice of protector had been made.

"Is it true?" Ebol asked. "Has she the mark?"

"She has. I saw it."

"I want to see it for myself," Broden challenged.

Gaffin bristled at that. Not at the fact that Broden didn't believe him but rather at the fact that the other man expected Gaffin to strip her for their curiosity.

Then again, his tunic was overlarge for her; if he moved it aside, her shoulder would be clearly visible through the gown. He shifted her in his arms and did so.

Broden stared at it, swallowing hard. "Gods alive. Mieshen will be beside himself."

Gaffin's muscles tightened down a notch at the mention of Ragath's father. True, she was of the other man's household and subject to his rule, but she was also Raga. Being Raga meant she was destined to choose a mate from among the other Warriors.

Did her clinging to Gaffin mean he was her choice? Or was it only because she saw him first? Was it because he'd ordered Hirus to stand down, when she was so panicked? Without common language between them, there was no way for him to know her mind.

The only thing that was certain was her ease with Gaffin. Until she made a clear choice, he was her protector. He prepared to defend that interpretation.

"Gaffin?"

He looked around at Ebol, the eldest of their hunting party. "Yes?"

"The lady has named you protector. It is your lead."

His mouth went dry at that pronouncement. There were six Warriors older than himself present, two of them lords, one of them his own father. Yet they were deferring to his judgment. He'd been certain they would argue his place as protector.

Words stuck in his throat for a long moment. "Broden and Alri...find Mieshen."

The Warrior had gone into seclusion and rarely interacted with his brother

Warriors. He would have been invited to join the hunting party if the beast had been any but Veriel. His control in the face of that particular beast would be an uncertain element and might have risked every man involved.

Gaffin glanced at Ragath, his heart aching. *All because you were stolen from him.*

“And?” his father continued.

*She is mine.* But she wasn’t his, and that was the problem. “Ragath has named me her protector. Until Mieshen states otherwise, she stays with me. We move. The beast will pursue when night falls.”

“You heard him,” Ebol ordered. “Move.”

\* \* \* \*

Ragath woke to the litany of soothing foreign words. She sighed, comforted, warm...protected. *Cherished.* Where that idea came from, she wasn’t certain.

Her servants had always told her she should feel cherished, but she never had...until now.

A whisper of movement near her face brought a delight of scents: green growing things and aroused male. *Undeniably Gaffin.* She moved closer, seeking them.

The words continued, bathing her lips. Was he going to kiss her? They ended, and he moved...slowly, torturously.

At the limits of her endurance, Ragath levered herself up, sealing her mouth to his, her body in a riot. Gaffin growled, sending a shiver of delight down her body.

He wrenched away from her, and she startled, her eyes opening wide. His jaw was tense, and his muscles were strung tight. She’d often seen Jonus in such a mood, and she knew well enough that violence was on his mind.

*What was I thinking?* She’d been inviting him. What madness had struck her to do such a thing?

Ragath pressed a hand to her lips, shaking her head. What would she do if he took that as permission? Did he even live by the same laws Jonus did? Would he require her permission to bed her?

*Surely not!*

His muscles tightened down further, and her heart skittered in fear. She’d refused his quest for satiation. She’d angered him. What would he do next?

Gaffin visibly calmed himself, and she relaxed in response. He wasn’t going to pounce on her. He wasn’t going to force her.

*At least not yet,* her mind taunted.

He eased back, giving her space. Ragath didn’t bolt from him. Something told her that with Gaffin was infinitely safer than outside the cloth room, where she could hear the other men milling about.

His hand went back, and it came around with a plate of food. Ragath stared

at it. Was he offering it to her?

As if in answer, Gaffin extended it toward her. “*Eat.*”

The word was unfamiliar. She took it, watching his face for signs that she’d interpreted his aim correctly. When the rough metal plate was in her hand, he nodded to it.

“*Eat.*”

*I have to learn to speak to him.* She pointed to the food. “*Eat. Food?*”

His brow furrowed. She sighed and tried again.

Finally, an expression of realization settled on his face. He placed his fingers to his lips. “*Eat.*”

She tried to make a logic stream that worked. Why was he telling her what lips or mouth was, when she wanted to know the word for food?

He sighed and reached to the plate, taking a bit of meat. He raised it to his lips. “*Eat.*” Gaffin stared at the meat, probably working at whether it would be ruder to place it back for her or eat it himself. In the end, he popped it into his mouth and started chewing. “*Eat.*”

Ragath nodded in understanding. He hadn’t been offering her food. He’d been commanding her to eat it.

For a moment, she considered refusing the order. How dare he order her! Gaffin hadn’t struck the deal with her father. He had no claim over her.

Her growling stomach made its opinion known. She sighed, her anger waning. Then she ate.

A strange movement against her chest had her looking for the cause. A heavy amulet rested on the end of a thong around her neck. The food stuck in her throat, and she coughed harshly.

Gaffin moved abruptly, rubbing his hand over her back. It was so solicitous, it made her head spin.

*But, the amulet...* She’d seen one like it before, of course. It would be the sign that she was Jonus’s, when she made the vow to be his forever.

She raised her head, fingering the amulet in rising panic. If Gaffin gave her this, he considered her his own. He’d marked her as such.

*I didn’t give my vow.*

*Perhaps his laws are not the same as Jonus’s.* If that was so, what were his laws?

Gaffin placed his hand over the amulet, his expression one that brooked no argument.

She considered that. It was likely a warning not to remove the amulet. If the males he traveled with respected it, they might not touch her while she wore it. Other men might not. Ragath nodded. If anyone removed the amulet, it would be Jonus.

*Or a male that bests this one in battle.*



## Chapter Three

Ragath stirred, looking around in the late daylight, her heart hammering.

It had been three days, and she knew the ways of the males well. They were awake and watchful through the night. No fires were lit in the darkness. After a time of rest and food that had been cooked in the waning sunlight, they traveled leisurely for the latter half of the night. They traveled hard in the pre-dawn and through half the day. Then they slept and ate. Only one stayed awake during those hours, a different one each day...never Gaffin, yet.

She didn't want Gaffin to be awake. If he was awake, he would do what he always did. He would sit with her, stare at her with those disconcerting eyes that made her want to invite him again.

*That make me want to speak the damned vow to him.*

Not that he would understand it, even if she did.

There was little enough chance that this would work. If Gaffin was awake, there would be none.

*I am mad.* Ragath didn't question that. Why was she considering this?

The answer was clear. Given much more time with Gaffin, she would beg to be his.

Whether she was or not, there was little chance Gaffin could defeat Jonus in battle. She'd seen Jonus train. He moved like lightning. He disappeared like ripples on water.

There was little chance he wasn't looking for her. Sooner or later, he'd find her. It was a safe wager he was close. If she ran from Gaffin, he might find her sooner...while she was still intact and not honor vowed to be Gaffin's. If she wasn't when he arrived, what he did to Gaffin would be akin to her nightmares, she was certain.

She hesitated at the cloth doorway, torn. She didn't want to be honor vowed to be Jonus's. Given the choice, she'd rather give herself to Gaffin. Was it fear of Jonus killing Gaffin that made her run? Was it simply the fear of being outside the walls that caused this irrational decision-making process?

*At what point did I decide I was being irrational?* Her anger spiked at that.

The sentry moved, coming to his feet as if danger approached.

*He's seen me. Please, gods. Do not let him see me.*

Moments passed, and he relaxed, shaking his head as if fatigued. Then he rose and started his walking tour of the camp.

Ragath knew the tour as well as she knew everything else about their ways.

In moments, he would be out of line of sight of her.

When he was, she ducked down and moved quickly toward the tree line, taking care not to disturb the sleeping males. A savage glee lit in her. No one had seen her. Perhaps she would make it to Jonus after all.

The attack came without warning, a few body lengths into the trees. Arms circled her, and Ragath struggled with them.

A muttered word the males used often in their disgust or upset escaped him, and he clamped down tight on her and started carrying her. In their struggle, she'd lost track of direction. Was he carrying her toward Gaffin or away from him?

A sudden certainty that it was away struck her, and Ragath screamed. The plan of escaping Gaffin gone awry, she was safest with him. If this male planned to force her or otherwise harm her, Gaffin would surely stop it.

*I pray.*

The one holding her startled, and calming sounds left his lips, but he didn't release her. She opened her mouth to vent another scream.

Males hurtled at them, stopping her short in mid-intake of breath. Weapons were drawn, and her attacker dropped her.

Ragath made to bolt, but another arm circled her. She beat at him, venting the aborted scream.

A blade nestled to the man's throat, and he released her, putting his hands up in surrender. Frantic words left his throat. Some of them she recognized. Some were new.

Ragath stood in stunned shock, staring at the blade, too frightened to run again. A hand closed on her arm and drew her along the length of the one with the weapon clenched in it. She looked up...at Gaffin.

\* \* \* \*

His heart pounded in a combination of *Blutjagd* and fear. At her scream, Gaffin had been certain Veriel's minions were upon them. He hadn't expected to find Ragath in the midst of what appeared to be two of his brother Warriors attacking her.

"Explain," he demanded of Demin, couching the promise of death as her protector—and therefore judge—into that.

Ragath curled to his chest, trembling hard, her breaths hitching in terror that stoked his fury further.

"When the others took down Nev, she bolted. I was afraid she'd become lost or separated from us. I tried to explain, Gaffin, but she has no words to comprehend. And after her scare with Nev, I imagine... Well, I shudder to imagine what she thought my aim was in grabbing her that way." He darkened at the admission, clearly tortured by the situation, as Gaffin was himself.

"It is the truth," Ebol attested. "Demin was an arm's length from me when

she screamed the first time. He was not with Nev.”

Gaffin forced his arm back, nodding stiffly. “My apologies, my brother.”

Demin took a deep breath, shaking his arms loose. “On my honor, I would never harm her. I swear it.”

“I believe you.” That settled, he turned to stand as judge to Nev.

The young man looked from man to man, swallowing hard as he met Gaffin’s eyes. He was surrounded by Warriors barely leashing their *Blutjagd*. It was Hiram’s blade at his throat, but the others were ready to gut him, if he moved a finger.

Gaffin took a calming breath before he spoke. “Explain this.”

“She was escaping, Gaffin.”

His heart stuttered at that. “What proof have you?” Had Ragath really been trying to escape him? Or was Nev trying to save his hide?

“She snuck out. She went to the woods.”

“Perhaps she simply needed to relieve her bodily aches,” he snapped. Most people did when waking.

“She was ghosting. Not perfectly. Not well, but ghosting,” he insisted. “What other reason could she have for it but escape?”

Gaffin considered that. To ghost, she would have to want not to be seen. It was what set in motion the power to do so, in the first place.

He cupped her chin in thumb and forefinger, urging Ragath’s face up. She stared at him, her expression unreadable. Yet again, he cursed the lack of language between them. Gaffin would have to accelerate their lessons.

He motioned impatiently at the deeper reaches of the woods, raising a questioning brow. He knew she recognized that as a request for information.

Ragath swallowed hard, glancing at the other men, then the trees...but not at Gaffin. “Needs,” she grumbled the word he’d taught her to use when she needed to relieve her bowels or bladder.

Gaffin didn’t doubt she’d lied to him. He didn’t look away from her, challenging her to be truthful with him. To attempt, at least, to explain why she’d run.

*This is new and frightening for her. Ragath needs time to build trust with us.* He might never discover what had spooked her into this attempt. Veriel might have done any number of things that would echo into her dealings with Warriors.

He nodded. “Release Nev,” he ordered. “She ran.”

“What will we do about it?” Ebol inquired. “If she means to run—”

“She will not have the opportunity to run again,” Gaffin vowed.

The Warriors’ sounds of distress made his heart stutter. If they felt he was mishandling her, they could stand as judge and end him.

“Surely, you don’t intend to bind her,” his father protested.

“No. I intend to never leave her side.”

“You do not now,” Demin noted in obvious confusion.

“Until now, she has had a sleeping space an arm’s length from mine. Now,

she will sleep beneath my arm. There is no possibility she will leave the mat without me waking.”

He expected protests at that. There were none.

One by one, his brother Warriors grunted or nodded their agreement. Ebol pronounced it “sensible.”

\* \* \* \*

Ragath shivered at the hard cut of Gaffin’s expression. He knew. He knew she’d lied to him. He knew she’d intended to escape...somehow.

His men wandered away to the camp, but Gaffin stayed with her. After a long moment, his hand circled her arm, and he guided her into the trees.

She looked back at the cloth room, panicked. She’d expected that he would claim her there. What would be his purpose in doing so in the trees? Would it be a brutal lesson not to attempt escape again?

Her foot caught on a tree root, and she stumbled. In a blur of motion, Gaffin was there, supporting her. He stared at her, his expressions shifting.

She wanted to question him, to learn what caused the pain in his expression, but there were no words for that. Ragath cursed it again.

Then they were in motion. Gaffin led her away from the camp and stopped.

Her breathing hitched, and she stared at his legged coverings, waiting for him to unfasten them as he did when he emptied his bladder. Soothing sounds brought her head up. Gaffin shook his head. Was he saying he didn’t intend what she thought?

His hand retreated, and Gaffin motioned to the ground. Ragath looked that direction, confused. His voice rumbled out, a confusing mix of words, but it contained the word “needs.”

She nodded. Ragath had used the excuse of needing to see to her bodily aches, and he was ordering her to do so.

Gaffin didn’t turn his back as he usually would. It was a punishment for her lies and her attempt to escape him, she was certain. He didn’t trust her as he had before.

That fact made her heart ache. What did it matter if he trusted her or not? She couldn’t say for certain, but it did. Ragath opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again. What could she possibly say that he would understand?

“Needs,” he repeated, probably believing she hadn’t understood him the first time. It was said in a calm, patient voice, but nothing else about him could rightly be called calm. His muscles were strung tight, and his jaw clenched.

Ragath had learned long ago not to balk a man in this mood. She nodded, pulled her dress to her hips, and squatted to accomplish the task.

When the flow stopped, Gaffin offered his hand to help her to her feet. She took it, pausing halfway up, her eyes riveted on his erect length.

He tugged, and she stood, her senses in a riot. Did he plan to bed with her

now that her needs had been seen to? There was no answer to that forthcoming, and so she followed him back to the camp, wound through the men settling back to sleep, and preceded him into the cloth room.

Her move to settle to her own bed met with the resistance of his arms circling her. Gaffin took a step toward his own, pulling her along.

Ragath resisted, trying to free her arm from his grip. Gaffin pulled her flush to his body, his cock long and hard against her belly. His breathing came in ragged blasts of air.

*“Do not run from me.”*

She had no clue what that meant, but he said it slowly and clearly, as if he meant her to learn it. It was probably a warning not to fight him.

Ragath forced her muscles loose, her heart hammering as Gaffin eased her to the narrow woven mat. He didn't cover her with his body. Instead, he knelt beside her and urged her to her side. Then he laid behind Ragath, wrapping one large arm over her in a blatant sign of ownership to the other men...and perhaps to her.

She held herself stiff in his arms, waiting for him to punish her...or to claim her. Her traitor body heated at the latter possibility. What would it be like to be held beneath Gaffin as he thrust through her barrier as Jonus would have?

Gaffin's cock went hard against her back, promising that. Her breathing hitched. For long moments, she waited for the overt move toward what he wanted.

It didn't come. In time, her exhaustion won, and she slept in his arms.

## Chapter Four

Gaffin sat his mount, Ragath across his legs. They would restock in the marketplace at Er and be on their way well before sundown.

Knowing the village was so close, Gaffin had reversed his usual orders for movement. The food the men ate on trail was good enough for them, but there was no reason to subject a woman to it. With winter approaching, the game was scarce, and despite trying, providing fresh food for Ragath had been difficult.

At first sight, the bright stalls drew her eyes. They widened, as if she was a child seeing such wonders for the first time.

He couldn't name what changed and made her so tense at first. Then it became clear to him. There were men, groups of men, drinking and sharing tales at an inn.

Ragath buried her face in his chest, pulling his cloak around her as if to hide herself from them. His mind worked quickly, piecing together similar attempts to hide herself from the sight of men. Hiram's arrival in her bed chamber had sent her to Gaffin's back. The sight of the nine Warriors had sent her into a faint. Every time she encountered new men, panic was the result.

What did she think would happen to her? What had the beast told her? There were no answers for that.

There was one thing he had to do. Now that she had been freed from Veriel, Ragath lived in a world full of men. She had to accept that.

Gaffin pulled his horse around, dismounted with Ragath in his arms, and tethered the animal. He settled her on her feet and eased his cloak from her fists.

*On second thought...* He removed his cloak and wrapped it around her, lending another layer of clothing to hide her slender legs from the men.

Ragath looked around, pressing closer to him. Gaffin took her arm, leading the way past the group of carousing men.

Their talking tapered off, and they stared. Gaffin bristled at that. Would all men have this reaction to her?

At his tensing, his brother Warriors closed ranks around them, to the sides and rear, leaving Ragath a clear range of vision while ensuring that no one would approach her.

She eased at that, shooting Gaffin a strained smile...in thanks, he was sure. He returned it, then set himself to the task of teaching her words.

The marketplace afforded them the opportunity to expand her knowledge in leaps and bounds. Like most Warriors, Ragath had a fine memory and rarely

needed to hear a word more than twice to add it firmly to her grasp of the language.

It was a fine time. Ragath smiled and blushed.

Gaffin learned her favorite foods by watching what her eyes and hands sought out in the mix. Meat was harder than other foods; they had to expand her knowledge with vendors selling prepared foods, when it became apparent that she'd never seen raw meat before.

The live animals fascinated her, both those in water and farm stock. It didn't surprise Gaffin. Animals wouldn't tolerate close confinement with a beast, and until they'd freed her, Ragath had never formed memories of the world outside Veriel's keep.

Overall, this had been the best idea he'd had yet.

Her head turned, and she went rigid. That simply, every Warrior lit in *Blutjagd*.

Gaffin sought out some sign of danger. Had she seen a minion? Surely, she hadn't seen Veriel in a strong sun.

\* \* \* \*

Ragath stared at the group of women in horror. They walked toward the marketplace in a pack, no guards surrounding them as Gaffin's men surrounded her. Where were their men? What were they doing outside their keep?

A group of men at a weapons stall turned. Their sounds were sharp and full of sexual promise. More than one cock rose at the sight of them.

Still, the women came.

Ragath shook her head, certain that she knew what would come next. Women outside the protection of a keep were used by any man who spied them. The men might take turns with them, fight for them, harm the women in their lust and their drive to be first into their soft bodies. If a woman had no male protectors strong enough to hold them off, they did what they wished, when they wished.

She turned, trying to slip between the men behind her. She didn't want to see this. Ragath wanted to be well away before they started warring and fucking.

They closed ranks, and Gaffin took her arms. He shook his head, his eyes wide in concern. "Do not run."

She knew what that meant now, but didn't he understand? Ragath hadn't been raised in this violent world. She couldn't watch such things. She didn't want to see them. She didn't even want to know they existed.

"Do not run," he repeated.

The males' noises went to a high that warned the breaking point was coming. She ground her teeth, her head spinning in terror.

"Run," she insisted. "Gaffin...run!"

He nodded, scooping her to his chest. He set off at a sprint, shouting orders

to the other men of his group. In moments, they were mounted and in motion, riding hard and fast toward the west.

Ragath held to him, sobbing in relief that she hadn't been forced to watch it happen, sobbing in agony for the women she'd left behind. Why hadn't she demanded they take the women with them? Had she been so selfish? That thought brought on a new spate of tears.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin dismounted, carrying Ragath to the mat Ebol had laid out for them. She'd trembled and cried herself into a stupor, then fallen into a deep sleep, and he still had no clue what had spooked her so.

Something told him it was connected to the hoots and comments the young men in the crowd had sent at the women coming into the marketplace, but it had been a harmless show of appreciation for their beauty...a childish attempt at gaining the attention of one of the young women escorted by their mothers and grandmothers. Perhaps one of the women would have noticed. Perhaps one would be bride to the young man in the spring or summer.

Why that would disturb Ragath was a mystery. But, considering the fact he had no clue what the beast had done to her or told her, it was a mystery he had no hopes of unraveling soon.

Gaffin settled her on the mat, arranging his cloak to keep her warm. Even now, tremors wracked her form.

"What caused this?" Ebol asked, his voice low to preserve her restless slumber. "What did she see?"

"I cannot say. It may have been a minion, but I doubt it."

"You *doubt* it?" his father scoffed.

"I do not believe Ragath has been permitted sight of any man save Veriel in her life. Our ways are strange to her. They frighten her. I do not believe Veriel would have introduced her to a male minion. Remember the keep?"

There was a moment of contemplative silence.

Finally, Ebol grunted his agreement. "There were only women within. Not a single male guard."

"Can you imagine the trauma to Ragath when faced with a world full of men?" Gaffin was having a hard time imagining it himself.

"What should we do to counter it?" his father asked.

"Avoid places like the marketplace...for now. Let her become accustomed to our ways in the small groups of Warriors and families. Then introduce her to the world, when she has calmed to us."

"Sensible. For now, we should let her sleep and make her a hearty meal."

Gaffin nodded his agreement. Still, he wished he knew what Ragath had feared so acutely.



## Chapter Five

The meal was a subdued affair. Ragath made no attempt at engaging in conversation. She hardly seemed aware of the conversation that did take place, of the worried looks the Warriors shot her.

Gaffin noted her wrinkled nose...the way she sniffed at her clothing and grimaced. She was a lady accustomed to comforts.

His cock aching at what he was considering, he left her for a moment and sought out his pack. The soap stone wasn't what he'd typically offer her, but it would do the job of cleaning away the dirt and sweat, and the cloth would cover and dry her, until her clothing dried.

Her eyes widened at the sight of his offering, and she vaulted to her feet. Ragath grasped the edge of his tunic and started to peel it back, revealing her body and reinforcing that she had no sense of modesty within the safety of their group.

Gaffin grasped her at the lower curve of her hips, stopping it there. Around the fire, heads snapped up, and *Blutjagd* rose. Ragath pulled from his hands, and he let her go.

He motioned the other Warriors down, and their ire faded. Ragath relaxed in response. Her gaze shifted to Gaffin, and she straightened proudly.

A tip of his head toward the other men caused the rising of a flush in her cheeks. She nodded, though he wasn't certain she understood his concerns.

Gaffin put his hand out. She hesitated and then stepped to his side, allowing him to wrap the hand around her arm.

"Gaffin," his father blustered. "Surely you do not mean to—"

"I have seen her nude before, Father. I will not take advantage of this situation."

There was no warning that he had best not. That went without saying.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin led her to a gentle river that ran over smooth rocks. He motioned Ragath to the water, his eyes soft and inviting.

She took a moment to consider her situation. She had to wash her body and clothing and probably don them again while they were wet.

*Or bathe in them.*

Ragath discarded that idea. If she bathed in her clothing, she wouldn't

properly clean her body, and she wanted to be clean.

Gaffin breathed her name, and she turned to look at him. He motioned to her clothing and spoke words that she hadn't learned yet.

Though he'd seen her in every possible state of dress and undress, including completely nude, disrobing before him now felt intimate, as if her nudity held some meaning it never had before. She hesitated, unsure.

When she started pulling off the clothing, Gaffin's eyes went hot and heavy-lidded. He took his tunic from her hand, then the gown Jonus had given her. Just when Ragath felt certain he would lean toward her and kiss her, he placed the soap in her hand and waved her into the river.

The water was cold and refreshing, and she glided in, reveling in the decadence of water so vast, with such natural, green scent about it. Ragath cupped handfuls up and wet her skin to make scrubbing away the dirt and sweat of their time traveling easier.

The soap was completely unlike the ones she'd been bathed with in Jonus's keep, but it did the job well, leaving her skin slick and her hair smooth. Ragath immersed herself several times, washing the slick away and leaving a light, woody scent behind.

There was something freeing in bathing herself, in not relying on servants to see to her needs. *I should have demanded this luxury long ago.* But she'd forgotten how enjoyable it was.

A sound behind her brought her head around. Gaffin was knee deep in the river, wetting the clothing he'd taken from her again and again. She ambled to him and offered the soap. He took it with a smile and a nod, and she went back to her soaking, enjoying the push of the current on her skin. It was like a hundred fingers, soothing her.

Ragath stared at the rippling water, enchanted. She'd always loved the way water moved and felt.

A sliver of memory played at her mind, and she cupped her hand slightly. Ragath stared at it, her brow scrunched tight over narrowed eyes.

*If I scoop the water and throw it thus...* The droplets glittered like jewels and made a pleasing melody on the slowly-moving surface. She smiled and tried again and again. Laughter burst from her throat.

*Small hands splashed water in her bath. Ragath aimed for the older nurses, giggling at their scowls of disapproval.*

She'd enjoyed splashing as a child. How strange that she hadn't remembered it. Ragath sent another spray up, smiling. What was there not to enjoy?

*The smack came without warning. Ragath stared at the rising bruise on her hand, stunned. The nurse struck her? She couldn't remember ever being struck before.*

*"No splashing, Ragath!" the nurse chided. "Look at the mess."*

*The other servants shied from the nurse, clearly horrified. Ragath scented*

*their panic and reacted, screaming in confusion and fear.*

She bit at her lower lip, trailing her fingers in the water. Was that why she'd stopped splashing water? Because a nurse had frightened her?

"Ragath? Is something wrong?"

"Ragath!"

*Jonus appeared from nowhere, scooping her out of the tub. Ragath held to his shoulders, her little feet pressed to his broad chest, sobbing hysterically. Around her, there was absolute and chilling silence.*

"Raga, my love," he breathed. "What—"

*His question died off. Jonus raised Ragath's hand, his dark eyes widening. He laid a kiss over the bruise, whispering soothing words. Ragath laid her cheek against his shoulder, her breathing hitching.*

*Jonus turned to the nurse who'd struck her, picking her out flawlessly. The other servants backed away further, leaving that one alone at the center of the floor. Still, she stood her ground, straight and tall.*

"You struck Ragath." It wasn't a question.

"The child—"

*She made it no further. Jonus's backhanded smack sent her sprawling, sliding across the wet floor.*

*Ragath stared at her, shivering in the uncomfortable stillness. The nurse's head was at an odd angle, and her eyes stared at nothing in particular. Red mixed with the puddles of water, racing toward Jonus's bare feet.*

*Jonus whisked Ragath away to the safety of his bed.*

She startled, looking at the water in mistrust. The setting sun turned the surface a fiery red and orange.

*Blood. So much blood. I splashed...played...and Jonus killed her.*

Ragath screamed at the thought, her mind rebelling.

\* \* \* \*

"Ragath? Is something wrong?"

She didn't seem to hear him. Ragath stared into space, her fingers stirring idly in the water.

Gaffin set her clothing on the rock he'd been using to beat his tunic and headed deeper into the water. Something wasn't right, and he wanted to be closer to Ragath in case it was a threat.

She shivered, her breathing coming in sharp gasps.

"Ragath?"

Again, there was no response.

She startled, her eyes darting back and forth, her head lowered. Was there something in the river?

Ragath screamed and surged toward him. She fought the water, fully opposite her smooth entry. Gaffin crossed the final distance and extended his

hand, intent on guiding her around to his back. She scaled his body instead of allowing that.

He kicked beneath the water, expecting to encounter some sort of large eel or fish that had spooked her. There was nothing, just the pull of gently moving water.

“Ragath? What is it?”

Bits and pieces of words escaped her lips, in his language and hers.

*Nothing that makes sense.* He opened his mouth to speak again.

“Gaffin!”

He didn’t turn toward Ebol’s voice. There was little question that every Warrior in their hunting party had come running at her scream, and Ragath was nude with only his body blocking their view of her.

“The cloth,” he ordered.

There was a flurry of activity and then the sounds of one man entering the water. The cloth appeared at his shoulder; the man holding it didn’t step forward where he could see Ragath.

Gaffin considered his options. “Who are you?”

“Niklus,” his father replied.

“Tuck the cloth around her.”

“Gaffin!” It was little more than a shocked whisper.

“You are a mated man,” Gaffin grumbled. “You won’t have feelings for what you see. Wrap the cloth.”

His father did so, his hands trembling, his eyes averted. When he was done, Gaffin offered a terse word of thanks and headed for shore.

“What caused this?” Ebol asked.

Gaffin ground his teeth in frustration. “Gods damned if I know, but I intend to find out.”

Enough of not understanding what upset her. Every time Ragath screamed, it stopped his heart.

He took her directly to their shared sleeping mat and settled Ragath on it. She huddled in the cloth, shaking hard.

“Fish?” he asked, seeking to use words she understood.

Ragath stared at him, seemingly lost.

“In the water? A fish?”

Her head swiveled in a negative response.

“An eel?”

“N-no. No eel. No fish.”

“What then?” It wasn’t adequate to elicit an answer. Gaffin knew that before he noted that her look of confusion hadn’t changed. He tried again. “What...makes you fear?”

“F-fear?” She shook her head, her brow furrowed.

Gaffin extended his hand and mimicked her trembling. He pressed a hand to his heart and then thumped it fast. “What makes you fear, Ragath? What makes

you run now?”

Ragath paled. “Jonus.”

He snapped a look at the setting sun, scanning for danger, reasoning himself out of it. If the Deceiver was near, why hadn’t he attacked or tried to take her back?

“Here?” he demanded. If she said yes, he would order the move this moment.

She shook her head, her brow furrowed, as if he’d somehow misunderstood her.

Gaffin breathed a sigh of relief. “Something that reminds you of the beast.” But how could he learn what it was to avoid it in the future? “Water?” No. She’d been so excited about bathing, so happy about being immersed.

Ragath visibly struggled with her limited vocabulary. “Water...no. Blood...on water.”

The sunset reflected on the water perhaps. “You have *seen* blood on water with the beast?” He annunciated each word and watched for her response.

“Jonus—” she choked out. Ragath squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them and started again. “Jonus...slaughter woman.”

He winced at the words she’d grasped on. It was probably precisely what she’d witnessed. Had she seen it the morning they’d rescued her? Did it matter?

*Not really. She saw it.* It didn’t matter when she had.

Ragath continued, probably believing he wanted more information. She was correct, though he had no way of asking the many questions circling in his head.

“I...” She hesitated and then placed her flattened hand waist-height over the floor.

“You were young? A child?”

“Yes. Child. I was child.”

Gods alive! Ragath had seen the beast kill a woman when she was just a child. He hardly knew where to begin trying to mend that trauma.

“I was in...bathe.” She struggled to tell the tale.

“Bath,” he whispered, correcting her usage automatically. Gaffin wanted to tell her to stop. He knew what she’d seen, more or less. *As a child!* It turned his stomach.

“I...” Her brow furrowed, and her hand moved aimlessly. It steadied. She cupped her hand and swept it around in an arc.

“Splash. You splashed.” Before she regained the memories, she’d splashed in the river and laughed. He’d never seen her play before, and he’d been enchanted by it.

“I splashed, and she—”

“No.” Hearing it would be a torture for him; telling it for her. Already, it was clear that she blamed herself for the woman’s death, for some reason Gaffin couldn’t understand. “I understand now.”

Ragath looked up at him, pleading, seemingly the lost child she must have

been all those years ago.

Gaffin knelt beside her, offering his chest for comfort. She pressed to him, letting him enfold her. They sat in silence until she slept.

He settled her on the sleeping mat, then stepped outside the pavilion. “You heard?” he asked no one in particular. The last thing he wanted to do was repeat it.

Ebol grunted an affirmative response.

Gaffin nodded and returned to the mat. Aching in body and spirit, he wrapped himself around her and sought out elusive sleep.

## Chapter Six

Ragath snuggled against Gaffin's body. Unlike most mornings she woke in his arms, they were face to face instead of with Gaffin pressed to her back.

The cloth he'd wrapped around her had gapped open, leaving her pressed to his body. His clothing against her naked flesh was a wealth of sensation. His scent on her skin was strangely exciting, and the leather and cloth teased and tested her body.

His hand slid from her back to the curve of her buttocks and his arms tightened minutely, bringing her up against the length of his ready cock. Her gasp disappeared in the rumbling sound he made.

The fasteners on his leathers enticed her. What would he do if she was bold enough to undo them? To touch him as she'd touched Jonus? Would he do what Jonus had? Would he taste her? Allow her to spill his seed? Would he want more of her body?

Her body reacted to that thought. *She* wanted more.

As if he'd heard that thought, Gaffin's eyes opened. They were dilated in what she'd like to think was arousal. His cock moved between them, seemingly confirming it.

His head tilted, and he looked down at their touching bodies. His fingers flexed and tightened against her bottom, as if he was considering his next move.

*I know what move I need him to make.* Ragath trailed a hand down his chest and stomach, hinting at it gently.

Some back corner of her mind warned that Jonus would kill for as little as this. She was raised to be his own, marked as his, and she was making an illicit choice of another.

*If Jonus cared to stop me, he should have kept me safe. I was taken by another. If all Gaffin is waiting for is a sign of my willingness, I will give it.*

His hand left her back and clasped her wrist, stopping her a mere hand's width from his cock. He didn't order her to stop, but he jerked his head toward the flap of the cloth room they shared.

*Not where the others can hear it. Not where they might want to partake, as well.* Her face heating, she nodded her agreement. Silently, she cursed men. Would there ever be a time and place they would be free to enjoy each other?

Gaffin's retreat and the way he yanked the cloth shut around her body spoke his doubts.

*Or perhaps he has no intentions of claiming me.* She shivered at that

thought, staring at his back disappearing through the flap. Gaffin didn't seem disinterested, but she knew well enough that not all men gave in to their innate urges to bed a woman fully.

If that was true, what would be his reason for denying himself?

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin swallowed down a scream of frustration. They didn't have enough words to discuss what Ragath's aim had been in touching him, and teaching her those words would be an inappropriate intimacy.

Still, her actions taunted him.

Had she wanted to compare his body to the beast's? If, as he believed, she had never seen a man, besides the foul one, it might be simple curiosity driving her. If it was, would the others support him letting her examine him.

*My sanity will not support it.* There was little question of that.

Worse...or better, what if her interest was personal? If he raised the possibility with her, it would be accused he was taking unfair advantage of his place to convince her to him.

Torn between duty and need, he pulled her dried clothing down from the pavilion lines and returned to the flap. Cursing himself, he shoved them through and waited for Ragath to retrieve them. Praying she would remember to put on both layers, he turned his back.

That wrenched a wince from him. There wasn't a single pair of eyes in the camp that weren't locked on him and assessing.

*Of course. I stormed out here, stamping down Blutjagd, reeking of arousal and woman.* There was little question that they were already speculating on what happened inside the pavilion. Perhaps, they were reconsidering their stand on Ragath sharing a mat with him.

*I have done nothing wrong!*

Yet, his mind taunted. The hand on her ass, holding her to his erection, had hardly been innocent.

*But unconscious.* He'd been asleep.

*And dreaming of Ragath riding that same cock.* If he allowed himself too long to consider that, he'd be turning himself over for judgment.

The movement behind him, had him glancing to make sure she was dressed before he allowed the others to see her. Both the beast's gown and his tunic in place, he relinquished his position at the flap and headed for the fire.

\* \* \* \*

"Practice? Training?"

Gaffin turned to Ragath, noting her excitement in surprise.

*Of course!* The beast had to have allowed her physical training, though by



the way she avoided their weapons, it was a safe wager Veriel hadn't allowed battle training.

"You wish to practice?" he asked in a slow, even voice. "To train with the men?"

She nodded.

He waved her toward the meadow they were using, his mind buzzing. Ragath was a Warrior; she would require physical activity to quell the *Blutjagd*, as any male Warrior would. Leaving her at the edge of the area, Gaffin headed for Ebol to discuss how to carry out training a female without injuring her.

"Gaffin!"

His drawn weapon thumped to the grass as he whirled around and launched toward Ragath, landing hard on his knees. Only after he had his hands around her hips did his mind process that her dress and his tunic were gathered beneath his palms, her legs bare to just below her feminine curls.

Gaffin forced the fabric down her thighs, averting his eyes by silent reminders of his duty alone. A rebellious corner of his mind protested the move.

"Practice," she protested, her cheeks going crimson and her eyes hard. "Train, Gaffin."

"Oh, gods." His answer came out rasping and unsteady.

"What is it?" his father asked.

He released the dress to her ankles and motioned for Ragath to be still. "She cannot train in a dress or tunic, but she must train, as we all do." As it was, they'd delayed training until the strain of it was beating at them. It was likely beating at her, as well.

There was a moment of silence.

Ebol managed speech first. "What are you suggesting?"

Gaffin swallowed the lump in his throat. "When—when we reach the keep, I will teach her to wear a boy's leathers."

"We have nothing that small here," Niklus reminded him.

"Obviously." Everyone in the group was a seasoned Warrior, fully grown into his muscle and more than twice Ragath's size.

Gaffin pushed to his feet, looking at Ebol and Niklus instead of Ragath. Considering what he intended, looking at her would be problematic. "For now...she has to train."

"Nude?" his father choked.

"You have another suggestion?" Gaffin raised an eyebrow in challenge.

The Warriors looked at each other nervously, and Gaffin noted that more than a few of them had come erect.

His face burned at the idea of all of them seeing her unclothed. "Alone. I will oversee."

For a tense moment, Gaffin thought they'd protest. Surely, someone would claim he was abusing his position to get a sexual thrill.

Instead, they nodded their agreement. Tension Gaffin hadn't realized he

harbored seeped from his muscles.

He motioned Ragath to follow him and led her to a spot over the hill from where the other men were training. Somehow, he was certain they were finding it hard to concentrate on that task, knowing what was going on behind the hill.

He stopped deep in the bowl of the meadow. "Now...train," he managed.

Ragath tipped her head back, glancing at the top of the hill. After a moment, she nodded and stripped off her newly-washed clothing. Gaffin tried to normalize his breathing, but his base needs were drowning out his thinking mind.

He licked his lips at the sight of Ragath securing her hair back with a strip of leather Hiram had given her to do the job while she rode. The move pushed her breasts forward and curved her back, placing her on display.

She shortened the thong the amulet hung on. Gaffin hadn't even considered the possibility that she might try to remove it, but she hadn't.

That accomplished, Ragath glided through the grass to a place near the center of the bowl.

Her first moves were stretches. Her supple body folded and unfolded, individual muscles tightening and flexing.

Forcing himself not to move was all Gaffin could manage. His cock lay heavy against his belly, and his head spun lightly in the combination of his strangled breathing and increased heart rate.

The next moves were strength exercises. Ragath supported herself in any number of positions and undulated slowly from feet to hands and back again, exposing herself to him in the process.

Gaffin's cock wept against his leathers, complaining at the confinement. It ached in demand for release. If he dared tempt fate and the rules of sanction, he'd take his cock in hand and end this torture...while she watched or ignored it. He didn't care which, though his cock had a definite preference.

Just when he thought it could get no worse, Ragath erupted into motion. Wheels of her body, hand to hand and foot to foot, gave way to flips, feet to hands and back again, one-handed and no-handed flips in all directions, rolls, vaults, and all manner of maneuvers Gaffin had no name for.

At some indeterminate point in time, Gaffin realized he was gaping and forced his mouth shut. He was also a few steps closer to her. Gaffin backed to his former position, using the tree behind him as a guidepost. He sent up a prayer to Tes that she hadn't noticed the change.

This was insanity. Vow or not, more of this would drive Gaffin mad. Already, his bespelled body argued to break sanctions his mind knew all too well.

He locked his muscles down, his feet shoulder-width apart, his arms crossed over his chest. Only his attention was allowed to roam.

It didn't. Looking away from Ragath was inconceivable. When her "training" ended, it took Gaffin's lust-soaked mind a hand of heartbeats to acknowledge the change.

She moved toward him, soaked in sweat, her skin glistening as it might during heated sex.

*That is not an image I need to indulge in.*

The beast's gown covered her first, and Gaffin cursed himself his envy that Veriel had been gifted this sight daily.

*It is no gift; it is torture.* How could so intemperate a being deny himself when Gaffin hardly could? When mated Warriors could hardly deny themselves with the want for her riding them?

*What if he didn't?*

Gaffin opened his mouth to ask it, then snapped it shut. His own reaction if the Destroyer of Lives had abused her aside, Ragath had suffered the beast's memories only the night before. Did he want to chance another miserable memory for her?

*No. Stand down, Gaffin.*

In the next heartbeat, Ragath gave him something else to occupy his uncertain sanity. His tunic smoothed over the damned gown, she appeared at his side.

Gaffin followed her line of sight, the blood rushing in every extremity in realization. She was staring at his erection, her expression moving from uncertainty to interest to hunger and back.

He didn't discourage her appraisal. Perhaps she would find peace in the knowledge that a male could come erect and not do whatever it was the Deceiver had made her believe was natural for an aroused male to do.

Ragath didn't attempt to touch him, and Gaffin reminded himself that he should thank the gods for it. If she touched him, he would surely have his answer of how far the beast had ventured sexually with Ragath.

*I have to stop thinking about this.* "We should go."

Her gaze snapped to his face. Whatever she saw sent her two steps further away. Ragath straightened, her chin came up, and she nodded.

Gaffin waved her ahead of him, half in expectation that she'd be afraid to have him at her back. As if in opposition to his line of thinking, Ragath turned and preceded him up the hill.

It didn't help. Instead of staring at her mouth and breasts, Gaffin found himself staring at her swinging backside. He dragged his gaze away over and over, cursing his Warrior memory for detail in three languages.

Reaching the camp both helped and hindered him.

It helped, because it gave him ample reason to find other places to fix his attention.

It hindered him, because that attention was drawn to the Warriors averting their eyes. Even the older, mated men seemed to have trouble looking at either Ragath or Gaffin.

Ragath paused at the fireside and reached for a skin of water. Hirus handed it up to her without turning his head. She hurried to the pavilion and darted

inside.

Gaffin didn't question why she fled. From the moment he'd come back into camp, reeking of musk, the others' bodies had gone into a frenzy of the same. There was no doubt that every man in camp was hard and wanting.

He wasted even less time speculating that Ragath was unnerved by the reaction, perhaps fearful that they would choose not to control their urges.

He wanted to demonstrate that control. His body was less accommodating. Gaffin panted back his arousal.

His father's hand closed on his shoulder. "Do you need self-release?"

Gaffin shook his head. He staggered to the closest tree and dug his fingertips into the bark until they ached.

"You do," Niklus insisted.

"No. If I do—" Gaffin looked at the pavilion, his face and neck heating in more than arousal. "My sanity will not stand for using memories of her to accomplish it."

Several of the Warriors winced at the blunt statement.

"I understand," Niklus assured him.

"When we reach the keep, I am teaching her to wear a boy's leathers for training," Gaffin decreed.

His father leaned closer. "Until then?"

"We have four days. We are not training again. None of us are. Not until she wears leathers."

Niklus groaned. "It was that difficult?"

Gaffin ran her fingers through his sweat-soaked hair. "I need...water."

"Water!"

Hirum scrambled to comply.

Gaffin pushed him away. "No. Not that." He staggered around and bolted for the river. He plunged into the water, grinding his teeth at the brain-clearing cold.

He dunked his head once...then again. When Gaffin dragged himself out, he was numb, exhausted, and still erect.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin startled at the sound of a vicious curse. If it had been one of the men, it wouldn't have affected him, but it was Ragath who'd uttered it.

He turned to her, his face heating at the fact that she was still squatting to see to her bodily needs. Gaffin had only watched once, after Ragath had run from him. Worse, he hadn't fully recovered from watching her train that morning.

Forcing speech was difficult. "Ragath?"

"I need..." She faltered, shooting Gaffin a panicked look.

"What? What do you need?" His heart was hammering, and he wasn't certain why it was.

“Blood...clothes?”

“Blood rags?” Was she cycling, or was it something else? Ragath wasn’t calm, as most women were about a moon time event.

She nodded. “Blood...” She gasped. “Rags.”

*Solve the puzzle later. Serve her needs.*

“Hirum!” Gaffin only called for him, because he knew the young Warrior was close.

Sounds of Hiram crashing through the wood drew near.

“Stop there and listen.”

He obeyed, and silence filled the void between them. “Listening, Gaffin.”

“We need blood rags. Quickly. Go to camp and scavenge spare tunics. Scavenge anything our men carry to accommodate her.”

Hirum moved the opposite direction as quickly as he’d come. Gaffin turned back to Ragath.

She’d stripped off her clothing and donned just his tunic. The beast’s gown was folded neatly and pressed to her chest. Ragath squatted there, taking slow, even breaths.

Gaffin noted that in rising concern. True, he’d only been around his mother and sister during their blood time, but he’d never seen such an outward sign of pain.

He knelt next to her, lifting the edge of his tunic. Ragath pushed back, her face paling another notch.

“I wish to see,” he soothed her.

Ragath shook her head and tightened her grip on the tunic.

A dozen distasteful possibilities fought for his attention. Had Veriel drank the blood of victims in front of her? Had the Destroyer of Lives insisted on drinking her moon blood, leading Ragath to believe Gaffin might wish to indulge in the same perversion?

*Don’t think about that!* “I have to check.”

“Check?”

“How much blood you are losing?” he qualified.

Ragath looked down, then grimaced. “More than some. Less than others.”

Gaffin nodded. “Is it... Is it your moon time?” *What if Veriel planted a child? What if she is rejecting it?*

Well, that would be for the best, but Ragath was a woman. She would grieve a lost child, half-beast or not. Ragath wasn’t a trained Warrior. She wouldn’t know what a monster Veriel’s young would be.

“What? My...my moon?” She glanced to the sky, assuring herself that the moon was not in the sunlit expanse. Her eyes pleaded for answers.

At a loss to explain it with their limited shared language, Gaffin reached for her hand. She stared at his hand, trembling.

“Give me your hand. Just your hand, Ragath.”

She complied, her fingers cold. Gaffin gripped her hand and sensed her. His

breath escaped in a ragged rush.

“Cycling,” he breathed. *Thank the gods, she is cycling normally.* If Veriel had planted his seed, rejecting the infant or not, she wouldn’t be.

“Gaffin,” Hiram called out. “The blood rags?” He didn’t dare to approach since he’d been warned not to earlier.

With one last gentle squeeze, Gaffin released her hand and stood. “Stay,” he requested.

Ragath offered a tense nod, and he hurried off to collect the first blood rag.

Hirem offered a broad smile, and Gaffin returned it. Despite their many failures, this was one they *hadn’t* made.

## *Chapter Seven*

The keep was built into the side of a mountain. There was no indication how large or small it was. If the corridors connected to tunnels, as she suspected they might, the structure might go on for miles. The thought warmed her for reasons Ragath couldn't name.

Gaffin took her arm gently, leading her toward the heavy doors. Before they reached them, one opened and someone launched toward her.

Ragath shied, then stopped in surprise. The approaching person was a woman.

She stopped and yelled out something. Another appeared. Several young men and children followed.

Before Ragath recovered enough to question Gaffin, the older woman wrapped Ragath in her arms and squeezed, speaking fast. Ragath allowed it, though she shot Gaffin a look requesting answers.

He launched into a rushed speech that Ragath caught little of. Her name and pet names were included, as was the term "beast." Aside from the fact that he was explaining her presence here, little more made an impression. Somewhere in there, she thought she heard the word "bath," but she couldn't be certain how it fit with the rest.

At his words, the woman stiffened. A moment later, she released Ragath and stepped back, her expression pained. Ragath reached for her, in need of a woman's companionship. As if she understood, the woman drew Ragath to her side.

Gaffin kept speaking. Ragath caught odd words in the mix, nothing that made sense in combination.

The woman nodded grimly and led her into the keep. Ragath looked back, meeting Gaffin's gaze for a long moment. He nodded his agreement and then went back to giving orders to his men.

Inside, the younger boys scattered, leaving Ragath with the two women. They didn't hesitate. In moments, Ragath was deep within the keep and moving deeper.

Torches lit the way, soft light that made Ragath feel immediately at home. She shivered at that; she didn't want to feel at home here. Not like the "home" she'd shared with Jonus, at any rate. Would this place be like that keep?

No. She stopped short, taking a step back. The women stared at her, then each other, seemingly confused. Ragath's heart pounded in apprehension. They

reached for her, and she jerked away.

“Gaffin,” she requested. She’d wanted the companionship of women, but she needed the security of Gaffin in this strange place.

The younger woman motioned for her to stay and bolted back the way they’d come. Ragath retreated to a close corner, shaking though she couldn’t state why she did. The other didn’t approach her. Soothing sounds left her lips, but she kept her distance.

Gaffin came barreling toward her, and Ragath launched herself at him. He was solid and familiar, and she held on tight, on her toes so her face nestled to his throat.

His breath stirred her hair. “What makes you fear?” he whispered.

Explaining it was impossible. All that mattered was that Gaffin was with her. “Stay. Do not run.” It wasn’t the correct way to ask it, she was sure.

He nodded. “Come. There is a bathing chamber.”

Ragath loosened her grip on his tunic and settled to the flats of her feet. Gaffin planted a hand on her lower back and guided her further into the rock, the two women in their wake.

The bathing chamber was large enough that the entire company she’d seen so far could conceivably use it at the same time. Something told her that wasn’t so.

*Or will not be when I am here.* What gave her that idea was beyond her comprehension.

Gaffin motioned for her to continue, then retreated to the doorway.

She started removing her clothing, and the older woman reached to take them. Ragath swallowed a sour wave. Were these to be her new servants?

*I do not want servants.* Moving deliberately, Ragath stripped down and tossed the clothing to the closest carved bench instead.

The move seemed to confuse them, but no one complained. The younger offered Ragath a comb but didn’t attempt to groom her hair. Confident that they understood her wishes, Ragath took it and set about untangling the half day of travel.

Soap and a cloth for drying appeared on the bench that ringed the pool of steaming water, and Ragath shot a look at the other two women. Neither one ordered her toward the water. Rather, they were busy stripping off their own clothing and wading in without her.

*No servant would do that.* With a sigh of relief, Ragath went back to her hair. When it was tamed, she ambled to the bench, set the comb on it, and retrieved the soap.

The water was so hot, she initially shied. Ragath dipped her foot in, testing the heat. After a moment, it was comfortable, and she waded further in. The floor dropped off faster, and she went from her knees to her waist with a gasp of surprise and a splash.

Her cheeks flaming and heart pounding, she glanced at the other two



women. Adults did not splash. Would they be angry? Would they think her clumsy? Neither seemed to notice her error, and Ragath forced her heart to slow.

Bathing in the hot water was a decadent experience. Ragath sank to her knees, reveling in the moment. Had there ever been a more perfect moment in her life?

The memory of Gaffin's mouth meshed with her own brought a flush she hoped the others would attribute to the heat. She opened her eyes and looked his way, but Gaffin had his back turned.

It was a fine back, strong and broad, but she missed seeing him from the front already. His eyes were soft and inviting. His lips were full and dark. And his cock... She was certain his cock was hard inside his leathers.

What would it be like to stroke him as she had Jonus? Would he make the same sounds or different ones? She felt certain his eyes would—

“Ragath?”

She snapped her head around, staring at the elder woman. Gods, what had she been thinking? Did the others know? Did they disapprove of such things? Women had no say in what men they belonged to. They had no preference.

*I have a preference.*

The younger pressed a hand to her chest. “Elee. My name is Elee, Ragath.”

“Elee,” she repeated. It was a pretty name, and the girl was pretty.

She waved to the elder. “Nara.”

Ragath nodded. She tipped her head to the first. “Elee.” And the elder. “Nara.”

Nara took over. “I am Gaffin's *mother*.”

Her brow furrowing in confusion, Ragath repeated the last word as a question.

Nara seemed to consider that. She cradled her arms as one would to hold a babe. “Gaffin.” She tipped her head toward the baby. “My Gaffin.”

“Mother,” the man in question growled. “Please.”

A laugh bubbled up. Ragath tried to hold it in, but it burst free. She clapped a hand over her mouth and shot a look at Gaffin. He was inspecting the cave roof, his face bright red. That was all it took to send Ragath into spasms of laughter.

The momentary twinge of fear that something bad was coming melted away. Jonus wasn't here. He wasn't here to be jealous that someone else had made her smile or made her laugh.

A sob mixed with the laughter at that. How lonely it was, even surrounded by people, when only Jonus was allowed to make her happy.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin shook his head.

On one hand, it was good to hear Ragath laugh. He heard it seldom. After her life with the beast, that was to be expected.

*But she is laughing at me. At the image of me as a babe at my mother's breast.* It stung. He preferred the image of himself as a strong protector.

*Only because she clings to me, and I get to feel her body against mine.* Gods but that was both damning and true.

Her expression changed, an indefinable sadness welling in her eyes. Her laugh went brittle, then stopped. There was a moment of tense silence. She sighed and went back to bathing.

The rush of feet caught his attention, and Gaffin turned to peer down the corridor. The young boys were heading toward him at a run. His mind working through the possibilities, Gaffin ordered a halt. They obeyed, staring up at him from their varying heights.

"Goff and Ran, you are too old to bathe with the women. Wait until they leave the bathing room." At twelve and fourteen, they were beginning to look like men, and he felt certain that would be too much for Ragath's sensibilities.

The two stared at him, shocked. Gaffin added a warning look, and they turned back.

*They shouldn't be shocked. Ragath is not a woman of our house.* Even then, the only man who bathed with a woman was her mate. Children bathed whenever they liked, though older children or women always accompanied babies and toddlers into the bath.

"And us?" Turl piped up, his bright four-year-old eyes expectant.

Gaffin cleared the way and motioned the other three—all under the age of eight—into the bathing chamber. They rushed past with all the exuberance of youth, shouting and running.

Ragath turned to look at them and caught a faceful of water. She sputtered, reared back, and lost her balance. Gaffin tensed as she disappeared under the water, but she was back up in a moment, wiping the water from her face.

The boys didn't seem to realize the havoc they'd caused. They splashed and dunked each other, their noises echoing off the stone walls and roof.

For a long moment, Ragath stared at them, her brow furrowed and mouth set in a thin line. She flinched at the splashes that connected with her.

Turl turned and saw her. A mischievous smile curving his lips, he aimed a splash for her.

Ragath smiled. Her eyes narrowed in challenge. Her return splash showered the child and left him sputtering in surprise. Then she laughed.

Scenting a competition in the making, the other boys joined in, and the water battle began in earnest. Elee took Ragath's side, though it seemed the young Ani had no need of her aid. Gaffin chuckled at the squeals and warnings, the laughter and riotous play.

*Thank the gods. I thought I'd never see it.*

\* \* \* \*

Ragath wrapped her arms around herself, another of Gaffin's tunics momentarily taking the place of her gown. This one was longer and reached past her knees, and it was infinitely better than the blood gown they'd tried to convince her to wear. It didn't carry his scent, as the other tunic had, and that was a loss.

Gaffin stopped and motioned to a chamber. "I bed here," he announced.

She turned to enter, and he took her arm, shaking his head. Gaffin guided her down the corridor, past a hand of chambers. He stopped again.

"You and Elee bed here."

Ragath swallowed a heavy lump. "Here?" She looked back the way they'd come. He was banishing her from his bed? A blade of disappointment lodged in her chest.

"I will be there if you need me," he promised.

The last morning with Jonus flashed through her mind. He'd refused to share her bed, as well. Gaffin was no better, no matter what kind thoughts she'd had about him.

She glared at him, turned on her heel, and stormed into the room he'd indicated was hers. The furs on one bed smelled sweet and fresh, so she flopped down on it, relatively certain it was the one intended for her.

"Ragath?"

She motioned him away, stung by his callous dismissal.

"Ragath, what is wrong?"

She called him a handful of foul names in the language he didn't speak. Gaffin deserved no better from her. In fact, if she knew the words in his own language, she'd make certain he understood them.

At last, he withdrew.

Ragath waited a few heartbeats, then glanced back at the empty archway. *Damn him!* Why did so simple a thing make her feel doubly rejected?

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin turned toward the young women's sleeping chamber again, hesitated, and doubled back. It seemed he would never know what would upset Ragath next or why it would.

The only thing he was certain about was that she was brutally angry with him. Her *Blutjagd* had been hot and potent, and whatever she'd replied to him in the beast's language had not be a compliment.

"Problem, Gaffin?" his father asked.

He ground his teeth for a moment, then forced his jaw to unclench. "She's angry at me."

"Angry? Well, that is an improvement over her usual upset."

"Is it? You didn't feel her *Blutjagd* burn your skin." *And hate yourself for making her react that way.* But saying that would give away too much of his

feelings for her.

“Oh, that was hers? Impressive.”

He turned, fighting not to say something his father would take offense to. The sight of the leathers in Niklus’s hands made his mouth go dry. They were small enough for a boy of ten.

*Or Ragath.* Just the thought of her body filling the leather sent tremors of delight through his stomach.

His father cleared his throat. “Will these—”

“Yes. I believe they will do nicely.”

“Elee can instruct her.” He shifted nervously. “Ragath will allow that, will she not?”

Gaffin took the leathers from his father’s hands, considering it. “I cannot say for certain,” he admitted. “I will let Elee attempt it.”

Finding his sister didn’t take long. Every Warrior, cursed and not yet so, would be aware of the females around him. With Elee in tow, he returned to Ragath.

Without turning to look at him, Ragath started spouting that damned language again, grumbling what were probably curses at him.

He ignored it. “Ragath, I have brought training clothes.”

She stopped talking and went still. Slowly, her head turned, and she stared at the leathers. Lines creased the skin between her eyebrows.

Abruptly, Gaffin felt the need to explain. “You must dress to train, Ragath. It is necessary. Do you understand?”

“In...” She motioned to the leathers.

“Yes, in leathers. It is the only appropriate way.” He hoped she wouldn’t refuse as she’d refused a woman’s gowns.

She looked down at her body, confused or sad for some reason he couldn’t name but wished he could. Ever since they’d arrived at the bastion, she’d been volatile.

Ragath looked at Elee, pleading for something. Gaffin turned to look at his sister, questioning silently.

She waved him away, taking the leathers from his hands. “Go.”

“I need to understand her upset,” he whispered harshly.

Elee’s look was the long-suffering variety women often shot males when they felt the males were being obtuse. “Go. I will tell you what I can...later.”

Grumbling curses, he retreated to the turn of the corridor outside. After a moment, Ragath’s face appeared in the doorway.

“Go, Gaffin!” his sister shouted out.

As if in agreement, Ragath waved him away.

He left, striding for the cooking chamber in search of food, no longer bothering to grumble the string of profanity he needed to vent.

Ragath shivered at Gaffin's fury. She recognized the feeling of it, though Ragath didn't understand why she could feel the anger of Jonus and the Warrior men when she didn't seem to feel it from her nurses and other servants. Never from another woman, in fact, even when it was clear they were angry.

She didn't understand what she'd done to displease Gaffin so either.

"Come," Elee invited her.

She took one look at the leathers he wanted her to wear and burst into tears.

Elee stared at her for a moment, seemingly shocked. The older woman dropped the leathers to her own bed and guided Ragath to the one intended for her. Once they were both seated, Elee wrapped her arms around Ragath.

"What has Gaffin done?" she asked, slowing her speech to allow Ragath to understand her words.

Her first attempt at answering came out in the language Elee didn't speak. Ragath took a calming breath and tried to find words in the correct one again.

"What makes Gaffin..." She had no word for it. Ragath made an angry face.

Elee looked toward the corridor, then back, her brow furrowed. "Angry? Gaffin is not angry."

"I have..." *Damn, but it is difficult to speak coherently with so many words missing.*

"Confused?" Elee guessed.

She shook her head.

"Well, you have confused Gaffin, but it is not what you meant to ask."

Ragath stared at her, at a loss for how she could have confused Gaffin. Surely, she'd been clear enough.

"Distressed him?"

She considered it and shook her head in a negative response. The Warriors had used that word to refer to Ragath many times. Distressed was akin to fearful, and Gaffin was anything but fearful.

"Displeased?" Elee continued.

Pleased was a word that Gaffin used to ask if something was to her liking. Displeased, as she understood it, would be something that was not to the liking of the individual. "Yes. Displeased. I...displeased Gaffin."

Elee sighed. "I do not believe so."

"Believe?" *So many words to learn.*

"No, Ragath. Gaffin is not displeased with you."

*He is.* There was no question that he was, but there was no way to make Elee see it. Ragath sighed at the impossibility of making her see that she must have.

"How?"

It wasn't a word she knew...again.

Elee continued, probably seeing her confusion. "You believe you have displeased Gaffin. What has he done to make you believe such a thing?"

She was starting to understand the word “believe.” Answering the question was difficult, though. *Start with the simple facts.* “Gaffin tells me to bed here.”

Elee motioned for her to continue.

“Not with Gaffin.”

She glanced at the corridor for a long moment, then swiveled her head back to gaze at Ragath. “You are accustomed to sleeping with Gaffin?”

“Sleeping?”

Elee seemed to consider something carefully, probably trying to choose words she knew Ragath understood, as Gaffin often did. “You bed with Gaffin?”

Ragath pulled her knees to her chest. “Before.” She waved back over her shoulder. “Then.” She’d felt safe in Gaffin’s bed. “And...” She motioned toward the leathers. Fury spiked hot in her. She wanted to rip them, burn them, anything to destroy the insulting piece of clothing.

“I do not understand,” Elee offered carefully.

*How can I explain something this complex? I need to learn the language. I need instruction in everything.* She opened her mouth to ask Elee to teach her. Since it seemed Gaffin had no intentions of doing so, now that they’d reached his home—

“What clothing did you wear to train before the leathers?”

Ragath glanced down her body, stared at Elee, and shook her head.

Elee’s confusion melted into shock. Her cheeks darkened in an unnamable emotion. “N-no clothing?”

“That displeases you?” She hadn’t meant to anger his family. What would happen if they refused her their home? Where would she go? Would she have any protection?

“No. Not at all.”

Ragath relaxed at that. It sounded sincere.

*So did Jonus. He wasn’t.*

*Not the time to consider that.* “It displeases Gaffin.” That was the problem, of course. Tears stung at her eyes, and she wiped them away miserably.

Elee’s eyes went wide, and she took several choppy breaths. “I doubt it.”

Ragath stared at her through the fog of tears. “Doubt?”

“Seeing you...unclothed does not displease Gaffin.”

*So much so that he wants me to dress as a man.* That thought burned more than her anger. It seared at her heart. “I...believe it did not, before...” She motioned to the leathers again.

When she’d trained in the nude, Gaffin had been affected enough. His cock had been long and heavy and his scent enticing.

*Not enough. If it had been enough, he would have bedded me. That is what men do.*

As if Elee heard every thought she had on the subject, she shook her head. “No, Ragath. Gaffin is not displeased with you.”

“But, he—”

“No. Gaffin must do these things. There are laws... You understand laws? Rules? Sanctions?”

Gaffin used those terms. When he gave her orders to be obeyed, he sometimes said them. She nodded. It meant things that were not to be disobeyed.

*“Do not run.”*

She focused on Elee’s rush of words.

“Our father and the other Warriors... There are rules. Gaffin must do these things or he breaks the rules.”

“Then?” she questioned. “Before...home?” Ragath didn’t have enough words to ask the question properly.

Elee seemed to understand well enough. “Outside, the rules are different. You had to be safe.”

Though “different” was a new word, Ragath thought she understood it. Not the same. Here, Gaffin had different rules to follow. She nodded.

Elee sighed in relief. “Will you wear the leathers?”

Ragath scowled at them. “Rules?” she asked. The more she heard of rules, the less she liked them.

“Yes. Rules.”

“Teach me to wear leathers.”

Elee smiled her encouragement.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin looked up at Elee, his heart pounding at the sour look she shot him. Never one to mince words, she had ones for this situation.

“You are a careless fool, brother.”

“There is no anticipating what will upset Ragath. I have tried, Elee.”

She breezed past him, her expression one that both dismissed him and chastised him. “I understood it well enough.”

“Then it is a female concern,” he shot back.

“If you had any sense, you would understand it.”

“Then tell me.”

“Why should I?”

“I need to understand her,” he reminded his errant sister.

“For your duty or for yourself?”

His breath caught at what she was hinting at, and he narrowly avoided looking around guiltily to see if anyone had overheard it. Suggesting he was being inappropriately intimate with Ragath could see him dead. It was better to act as if he didn’t understand it. “You are saying what now? Riddles? Games?”

A little harrumph of sound was her only answer for a moment. At last, Elee turned and met his gaze, an alien stern look for him. “If you truly mean that, you will never understand her, and you do not deserve to. If you are playing coy with me... Well, you are a careless fool to play such games.”

His heart stuttered. Surely, he was misunderstanding her. Elee couldn't mean that she felt he was playing coy with Ragath, that he was playing with the young Ani's emotions in such a way.

Before he could ask it, Ragath ambled into the room, tying a knot to secure the smaller tunic Elee had provided at her waist. His mouth went dry at the sight of the boys' leathers outlining her. They left nothing to the imagination, while they covered the actual body beneath.

Not that Gaffin needed an imagination. He'd seen her delectable body enough times to have memorized every line of it. At the reminder, his cock surged up.

A soft cough from Elee brought Ragath's head around, and the young woman stared at his state of arousal. Her red-rimmed eyes went soft and considering. A small smile pulled up at her lips, and Gaffin felt it hard to breathe.

*She is interested in how men react, compared to beasts,* he reminded himself. It could be nothing more. His sanity wouldn't stand for it to be more.

"Where do I train, Gaffin?" Ragath asked.

His heart in his throat, he led the way to the empty training room. All the while, he tried to work out how to keep the other men from watching her train. Even in the leathers, this would be an assault on any adult male in her vicinity.

*Perhaps on youths, as well.*



## Chapter Eight

Gaffin stared at Mieshen across the table, noting the other Warrior's nervous movements.

"You are certain?" he asked. "The girl is really my child?"

"The Stone confirms that Ragath is your daughter."

"And she..." His jaw tightened. "Did the beast..."

Gaffin understood his reluctance to ask the question. "She has known...some of the beast's touch," he offered carefully.

Mieshen pushed to his feet, dragging his hands through his hair. His Blutjagd burned hot and fierce.

"I do not believe she has been...pierced of yet." Gods, how did one discuss such a matter with a father?

There was no response for a long moment. "You are not certain." His voice was tortured and heavy in guilt, Gaffin was sure.

"As certain as I can be without..." He let the rest remain unsaid.

Mieshen nodded.

"The beast raised Ragath with..." *Delicately*. "...strange ideas. She does odd things that you may find unnerving."

"Odd? What do you mean by—" Mieshen's jaw dropped, and his eyes went wide and wild.

Gaffin didn't question that Ragath was behind him. Nor did he question that she wasn't dressed appropriately. Again.

He turned, snatching the length of cloth from the shelf beside him. Ragath startled at the move, then settled as he wrapped it around her over the damnable gown. Her cheeks darkened, and she shot him a sheepish look.

Her head turned, and her gaze locked on Mieshen. She gathered the cloth closer around her, moving to place Gaffin between them.

Mieshen watched the move, his eyes pained. "What is...that...that..." He motioned, seemingly at a loss for words.

Gaffin sighed. "The beast dressed her in such gowns."

Her father's face lost all color.

*It is better that he hear the worst now.* "As near as I am able to tell, she only wore something heavier when she bled. I have taught her to wear a tunic over the gown...when she remembers to do so, but within a permanent structure, she seldom does. At least she remembers to wear leathers for training."

Little good that it did Gaffin's sanity, but something was better than nude,

he supposed. His mind argued that he was lying to himself.

Mieshen staggered to the chair and slumped into it, looking to the roof with tears in his eyes. “She had no protection. All of those years with the beast, and I was not there to protect her.”

\* \* \* \*

Ragath stared at the new male in interest she could find no good reason for. There was something about him. He was different than the others, but it was in some way she couldn’t name, wholly unlike the ways Gaffin was different than the others.

She touched Gaffin’s arm, and he turned to her, his eyes questioning. At a loss to ask for specific information about him, she decided to indicate whatever he could impart with their limited shared language.

Ragath pointed to the stricken man, hoping Gaffin would understand her.

His eyes shifted from her to the male and back again. She prayed he didn’t think she was showing a preference of some sort.

“Father,” he stated simply.

That made no sense. Gaffin’s father was deep in the keep with his woman, Nara. She looked that direction, confused. Her knowledge of the things a man and woman did together were not extensive, but she knew only one man could be father to a child. How could he have two?

Gaffin drew her face back. He shook his head slowly. “No.” He motioned to the other male. “Mieshen.”

“Mieshen,” she repeated, pointing to the male.

He nodded solemnly. “Mieshen...Ragath’s father.”

Ice settled in her stomach at that. Mieshen was her father? That meant he’d struck the deal with Jonus to sell her to her future husband. Was he here to strike a deal to return her to Jonus?

*No. I will not go. I cannot go.*

She bolted.

Gaffin caught up with her before she was out of the big meeting room. She held to him, searching for the words to tell him she wanted to be his and not Jonus’s.

*Women do not have a choice in whose they are. Their fathers strike the deal.*

She sobbed at that. Was this why Gaffin never claimed her? Did he want riches to give her back to Jonus and needed to prove her unmolested to gain his prize? At that, she struck his shoulder. If it was true, she’d gut him herself.

Soothing sounds surrounded her.

Mieshen—her father—asked something about her upset, but he spoke too fast for her to catch every word she knew.

Gaffin waved at him, motioning for a moment of silence. He raised her chin, forcing her gaze to his. Then he spoke.

“Do not run,” he reminded her.

She shook her head, then shot a look at Mieshen to make certain he wasn’t close enough to touch her. To her relief, he was still at the center of the room.

Gaffin spoke slowly, enunciating every word. “Why-do-you-fear-Mieshen?”

The words to explain it seemed lost in her mind. “Mieshen...bring...” She motioned to herself, cursing her inability to focus on the correct word to identify herself in her panic. “Jonus.” She didn’t look at the man in question to see if he was angered that she was defying him, perhaps denying him some prize in the second delivery of her to Jonus.

“What?” Gaffin shook his head. “Mieshen will *not* bring you to...Jonus.”

She knew he hated saying that name, though she didn’t understand why. He’d tried to teach her to say another for her former master, but the sounds wouldn’t come reliably to her mouth. Sometimes, she managed the second term he used...beast.

“Mieshen bring...me...” *That is the correct term.* “To beast.”

“No. I promise you, he would never do that.”

Ragath shook her head, tears pooling in her eyes. How could she make him understand that Mieshen had already done so once? Did he not know it? Or was Gaffin lying as well?

She calmed herself, searching out every word she knew, every one he’d taught her while they’d traveled and here at his keep. She spoke slowly, trying to recreate the sounds faithfully, so there would be no misunderstanding.

“Mieshen...” She motioned to him to emphasize her point. “*Father...sell...me to Jonus.*”

She watched Gaffin’s face go pale in satisfaction. So, he hadn’t known it. The question remained, what would he do about it now that he knew?

Before he could respond to her statement, Mieshen was in motion. An unholy howl escaped his lips. The chair he’d been sitting in splintered against the far wall, and being in the room with his anger was like scorching her skin on a close fire.

Ragath pressed to Gaffin, swallowing a scream of fear.

She’d seen Jonus in a fury like this once, when one of her nurses had cut her while arranging her hair. It had been a simple accident; Ragath had been fidgeting as children do, and the bone pins had points. He’d beaten the servant to unconsciousness. Ragath hadn’t seen it; another servant had whisked her away at nearly the first blow, but she’d been told the servant had been evicted from the keep...once she woke from that beating. More than once, Ragath had suspected Jonus had killed the poor woman instead, but there was no way to know.

She’d prayed never to see it again. But now Mieshen was in a similar fury. A low whine escaped her throat. Every instinct said to stay with Gaffin, but something else warned her to run.

As if making the decision for her, Gaffin pushed her to his back, stepping between them. “Stay there,” he ordered. “Do not run.”

\* \* \* \*

Gods, what would go wrong next?

Gaffin cursed himself for not attempting to get the story of what she believed to be her life from Ragath before she met her father. He'd expected a lie Veriel had told her, but he hadn't expected the lie that her own father had sold her to the beast.

That lie had pushed Mieshen past endurance. If Veriel was here now, he would lose—for the first time—in single combat.

His father launched into the room, stopped, and stared. "What in the gods' names is this?" he demanded.

"Veriel's lies to Ragath," he replied simply. "I did not know what he'd told her...about her father." He tipped his head to Mieshen.

"Take her away. It may take hours to burn off this much *Blutjagd*."

Another chair fell prey to his fury.

Gaffin nodded. "Probably best." He guided Ragath into the deeper reaches, not toward the sleeping rooms but rather toward the Stone room. Why he made that choice, he couldn't say, but he did.

It was a testament to Mieshen's madness that he didn't notice them leaving. His father was correct. It might be hours before this abated.

In the meantime, Gaffin had to explain this to Ragath as best he could.

He settled her on a mat in the blue glow of the Stone and knelt facing her. Ragath stared at the Stone as if fixated. His heart stuttered at that. If she touched the Stone in innocent exploration, the gods only knew what it would do to her.

"Do not touch," he warned her. "Never touch. A rule, Ragath. A law that must never be broken."

She nodded grimly and looked away from it, stealing peeks out of the corner of her eyes.

"Now... Mieshen did *not* sell you to the beast."

She sobbed, nodding fiercely.

Gaffin sighed. "No. The beast told you that."

Ragath stared at him, seemingly confused.

*Not enough of the words she knows.* "He...lied." *Gods, I need words she knows.*

"Father sold me," she insisted.

*Has she never questioned anything she's been told?* Probably not. Veriel wouldn't have encouraged it.

"Father sold me!"

"No, Ragath. Father did not sell you. The beast took you."

Her brow furrowed, though he knew she had a grasp of almost everything he'd said.

*Take. It is not a word she knows.* "Stay."

She nodded.

Gaffin rose, marched to the weapons cabinet, grasped a sacred weapon, and turned to her. "Take. Took," he corrected himself. Small distinctions in sound were important to her.

When she didn't reply to that, he continued.

"The beast *took* you. He took you from your father...in battle."

Ragath stared at him, seemingly without comprehension. "Battle. Jonus..." She swallowed hard. "Jonus *battle* Father Mieshen?"

He nodded. She understood half of it. Her expression said she didn't understand the rest.

Gaffin returned to her, at a loss to explain *take* clearly. She understood *battle*. *That is it!*

He offered the weapon to her. Ragath shot him a panicked look and shook her head.

*Of course. Veriel forbade her to use weapons.* He would have. Though she was female, Ragath was a Warrior. The beast wouldn't want her trained to fight him, though he'd allowed her physical activity to relieve her *Blutjagd*. She seemed to have been trained in speed and acrobatic skills only and practiced at them as the men trained to fight. It was ingenious but deplorable.

Gaffin eased one of Ragath's hands away from her chest and pried her fist open. He settled the hilt in her hand and closed her fingers around it.

"Give," he stated.

She pushed the weapon back at him. He retrieved it carefully, watching as she rubbed at her wrist. In a moment of clarity, he realized Veriel had injured her for touching a weapon. He pushed that away before it could launch him into a fury.

"You gave the weapon to me," he supplied calmly. "Give. Gave. I gave the weapon to you. You gave the weapon to me."

Ragath nodded, her breathing hitching. "Gave," she repeated.

"Mieshen did not *give* you to the beast. Mieshen did not *sell* you to the beast. Veriel—Jonus took you in battle."

She shot him a weary look. "Took?"

Gaffin offered her the weapon again.

Her hands shaking, Ragath held it as he'd instructed. She looked up at him. "You...gave...me the weapon."

He smiled his encouragement. "Yes."

She tried to offer it back. Gaffin shook his head. Ragath looked at the weapon, turning it in her hand to examine the lines of it.

Gaffin snatched it from her hand, and Ragath recoiled, tripped over her feet, and landed on her backside on the mat. The fabric he'd wrapped around her gapped open, baring her body to him.

Hating himself for it, Gaffin stood over her, the weapon in hand. "Take," he growled. "Took. I took the weapon from you, Ragath."

She stared at it, trembling hard. "Took," she gasped out.

Gaffin tossed the weapon away, kneeling before her. Ragath didn't right herself immediately. She closed the fabric first, then she pushed to sitting. When she was buried inside the shield of the fabric, he chanced speaking again.

"The beast *took* you from Mieshen," he repeated.

Her face went a shade paler at that.

He let her digest that much. Her calculation was palpable. Gaffin didn't push her. She would come to the decision to believe or disbelieve on her own.

"Women...go...buy...market," she mused.

"Yes. Women do go to the market to buy things," he corrected her grammar. He had no clue what that had to do with the subject at hand.

"Jonus..." Her breathing hitched. "...lentaen."

"Lentaen," he corrected automatically, as if he was teaching a young Warrior. His jaw dropped in realization, and her gaze snapped to his.

Gaffin slipped into the language of the ancients. "Yes, the beast lied." He spoke slowly, hoping he was interpreting it correctly.

She did the same. "Your women are not...prisoners in the keep."

Her pronunciation was strange, so strange that he only understood her when she slowed her speech to a snail's pace for him. It was as if she was using an older root version of the language, perhaps the version Veriel would have used when he was the traitor god and not the traitor beast.

"Never," he assured her.

"Your women walk in the sun. Men do not..."

"What are you asking? Our women do walk in the sun, as you have, since we freed you. As do our men." She didn't think they were beasts, did she?

"Men do not...attack them, if they go outside the keep? Without their men?"

His jaw tightened. "I would gut any man that did," he informed her. "But no. There is little danger of that."

Ragath didn't reply. After a moment, a tear fell to her cheek. Then a second. She looked at him, her eyes tortured. Then the sobs started.

Gaffin wrapped his arms around her, letting her cry into his chest. Knowing that she would understand him, he used the language of the ancients to soothe her.

She started pulling at the dress the beast had given her, and the sound of tearing fabric mingled with her grunts. *Blutjagd* flamed around her. "Get it off," she grumbled. "I will not wear it a moment longer."

Sounds of someone approaching nearly stopped Gaffin's heart. He dragged Ragath behind the shelter of his body, blocking the view the interloper would have of her.

"Gaffin? Ragath?" Elee called out.

"Get a dress she can wear, Elee. Get one quickly."

In moments, Ragath would be nude and pressed to his body. The ripping got louder. Elee rushed toward the room she shared with Ragath.

She was back a few moments later, and she tossed the dress his direction. Elee stared for only a moment before she bolted away again.

The dress in tatters around her, Ragath allowed Gaffin to ease the new one on. Then she sank into his arms and held on tight.

\* \* \* \*

A sound brought Ragath's head around. She stared up at the man who was reported to be her father...lost, hating him, fearing him.

"Ragath?" Mieshen reached for her.

The memory of his uncontrolled fury sent her skittering behind Gaffin.

He swore fluently. "Gods damn it! I did not sell her to that damned beast," he complained in the other language Gaffin spoke.

Gaffin switched to her primary language, but he didn't speak to her, confirming that Mieshen also spoke it. "She knows that now. My apologies for that shock. I never thought to ask it."

Mieshen's response was so fast...and in that same strange dialect of the language Gaffin used, she couldn't follow it.

"Slowly. Ragath speaks a version of the language of the ancients, but she cannot understand you, unless you speak very slowly."

"She...understands?"

Irrked by his patronizing pace, she fired back an answer. "I understand without your damned—"

"Slowly, Ragath," Gaffin reminded her.

She took a calming breath and offered each word clearly. "Yes, I understand you."

"I was told she had no language in common."

Gaffin nodded. "As you can hear, her accent is nearly indecipherable at speed. Until she spoke a single word clearly, I had no clue to what language she was using."

Ragath sighed, burying her face in the back of his tunic.

Mieshen directed his next comment to her. "I understand you have chosen Gaffin as your protector," he intoned. There was something harsh in that, as if he disapproved.

"Yes. I have."

"Then you are refusing to return home with me."

She raised her head, staring at him. Now she knew why she feared him. Like Jonus, this man had power over her. She didn't doubt it.

*Still, he asked.* "Yes, I am refusing to leave here." She held her breath, waiting for his response, ready to spring away if he went into another fury.

Mieshen went to one knee and bowed his head. "For losing you in battle, I deserve no better," he opined. "Still, if you would allow me, I would like to spend time with you. Here, when you are comfortable with the idea." There was

a plea in that, as if he would not be allowed that much without her permission.

“Y-yes. If Gaffin is with me.” After his fit of temper, there was no way she would meet with Mieshen alone.

Mieshen nodded. “Gaffin, may I speak with you alone? Just for a moment?”

He nodded and rose, following Mieshen toward the corridor. Halfway there, he turned, his expression a warning. Gaffin motioned to the glowing stone. “Do *not* touch,” he reminded her.

A snicker escaped Mieshen’s mouth, and Gaffin turned on him, issuing a silent warning. Her father put up a hand for peace and turned away.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin stood in the corridor, careful to keep himself between Mieshen and Ragath. He rested his hand on the hilt of his weapon in warning, just in case the old man intended to unleash another spate of *Blutjagd* on him.

Losing a daughter this way had to be nearly as crushing for him as her initial loss had been. Gaffin was certain Mieshen was planning to point out that the law was on his side, and he would only wait so long to take custody of his daughter again.

That was one thing Gaffin would fight with all he was worth. After the horror of her life with the beast, no one would forcibly take Ragath anywhere she didn’t want to go.

Mieshen glanced toward the doorway to the Stone room, his face strangely calm. “She trusts you.” He switched away from the language of the ancients, probably to ensure that Ragath wouldn’t be able to follow their discussion if she spied on them.

“She does. I cannot explain it. Ragath trusted me nearly on sight, and I cannot account for it.”

There was a moment of silence. “Has she shown a preference for any man yet?”

“Not particularly,” he admitted. *Gods, do not let him bring men in to try and force her to a match.*

Mieshen stared at him. “You are blind, Gaffin.”

He searched for the words to adequately express his outrage at that statement.

“She shows a preference for you. Can you not see it?”

Gaffin looked toward the Stone room, his face burning at the accusation. He’d like to deny it, but it was true, and he was taken with her.

Mieshen’s voice was a whisper, directly behind him. “If she shows willingness to be your mate, do it.”

His heart pounded. “You would freely give me leave to pursue Ragath as mate.”

“Not to pursue. To accept her, when she is ready to trust you that much.”



He nodded, turning his face back to her father. It was a rare show of trust. “I will not pursue her,” he vowed.

Mieshen offered his hand in agreement. “I trust you will not.”

## Chapter Nine

Gaffin heard the movement in the corridor and startled awake. The footsteps were light, too light to be a Warrior or a clumsy child. They were too smooth to be one of the older women. It was Ragath. He slipped from bed silently and donned a short set of training leathers.

She moved again, not toward the outer reaches of the keep but rather toward the deeper. Gaffin shook his muscles loose. As long as she was heading into the keep, he was content. Anything else was curiosity or investigation.

*The Stone!* He rushed after her. Though Ragath hadn't disobeyed him in almost half a moon, she'd continued to show a marked interest in the Stone. This wasn't a mistake he couldn't chance her taking.

Ragath didn't go to the Stone room. Gaffin found her in the training room instead, dressed in her leathers but not stretching or whirling about the room. He didn't announce himself; Gaffin wanted to see what she'd choose to do if left to decide for herself.

Her hand extended, stopped a finger's width from the hilt of a training weapon, and retreated to her chest. Ragath took a deep breath and extended her hand again. She caressed the length of the blade with a shaking hand, her breathing easing when there was no attack imminent.

Gaffin shifted to the right, watching her. *What did the beast do to her? What atrocity made her fear a blade so palpably?* If he cut her with it, she bore no scars to show it, not even the lines of something the beast healed with his powers.

Her teeth made little indentations in her lower lip. After a moment, she lifted the weapon from the shelf. Again, her breathing roughened at the move. It took a moment longer to ease this time.

He smiled. Ragath was taking control of her life, rejecting the harsh lessons the Deceiver had taught her, one at a time.

She whirled toward him as if Gaffin had made a sound, though he knew he hadn't. He expected her to drop the blade at the sight of him, but her hand tightened on the hilt.

*Yes. You are a Warrior. This is your birthright.*

\* \* \* \*

Ragath stared at him, waiting for Gaffin to make his move. Would he try to take the weapon from her? Would he crush her arm in his fist until something

snapped inside and she couldn't move it for weeks? Until it had to be splinted for ten days? Until she could hardly bear to eat or move from bed? Until she woke crying, night after night?

*I will kill him before I suffer that again.* Her hand tightened in preparation to use the weapon against him.

Gaffin's smile didn't falter at the implied threat. He stood there, his arms crossed over his bare chest. A tense moment later, he moved, and she sidestepped to a more defensible position.

*"Weapons are for men. Women do not battle, Ragath. It is a kindness I show you. The penalty for using a weapon against me is death. I prefer a gentle lesson."* His eyes had been cold and hard.

*Gentle.* She nearly snorted at that. *I will never suffer such a lesson again.*

Ragath brought the weapon up and adopted an attack stance she'd seen Jonus use in his training. Gaffin nodded and ambled to the shelf. He took down another weapon slowly...reverently and turned to her.

She let out a breath in a gasp, a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Her hands trembled in the possibility that he might intend to cut her as lesson. She moved into a more aggressive stance, one Jonus launched what she believed were his most deadly attacks from. Perhaps Gaffin would reconsider if he believed she could harm him in return.

"Hold the weapon like this." Gaffin didn't attack. Instead, he rotated his hand back and forth, demonstrating his grip.

Ragath hesitated, then looked at her own grip, adjusting it to match his as closely as possible.

"Do not ever turn your attention from an opponent."

She startled, bringing the weapon around with the new grip, taking the stance she'd chosen to unnerve him with feigned expertise.

He hadn't moved, despite her lapse. "Very good, Ragath. Now...show me what you know."

"What I know? Of battle? The training I have seen the beast engage in?" Too late, she realized she was admitting she had no personal knowledge of battle. *It would be best if he thought I have.* He would be less likely to hurt her then.

His eyes narrowed.

*What have I done? I should have lied about my prowess.* One guilty look at Gaffin later, she conceded that she didn't want to lie to him.

"If that is what you know, that is what I wish to see," he offered diplomatically.

Ragath called to mind one of the battle forms Jonus practiced and started to follow it. Instructions flowed from Gaffin's mouth, directing and correcting her execution.

"Keep that elbow up." He motioned to it.

"Do not overextend your arm. It compromises your balance and opens you to attack.

“Good form. Excellent kick. Higher next time.

“Again. Faster this time.” He cocked his head to one side as if in consideration.

“Keep your movements close to the body, a snap of movement and return.”

Time and again, she repeated the form, until Gaffin called a halt and proclaimed it perfect. Pride welled in her at that. She’d done well at something Jonus had denied her. Gaffin’s voice drew her back to the present.

“Do you know another?” His expression was encouraging.

“A few. Not as well,” she admitted.

A smile curved up the corners of his lush lips. “You will,” he vowed. “I will teach you the forms. All of the forms, but we will start with the ones you know.”

\* \* \* \*

“Like this,” Gaffin instructed. He caught Ragath’s leg, raising her thigh until was parallel with the floor.

Ragath’s heart skipped a beat, and she stared at his hand. If it slipped just a little higher, Gaffin would be touching her slit through the fighting leathers.

Her body heated and moistened in response to his proximity. Gaffin went still, his breathing harsh. His hand moved minutely, and she licked her lips.

“Do you...” His hand moved again...only a finger’s width closer.

Ragath looked up at him, her heart hammering at the stark hunger in his eyes. “Yes.” It came out a strangled whisper.

Gaffin moved, putting a body length between them. “Again,” he ordered.

Tears stung at her eyes, and she started to question his abrupt withdrawal.

“Gaffin?”

She stiffened at the sound of Niklus’s voice.

Gaffin nodded, though whether in confirmation or soothing she couldn’t say. “Now... Ragath, demonstrate for my father. All the forms you have knowledge of.”

“But I—”

“Your best,” he soothed her. “It takes Warriors a year to train.”

“Train?” There was a snap in his voice and the burn of anger pouring off him in waves.

Ragath winced. Like Jonus, Niklus didn’t approve of her training as a Warrior.

Gaffin shot a quelling look at his father, and the old man’s *Blutjagd* settled.

“Show him.” Gaffin’s voice stayed calm and encouraging.

She moved into position, checked her stance, then focused on the forms. Blocking out the lord and any other distractions, Ragath transitioned from form to form smoothly. In the end, she looked to Gaffin for a reaction.

He smiled, and his eyes glittered.

Nikus was slower to respond. “It is...wonderful. Gaffin, why did you keep

this from me?”

“Ragath has only just agreed to train for battle. I encouraged her interest, of course.”

“Immediately,” his father decreed. “I will—”

“No.” The word was out before Ragath could rein in her errant tongue.

Both men stared at her.

Ragath swallowed hard. “I wish...” She glanced at the glowing stone, then forced her attention to Niklus. “I wish Gaffin to train me.” She closed her hand into a fist around the hilt of the weapon, preparing herself for the lord’s outrage at her demand.

The older man swiveled his head, moving his gaze from his son to Ragath and back again, his expression unreadable. “Of course, Ragath. If that is your wish, Gaffin will train you.”

“T-thank you.” She shivered at the tension between them. “May I rest now, Gaffin?”

“As you wish. You have worked hard tonight. Perhaps after a day of rest, you could join the—”

“No.”

Two pairs of eyes flicked toward each other and then focused on her.

“I... Not yet. The men...stare.” Her cheeks burned. They would surely think her a frightened child.

“In the night then,” Gaffin conceded. “When you are more comfortable, we will join the men.”

She nodded and then glanced at Niklus. His stillness made her uneasy, though no *Blutjagd* burned in him. At last, he nodded his approval grimly.

Ragath passed the weapon into Gaffin’s hand and fled to the room she shared with Elee. In the silence, she burrowed under the furs without removing her leathers.

Her stomach squirmed in excitement. Gaffin would train her in the night. Alone. If tonight was any indication, who knew what might happen without interruptions?

\* \* \* \*

“Is she warming to you?”

Gaffin ground his teeth at the memory of her scenting body. Had she been nude for training, his father would have found them in a very different position.

“A bit,” he admitted.

“Yes.”

Ragath’s whisper taunted him. Had she been accepting him as a lover? Or had she been saying she understood his instructions? Given a few more moments, he might have been certain.

“Be cautious, Gaffin. If the others believe you have convinced her...” He

raked a hand through his hair, mussing the curls more than he smoothed them. "The move to a more intimate relationship must be hers." Niklus jerked his head toward the empty corridor.

Gaffin let his attention stray that direction. "I understand."

He did. Gaffin couldn't even hint at what he wanted. There could be no assumptions. No chances. Until Ragath said she wanted him as a lover or mate, he would have to keep his errant cock in his leathers.

His semi-erect length added that he had to do something to relieve his present discomfort. When he did, there was no question what his fantasy would be.

## Chapter Ten

“Like this, Ragath.”

He stepped up behind her, one hand on her hip and the other on her weapon arm. His scent was sublime, and she didn't have to look around at Gaffin's cock to know it was pressing to his leathers.

“Do not overextend. Rock your weight from flat forward and back again. Do not reach your arm further than...” He eased her arm into a slightly bent position. “Here.”

She did so, acutely aware of how he moved with her. All it would take would be an extra movement back toward her heels and—

She gasped in pleasure at the proof that he was aroused by her. *By something*, she taunted herself. Perhaps it was a normal male reaction to being close to a woman, as Jonus had attested. Perhaps the beast had only given in to it, because he was a beast. Perhaps a man that didn't find her attractive would have no interest in doing so.

Gaffin went still, his ragged breathing buffeting her ear.

Ragath took the opportunity to rock back and forth, as if she was still practicing what he'd meant to teach her. She added movements to the left and right, playing at testing her balance while she invited him to let loose his control and ask her to share his bed.

He let her brush against his body, his grip tightening a notch. It wasn't painful, as Jonus's grip sometimes was. There was something encouraging in the movement.

Gaffin released her and backed off a few steps, and she turned to him. He didn't look at her. He didn't invite her to his bed, as she'd hoped he would.

“We should stop for now,” he informed her.

Her heart crumpled again. While her dreams were driving her mad, the only man she wanted to take the need away showed no interest in it.

Acting unaffected took all her remaining calm. “Of course.” She hurried to the bathing pool, hoping the heat would calm her jangled nerves.

It wouldn't of course. Nothing did. Nothing could except one disinterested man.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin sparred with his cousin Ries, his mind half on the training and half on

the woman that was such a bittersweet distraction.

*Damn this!* The punch he landed was harder than it had to be, and Ries winced and bounced out of range.

He'd given his word not to pursue her, but it was likely to drive him mad. If Mieshen had given him leave to pursue Ragath, Gaffin wouldn't be playing this maddening game. He'd already have told the young Ani how he felt and either gotten her agreement to what he wanted or been free to break printing.

Her innocent movements and words were driving him mad with the belief that she was interested, but there was no sign of her upset at being rebuffed when he could take no more of it. When he broke training with her, she always accepted and left without distress.

*She goes on to her amusements, while I am in misery. She never asks to spend more time with me. She never seeks me out for companionship.* He cursed his decision to encourage Elee to be Ragath's confidant.

Ries made a move to round Gaffin, probably feeling he would be safe somewhere other than in front of Gaffin's fists.

Gaffin swept his cousin's feet and laid the killing punch. Still, his blood burned in an edge of *Bhutjagd* that refused to be silenced. "Another," he grumbled, offering a hand to aid Ries to his feet.

"I think you need a night in a woman's bed instead," Ries opined, taking advantage of the boost to his feet.

Fury lit in Gaffin, and he shoved Ries against the wall. Before he could pull back his arm to strike again, his father was there, ordering a halt.

"Go to bed and sleep, Gaffin."

As if he could. His rest time was full of erotic dreams of Ragath, near-climaxes from which there were no sweet release, asleep or awake.

On some level, Ries was correct. Gaffin definitely needed a woman in his bed, but the only woman that could please him now hadn't given more than the faintest indication that she saw him as a prospective mate or lover.

Niklus appeared before him, his eyes so knowing that Gaffin was forced to look away. His father's voice went to a soothing low.

"You train twice a day, Gaffin. You do not sleep often enough or long enough. Sleep. That is an order from your lord." There was a warning couched in that last statement.

Gaffin growled out an acceptance and stalked away, his muscles strung tight. Sleep? There would be no sleep for him.

There would be no sanity for him until he either sealed printing with her or broke printing entirely.

*Perhaps I should attempt self-release again.* It hadn't worked in days, but maybe the gods would show him mercy and allow it to work for him.

"And perhaps Veriel will impale himself on his own blade, as well." The chances of either were as likely.



## Chapter Eleven

Ragath stared at the ceiling, her nerves jumping so much she couldn't sleep. Every night, Gaffin showed her to the chamber she shared with Elee and took his leave. He'd never even hinted at taking her to his bed.

For that matter, she'd all but begged him to bed with her in practice, and he'd sent her away. His musk screamed his interest, yet he sought no roads toward the goal.

*It would serve him right if I found another interested man.*

But, damn him, she didn't want someone else. On that thought, she punched the furs beneath her and rolled over.

"Problem, Ragath?" Elee kept her voice low and her words slow for Ragath's comfort.

Realization came in a flash. Jonus had lied to her about so many things. What if the rules for bedding a woman were different than she'd believed all this time?

"Ragath?"

She launched in before she could talk herself out of so intimate a discussion. Elee was a woman, after all. She could be a confidant.

"How do your women...*our* women tell a man she would like to...to bed with him?" Her face burned at the audacity of the question.

Elee moved, crossing the floor between their beds and settling on the edge of Ragath's. "You are not like other women, Ragath."

She turned, stunned by that comment. "I am like you. Miesh... My father is a Warrior, like your father is."

There was a moment of silence. "You are blessed by the Stone. Touched by it. I am not. I would need my father's permission to bed with a man."

Ragath bit her lower lip. Mieshen's permission? Gods, what were the chances of that? Not high, she'd wager.

Elee continued. "You need merely choose a man, and he is yours."

"Choose? Women do not choose. Men choose, and women may..." Her face darkened. "That is not so. Is it?"

"Men show an interest to be sure. Men may indicate an interest, with the father's permission...if such a man sought a woman like myself. You..."

Her heart hammered in her chest. "Yes? What about me?"

Elee's smile widened. "No man would dare approach you without your leave to do so, but they need not ask your father's permission."

Ragath tried to find the reason in that. “Because I am Stone touched? But... I have *not* touched the Stone. Gaffin told me not to. Never to. It is a rule, Elee.”

The young woman laughed, then sobered. “No. You must not touch the Stone directly. Gaffin is correct about that. The Stone...chose you, Ragath. It marked you with the sign of the gods.”

She reached back, touching the mark. She’d seen it in mirrors so many times, but Jonus—“The beast Veriel lied about that as well, I suppose. He said it was his mark, and he’d placed it on me as a babe to show his ownership.”

Elee grimaced and looked toward the corridor. “Gods, do not tell the men that.”

“Why?”

She looked back, seemingly picking her words carefully. “It is sacrilege, and the men will be upset to hear you say it.”

Ragath nodded, filing the information away for future encounters with them. Still, she had no answer to her question. “So, how does a woman like me tell a man she wishes to bed with him? How do I know if the man has interest in it, if he will not say?”

Elee smiled brightly. “If the man is the one I believe it is, he has interest. How do you tell him?” She giggled, then leaned closer. “Listen well, Ragath.”

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin came to consciousness slowly. There was something different...not wrong, precisely, but different.

He shivered in the evening air. The chill bumps rising on his thighs were the first indication that something was amiss. Where was the cover he’d gone to sleep with?

Gaffin ranged his hand about, searching for it. What he encountered was vastly different.

The soft globe of a breast filled his hand. He froze, cupping it, too stunned to withdraw.

*I do not have to withdraw. Mieshen has given his leave, if Ragath proves amenable to the idea of mating.* That in mind, Gaffin stroked her.

Ragath moaned, arching into his touch. Her nipples came to tight little points against his hands, and her scent intensified.

He sensed her cycle, groaning at her timing. If he did this, she would likely catch pregnant.

She shied. “You have no interest in me?” There were tears hidden behind the words.

“Oh yes. I do have interest.” He lowered his head, laying a lick on the tip of one rigid nipple.

“Then you will lay with me?” she asked. “Bed with me?”

His cock surged up at her direct question of it. *Gods, she is offering to be my*

lover.

*She is not sealed as my mate. I cannot chance a child with her.* “I will lay with you, but I cannot breach your body with my cock.”

There was a tense moment of silence. “Cannot? Elee said any Warrior I offered to could, if he had interest and I did. Do you lie? Or does she?”

“Neither...but... We have laws, Ragath. Rules.”

“Elee said the laws and rules did not apply to me, as they do to her.”

“This one does, but Elee would not know to mention it.”

Ragath drew away, sitting up next to him, seemingly seeking space. “What law? What rule?”

He pushed to sitting, meeting her eyes in the near total darkness within the keep. “We may only create life with a woman sealed to us as mate.”

An edge of *Blutjagd* burned in her skin. “And how do you seal a mate to you?”

“You must promise to be mine always.”

She swallowed hard, and a shiver worked over her form.

“What is wrong?”

Ragath remained silent.

“Ragath? What is it?”

“Veriel asked the same of me. I did not promise it, of course,” she hastened to add.

A vicious string of curses left his mouth. “And so you will not offer that promise to me, even if I wait years for it,” he guessed. Already, his printing was driving Gaffin mad, and he was doomed to failure, because the damned beast had played at Warrior for this one thing.

She wrapped herself around him, seemingly seeking comfort. Gaffin let her and even managed an awkward attempt at patting her back, but he couldn’t force words forth.

Her breath teased his ear, heating his blood in an indecent show of his mounting printing madness. No matter his vows, he would have to leave her soon.

“I promise to be yours always. Only yours, Gaffin.”

He pulled back, gaping at her. “You mean that?”

Her hand circled his cock, stroking him in a manner he tried to ignore was all too knowing. “I... Yes, I will be yours alone. Please—”

He captured her lips in a fierce kiss. Some corner of his mind argued that he should be slow for her.

Her heated responses refuted it nicely. Her tongue danced with his in a way that reinforced the beast had done this, at least.

Gaffin had to know what he’d never dared ask before. He broke off the kiss. “What have you experienced of a man, Ragath?”

She laid her head on his shoulder, her hand working him. “He tasted, as men taste a woman.”

“And you?”

Her hand tightened a bit, and she made a concerted effort at his pleasure. “This.” It was said in a wary little voice, as if she expected his displeasure for having known so much of a man.

*Beast. It was the beast she touched and who touched her.*

*I must put her at ease.* The only way to do that would be to put the beast out of his own mind and give them both pleasure.

For that, he had to give her a new experience. He slid his hand between her thighs and started circling her nub. Ragath rose against him, seeking more, seeking his fill.

She begged for him. Gaffin guided her to the bed, easing her hand from his cock. He made a more concerted effort at her pleasure, moaning at her sweet sounds.

“Gaffin, please.”

“Please, what?” he teased.

“Fill the aching emptiness.” Gods, but she was blunt, and there was nothing like it on the furs.

“Soon.”

He could tell her release was beating at her. Her eyes slid shut, and her head rocked back. She panted, arched, opened her mouth to suck in air—

And he moved, filling her in a single stroke and then freezing against the gates to her womb.

Her eyes opened wide, and the breath hitched in. In the next instant, her body started contracting around him and the scream ripped forth. Her hands clawed at his back, giving him the same sort of pleasure-pain she was experiencing.

The scent of her blood went to his head, driving Gaffin on. He started moving, slowly at first, savoring her continuing contractions. Then he was pounding, venting his possession in grunts, as an animal might.

Another scream split the air...then a battle cry.

Gaffin jerked upright, dragging Ragath along with him. His move to turn on the intruder ended with a groan of delight as she settled onto his cock and started levering herself up and down his length, oblivious to their audience.

“Gods,” his father choked out. “My apologies.”

Ragath’s legs encircled him, and his father bumped his way out of the chamber. Gaffin was torn between the urge to gut him for daring to look at Ragath and the soul-deep need to spend deep inside his mate.

The need to spend won out. Her mouth meshed with his, and his seed rushed into her body.

He’d heard sealing soothed the madness, but as far as Gaffin could tell, it had done nothing of the sort.

*Perhaps her fertility affects me.* Whatever the case might be, he wanted her again immediately.

Ragath broke off the kiss, biting her lip, her hips shifting to move his still-hard cock in her. "This is the claim," she breathed.

Gaffin liked the sound of that...claiming her as his own. He pressed her into the mattress and pinned her arms down. "I claim you," he growled. "You are mine, Ragath."

She rose against his thrusts, her sounds deepening again. "Yours," she panted out. "Only yours."

"No!"

Gaffin startled, his senses going wild with the proximity of a beast. Before he could turn, claws cut into his shoulder, and he found himself flying through space and into the cavern wall.

\* \* \* \*

Ragath forced her eyes to focus, her heart skittering at the sight of Jonus. She pressed her thighs together on the mixture of sex fluids and blood, sending a silent challenge that she would never be the beast's woman.

His hands fisted, and his teeth lengthened into the fangs Gaffin had told her the beast had. She'd never seen them before, but she'd suspected he'd been hiding more than his liaisons with her servants long before she saw evidence of it.

Jonus didn't address her. He made a sound of disgust at the sight of Gaffin's amulet. Then he turned toward the downed Warrior, wicked-looking claws appearing at the ends of his fingers.

There was no question what he intended. Ragath didn't hesitate. She grasped the weapon hung on the far side of Gaffin's bed and flipped across the room in one-handed arcs of her body, landing between them.

Jonus made as if to push her aside, and Ragath struck, sliding the dagger into the spot that her mind told her was right with a scream of fury. The Warriors rushing toward them stopped at the archway, gaping in surprise.

The beast staggered back, pulling the weapon from his chest. Ragath tensed to move, planning how to turn a flip into an offensive attack.

Before she could do so, Niklus was there, giving her his back as he wrenched the weapon from Jonus's fingers. "You may not wield the weapon, foul one," he growled. "You are unworthy."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by harsh breathing from everyone in the room.

The foul stench of the beast filled the chamber, a rancid cloud that made Ragath's eyes water and her lungs complain. So, this was what he truly was. This was the creature that had stolen her away from her father and imprisoned Ragath with stone and gates and lies about who and what she was. She hated him.

Jonus looked up at her over Niklus's shoulder. His fangs were gone, and a strained smile pulled up at his lips. "I have always loved you, Ragath."

Her stomach clenched at that pronouncement. “You show it poorly,” she offered in return.

He collapsed to his knees. “No doubt.” He wheezed the concession. “I always have.” He started up at her, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he pitched backward.

Ragath turned to Gaffin, kneeling at his side, trusting that Niklus would protect them both. He didn’t answer her call, and a mixture of hopelessness and anger bubbled up in her.

Gaffin couldn’t be gone. Not now, when she’d finally promised to be his.

One of the men draped a fur around Ragath.

Ries motioned her aside and started to poke and prod at Gaffin. He smiled grimly. “Gaffin will need mending, but he will survive it.”

She sobbed in relief. “Fetch my gown. I wish to help.”

It wasn’t until the gown settled in her hand that she realized she’d given an order and been obeyed. It was hard to conceive of, but she was master of her own body and space. Ragath savored it.

\* \* \* \*

Gaffin groaned at the aches and pains spearing him here and there. His head felt as if it had been split in two. His shoulder and chest felt as if he’d taken one of his grandfather’s hardest hits in his early training. Bruises made themselves known over most of his body.

*Over my back. Someone attacked my back? Only a beast would—  
The elder!*

He came up with a shout that was half warning and half pain. Hands stopped him, and Gaffin panted and ground his teeth.

The pull at his shoulder was stitches. Only his family would extend that kindness.

As if in confirmation, his father’s voice rumbled out. “Slowly. Don’t tear the mending out.”

*Stitches... That took time. How much time? What did the beast do to Ragath?*

His heart aching, he opened his eyes. He let out his breath on a word of thanks for Tes and Ani at the sight of her. Ragath appeared whole and unharmed.

Gaffin reached for her, stroking a hand along her cheek. “Are you well?” There might be amulet bruises he couldn’t see.

She nodded. “Are you?”

The hands eased away. Only his father’s remained, steadying him while Gaffin’s head spun lightly.

“Confused,” he admitted. He couldn’t reconcile what the beast had done to him so quickly that he’d had no chance to retaliate.

A mark on her forehead caught his attention, and he reached for it. It was

akin to a burn or abrasion.

*Beast blood.*

The outline of the mark of Syth took shape. Realization came slowly, at about the same time Ragath darkened and averted her eyes.

*She killed him.* The only reason his father would paint the blood seals was if Ragath had made a kill.

*She saved me.* Gaffin didn't doubt that. The elder would have been intent on the goal of ending him.

At a loss for words, he cupped her head in his good hand and pulled her into a kiss. Ragath met him avidly. Her scent rose, and his cock did as well.

*She's fertile.* The need to take advantage of that again was impossible to ignore.

"Gaffin," his father whispered harshly.

He broke from the kiss, making a sharp movement with his hand. "Leave us."

"Your injuries?" Ragath suggested.

"The blood needs cleaned away. Mine and yours." It was a challenge to the others. Gaffin had shed her blood. Ragath was his and no one else's, and he would bathe her in the traditional manner in sign of it.

"You'll hurt yourself," she protested weakly.

"I wasn't done with you," he informed her. "Not by a long, hard..." He nuzzled her lips. "...march."

Ragath gasped at that. "Leave us." There was a bite of order in that.

No one questioned her. No one wasted time in complying. The bathing chamber was empty in moments.

She kissed him, pulling her gown up between them.

Gaffin drew away. "Remove it. I want to see you."

In a heartbeat, she'd flung it away. The matching symbol covered her heart. He kissed lightly at it, prompting a shiver from her.

"First I bathe you," he informed her. "Then I finish claiming you."

"Now...please."

"No. It is traditional that I bathe you."

"Traditional?"

He repeated it in the language of the ancients, and she nodded.

Gaffin used his good arm to lift her from the floor. His head was fuzzy and complained at the movement, but his responsibility for Ragath kept him focused enough to stand and wade into the pool with her.

He settled her on her feet in water that reached her mid-thigh and sank to his knees before her. Cupping handfuls of hot water, he started stroking away the blood from her inner thighs and along her seam.

Ragath moaned at the contact, her head pitching back and her hips forward. It was too much temptation for Gaffin. He would have what was his alone.

He buried his face between her legs, licking and suckling at her ready body,

tasting the faint traces of his earlier possession. Her hands closed in his hair, and her legs trembled.

“Gaffin, please.” It came out a rough whisper.

He eased away minutely, burning with the need to send a message that Ragath was his. “You still wish to have me claim you? You still wish to be mine always?”

“Yes.”

His printing blazed at that, and he pulled Ragath to her knees, chest to chest in the pool with him. The water splashed up around them, but she didn’t flinch from it as she often did.

“You are mine,” he informed her. “You will never belong to another man.” *Not now. Not ever.*

Her answer turned to a scream of pleasure at his thrust into her body. Gaffin pinned her wrists together behind her back with his weaker hand, using the stronger to guide her up and down his length.

It wasn’t enough. He had to be deeper. Gaffin drew her to the smooth lip of the pool and lifted Ragath to it. Once she was settled, he pinned down her arms as he had in his bed.

They came together hard and fast, voices echoing off the stone walls. Her legs wrapped around him, and Gaffin ground his teeth. The next time, he would hold them open for their joining.

*She is fertile. She is mine.* He had no doubts that she’d carry his son before this need to show his strength abated. Once that was accomplished, there would be no doubt whose woman she was.

*She may have been tricked into thinking she was the beast’s woman, but she was born and raised to be mine.*

With that, they climaxed, a long, loud announcement that nothing would part them.



## *About the Author*

Brenna Lyons wears many hats, sometimes all on the same day: former president of EPIC, author of more than 80 published works, columnist, special needs teacher, wife, mother... In addition, she's a member in good standing of ERWA, MWW, RWU, WPM, IWOFA, and Broad Universe.

In her first seven years published in novel-length, Brenna has finaled for eleven EPIES and won two of the coveted awards. She has also finaled for three PEARLS (taking Honorable Mention second to NY Times Bestseller Angela Knight), two CAPAS, a Dream Realm Award, and has taken Spintetinger's Book of the Year for 2007.

Brenna has been termed "one of the most deviant erotic minds in the publishing world...not for the weak." (Rachelle for Fallen Angels Reviews) She writes milieu-heavy dark fiction, mainly science fiction, fantasy and horror (in 21 established worlds plus stand-alones), poetry, articles, and essays. She teaches classes in everything from POV studies to advanced editing, networking to marketing. Brenna loves talking to readers and can be reached via her site at <http://www.brennalyons.com>.