



CAPTURED

MELINDA BARRON

Captured

The Sons of Gunnmarr, Book One

By Melinda Barron

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC
P.O. Box 992
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For C: How does this one strike you?

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Prologue

Should a man's sons suffer for his wicked ways?

Rugoff took a stick from the pile he'd just gathered and touched it to the blaze, holding it up when it caught, watching the orange flame dance around the wood.

If only the fire could provide more than heat. If it could give him a woman, he would be thrilled. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the stick in his hand. *Please, please change. Let your beautiful orange burn flare up into a woman, full of curves with soft, warm flesh.*

He closed his eyes, praying to feel heat from her body, the gentle slope of her breasts in his hands; he wanted warmth from another human body, wanted to see her standing before him, wanted to hear her laugh.

He opened his eyes to see the flames eating the stick, the ash falling into the fire.

Despair over took him. It threatened to steal the air from his lungs, send his body crashing down to the ground. But it was only a threat. The witch's curse had seen to that.

Should a man's sons suffer for his wicked ways?

His despair quickly turned to rage as he thought of his father, selfish to the end, not thinking of anyone but himself. When he called for extreme wealth, for power over everyone in the land, the witch he'd summoned had gladly given it to him.

All she'd ask for in return was the precious jewel that set in the center of his father's crown. He'd agreed and she'd given him all. When he'd double crossed her and ordered his guards to kill her when his coffers were full, she'd had the last laugh.

With her final breath, she'd uttered a curse upon the sons of Gunnmarr, sending them to the depths of the earth, buried deep inside its core. They would never age. They would enjoy an abundance of food and comfort, warmth in the dark times and cool winds in the light.

But it was what the three would not be able to get that haunted Rugoff, as he was sure it haunted his brothers. They would have no human contact, even though at first, they were able to hear the peoples of his land as they laughed and joked and loved. When that happened, he envied the fact they enjoyed the warmth of the sun on their faces, something he would never feel again.

Damn his father to the bowels of Hel. Had he cared that he'd condemned his sons to an eternity of pain and loneliness? No, of course he didn't. If he did, then he would have done something to see them brought safely home again.

He thought about Benedikt and Egill, and what they were enduring. Did they feel the same pain as he did? Or had they found some way out of their everlasting torment? Somehow, he didn't think so.

If he ever found a way out of his prison, the first thing he would do was find a way to free his brothers. He would see to it.

After all, a man should not suffer for his father's wicked ways.

Chapter One

“Mrs. Westergard?” Venise Stewart knocked hard on the wooden door and then rubbed her gloved hands up and down her arms. It was colder here than anywhere she’d ever been in her entire life. When no answer came to her knock, she tried again. “Mrs. Westergard, are you there?”

She wanted to add the words *“hurry up and open the door before my toes fall off,”* but she held back. It wouldn’t make a very good first impression.

A shuffling noise from inside the house made her think that maybe, just maybe, the woman would open the door and allow her to come inside. She didn’t relish the idea of going back out to the huge rental vehicle that brought her out here to the middle of nowhere—a place Venise thought could possibly be the coldest place in Norway.

She called out the woman’s name again, praying it hadn’t been wishful thinking that had made her imagine the noise of feet moving across the floor inside the house. When the portal swung wide open, Venise sighed in relief.

“Hello.” The old woman opened the door and motioned her inside. “Hurry, hurry, we don’t want to let in Loki or his mischief makers.”

Venise rushed across the threshold, actually looking behind her to see if the mischievous, make-believe imp was behind her before the woman shut the door and firmly threw the bolt into place.

“Let me look at you. Yes, you must be Venise, the Italian who grew up in America, right? You’re the first. Come in, come in, and let’s get started. We have a lot of things to do.”

Feet rooted to the floor, Venise stared after Mrs. Westergard as the strange woman scurried into the other room. The greeting made her wonder if her hostess was expecting someone else. She hadn’t mentioned entertaining other visitors when Venise asked to come and talk with her about Norwegian folk tales.

This was the last stop on Venise's tour of the region. If all went well, Venise could go home to Princeton, finish her dissertation and gain her Ph.D. in literature of the Scandinavian countries. She'd already been to Sweden, Denmark and Finland. She'd made Norway her last stop because of the woman who'd just walked into the other room. Mrs. Westergard, said to be an expert in Norwegian folk tales and literature, had told her she couldn't meet with her until today.

A heavenly smell wafted in her direction and Venise wanted to follow it, to see what the woman had prepared for the visit. Another hearty whiff of food propelled her toward the other room. When she stepped inside, she found a table laden with offerings. Several large tureens of soup sat in the center. She imagined them full of some sort of fish stews from the smell. A large platter was off to the side, filled with meatballs, potatoes and cabbage.

Venise's stomach rumbled and her mouth watered. She'd eaten breakfast at the hotel before she'd left, but who had expected that the trip out to the wilderness would take over two hours and keep her on edge so much that her nerves would be shot?

"Eat, eat." The woman indicated the table as she poured something that looked rich and heavenly into a mug. She offered it to Venise, who held it to her nose and inhaled sharply.

Chocolate. "Smells delicious, thank you." She took a tentative sip, savored the taste of it on the tip of her tongue and took another. "There's a lot of food here. Are you expecting someone else?"

She wanted so bad to say, "*I'd appreciate it if you just talked to me.*" If there were too many people around, Venise grew shy. If that happened, it would probably be the unknown guest who would take over the interview and Venise would, in essence, be using his, or her, information. That wasn't something she wanted to happen.

The woman gave her a sly smile and once again indicated the table. "Try the meatballs. They are, if I do say so myself, quite splendid."

Venise set down her computer bag and purse, then unzipped her heavy parka. Even inside the house, she could feel the cold from outside. This had to be the coldest place she'd ever visited. How did people live here year after year? And how did this woman live here, in the middle of nowhere, by herself?

She shouldn't worry about that, though. The woman looked hearty enough to take care of herself. It was best if she started the interview now, before anyone else arrived.

"I'd like to talk about tales involving the nine worlds created by Odin and his brothers. I understand you have some stories that people have never heard before, some that add to the myths." Venise shrugged out of her coat and looked for a place to put it.

The older woman hurried across the room and put it, and Venise's laptop case and her handbag, on a chair that looked as if it had been carved out of a tree. The arms and legs contained many knots and the seat looked extremely uncomfortable.

"I need the bag. It has my laptop in it." Venise held out her hand, but Mrs. Westergard just patted it carefully as if she were tucking it into bed. Then she returned to the table.

"Eat. Eat."

Venise blinked, wanting to ask if she was really in Norway about to interview a scholar, or had she somehow missed her spot and ended up in a grandmother's kitchen, who wanted nothing more than to stuff her full of food as if she'd never eaten. She moved toward her bag.

"I'd really like to get started. I only have a few hours before I need to start back to town, in case the roads get too icy. I can come back tomorrow, though, if we don't finish today; I mean, if that's okay with you."

"Today, tomorrow, the next day..." The bright smile on Mrs. Westergard's face made Venise smile. "It will make no difference to me, or to you."

That statement made Venise's eyes widen. What did she mean by that? "Actually, it does. I'm only here until tomorrow. I have a few meetings with professors at the University of Oslo the following day, but I wanted to talk to you first."

It wouldn't start the interview out right, Venise knew, to say she wanted to see what Mrs. Westergard said because her theories about Norse mythology were a little...unusual. She was a well-known scholar, yes, but she had anecdotes that most other professors thought were pure fiction she'd made up herself. When she'd retired from the University of Oslo, most people had said it was a good thing. In fact, several of her professors had warned Venise about talking to Mrs. Westergard.

But Venise liked to go the extra mile. She prayed talking to this woman would provide her with information that would make coming all the way up to the northern edge of Norway worth her while.

"Sit," her hostess said, indicating the table. "We can eat and talk."

Venise hurried to her bag. She took out her cell phone, then extracted a pen and paper before going back to the table. Mrs. Westergard had already loaded up a plate for her, food filling

the entire disc from side to side. There was no way she would be able to eat all that food, but she wouldn't be rude and say that. She'd eat what she could and then, maybe, she'd ask for a doggie bag. Was that kosher in this part of the world?

Venise wasn't exactly sure, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

"Do you mind if I take your picture? I'd like it for my records."

"Of course." The attractive woman smoothed down her hair, then smiled as Venise held up her cell and snapped the photo.

"Thanks." She tucked the phone into the pocket of her jeans. "Let's talk about Odin," she said, sitting down at the table.

Her hostess had already sat down and was eating one meatball after another as if she hadn't had food in days. Venise tried to hide her surprise. The older woman was thin, and didn't really show her age, which was seventy-two according to the research Venise had done. She didn't look a day over fifty, if not younger. There wasn't a wrinkle on her.

Maybe it had something to do with living up here. Venise bit back a laugh. If that were true, lots of women would be running toward the outer edges of Norway.

"So, let's talk about the creation of the world."

"Ah, Odin." The older woman waved her hand in the air as if she were shaking a pom-pom. "Such a virile man he was, in his younger years, that is."

She stood and walked to a tapestry, letting her fingers trade the image of a man on a rearing horse. Venise recognized it for what it was, an image of Odin entering Valhalla.

There was a long, pregnant pause and Venise almost had the feeling that Mrs. Westergard was mourning a lover.

"Everyone knows about Odin," the woman finally said. "Let's talk of something else."

"Something else?" Panic seeped into Venise's bones. Had she come all this way only to be denied the information she sought? Mrs. Westergard had told her she had tales about Odin that would 'burn her ears', and that's what Venise wanted to hear.

The woman came back to the table and sat down, popping another meatball into her mouth, chewing, swallowing, and then repeating the action again. What was it with this woman and food?

"Mrs. Westergard?"

The woman swallowed, then took a deep swig from her mug. "King Gunnmarr had three sons."

“Who?” She’d never heard that name before and wondered exactly what the woman was talking about.

“Three. Rugoff, Benedikt and Egill.”

Venise opened her book, flipping to find an empty page. “Is this a folk tale?”

“The king was quite a popular man, always making sure his people wanted for nothing. He was victorious in battle, slaying his enemies and battling monsters. And, he was quite popular with the ladies.”

Venise put down every word, making a mental note to ask Mrs. Westergard about spellings and accent marks before she left.

“One day he met a beautiful woman and she bore him three sons.”

Venise wanted to tell Mrs. Westergard she didn’t need to mention the fact there were three of them. She’d already made that perfectly clear. “Rugoff, Benedikt and Egill?”

“Correct.” The storyteller inclined her head in approval and Venise felt a thrill of anticipation. This might be better than hearing yet another story about Odin.

“As Gunnmarr grew older, though, he changed. He could never get enough. He wanted more money. More land. More women. He cast aside his wife and took a different woman to his bed every night.”

Venise looked up from her notes. “In other words, he went through an ancient mid-life crisis?”

The joke didn’t get the response she wanted and Venise turned back to her notepad.

“As he grew older, he demanded what he thought was his due. His people, upset with his dismissal of his wife, were no longer as giving as they had once been. They refused to send in taxes and other tributes. He fought many battles to take lands and he lost. So, to gain his ends, he summoned a witch.”

Of course he did, Venise thought. There’s always a witch of some sort in these tales.

“The witch promised him gold, and victory in battle. But she demanded one thing in return.”

“Money?” Venise regretted the suggestion as soon as it was out of her mouth. If the witch could provide Gunnmarr with gold, she wouldn’t demand it for her payment. “What did she want?”

“She wanted him to give her a jewel that was set in the center of his crown, a beautiful emerald that was very rare at the time.”

The woman really didn't need to tell the rest of the tale, Venise thought. Gunnmarr agreed to the trade-off, then stiffed the witch, leaving her with nothing.

"Exactly." Mrs. Westergard pushed the plate toward her and Venise followed the woman's lead, picking up a meatball with her finger and eating it quickly. She'd done it mainly to hide her shock at the fact her hostess seemed to have read her mind.

A drink of chocolate washed down the meatball and Venise tried not to think about how the two flavors didn't match.

"So, what happened?"

"Well..." Mrs. Westergard toyed with her cup, staring into its contents. She remained silent and Venise could swear she saw tears in the woman's eyes. "The worst thing that could have happened did. After the witch gave the wicked man all he wanted, and he had her condemned to death."

"Ouch." Venise made a few notes. "I've never heard this story before."

"It's been forgotten through the years." Mrs. Westergard took another bite. "But the story does not end there."

"Doesn't end with her death?" She drew a figure eight on the paper. "Things always end with death."

"No." The older woman sat back in her chair, and for the first time since she'd arrived, Venise could see her age. "Tell me about your childhood."

The change in subject shocked Venise, who stared at her hostess dumbfounded. She toyed with her meatballs as she tried to figure out what this had to do with folk tale the woman told.

"I grew up in America, and now I'm working on a Ph.D. in Scandinavian Literature. I've included folk tales in my research because they fascinate me." She picked up another meatball.

"So after the witch died, what happened?"

"What about before you moved to America? You're Italian, correct?"

Okay, this was weird. Usually she did research on her interviewees, not the other way around. She supposed, though, if she were going to let someone into her house, she would check up on them, too.

"Yes, I am. I was left on the doorstep of a church in Venice. A nun found me."

"I see. Venice. Like your name."

Unease spread through her and she started to draw circles on her paper. "The nuns named me Venice. When my parents adopted me, I was ten. They changed the 'c' to an 's'. They never really did say why."

"You were ten." The wistfulness in the older woman's voice made Venise wonder exactly where this was going.

"Yes. I spent the first ten years of my life in an orphanage. I was lucky to find my parents, or I should say they found me."

"I had a child." The words were spoken so softly that Venise wondered if she'd imagined them. "I wonder sometimes...I wonder."

The room grew silent and Venise watched the older woman, who now stared at the tapestry, her gaze growing misty.

"Mrs. Westergard? Are you all right?"

"Before the witch died, she cursed the King by taking away that which she thought he valued most. His sons."

"What?"

"She should have known better, of course," the woman continued. "The man cared not for his sons. But they suffer for his greed."

Suffer? As in present tense? What was the woman talking about? "What did she do?"

"She banished them to the depths of the Earth, each to his own spot, to live their eternal lives alone."

"Eternal?"

"Yes, she wanted the King, even in his death, to feel pain for what he'd done to his sons. The only problem, of course, is the King had no sense of feeling for others. He cared not what he'd done."

Venise drew another circle. The woman was lost in her own little world, switching from past tense to present, as if what they were talking about was still taking place.

"I see. Are they like male sleeping beauties? Do they need the kiss of true love to wake them?"

Mrs. Westergard chuckled softly. "No, they're awake. Only trapped."

"You make it sound as if they are still alive."

"That is what eternal means, dear."

Venise wanted to tell her that fairy tales had nothing to do with real life, but that wouldn't be nice. "If they're trapped, how can they break free?"

"Each of them has to find peace with their lives," the woman replied softly. "Until all three do, none of them will be saved."

Mrs. Westergard stood and walked to the chair that looked so uncomfortable. She picked up Venise's bag and purse and held them out to her.

"Are we done? I just got here, and we haven't finished yet. Mrs. Westergard, please, not yet." She stood and walked toward her, intent on assuring her they still had work to do. As she walked closer, though, she could see the woman had a different plan. Her face was resolute and she jiggled the items again.

"Please, let's sit back down and..."

"Sitting. An excellent idea." Mrs. Westergard shoved her computer bag and purse into her arms, tossing the jacket on the floor next to her. Then with the strength that said she was nowhere near her age, she pushed Venise into the chair. The hard wood bit into her backside and she let out a cry of pain.

"I'm so sorry it has to be this way. It's all for the best, though. You'll see that in the end."

"What the hell?" Venise tried to stand but the chair seemed to grab hold of her, and then the room began to spin. The bottom dropped out of the chair and she felt herself falling, a sinking feeling of sheer terror invaded her body as she flailed her arms around, trying to grab onto something, which was impossible since there was nothing there.

She hit a cold piece of land with a hard thud, snow creeping into her clothing as she tried to capture air back into her lungs.

"What the hell?"

She looked around, trying to orient herself. The house was gone, as was Mrs. Westergard and her food-laden table. There was sound, though, although she couldn't quite make it out. It was a crunching sound, almost like...footsteps on snow.

Venise cast aside her bags and stood, the world continuing to spin. A man broke through a copse of trees, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he came to stop, his mouth open as he stared at her.

"Stay away from me!" She backed up, holding up her hands as if she would give him a good judo chop. The only thing was she knew nothing about judo, or any other fighting method.

They both stood in place, and she could tell he was as shocked to see her as she was to see him. When he took a tentative step in her direction, she turned and fled, leaving behind all the things that had made the trip with her, and not knowing where the hell she was, or where she was going.

Chapter Two

Rugoff stood in place for a moment, unsure what to do. He'd seen the woman, and she'd seen him. That in itself was stunning. When he'd heard the thud outside his cave, he'd thought an animal had wandered nearby.

He had no traps set, because he didn't need the food. But that didn't mean animals didn't get hurt in this ugly area from time to time. When that happened, he did his best to free them and treat them, if they would allow it. If not, he would leave them to their own devices, as nature intended.

He'd always been happy that he didn't have to hunt for food. The witch who had cursed him to this unholy realm had provided him with nourishment daily. When he woke, it would be there, magically appearing while he'd slept.

When it had happened the first time, he'd stayed awake the next night, hoping to catch the person who made the delivery. He was sure that whoever it was could help him. But as he'd watched, the food had appeared out of thin air, much as the woman had appeared. And now she was disappearing through the trees.

He yelled at her not to run, the sound of his voice sending further shock waves through him. It had been forever since he'd tried to talk to another human.

Rugoff took off after her, fearful that if he let her out of his sight, she'd disappear forever. He wasn't sure which god was responsible for this gift, but he didn't plan on turning it down.

He didn't stop to pick up the items she'd dropped. They would come back for them later. He ran as fast as he could, putting his feet down on top of the prints she'd made in the snow, zigzagging through the trees, ducking to miss the low-hung branches.

She was still ahead of him, but he was gaining on her, and he could tell her lungs labored to keep up with her breathing, which sounded loud and very frightened. He didn't want her to be frightened. He wanted her to stop and talk with him, to tell him how she'd come to be here.

Maybe she'd come to rescue him. Did he dare hope for something like that? It would be absolutely perfect if she had arrived to bring him home. He'd only had a slight look at her, but he knew she was beautiful, dark headed and rounded in all the right places. His cock pulsed to attention, but he ignored it, knowing that if he didn't catch her that she could, very well, come to harm, either from the elements or the animals.

While he did not have to hunt animals, they still lived here, including bears and wolves who would love to see her running their way. They'd make a meal out of her in seconds.

There was that other thing, too, but it wasn't time for it to make its annual appearance.

He yelled once again for her to stop, but she ignored him; he could still hear her feet pounding through the forest, and then, suddenly, there was silence. He skidded to a stop, his gaze spanning the area, wondering where she'd gone.

Had she disappeared as quickly as she'd appeared? By Thor's Hammer, he hoped not. Just to look at her was a gift, but the idea of talking with her, and, did he dare think it could happen, feel her under him, was perfection.

An image of her soft, warm flesh bathed in firelight appeared in his mind. She lay upon layers and layers of fur, her dark hair contrasting beautifully with the white skins. His cock hardened even more and he took a deep breath, trying to get himself under control.

It wouldn't do for him to greet her like an out of control youth; assuming, of course, that he could find her. He stayed where he was, trying to keep his senses tuned for any sound or smell of her.

Hopefully she hadn't stumbled upon a bear's den, or fallen into a fox's lair.

How could she have disappeared so quickly? The same way she appeared, he told himself as he closed his eyes and concentrated on what was happening around him. There was a slight click, click, click of what he thought might be a squirrel's teeth as it devoured a nut. Or maybe it was reindeer, coming through the forest.

No, that couldn't be it, he thought. Snow covered the ground, which meant the reindeer hooves would not make any noise. What was it? He stood for a few moments more, scanning the area. And then he looked up.

A smile broke over his face as the beautiful woman stared down at him from the tree, her eyes wide in terror.

He motioned for her to come down and she shook her head violently, clinging tightly to the solid branch.

Rugoff pondered his options. He could go up after her, but that would frighten her even more, and he didn't want that. Plus, who knew if the branch would hold the both of them. If they tumbled back to the ground, it would not be a good thing.

She thinks I mean to harm her. The thought had not occurred to him until he realized her body shook as she grasped the branch. It could be from the cold, but more likely it was from fear. The look she gave her was one of pure terror, her eyes wide as she stared at him.

She hadn't responded when he'd yelled for her to stop. Could she hear? Or maybe she couldn't speak.

What he needed was to calm her down, to let her know he didn't mean her any harm. His brain raced, trying to come up with a solution. When it came to him, he smiled and nodded at her, then hurried back the way they'd just come.

Maybe there was something he could use as a peace offering. He had to get her down from the tree and out of the elements. Dressed as she was now she'd be frozen solid before the sun went to sleep for the evening.

He said a silent prayer to Odin that this idea would work. As he made his way to his cave he wondered who she was, and where she'd come from. She could either be a wonderful gift from the gods, or an agent of Loki, meant to do him great harm. Either way, the beautiful creature was the first human being he'd seen in ages.

And he didn't intend to let her go.

Venise's heart was in overdrive, her senses reeling as the huge man stood below and waved at her to come down.

No fricking way. She shook her head emphatically. If he thought she was going to just drop into his arms, he was crazy. What the hell was happening? First she was in Mrs. Westergard's living room, then she was falling, almost as if the world had disappeared, giving her nothing to grab hold of in her descent.

Then there was the bald guy, yelling in some language that definitely wasn't English. She stared down at him now, wondering exactly who he was and what was happening. In return, he gave her an appraising look, then turned around and ran back the way they'd just come.

"What the hell?" She glanced around, wondering if she should take advantage of his absence to leave. But where would she go? There were no other signs of inhabitation. A quick glance showed no telephone or utility wires. There was no noise, except for the slight rustling of branches in the wind.

"Mrs. Westergard!" Her shout seemed to echo in the trees. "Get me the hell out of here!"

Maybe this was some sort of test the woman used to see if her guests were worthy of receiving information. If she lasted an hour in the frosty air, she would be able to publish her paper. Or maybe the woman was some sort of serial killer who used the frigid temperatures to kill her victims before she sliced them up and put them into her meatballs.

The idea made her want to throw up. But she needed to think of something else, like the man who had chased her through the trees. He would be back, she was sure of it. He wouldn't give up so easily. What would he do if he captured her? Maybe he was the serial killer and Mrs. Westergard lured his victims here for him.

What would he do if he got hold of her? The thought increased the bile in her throat and she was afraid she would pass out from fear. She needed to find a way out of here, wherever here was.

Rethink what happened, she told herself. Don't panic. Analyze the situation and come up with a solution. One minute she'd been sitting in that chair, thinking her interviewee was just a little odd. The next thing she knew, she was standing in front of a very buff bald man wrapped in fur. He looked like he'd just come off the cover of a romance novel.

She placed her head on the branch, shivering as the icy air seeped further into her bones. Keep going, she said to herself, just keep going. What happened next?

Venise replayed the day's events in her mind; coming into Mrs. Westergard's house, eating some of her food, listening to her talk about King Gunnmarr and his three sons and how they'd been banished to another realm by an angry witch.

And then she'd sat in the chair and fallen. But fallen where? Was she like Alice and her rabbit hole? Had she gone to another world? The thought was almost too much to comprehend. There weren't other worlds, not in real life.

In fairy tales and novels they existed, usually right alongside the world in which everyone lived. But since this was real life, the truth was plain to see. The woman and the man were in it together. Mrs. Westergard had obviously put something in her food. That's why she'd been so insistent upon Venise eating and drinking.

"That old witch! If you think I'm giving in to you, you're sorely mistaken. I'll see you both in jail before it's over." Her fingers and toes tingled from the cold, and her cheeks burned. She couldn't stay out here much longer or she'd have more problems to deal with, not the least of which would be frostbite.

A noise from below caught her attention. The man was back, her computer bag in his hand. He held it up and motioned to it.

"Put that down!" She pointed to the ground. "Down, damn you! It's mine."

The son of a bitch had her purse, too. He put the bags on the ground, then took something off his shoulder, holding it out. It was a fur, just like the one he wore. His meaning was evident; it was cold and he wanted her to take the pelt and wrap it around herself.

The offering could be just a ruse, though, to get her out of the tree. If she came down, would he attack her? Serial killer, she reminded herself. Maybe he wanted her warm before he cut her into itty-bitty pieces. That didn't make sense, though. He was tall enough that, if he wanted to, he could reach up and grab her. He could overtake her in a New York minute. Why was he offering her something to keep her warm?

He wiggled the fur at her and she shivered. She knew she couldn't stay up here forever, even dressed in jeans and a heavy sweater. Maybe she should take the fur. That way, when she ran from him, she would have something warm to wrap herself in until she figured out what to do. She just needed to make sure she had the upper hand with him. She was smaller, and therefore she could, hopefully, run faster than he could. After all, she'd made it here and climbed the tree before he'd arrived. She inched down the branch slowly, sliding a little before she reached the trunk.

A look at her pursuer proved he hadn't moved an inch. If she jumped down, would he give her the wrap? Or would he grab her first?

Running didn't hold the same appeal it had just moments ago. Where would she go? The best thing to do would be to go back to the place where she'd originally landed.

Maybe it was some sort of hot spot. She'd read about it in stories before, a certain magical spot where...*stop it!* What the hell was wrong with her? She'd read too many stories about magic

and other worlds. This wasn't a fairy tale, this was something set up by that witch and the man standing under her. Good heavens above, she was falling into some sort of trance, actually believing she'd slipped through a hole and ended up in her own personal version of Wonderland. Definitely drugged. Hopefully there would be some of it left in her system when she found a cop. They could use it as evidence in Mrs. Westergard's kidnapping trial.

She should go back up the tree until the idiot standing below her told her the truth. At least up in the tree she was safe from him. She made to inch her way back up.

The tree was cold and her foot slipped as she went to grab for the branch she'd just abandoned.

"Ouch!" She clenched a fist as pain sliced through her already frozen hand, making it throb even more. Below her, arms wrapped around her calves and she kicked out, trying to get away from her pursuer's grasp. But she couldn't keep hold.

For the second time that day she fell, the feeling making her stomach lurch. He caught her as she fell and they tumbled onto the snow together, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist.

She struggled against him, the shock of what was happening mixing with the pain that now radiated up her arm.

The fight tired her out and she stopped for a moment to try and catch her breath. That's when she saw the blood leaking from her hand onto the brilliant white snow.

Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she fainted dead away in her captor's arms.

* * * *

Rugoff stared at the woman lying in the middle of his bedding. When she'd gone limp in his arms, he'd wondered if she were trying some trick on him. Maybe she'd thought to catch him off guard to try and get away.

That wouldn't have worked, but she didn't know it. If he'd left her outside, she would have frozen to death right after the sun passed the horizon. Either that or a wolf would have made a tasty meal out of her.

Then he'd looked down at her and realized she'd lost consciousness. Her hand bled with vigor, her life force seeping into the snow. He knew he had to act, and soon, or else the only human he'd seen in the last thousand years would die right before his eyes.

She hadn't stirred when he'd lifted her into his arms. Nor had she moved since they'd arrived in the cave. In the years since his imprisonment, he'd made improvements in it, erecting

tables and chairs and other things that made life easier for him, and helped to relieve his boredom. He'd made the bed where she now lay.

He'd taken off her clothing, wanting her bare skin to be against the warm rugs. The clothing was wet, after all, and if he left it on her, she would likely catch her death, and he didn't want that to happen. Then he'd thrown a few more logs on the fires, helping to spread warmth through the room while he'd tended to the cut on her hand.

It wasn't deep enough to require sewing, but it had bled quite a bit. He'd cleaned it and applied an ointment he'd made from herbs and berries before wrapping it in clean cloths.

Now he watched her as she slept, her luscious body wrapped in the furs, her face the most perfect thing he'd ever seen.

After all these years, had the witch taken pity on him and provided him with a companion? Somehow he doubted it. He'd asked for a mate many times, sometimes pleading with whatever invisible force that left him the food each day.

But he'd always been ignored. When he'd first arrived here, he'd thought he would go insane. He'd hunted for a way out, exploring each nook and cave that he'd found, all to no avail. He'd been angry, shouting at his unseen jailor, whom he was sure was the witch his father had double-crossed.

Yes, his father had killed the woman, but she was a witch after all. They had power over everything. He'd screamed at her daily, telling her that, if he ever got out of here he'd tear her limb from limb. All that had done was make his throat sore.

As the days turned into months, and the months turned into years, he knew there was no way out. He was trapped in a prison his father had made. His life was worth nothing, and his existence would be lonely, and eternal.

When he'd come to that conclusion he'd started to make a life for himself here, asking the witch for tools he could use to make furniture. And he'd asked for a woman. Repeatedly. Only now had his request been answered.

But as much as he wanted to believe the dark-haired beauty was his for good, he knew that, like him, she'd been placed here by some cruel twist of fate. There could be no other answer. There was no reason for the witch to ignore him for years, and then place a beauty on his doorstep.

He reached out and stroked his hand along her soft cheek. It was warm now, whereas earlier she'd been cold as the ice, something that had concerned him greatly. He glanced over at the strange items she'd brought with her.

They were made of some material that was foreign to him. He was sure the strange looking devices with teeth like he'd never seen before would open the pieces of material, but what would be inside? She'd been angry with him for touching them, that much had been evident.

The thought passed through his mind that she had something in there to harm him, that the witch had sent a female assassin to bewitch and then kill him. The beauty didn't seem like the type to kill someone, but then again, you never knew what someone was capable of. After all, he was here because his father, whom he always thought loved him, but turned out to be the most selfish person in all the kingdom, choosing his jewels over his own sons.

The woman stirred and Rugoff glanced around. He tried to decipher how much time had gone by since he'd heard the first sounds of something different outside, since he'd gone into the forest and seen the woman sitting on the ground, a look of horror on her gorgeous face.

She moved again, throwing back the fur, exposing her lush and full breasts. Her nipples immediately hardened, plumping up into little hard nubs he imagined would taste like the sweetest wine.

His manhood stirred, swelling painfully. He licked his lips and imagined himself thrusting into her, her soft folds welcoming him, her arms wrapped around his neck, holding him close.

She'd wrap her legs around his hips and... He groaned and ran his hand over his hard length as she stirred again, a soft moan escaping her lips.

He had to leave now or else he would lose control of himself. He stood and grabbed two heavy furs and wrapped them both around himself. He pushed aside the wood guarding the portal and stepped outside, the bracing cold slapping him in the face.

Maybe the chill of the air would cool his lust. With the sun down, he couldn't stay outside for very long. The weather was brutal down here, but if it could bring down the lust surging through his body it would be worth the discomfort.

The frigid temperatures did indeed invade his body, but it did nothing to lessen the hardness between his legs. The only thing that would work for that would be the soft woman lying in his bed right now. Or, he knew, his hand. It was the only companion he'd had for thousands of years.

As much as the idea disgusted him, he had no choice. He'd never forced himself on a woman in his life, and he didn't intend to start now. He'd think of her while he worked himself, imagining his hand as her tight, wet channel. Afterward, a good soak in the bathing room would help relieve the tension he felt right now.

Staying around the new arrival would only cause problems, ones that would probably cause him more woes in the end. He closed the door and bolted it tightly, then walked toward the bed.

The beauty still slept, her face peaceful in her slumber. Maybe in the morning, they could communicate. He thought about the food he found every morning, and about the many comforts he'd asked for and received. Now that his request for a woman had been answered, he prayed to Odin that she wouldn't be taken away. He realized, though, that he was probably offering his prayer to the wrong person.

Please, witch, I know you're angry with my father. But I would like nothing more right now than to keep the woman who is currently sleeping in my bed. If you can grant that wish, I would be eternally grateful.

Chapter Three

Venise stirred, snuggling down further into the bedding, savoring the warmth that surrounded her. In the back of her mind, she remembered the bed at the hotel hadn't been very comfortable, and she'd had to pile on every blanket she could find in the room to stay warm.

The blankets there had not seemed as soft as the furs that now covered her. She stirred, opening one eye as the information registered in her brain. She moved her hand out from beneath the coverings and ran her fingers over the soft down. Yes, she was sleeping under furs.

As the idea took hold, she lifted her hand and stared at it. It was wrapped in white cloth, and it all came crashing back to her. The man in the woods, the fall from the tree, the blood soaking into the snow.

She sat up cautiously, glancing around the darkened room. There was a large fireplace carved into the wall, and she wondered exactly where she was. The walls seemed to be made of stone.

Was this some sort of primitive hut? No, that couldn't be, at least she didn't think so. She thought about it for a moment and then decided that yes, she could be in a cave somewhere. The man who had offered her the fur had brought her here, obviously. Did he live here? That much was obvious, too. That's why there was a bed here, and the fireplace and a chair and...a large lump, covered by fur, lying on the floor near the fire.

Her captor. Or was he? It was Mrs. Westergard who had led her into this trap. Finding a way out couldn't be that difficult, could it? If she was quiet, could she sneak out of here and find her way back to the place she'd first seen him. And if she did, would she be able to find a portal that would take her back home? She rolled her eyes then put her head in her hands. She was thinking crazy thoughts again, about portals and other worlds, but it was obvious to her right now that she wasn't in some sort of drug-induced haze.

If Mrs. Westergard had drugged her, the effects would have worn off by now. The temptation to run for the door was strong, but that wouldn't be the smartest thing she could do. Rather than face the elements again she needed to think.

She glanced again at the lump on the floor. When he'd spoken to her, she hadn't understood him, not totally. It was obvious he'd been speaking Old Norse. She'd caught a few words, since her knowledge of the language was very scarce. She certainly didn't know enough to converse with him.

Venise focused on the man. He'd been as surprised to see her yesterday as she had him. Now that she was thinking clearer, she realized that. The shocked look on his face had been genuine. Either that or he deserved an acting award. Maybe he was a native who Mrs. Westergard had tricked, using the same methods she'd used to trap Venise. No, that couldn't be right. His dialect was not of this time period.

She needed information, and to get it she had to search. The best way to do that would be by getting up and examining things while he slept.

If she looked for herself, she'd be able to discover things and draw her own conclusions. She'd never been one to have things handed to her. It was why she'd come to Norway in the first place.

With modern technology, she could have done all her interviews via e-mail. But she'd wanted to see the people face-to-face, be able to conduct a proper interview. She'd interview the man who'd brought her here but first she'd look around to see what she could find out.

She stepped out of the bed and put her feet on the floor, cold seeping into her toes and shooting up her legs. Her naked legs, which matched her—she looked under the fur she held to her breasts—totally nude body. The bastard had undressed her.

"You son of a bitch!" The man on the floor bolted to his feet, throwing off the furs and revealing the fact that he, too, was totally naked. His cock lay soft between his legs, until his gaze fastened on her; and then it started to rise.

"Oh no you don't!" She pointed at his crotch. "Put that, that...*thing* away and bring me my clothes, this instant!"

His frown downright pissed her off. "Don't you stand there and act as if you don't understand me." She clutched the bedding closer to her body. "Bring. Me. My. Clothes."

He took a step toward the bed and she crouched on the bed, scooting closer to the wall that served as a headboard, which wasn't the smartest move she'd ever made. It left her with no escape route if he decided to attack her.

"Is there a problem with your hearing?" He opened his mouth as if to answer her, then closed it without uttering a sound. "Listen, buster, I'm not sure what the hell is going on here, but if you and the old lady are playing some trick on me, you can kiss my ass."

The look he gave her was one of sheer confusion and she knew it confirmed her idea that he hadn't expected to find her here. And it was obvious he didn't understand one word of English.

There was one way to confirm that once and for all.

"What is your name?"

He opened his mouth again, but once again, nothing came out.

"Let's make this easy, shall we? Do you know the phrase Me Tarzan, you Jane?" Venise hoped her smile lessened the sting of her tone. She pointed at her chest. "I'm Venise, and you are?" She pointed at him.

He shook his head, then turned his gaze toward an empty table in the middle of the room. Confusion swept over his face and Venise laughed.

"I know exactly how you feel. Nothing is making much sense to me right now. Shall we try it again? I'm Venise, and you're...?"

There was a swooshing sound, as if someone wearing long skirts was inching across the stone floor. Venise watched in fascination as a plate of food appeared on the table; another soon joined it, then another and another.

Venise's mouth dropped open as the man walked to the table and picked up a slice of bread, offering it in her direction. He still stood naked, his cock fully erect now. She couldn't help but look at it, long and thick as it was. He was larger than either of her two lovers, that was for sure.

Neither of them had looked as masculine, or as appealing, as the man standing in front of her. She looked him up and down, her hands holding the covering close to her breasts. This really was too much.

The sight of the naked aroused man offering her food was too much. Venise burst into laughter. The wounded look that came over his face made her stutter, and cover her mouth.

"I'm sorry, it's not you. You're magnificent, to say the least. I mean, truly you are, it's just, this is..." she stopped short as Mrs. Westergard's words played back in her mind. "King Gunnmarr had three sons. Sons that were banished to the core of the Earth."

"Gunnmarr." The deep voice startled her and she cleared her throat, trying to give herself time to come to terms with what she knew was reality.

"Which one are you?" She racked her brain for the names the woman had given the King's sons. They came to her almost instantly. "Rugoff? Benedikt? Egill?"

"Rugoff." His voice sounded cautious, but full of hope. He pointed toward his chest and repeated the name. Her gaze ran from his hand down to where his hard cock still jutted out. It seemed to grow even thicker and her mouth watered.

It wouldn't be easy but she needed to forget the physical attraction she felt and realize that the fairy tale the woman had told her was the truth, and that somehow she'd slipped right into the middle of it. Things like this didn't happen, did they?

She pinched herself, yelping as the pain spread through her arm. Then she laughed, hysterical laughter that threatened to steal her breath for good. When she finally got control of herself, she looked at him again. He stood in the same place, his gaze one of extreme confusion.

Venise supposed she couldn't blame him. After all, how many times did a woman laugh uncontrollably while a naked man stood in front of her.

"Well, isn't this fun? You Rugoff, me Venise." She held out her arms to indicate the room they were in. "And this is hell."

How in the name of Odin did she know his name? And his brothers' names, too? She wasn't the gift of the gods that he thought she was. She was obviously an emissary of the witch who had sent him here.

She thought he hadn't suffered enough, so she sent this woman to remind him what he couldn't have, to reinforce what he'd lost.

He stomped across the floor, not caring that she moved away from him, obviously trying to get to the far corner of the bed before he got to her. His blood boiled in his veins as he drew nearer to her.

Was his fervor caused by the fact the sheet had slipped, giving him another glimpse of her creamy flesh, the beautiful curves that would mold with him perfectly as he thrust into her soft,

warm body? Or was it because, as he suspected, she was sent by the witch to further torment him?

“Agent of Loki! He sent you here to deepen my anguish! Is it not enough that I feel anger every day with my father? Is it...” He stopped at the edge of the bed, staring up at her. The horror he’d seen on her face yesterday has returned. Her hands shook and if her eyes widened any more he feared they would pop out of her head.

He took a step back, trying to get his rage under control. Screaming wouldn’t help anything. He had to find a way to bind her, and that wouldn’t be easy with one of Loki’s kind. They had all sorts of tricks they could play. He had to...

She shot by him so fast he staggered. Pain soared through him as her fist slammed into his mouth. A second fist landed on his nose and even more pain shot through his head. The room spun. He grabbed out for something, catching the edge of the bed as he fell, the top half of his body landing on the soft down, his knees hitting the hard floor.

Rugoff shook his head, trying to shake off the sensation that seemed to radiate through his whole body. He stood and fell back on the bed, his gaze focusing on the woman as she wrapped the covering around herself before running toward the door.

“Oh no you don’t!” He ignored the fact his head swum and stood. Letting her go was not an option. He overtook her in seconds, wrapping his arms around her waist and wrestling her to the floor, rolling until she was on her back, her arms pinned to her sides by his legs.

He’d show this agent of the evil one exactly what he thought of her. Her curves were meant to entice him, to throw him off guard and forget that nothing could be trusted, not even his own father.

He’d kill her, then tomorrow, he’d ask the spirit who provided his food to take her body to Loki as a warning. He may be a prisoner here, but he was still not one to be trifled with.

The witch wiggled under him and his traitorous cock responded by throbbing with need. It rubbed against her belly and he reached for her throat, intent on blocking her air, therefore putting her out of his life when her sobs stopped him. He couldn’t make out all the words, but he heard the ones, “No Loki,” well enough.

She repeated the words and he wondered if she was to be trusted. She’d gone limp under him. She held up her hands, which shook as if in terror. The pulsing of his jaw, though, showed it hadn’t been that long ago since those hands had been balled into fists.

“No Loki.” Her dark eyes glistened with tears and he could see fear there.

If the mischief-maker had sent this woman, she wouldn't be frightened. She would have his power behind her, she would know Rugoff could not hurt her unless he caught her off guard; and he'd lost the element of surprise.

But his hands were still on her throat, and all it would take was a quick squeeze and she would be gone.

"No Loki," she repeated, her breasts rising and falling rapidly, drawing his eyes down.

"Who are you?"

"No Loki," she said again. Then she added a jumble of words he did not comprehend. He moved his hands from her neck and took hold of her wrists, pinning them to the floor on either side of her head.

"Who are you?" She answered with another torrent of words he didn't understand. "Did the witch send you?"

Tears leaked from her eyes now and she turned her head, as if she were ashamed to let him see her cry. Someone sent by the mischief-maker would not cry, unless it was a trick to catch him off guard.

There was one way to test that theory. He let go of her hands, expecting her to once again slam a fist into his mouth. She didn't move, however, and her chest rose and fell with gentle sobbing. She kept her face turned away from him.

Rugoff stood, waiting for her to do the same, to attack him again. Instead she pulled the fur closer to her, keeping her gaze off him. Staring at her was doing him no good. It put two sides of him at war, his mind, which wanted the truth, and his body, which wanted to bend her over and claim her.

If the witch had sent her, she would welcome him with open arms, offering her lush curves to him, welcoming him inside her. Instead, she continued to sob. He needed to leave here, and now. If he stayed, he might do something he would regret.

He went to the door and barricaded it with several pieces of wood he was sure would be too heavy for her to move. That would keep her from doing anything stupid and going outside. Then he stalked to the back of the cave. It would be best to put distance between them until he had himself under control.

Maybe tomorrow he should ask the witch for an explanation. The idea had no merit, since he knew he wouldn't get it. He could still try, though. Maybe things were changing. After

all, this was the first person he'd seen in who knew how many years. And he wasn't quite sure what to do with her.

Either he was going to bed her, or kill her. And he prayed his cock won that particular battle.

Chapter Four

Venise waited until she could no longer hear his footsteps, then she sat up slowly. She needed to find her clothes. What had she been thinking? She'd hit him for heaven's sake, not once, but twice! The blows had caught him so unawares it had made him fall. Not that it had kept him down for long, and it had only fueled the anger that had been there when he'd thought she was a minion of Loki.

He was definitely speaking Old Norse, and she didn't understand everything he said, but she did get that part of it.

Luckily for her, he'd listened to her when she'd told him she wasn't sent by the little devil. He'd had his hands near her neck when he'd finally come to his senses. If he'd applied just a little more pressure, she wouldn't have been long for her new world. She supposed she couldn't blame him for being suspicious of her.

If he was who she suspected him to be, he hadn't seen another human for hundreds of years. She'd be more than a little distrustful if someone happened to just appear out of nowhere, too. Of course, she was in a similar position, since the old woman had pushed her into the chair and sent Venise tumbling down the rabbit hole, straight into the arms of the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen in her life.

And judging from the fact that his prick had been rock hard since he'd woken up, she would say he thought she was not too shabby herself. Well, she supposed he would feel that way about any woman, since he hadn't gotten laid for centuries. Not that she was going to fuck him. She had more important things to deal with, like getting the hell out of here.

Having sex with him, no matter how much his hard, naked body had impressed her, was not in the cards. Her nipples tingled as if to weigh in with their opinion. Her mind might say no, but her body thought something all together different.

Ignore your body, she repeated to herself. In this case, the mind knows best. Her first priority was to get dressed. She lifted slowly from the floor and glanced around, wondering where he'd put her clothing. There were a few niches in the wall and she went to them, searching. She didn't find her clothing but she found several tunic style tops. She took one down and threw it over her head.

Despite the fact she was a larger woman the material swallowed her, and she searched for a belt, finding two that she could use. It took her a few minutes to work it out, but she belted the tunic so that she could walk without tripping over the material.

Next came the table. She went to it, examining the contents. The spread featured the same foods that had been on Mrs. Westergard's table: fish stews, breads, meatballs, potatoes and cabbage. The appearance of the food had been a vital clue that what was happening to her was real. She'd watched it appear with her own eyes and he'd been standing far from it.

Venise got down on her knees, looking for trap doors or other things that could have been used to fake the supposedly magical appearance of the feast. There were none, which really didn't surprise her. Hell, she wasn't sure anything would surprise her anymore. The world was definitely changed, or it had always been this way and she was just now seeing it for what it was: magical. She needed to keep that in mind as the days progressed.

Rugoff was no one to be feared, either. He'd had the chance to kill her just seconds ago, and he hadn't done it. She needed to go and talk to him. Her command of Old Norse was minimal, but hopefully she could get them to communicate in some way.

There were two hallways off the main room, and she'd seen him go down the one to the left of the bed. She went to it cautiously, wondering if she should knock to let him know she was coming, or if she just barge in on him.

Maybe she should go back to the clothes closet and get him something to wear. Their conversation could be awkward with him sitting there naked. And erect. Very erect.

The thought stopped her in her tracks and she leaned her back against the wall. She'd had two steady boyfriends in her life, both of them scholars who, while not too bad in bed, had not made her overanxious to jump in the sack with them.

Something told her having sex with Rugoff would prove far more satisfying than it had with either of her former lovers.

"Don't think about sex," she whispered. "Just pray he has clothes on and his penis has deflated."

She followed the hallway, the space narrowing and getting darker as she walked. She tried not to think about the fact that she was probably inside a mountain, or even underground. She rounded a corner and the sound of running water startled her.

There was an opening at the end of the hallway. Light shone out from it and she crept toward it, careful to make a slow entrance so she wouldn't startle him, because she knew instinctively this was where he'd gone.

Rugoff sat in the middle of a large pool, water from a fall cascading over his head. His shoulders were slumped and, she wondered for a moment if he'd heard her enter. Steam rose from the pool and she knew this was some sort of hot spring.

"Hello." She kept her voice low. "Rugoff?"

For a long moment, he didn't respond, and then he lifted his gaze to hers. He still didn't speak, though, and she took a step forward, putting a finger on the sleeve of the tunic she wore.

"Yours. Thank you."

He frowned, but nodded. He might not understand the words, but he obviously knew what she meant.

"Food." The frown returned and she searched her mental Old Norse dictionary. "*Fillique*."

This time he stood, his nod adamant. He was still naked, but his manhood was no longer erect. He pointed the way they'd come. "*Fillique*." He made a motion simulation breaking a loaf of bread in half.

Relief flooded her that she'd used the right term for bread, which was the only Norse word she knew that could denote food. She mimicked eating, putting her fingers next to her mouth. Then she pointed at him, and at herself.

Instead of following her, he stood where he was, spouting off words in quick succession. She didn't understand a one of them and she waved her arms, moving them rapidly, hoping he would figure out she wanted him to stop speaking. What was the word for slow? Damn, she should know it.

"I don't understand." She pointed to her ear, then realized that would indicate she couldn't hear. "*Vita*? No *vita*."

His face brightened and he fixed her with a sweet smile. "*Ya, no vita*."

She again made eating motions, then pointed back to the main room. "Eat."

She rubbed her belly when he repeated the word, walking toward her. She looked over his body, his absolutely gorgeous, naked body. She swallowed as she settled her gaze on his manhood, which started to swell under her perusal.

Not good, not good. Well, not good in the mental sort of way. In the physical sort, he was more than good. He was perfection.

“Oh, um...” She turned suddenly. “You need, um, clothes.” She turned back around. He was fully erect now, and her mouth watered at the sight. What the hell was wrong with her? She wanted nothing more than to drop to her knees and take him in her mouth. That would satisfy her hunger, wouldn’t it?

His cock twitched and she swallowed hard, her gaze never wavering. She’d never seen an uncircumcised penis before, and it was fascinating. She wanted to touch him, to stroke back his skin and reveal the head hiding underneath. She shivered in need, but took a step back, reminding herself to focus on what needed to be done. “You need to get dressed.”

She pulled on the tunic she wore, then pointed to him. “Cover yourself. *Ript.*” That was the word for clothes, wasn’t it?

“Ah.” His smile made her toes tingle, but even as he smiled, he shook his head. She looked around and spotted a hole in the wall, much like the one where she’d found her tunic. She walked to it and pulled out a long length of cloth he obviously used as a towel.

She handed it out and she saw understanding dawn on his face. He took it and started to dry off. Venise turned her back on him, afraid that if she kept staring at his cock, she would grasp him and explore the tempting tool that rose to attention every time she saw him.

There was shuffling behind her, and when he moved in front of her, he wore a tunic exactly like hers, except it barely covered his ass. He nodded toward the other room, then walked to the hallway without waiting for an answer.

But what answer would she give him, really? They barely understood each other. She had to find a way to communicate with him, though. It was probably the only way she was going to find a way out of this hellhole.

* * * *

Rugoff took a loaf of bread from the table. He could sense his beautiful visitor behind him, her anxiousness coming off her in waves. He turned back to her and tore the loaf, offering her half.

She took it tentatively, looking down at it in wonder. He supposed what she felt mirrored what he'd experienced when the food had appeared on his first day in his prison. He'd been suspicious then, too. Hopefully she would know he didn't mean to hurt her.

He watched as she examined the bread, lifting it to her nose to sniff. When she finally put a piece in her mouth, he felt as if they'd jumped a huge gap. He nodded in approval, then took a huge bite of his own food, watching her as he chewed.

The fact she watched him right back quickened his blood. It had been so long since he'd tasted a woman, and here one was, a gift from the gods, standing in front of him, wearing his clothes. It wouldn't take much to pull that tunic from her and bury himself in her soft warmth.

The need was almost overwhelming, and he wasn't sure exactly how he kept himself from throwing down the bread and tumbling her to the floor. Her gasp alerted him that something was wrong.

He looked down to see the bread, squished between his fingers, hanging out both sides of his fists. He let the ruined food drop to the floor and brushed the crumbs from his clothing. Touching the material was a painful reminder that his cock still pounded underneath it, the feel of the fabric increasing the arousal he felt.

She lowered her eyes demurely as if she knew exactly what he was thinking, then she walked to the wall where he'd arranged an array of weapons, some of them he'd made and some of them gifts from his invisible benefactor.

They helped when it came time to face his yearly challenge, although every year it was getting harder to defeat the beast.

She touched a sword, then let her fingers trail over the various arrows and swords, finally closing over a bow and taking it down. She didn't grasp the quiver of arrows next to it, though. She simply turned the bow this way and that, looking over it as if she were trying to figure out how it was made.

When she put it back on the wall, she went to the table against the far wall. Her cry of delight was like music to his ears.

"Hneftafl."

"Ya." He hurried to her and picked up the king. He'd carved this board and its pieces over the years, trying to alleviate his boredom as the years crept by.

She pointed to the middle, she pointed to the edge square and he knew she understood the game.

“Ya.”

Before he knew what was happening she'd put her food next to the board, dragging a chair up to the table. There had only been one there before, since he'd never had anyone to play the game with him. She sat down, then pointed to the empty chair, the one he usually sat in when he tried to amuse himself each night.

Tears stung his eyes as she set up her part of the game. For the first time in forever, he was going to play *hneftafl* with another person, and it made him feel as if the sun had moved into the room and would never leave.

As he drew closer to her, he wished they could communicate, verbally anyway. His body did a lot of communicating for him, since his cock was still hard, painfully so. If he stood up and thrust his hips back and forth, would she understand him?

Oh yes, he had no doubt that she would. Sex was a universal language. But that didn't mean it was one they needed to converse in right now, although his body had other ideas. If his cock had its way, he would throw the table aside, then get her down on all fours, mount her and ride her until they both screamed in ecstasy, which wouldn't take long for him.

He sat down in the chair and put his hand in his lap, stroking himself gently through the material. Maybe he should go to the other room and once again take care of the problem before they started the game.

That wouldn't help, though. He'd be hard the minute he came back in the room and saw her again. Best just to stay here and ignore the throbbing between his legs, as if that could happen.

Venise stared at the board, wondering what she should do next. In theory, she knew how to play this game. She'd studied it after seeing it featured in a folk tale she'd read. A witch had played the game, what Venise thought of as an early precursor to chess, with a warrior who wanted to be victorious in battle.

She'd told him if he beat her in *hneftafl*, he'd win the battle. The soldier had lost, and the witch had taken his soul. To her, the story had been a cautionary tale against gambling. She'd remember that before placing any wagers with the man who now sat across from her.

The main gist of the game was for the main player to protect his king and get it to the corner piece. Her pieces were of dark wood and the king was light. That meant she would be trying to keep Rugoff from getting to the edge.

Maybe while they were playing they would develop some way to communicate better than they were right now. One or two words at a time didn't exactly make for great conversation, or help develop a bond that might make the two of them trust each other, since they seemed to be stuck here, together.

Maybe if they could communicate they could figure a way out of here.

"Or maybe I should just click my heels together three times." She snorted at her own sarcasm, then glanced at him when he spoke.

"*Hvat?*" She understood that word. It meant he didn't understand what she'd said.

"Sorry." She picked up a board piece and moved it diagonally. Soon they were moving pieces, laughing and trying to outwit each other in play. True, they couldn't understand what they were saying to each other, but body movements were plenty right now.

They playfully slapped at each other as they maneuvered the pieces around the board. He won the game and she wasn't surprised.

Maybe he sat here night after night doing nothing more than coming up with strategies to beat himself at the game. Or he might work with the numerous weapons she saw on the wall. They were all of exquisite handcraftsmanship. Did that mean he'd made them himself, or had they been here when his father had outwitted the witch?

The scholar in her wanted to take notes on everything that was happening. Then she could write up a paper when she returned to the real world. No, she couldn't do that. They'd fit her for a little white jacket if she did.

"Really, it all happened, doctor, and no, my name is not Alice." No, a scholarly paper would not work. The story would have to be fiction. Maybe she'd do a romance novel, complete with a half-naked Viking whose cock was always at full staff and ready to give her pleasure. If she did enough research, it could be very realistic.

Of course, to do a proper investigation for a nice, hot erotic story she'd have to have sex with him; more than once. She grinned as she moved a piece for the opening of a new game.

They traded moves, laughing and pulling at each other's pieces in an effort to keep them from moving to a spot that would block the other. Their laughter filled the room and when Venise won the second match, and the third, she jumped up and danced around the room, shaking her hips and lifting her arms above her head.

She stopped when she realized he was staring at her, and that the fabric of his tunic had tented, again. Or maybe it had been that way the whole time they'd been playing. After all, he'd

been sitting down, and she couldn't see it. And he hadn't seen a woman in centuries. Of course his cock would get hard. And stay hard.

"Sorry." She sat back down in her chair. "I got carried away and—" He couldn't understand her, so why was she apologizing?

"It's late." She got back up, looking around the room. There was no semblance of a clock, or anything else that might tell her what time it was, or how long they'd been playing the game.

The stark reality of today came back to slam her in the stomach. She'd allowed herself to think that everything was normal, that she was with a man she knew nothing about except what some woman told her, and she was probably stuck her for the rest of her life. No, not that, for the rest of eternity, which, as Mrs. Westergard had told her, meant forever.

Tears formed in her eyes, and before she could stop them, a few crept down her cheeks; the first few became a small stream, and the stream turned into a river. She buried her face in her hands, wondering how she'd ever allowed herself to sit and play games when she should have been trying to convince him to take her back to the place where she'd landed, see if she could find a way home.

When warm, strong arms wrapped around her shoulders she didn't fight him. She put her head on his shoulder, the crying jag continuing as he picked her up and carried her to the bed, gently placing her in the middle.

Venise continued to sob as he arranged the furs around her, then lay down and pulled her into his arms. She didn't care they were in bed together, or that his hard cock demanded attention. All she cared about was the warm body next to her that reminded her she was alive—in hell, but alive.

She wondered vaguely how he'd handled his time here when he'd first arrived, but when he started to stroke her hair and murmur soft words that she was sure were meant to soothe her, she closed her eyes and let sleep overtake her.

* * * *

He could feel her pain, seeping out from her skin into his heart. The evening had seemed so perfect, with the two of laughing and enjoying the game. It had been so long since he'd felt the pain and fear that came with his banishment.

The memories of his first nights in this place came back full force, slamming into his brain. He'd been scared at first, wondering if he'd been sucked into the underworld after the

witch had killed him. Then the food had appeared and it had become painfully obvious. He'd tried to find a way out, to no avail.

And then he'd come to terms with his imprisonment, although it hadn't been easy. There had been times when he thought he would lose his mind. The only thing that kept him sane was the knowledge that there might be some way out of here, at some time. Was the woman he held right now his way out, or was she some ugly trick the witch played on him?

The answers would come in time, he knew. And they had lots of time. But first, he had to help her come to terms with what was happening to her. But how could he do it when they couldn't even speak? She'd reacted well when he'd taken her in his arms; at least she hadn't hit him.

The only problem was his manhood, already swollen, had throbbed with the need to seek out her soft, feminine center and make her his own. The thought of thrusting in and out of her made his flesh harder, and made him want to climb on top of her and bury himself inside her.

No! You can't do that. What would she think of you if you did that? She'd hate you, and try to hit you again. But did it matter? She was his, after all. She was in his bed. In his world, he would claim her, no matter what her needs or desires.

After all, she was a gift from the witch, wasn't she? But what if she wasn't? What if Venise was just someone who had fallen into this world by mistake? If that were so, he couldn't take her, because she might disappear. Right now, he didn't really remember what it was like to take a woman. If he took her, and then she vanished, he was sure he would die.

At least in his mind. His body would live on, in torment with the memory of her soft body accepting him inside her. Staying down here by himself was torment enough, but having those thoughts to torture him would make it even worse.

It took him a few moments to realize she was no longer sleeping. He'd felt her drift off when her crying had slowed, but now her breath was coming in normal rhythm. She hadn't moved out of his arms, however.

"Rugoff?"

His body flinched as she put her hand on his stomach and lifted up enough to look him in the eye, then sat up fully. The movement pushed back the sheets and her gaze drifted down to his manhood, now uncovered and still hard as a rock.

She started to talk, the words coming fast. He didn't understand a word she said, but she kept pointing at the food table, then put her hand between her legs.

The need inside him increased as she jiggled, her breasts moving under the loose clothing she still wore.

Was she hungry? Should he get up and bring her food or what? She stood and danced around a little, looking much like she had when she'd won the game. But her hands were still between her legs and...understanding dawned.

She needed to make water. He jumped from the bed, trying as hard as he could to hide himself from her view and motioned for her to follow him. The relieving room was close to the bathing stream. He ushered her in and went to the pool, intent on giving himself relief of different sort while she was occupied.

Once he was at the far wall, he braced himself with one hand while the other went to his aching flesh. He grasped his manhood, pain shooting through him. It wouldn't take long, he knew, to bring seed from his body. But once he'd done it, would his flesh harden again immediately? He was pretty sure it would, since lying next to the beautiful female was a sweet torture he'd never felt before. And his body ached as it never had before.

Take her! The words screamed inside his mind as his hand went to work, moving from base to tip and back again. *She is in your home. She is a gift from the gods. Take her! Bend her over and plunge inside her.*

He stopped moving, his breath coming in hard, harsh gasps. He knew he shouldn't listen to the voice, which was just temptation reminding him there was a soft female nearby. It was his beautiful mother, though, long oppressed by his vicious father, who had told him a woman should enjoy coupling as much as a man.

She taught him to take things slow, to make sure the woman reached the same peak a man did at the end of lovemaking. He would not dishonor her memory by forcing himself on Venise, whether she was a gift from the gods or not. If she were a gift, she would want to lay under him as much as he wanted her to. Until then, he would suffice with his hand.

Rugoff closed his eyes and settled into a hard pace, pleasure spreading through as he squeezed his rod harder, his hand moving faster. His climax neared, the feeling overwhelming.

When a female hand caressed his thigh, he lost his rhythm, and his breath caught in his throat. Pain surged through him, until she moved her hand to his rod and clasped it firmly.

Her breasts, still clad in the tunic, pressed against his back as she stroked him. He put both hands on the wall and allowed her to work his cock, closing his eyes and savoring the touch of her soft flesh after so many years of feeling only himself.

“Venise.” He whispered her name over and over as her movements increased, bringing him closer to the edge. She wrapped her free arm around his middle, letting her fingers stray down to tangle in the curly hair at the base of his rod.

Two fingers slid on either side of him, squeezing at the root while her hand covered the tip, moving the skin and back forth.

Rugoff couldn't hold back, no matter how much he wanted this superb pleasure to last. His seed shot forth, coating her hand and the wall as she continued to work him. A second stream erupted, the bliss ripping through him as it left his sac. He'd never felt anything this good in his entire life.

It had been so long since he'd had more than dreams, he couldn't remember what it had ever felt like before. Right now, though, he thought he might die from the ecstasy surging through his body.

When the last of the stream had left him, he straightened, reaching a hand around to her, intent on giving her the same joy. She backed away, though, shaking her head when he turned to her.

Then she dropped to her knees and washed off her hands in the water, wiping them on the tunic as she headed out of the room, not looking back to where he stood.

He stared after her, wondering if he should follow her and give her the same pleasure she'd just given him, or if he should stay. If she wanted him to fill her, surely she would not have left.

Despite the fact he'd just climaxed his cock still pulsed. He should follow her and complete what they'd just started. Or should he take her leaving as the sigh that it was and leave her alone?

He waited for the answer to come to him. When it didn't he asked the witch for it, but she didn't answer him, either.

“This would be so much easier if we could communicate,” he said softly. “Would you help me in that department, witch? Please?”

As usual, there was no answer. At least not right now. Hopefully by the time morning arrived there would be, though, and he could ask Venise if she wanted to give herself to him in the most intimate of ways.

Chapter Five

Was it morning, or was it the middle of the night? With no windows through which to gauge the sun, or lack thereof, Venise had no idea how long she'd slept. When Rugoff had not followed her to bed, she was not sure what she felt. Would she have let him make love to her? Her world was turned upside down; and it was no more evident in the fact that she'd jacked him off.

She'd never played with an uncut penis before, and she'd been fascinated by the foreskin and the way it moved around the tip of it. It seemed to provide him a great amount of pleasure when she moved it, letting her fingers toy with the skin just a little before going back to the actual hard strokes.

His hips had moved rapidly when she'd done that, and the sounds of satisfaction coming out of his mouth were universal. She'd felt connected to him in a way she never had with anyone else, and that frightened her a little. Maybe it was the extreme events that had brought her into his world, or maybe there was a bond she couldn't see. Whatever it was, when he'd climaxed she'd felt his passion seep into her body, and she swore she felt the tingle of release deep in her soul.

Despite that she still questions whether she would have given herself to him if he'd come to bed. She would never know the answer to that, however, because he hadn't returned. She'd fallen asleep, and woken alone. Sounds from the bathing room told her where he was, and she wondered if he'd stayed there all night.

Unfortunately, she couldn't ask him. She had to figure out some way for them to communicate. She was a scholar, for heaven's sake. This should be a problem she could solve in nothing flat.

She glanced at the food table, then got up and padded toward it. The table was still full, but the food there was new, different. There were still meatballs, but there were different types of bread, and there were fruits, bananas, oranges and apples; and there were vegetables, too, some carrots, broccoli and cucumbers, one of her favorites.

It was as if someone had read her mind and provided her with everything except coffee. She glanced at the pitchers to find milk and orange juice. A noise from behind startled her and she turned to find Rugoff standing there, his body glistening with water.

He wore his tunic and a pair of linen trousers, which kept his cock hidden from view. Venise wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Memories of last night flooded her and part of her wanted him to be hard again, to see what would happen.

Forget that for now, she mentally chastised herself. Think about other things.

“Food.”

“Yes, food.” Her mouth fell open in shock as he spoke. “The witch provides me with sustenance daily.”

“You...you...bastard! You can speak English.” She didn't know whether to slap him or hug him. Yet another confusing element that she didn't know how to interpret.

The look on his face showed her he was as surprised by this as she was. “Last night, I asked the witch for the ability to communicate with you. I guess she saw clear to fulfilling that request.”

“Yeah, right.” She couldn't keep the sarcastic tone out of her voice, even though in her heart, she knew he was right. There was no way someone could set up this elaborate of a hoax. “Sorry, this whole thing just...freaks me out.”

The confused look on his face said he was searching his newfound language for her meaning.

“I'm baffled, perplexed, puzzled.”

He nodded as understanding dawned. “The food meets with your satisfaction?”

“Yes, the only thing that's missing is coffee.”

“Coffee?”

“Yes, it's a drink with lots of caffeine to help get you going for the day.” She fixed him with an inquisitive look. “Can you ask for coffee tomorrow?”

“I will, but I never know when she will answer me.” His grin made her shiver. He seemed more handsome now than he had yesterday. How was that possible?

“How long has she been leaving you gifts?”

The grin disappeared. “Since the day of my arrival, which was a very long time ago. She doesn’t always respond, but sometimes she sees fit to give me some comfort in my prison.”

“It all seems so strange.” She picked up a bagel and looked around. “A toaster would be nice, too. You can also ask for a microwave, a refrigerator, a stove, and maybe a blender, too. But you’d also have to ask for electricity. Strange that she didn’t give it to you when you have running water in the bathing room and a bathroom that looks like an outhouse in a cave but works like a toilet.”

Venise held back the laughter she felt as he processed her words. She imagined him mentally scanning the dictionary that had been magically loaded into his brain.

“I wouldn’t know what to do with those things.”

“I would.” She pulled apart the bagel. “Peanut butter would be nice, too. I enjoy it, a lot. Good protein.”

He leaned forward, a mischievous grin on his face. “Perhaps you should make me a list.”

Venise laughed, then took another bite of her bread. “Perhaps you should just ask her to restore you to the real world. It’s unfair of you to suffer because your father was an ass.”

“My suffering has eased since you’ve arrived.”

Heat soared through her and she felt a blush spread up her cheeks. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Not right now.” He sat in a chair “Tell me how you came to be here. You obviously don’t work for the witch, or you wouldn’t have to ask for things, you would be able to conjure them.”

She nodded, impressed with his logic. “I’m a scholar. I came to see visit a woman to learn about her folk tales and she... pushed me into a chair and I landed in the snow, here.”

“A woman? What woman?”

“Mrs. Westergard. Does the name ring a bell?”

“No, no bell.” The look on his face was much like that of a child learning things for the first time.

Venise picked up a banana, hoping the movement turned her face from him enough to hide her smile. “Now that I think about it, she had this planned. She acted as if others were arriving. You have two brothers that are in the same position you are in, right?”

“Benedikt and Egill.” There was deep sorrow in his voice. “I hate my father for what he did to us.”

He started and stood, walking toward the bed before turning suddenly and going to the fireplace instead. Venise had the impression he was embarrassed for expressing his feelings.

“You know, just because he’s your father doesn’t mean you have to love him.” She moved toward where he fed wood into the blaze. “It’s not as if he had a care for you.”

She thought about telling him that her own parents had abandoned her, but thought it wasn’t the same thing at all. She’d been left at a church, probably in an effort to give her a chance at a better life, which had happened. His father had betrayed his sons and consigned them to hell.

“Can you talk with them? Are they near?”

“No, the only visitor I have is the agent of Loki, who comes for my part of the key.” He looked up from the fire. “Well, other than you.”

“Key?” This was a new part of the story. “Mrs. Westergard said nothing about a key. She said the witch sent the three of you to the bowels of the Earth to punish your father.”

“That is true, but there is more to the story than that.”

Venise wasn’t surprised to hear that. There was always more to the story. The scholar inside her perked up. “Will you tell me the rest?”

“Of course.”

She clapped her hands together then went to her backpack and retrieved her laptop, praying it had survived the fall and that her battery still worked. She put it on the table and lifted the lid, thrilled to hear the familiar jingle that signaled the start up.

“What in the name of Odin is that?” She glanced to where Rugoff stood, transfixed. His gaze never left the laptop and she smiled.

“It’s a computer.” She stayed where she was, very aware when he took a few steps back and stared at the device as if it would come to life and kill him. “It helps me to store information, that’s all. It’s not alive, it’s a machine.”

“Machine.” He whispered the word, his gaze never wavering.

“Come and touch it.” She tapped the plastic. “Things have changed a little bit since you left civilization.”

Rugoff stayed rooted where he was. Venise sat down and tapped a few keys to start a new file for his story. She kept her face turned toward the screen to hide her smile as he moved toward her ever so slowly.

How hard it must be, she thought, to see things that were so totally foreign, and even frightening, especially when he’s spent so much time down here by himself.

“While you talk, I’m going to type. The things here are called keys, and I press them according to the spelling of a word. It transfers the words onto the screen and then I can save the information to the hard drive.” She laughed as she looked at him. “And you have no idea what I just said. Just trust me. I need it, and it won’t hurt you.”

He glanced at the swords hanging on the wall and she put a protective arm around the laptop. “Don’t even think about it.”

He sat down opposite from her, keeping a wary eye on the machine. “Tell me what this woman told you.”

Venise quickly related the story Mrs. Westergard had spun for her. She watched Rugoff, who listened with care, taking his gaze off the computer and settling it on her.

“She tells a half-tale,” he said when she was done. “I wonder if it is because she does not know the whole thing, or because she does not want it to be known.”

That thought hadn’t occurred to Venise at all. “Do you think she could be the witch? But what could she want?”

Rugoff licked his lips and she wondered what he was thinking. There was silence between them while he thought, and she wanted to tell him to hurry up and talk to her, that she wasn’t the type who took waiting in stride.

“You know my father killed the witch?”

Venise nodded slowly, wondering where this was going.

“I often wondered how she could provide me with food and other things I asked for when she was dead. But I convinced myself that she, somehow, could break the veil of death and still work her magic.”

“So you think Mrs. Westergard is the witch, then. If she is, and she feels bad about what happened, why doesn’t she just end things and bring you back?”

“I wish I knew.” He looked away from her, then cleared his throat. “But that’s not what you asked about. You wanted to know of the key. Before the witch died, she captured the green stone in my father’s throne and locked it in a bronze box. She fashioned it with three keys, and gave one to each son before she sent him spiraling down into the Earth.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Venise pushed away the computer. “Mrs. Westergard made it sound like it was some sort of romance story, like the sons were waiting for women to rescue them, sort of a true love saves the world type thing. I thought maybe that’s…” She clamped her mouth shut.

“You thought that’s why you were here?” He ran his fingers up the insides of his thighs and Venise felt her nipples tighten. She remembered the feel of his cock in her hand last night, the way it pulsed as she stroked it. What would it feel like in her mouth? Or sliding inside her, guided by the wetness that now pooled inside her.

“Yes.”

“An idea that holds great appeal for me.” He moved closer and put his hand over hers. “Why would you not allow me to pleasure you last evening?”

“I..you...didn’t come after me.” She pulled her hand away and typed a few words of text. She wasn’t ready to have this discussion. “If the woman is the witch, if she’s somehow found a way to come back, then...”

Rugoff moved so quickly that she didn’t have time to react. He grasped her head between his hands, capturing her lips in a burning kiss that seared her down to her very soul. His coarse, manly hands seemed soft against her skin as his lips took control of hers.

He nibbled on her lower lip, then flicked his tongue, seeking entry into her mouth. Venise opened for him, moaning as his tongue slid ever so slowly into her, licking at her teeth, lapping very gently at the roof of her mouth.

Need swamped her as one of his hands left her face and trailed down to her breast, capturing it in his palm, massaging her hardened nipple with his thumb.

“Rugoff.”

“If you are here to save me with love, then we should get started, so we can get us both out of here.”

A nervous giggle escaped her lips. He continued to caress her as his lips moved over her jaw and down her neckline. Then suddenly, he backed away, turning from her so quickly she almost lost her balance.

“What’s wrong?”

When he turned back to her, she could see the pure lust written on his face, the tight muscles around his neck and shoulder showing he was having trouble keeping himself in check. His hard cock was back, making his clothing bulge.

“I’m afraid that I won’t...be gentle.” His voice was ragged. “Last night you gave me something I’d dared to never hope for again, but...”

Her heart beat just a little quicker as his words sunk into her.

“Forgive me, it has been so long and I...you are so beautiful.” He put his hand over his cock. “Last night just...it...” He turned from her again and she put her hand on his shoulder.

“Rugoff.” His body tightened more. “Nothing that has happened makes sense to me, and in my time, I would never sleep with a man I just met. But we’re not in my time, or at least not in my place. We’re in yours and...well...”

Maybe she should offer to jack him off again. If he experienced relief again, would it help relieve his years of pent up passion? Or would it make things worse?

“Listen, in my day, we have what’s called romance novels, and Vikings feature in those books sometimes, big, strong, beefy men who raid the village and then seduce the fair maiden into giving them their virginity.”

“You make it sound as if they asked permission.” She could see he was still trying to keep himself in check, despite the fact that the burn in his gaze was deeper than it was before. “We took what we wanted, not caring who we hurt in the process.”

“But that’s not what you’re doing now, despite your obvious—” she looked at his crotch, “—desire to take what you want.”

“Things are different now. When I was very young, my father taught me that a man was allowed to use a woman’s body to slake his lust. Captives were slaves, and could be used for anything. I followed his lead, and when I think about him now, and what he became, it disgusts me. My mother, however, said a woman was not to be used in such a fashion. I tried to change my ways and follow her example before my...banishment.”

Anger at the witch built in her as she thought about this man, who had tried to keep from following in his father’s path, being sent here to live his life alone, with no hope of ever leaving this cold, lonely place.

And, after all these years, he was still trying to be a gentleman. “Well, as far as a Viking raider romance novel type goes, you have the look down pat, which, I have to say, is quite thrilling.”

Venise licked her lower lip. “But, as far as I see, we have two problems. The first being, I’m sorry to say, I’m no virgin for the big bad Viking to tame. The second being that you didn’t exactly raid my village; I raided yours. I think that means I should be the one doing the taking.”

She poked her finger into his chest, her need rocketing when his hand moved from his crotch to bat her away. It looked as if his rigid cock would burst out of his breeches.

“So move toward the bed, buster, and prepare to be conquered.”

Chapter Six

Rugoff took a step back, but Venise kept moving forward, jabbing her finger into his chest. He backed up again and again as she advanced. Rather than making him angry, it made his rod harder, the need to possess her stronger than it had been moments ago.

“You’re playing with fire.”

“Maybe I want to get burned.” They were at the edge of the bed now and she put both hands on his chest and pushed. He tumbled back and she straddled him, the tunic rising above her hips and revealing the lush thighs that surrounded her beautiful curls.

Was it his imagination or did her area have less hair than he remembered women having? Had it been so long since he’d seen a female unclothed that he’d forgotten what they looked like?

She put her finger under his chin and moved his head so that he was looking up into her face. “You look hungry, but if I’m doing the raiding, then I’m in charge.”

Her hands wandered to her breasts, moving leisurely up from her hips and cupping them in invitation. Rugoff thought he would die from the need of her. He wanted nothing more than to flip her over and slam into her hot wetness. He could smell her arousal, and her hardened nipples showed that her desire was equal to his.

She licked her lips, then fisted her hands in the material between her breasts. She pulled it, which he knew was an effort to rip the tunic in two. The material didn’t budge, though, and she tried again, once more to no avail.

“Oh crap! I knew I should have done more workouts in my life.” She lifted up and grasped the tunic, but he pushed away her hands, grabbing the small slit between her breasts and ripping the fabric in two.

Her breasts bobbed free and his mouth watered. She laughed, the lilting sound making him want to join in with her. Then she moved over him, her breasts dangling just above his

mouth. He grasped them together, gently massaging the soft flesh before he took a nipple into his mouth, sucking it hard. The nub seemed to pulse as he worked his tongue over it, taking as much of her into him as he could manage.

Rugoff lifted his gaze as much as he could without letting go of the sweet morsel. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open in obvious ecstasy. Her hips moved in a gentle rhythm as he flicked his tongue over the nipple, abandoned it, and started to savor the other one.

He had forgotten how soft a woman was, or maybe it was just that he'd never felt a woman as supple as Venise. He continued to suckle her, letting his hands settle on her hips and squeezing gently.

"So good," she whispered. "I need you inside me."

His cock strained against the material that held it hostage; the way he felt right now, though, if she moved just a little, his rod would break through and feast on the wonderful flesh that was just out of its reach.

Her nipple popped from his mouth as he laid his head back. "Venise. I cannot wait. I implore you, please."

The seductive smile on her face made him feel as if she could drive him insane. She slid down his legs and cupped her hand over his straining cock. He bucked up into her touch and she squeezed ever so gently. It was only by the strength given to him by the gods that he kept from shooting his seed into breeches.

She grasped them tightly in her hands and tugged them down. He wiggled his hips as the fabric slid down, bringing another sweet round of laughter from his lips.

At any moment, he thought to wake up, to find himself alone with nothing but the sweet memories of the dream that was undressing him right now. How many times has he wished for a woman to warm his bed at night? And now, after all these years, his dream had come true in a fashion that far surpassed anything he'd ever hoped for.

His breeches were past his hips now, the tip of his cock breaking free from its prison. When she ran her tongue over it, he surged up, crying out when she sucked the end of him into her mouth.

Never had he felt anything so exquisite, and he once again feared he would lose control of himself. He grasped her by the shoulders and pulled her away from him, intent on flipping them over and pounding himself into her core.

But before he could, she stood up, her hands on her hips, the two halves of the tunic framing her succulent body. "Listen, buster, don't make me tie you to the bed. I told you, I'm in charge here. In effect, you're my captive."

"A willing one."

"The lay back like a good boy, or else I'll search for rope. Do you understand me?"

He nodded, then lifted his hips as she slid his breeches off his hips and peeled them from his legs, one at a time, the slowness of it threatening his sanity yet again.

When he was free, she placed a hand on either side of his length and slide it up, and then back down, the friction building the heat in his bollocks.

Venise's warning rang in his mind as she played with him and he clutched his fist in the furs, delighting in the smooth feel of her flesh. He tossed his head from side to side, praying she would put him out of his sweet misery and take him inside her.

Just when he thought he would disobey her edict of staying still, she finally straddled his hips. She leaned over and kissed him, her tongue playing with his lips before she lifted up and sat down, taking the full length of him into her silky folds.

"Oh my stars above." She gasped as if she were having trouble taking breath into her lungs and he took advantage of her loss of control to grasp her hips and turn them so that she was under him.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and gave him a questioning look. "I thought I was I charge."

"Not anymore." He clutched a thigh as wrapped his free hand in her hair, claiming her lips as he pounded in and out of her wet, velvety folds. Her legs clasped him tightly and he never, ever wanted to leave.

His body had other ideas, though. Sweat pooled on his forehead as he thrust, and when she squeezed her women's flesh around his cock, he could take no more. Rapture roared through his loins and his heart felt as if it might break in two from the erratic pulse it set.

Below him, Venise clasped her hands on his arms, squeezing tightly. He realized he'd found his release, but she was still breathing heavily, probably teetering on the edge. He slipped from her and sat up on his knees, probing her folds until he found the hardened nub.

He looked up, thrilled to see her lick her lips in anticipation, and then he squeezed, delighting in the cry of pleasure that filled the room. She bucked up into his touch and he leaned

over and kissed the soft flesh of her belly, letting his tongue bath her, the salty taste of her skin rivaling that of the sweetest berries he'd ever eaten.

When she was finally still under him, he licked each nipple, then cover her mouth with his, delighting in the satisfied smile that lit her face.

"Beautiful," he whispered, laying down next to her and pulling her into his arms. He stroked her hair and kissed her temple. "Thank you, sweet Venise."

"You're welcome," she replied, snuggling into his chest. "But I'm not done with you yet, not buy a long shot."

Rugoff groaned, then closed his eyes. "Venise, you have no idea how happy I am to hear that."

Chapter Seven

Venise felt like she was wrapped in a fur cocoon. The only thing missing from her warm shell was the second body that had been with her the whole evening. She opened her eyes and looked around. A pleasant soreness infused her muscles, reminding her of the sensuous way she and Rugoff had spent the previous evening.

She scanned the room and finally found him at the table, staring intently at her laptop. He bent down twice to examine the screen, each time running his fingers over the keys.

There was a look of extreme awe on his face. She wondered if the machine was on and that was what fascinated him so. She hadn't thought about turning it off last night, since she was so turned on in a different fashion. The controls were set so the machine would sleep after thirty minutes of inactivity. If they had worked, she should still have some juice in the battery. Hopefully.

She had a few romance books stored on there and she wanted to use the computer as entertainment. During Rugoff's time, storytellers would provide tales for people as a way of entertainment.

During one of their few breaks last night she'd explained to him that her work was studying what those people had done; finding the stories they had told and letting them be known again. In the back of her mind was the idea that she could call up a few of the romance novels she had on her hard drive and read them to him, see what he thought of the descriptions of the time in which he lived.

It would be fun, and she was pretty sure it would end with some very satisfying sex, as everything seemed to do with him lately.

"Good morning."

“And to you, sweet one.” He crossed the room, took her hand and pulled her into his arms, kissing her deeply, a profound sense of belonging seeping into her body as he claimed her. He traced his fingers down her back, then cupped her buttocks, pulling her close to him.

He was hard. Again.

“Damn, that’s a greeting I can get used to.” She snaked her hand between them and clasped his length, slowly working it up and down.

He kissed her again. He’d moved his hands to her face as she caressed him, his thumbs stroking her cheeks as he held her face in his hands. He thumbed the tip of him, sliding her finger into his skin and pressing down. The satisfied sharp inhalation of breath made her smile.

A sharp gasp escaped her as he grasped her buttocks again, lifting her in his strong arms and bringing her down onto his hardness. She wrapped her legs around his middle as he jiggled her, then he let them tumble onto the bed. His cock felt as if it had become a part of her as he thrust, harder and harder inside her, the bed shaking, her body trembling as he fucked her with wild abandon.

Each stroke made her clit tingle with delight and she felt her climax building. She kneaded his back, his deep moans of pleasure letting her know how much he enjoyed the sensation.

Just when she thought she would come he stopped, pushing himself out of her legs and then flipping her over in one fluid movement. He slapped her ass and she arched upward.

“Oh fuck!” He slammed into her again, his nails scratching her buttocks like she’d just done to his back. He fucked her hard, the thrusts almost painful as she clawed at the bedding.

“Rugoff, Rugoff! More, harder, harder. Oh fuck me, so good!” Having someone inside her had never been so intense. He slapped her ass again and she cried out.

He clasped her hair and pulled back and Venise screamed. The feeling of being claimed intensified with each tug and thrust. She slipped her hand under herself and stroked her clit, the aching nub throbbing more with each pass of her finger.

She tightened around him as her orgasm exploded inside her, sharp tendrils of bliss making her fingers and toes tingle as he continued to pound himself into her. His guttural growl filled the cave as she felt him spill inside her. He let go of her hair and grasped her buttocks, his thumbs pressing against her anus.

For a moment, she thought he would leave her pussy and slide inside the hole he now massaged. The feelings were intense and, even though she'd never taken anyone that way, she'd welcome him there right now.

Instead of following through on the promise of taking her there, though, he collapsed on top of her, pushing her down into the soft coverings.

His weight stole her breath, but it wasn't pain she felt. She wanted to stay this way forever, with him still throbbing inside her silky folds, his body heavy upon her, making her feel as if they were one.

"I've hurt you?"

"No." How she managed to speak when her chest heaved with exertion was beyond her. "That's the roughest fuck I've ever had, and I loved it."

He kissed her jaw, then slid his tongue up to her ear when he licked, then bit gently. She wiggled her ass at him, loving his growl of need the movement produced.

"Your man never claimed you this way where you came from?"

"I don't have a man," she said, turning her head to look back at him. The pure lust in his eyes made her shiver. Was he ever satisfied? Was that the Viking in him, or the fact he'd been alone so long? Not that it bothered her. She'd gladly spend the whole day in bed with him.

He kissed her shoulder, then moved them both so they were on their sides, her spooned into his warm, hard body.

"I don't have a man," she whispered. "My work has always been my life."

"Work. You spoke of this last night. I wish to hear more."

She nodded. "I'll tell you everything about it. But first, I'm hungry." She inhaled and a scent invaded her nose, making her mouth water and her stomach rumble with need.

"Is that cinnamon rolls and...coffee?"

"I asked the witch for this coffee and what would best be served with it. Did she provide the right food?"

"Oh, she did indeed." He stood and pulled her up. She rushed to the table and grinned as if she'd just discovered a diamond mine. "Have you tried them?"

"No, I waited for you." That thought warmed her through and through. "I thought it was the least I could do, since I—what was the word you used—oh yes, ravished you so many times last night."

“I believe it was a mutual ravishment, and it goes well with the one we just added to it.” She reached behind him and picked up a steaming mug of coffee, inhaling the wonderful smell. The brew had been doctored with creamer and she took a tentative sip, then sighed. “French Vanilla, one of my favorites.”

The coffee warmed her throat as she took a deeper drink before offering the cup to Rugoff. He took it and sniffed as if trying to decide its chemical formula, then took a drink. She saw him wince and she grimaced.

“Too hot?”

“I did not expect it to be sweet,” he said, taking another small sip. “It’s delicious.”

“Be careful and not drink too much. The caffeine has a real kick.”

He looked confused for a moment, then shrugged. She glanced at the table where she saw ten cups of coffee and an overflowing plate of rolls. She knew from yesterday the food wouldn’t spoil. It would stay warm, or cold, as needed. It was the power, she knew, of the witch. If it was indeed the woman who had banished him here.

Thinking of the witch made her think about her reason for being here. Maybe they should just ask the witch for a written explanation. She seemed to provide most everything he asked for. Why couldn’t they get her to explain the why and how of things? It would be worth a shot.

She picked up her own cup of coffee, watching as he drank his heated brew, draining the cup and reaching for another. “You should slow down on that. The caffeine will make you jittery.”

He ignored her and took another deep drink. “I hope she brings more tomorrow.” He had the cup close to his mouth, and his breath sent the steam from the coffee wafting toward her. She smiled as he drained yet another cup.

This should be fun, she thought, wondering how he would react to the caffeine buzz. Maybe it would fuel him to fuck her even harder than he had just moments ago. If that were the case, she wanted him to have another cup.

Venise picked up a cinnamon roll and took a drink of her own coffee. “Is it always snowy here?”

“No, the snow goes away for a little while, then returns. It is when it’s gone that the agent of Loki appears to fight for the key.”

Another bite of the cinnamon roll disappeared into her mouth as she thought about the information. “Where is he at other times? Why does he only come once a year?”

"I do not know." He finished his third cup of coffee and reached for another one. She put her hand on his and squeezed gently.

"You really should slow down on the coffee. Trust me on this. I've OD'd on it before, and it can do funny things to your heartbeat."

He frowned before shrugging her off and taking another cup.

"There's got to be some reason why he only comes once a year. If the key is so important to him, I would think he'd be here every night trying to steal it from you." She tore off a piece of the roll, shaking it at him. "And another thing, why is the witch sending you things when she's dead? How does she do that?"

He shrugged and a small amount of the coffee escaped the cup that seemed to be glued to his mouth. He lowered the cup and licked up the coffee from his chin. Her nipples tightened at the sight and she looked away. They couldn't spend all their time fucking, could they? Her body was pleasantly sore, but if they kept it up, she might feel some effects that wouldn't be so pleasant.

Best to think about something besides sex for a while. Of course, that was hard to do since they were both naked right now. Figuring things out wouldn't be easy when his cock, which looked so inviting even though it wasn't hard, was right in front of her, would be difficult. She'd try her damndest, though.

"We need to figure out why I'm here. Mrs. Westergard didn't push me into that chair by accident." She glanced at him, noticing his hands were shaking. The caffeine was winding into his system.

"I really think Mrs. Westergard means for me to rescue you. We just need to figure out how to do it. There has to be a solution to leaving this place."

He paused mid-drink, then lowered the mug. She could tell by the look on his face that he was afraid she would leave, and he would not. He looked as if he'd just lost his best friend.

"Don't worry, we'll go together." She took the mug from his hand and placed it on the table. "Maybe you should eat to try and soak up some of that coffee."

Rugoff jumped up and down, then wrung his hands together. "My body, it pulses."

"It's the caffeine," she said slowly. "I told you it would do that."

"I don't like this." He rubbed his hands up and down his thighs. She noticed his cock was filling yet again and she touched his shoulder, rubbing it gently.

"Relax, eat something. It will lessen the tension you feel right now."

He backed away from her and started to pace, moving round and round the table, his speed increasing with each lap.

“Maybe there’s something we have to do, like say a spell or something.” He ran a hand over his bald head. “Maybe I should ask her. After all, she brought me you, and the coffee. Maybe she will answer me this time, since you are here.”

The hopeful note in his voice made her heart bleed for him. She grabbed him as he made a pass, stroked his cheek and gave him a quick kiss. “Perhaps you’re right. Maybe you should ask the witch the question when she brings tomorrow’s offering. But first you need to eat, you need to relax before you explode.”

He put his hand on hand over his heart and massaged. She knew from her own experiences of mainlining coffee while working on her master’s exactly what he was feeling right now.

Venise put a roll in his hand and watched him take a bite. He smacked his lips as he chewed, then swallowed. “Is everything in your world sweet?”

“Just like me.” She giggled, something she hadn’t done in a long time.

Rugoff dropped the roll back onto the table and kissed her, his lips hard and demanding. When he was done, he licked his lips and wiggled his brows. “You’re right; you are as sweet as the food.”

His hands cupped her breasts and she wiggled away from him.

“You do not wish to join with me again?”

“Oh, I do, but I think we should take a pause. I don’t want to overdo it.”

The hurt look on his face went straight to her heart. “I don’t mean it that way. I love having you inside me. It’s just if you’re inside me again, after so many times last night, and this morning, it will...hurt me just a little. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, too much.” He still looked wounded. “I am sorry I forced myself on you this morning.”

“No! You didn’t. I loved it, it’s just I need a short rest before we do it again.” To let him know how she felt she grasped his cock. “And believe me, I want to do it again. I love your hard cock.”

Pure, animalistic lust once again flooded his features. She stroked him a few times, feeling him swell in her hand. She stroked him gently, wondering if the flush on his face was from the

orgasm building inside him or from the overload of caffeine. Would the coffee change the feelings he experienced when he climaxed?

He put her hands on his shoulders and she could feel him shaking. She continued to jerk him, savoring the feel of his hard cock in her hand. If her body wasn't already sore, she would bend over and beg him to take her. Instead she stroked him gently, working his foreskin, loving the way his facial movements changed as she played.

"Is this good?" She put one hand on his balls, squeezing them gently. "Do you like that?"

"Fucking good," he said, frowning when she laughed. "Did I not say it right?"

"You said it perfectly." She jerked harder, tightening her grip.

Within minutes, he threw back his head and bellowed, "Venise!" His seed coated her hand and she put her ear against his chest, listening to the rapid thump of his heart. As they stood there, she wondered why she would ever want to leave her. Being with him had been perfect once she'd come to terms with her situation.

Then she thought about her parents, and wondered what they were thinking right now. Would they know that she'd vanished? Had they called the police to look into her disappearance? She was their only child, and they'd given her everything she could ever hope for in life.

She had to find a way out of her, for their sake if for nothing else.

"She's never spoken to me. No one has, until you."

She looked up at him and frowned. "What?"

"The witch, she's never said anything to me. I ask for things and she gives them to me, if she thinks I deserve them."

"That's very big of her, since she's the reason you're here anyway." Venise turned him toward the table, then gave him a slight push toward a chair. When he was seated, she sat on his lap, picking up a napkin and cleaning off his cock. She tossed the tissue into a barrel that sat nearby then wrapped his arms around his neck.

A day ago, she would have been embarrassed to sit on a man's lap while she was totally naked. But somehow, this felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm impressed that you lasted here this long, by yourself."

"At first I tried to end my own life." His voice was devoid of emotion as he spoke. "But then I realized my father would win. And I couldn't have that. I would stay by myself forever if it would make him suffer."

He spoke the last few words with an intensity that made her shiver. "Do you think he's dead?"

"I do not know, nor do I care. If he is suffering in the land of Hel it is too good for him." He looked away from him. "But my brothers...one of the things that kept me going was the thought of them, wherever they may be. I was afraid if I harmed myself it would somehow hurt them, also. And I couldn't allow that to happen. I love my brothers, and my mother."

Warmth suffused her as he caressed her thigh. "Do you love your mother and father?"

"Yes." Tears stung her eyes. "My parents adopted me. I was left on a church step in Italy, and they brought me into their family, made me their daughter. They've given me everything."

The difference between her loving parents and his asshat of a father didn't escape her. "You know how you feel about your mother?" When he nodded, she continued. "I feel that way about my parents. I'm sure they're worried about me."

"I'm sure my other was upset when my brothers and I disappeared. I've often wondered about her, how she withstood our loss, but yet had to stay with...him."

His body grew taut and his chest still heaved. It was a mixture, she was sure, of the caffeine, and the hatred he had for his father.

"We need to make a list of questions for the witch. Do you have something to write on?"

His look of confusion answered the question.

"Okay, let me see if I have anything in my bag." She jumped from his lap and grabbed her bag. She dumped it upside down on a chair. Out fell her wallet, some pens, two small notebooks, a romance novel and several cosmetic bags she'd forgotten had been inside. They spilled open, a few of the items spilling to the floor. She ignored them and grabbed a pen and notebook before settling herself on his lap again.

"Number one, we need to find out what happened to your brothers, where they are."

"Mrs. Westergard says they are banished, like me?"

"Yes." She wrote down the question. "We should also ask her what happened to your mother."

Rugoff nodded, and she had the idea he couldn't put into words how important that was to him.

"Then, we need to ask her how we can get out of here. Together."

A seductive smile spread across his face. She'd barely swallowed when he captured her face between his hands and kissed her. The manly taste of him mixed with the coffee and sugar that still lingered in his mouth was intoxicating.

"I think I like the food from your time, although your other things are somewhat mystifying." He fingered the notepad then glanced at her computer.

"Computers are a wonderful thing and can come in handy. I'll demonstrate how it works."

"I would like that." He patted her on the bottom as she stood and she responded with a shake of her hips.

They walked to the table and she tapped the power button on her computer. It didn't respond and she groaned in disgust.

"It's out of juice."

"Juice." He went to the table and returned with a pitcher of orange juice. "This comes every morning. Will it work?"

Venise tried to stifle a giggle. "No, it's a different type of juice. I'm talking about batteries, which provide power for things. That's the juice that you drink."

In response, he lifted the pitcher to his lips and took a drink.

"Just like a man." She ran her fingers over the keys. "We need to remember to ask the witch to bring us a computer battery."

"You must remember that she doesn't always answer my requests. Nor has she ever answered my questions about why I was here, or when I could leave."

"You've asked it before?"

"Many times, especially after the annual trial. I defeat the evil force and keep the key safe. Yet I'm still here, day after day."

Venise's body tingled, but this time it was not from the nearness of Rugoff. "Maybe I can help you this year. Tell me about the trial."

"It comes at different times, and I always know when it will arrive, because there is no food that morning."

That was rude, Venise thought. Why would the witch send him into battle without a good breakfast? Did she want him to fail?

"After the battle is won, she provides me with a great feast."

Which you have to eat by yourself.

Venise needed to have a talk with this witch. Making Rugoff and his brothers suffer for what their father did was not a proper punishment. When she came face to face with the woman, she intended to let her know that.

Rugoff had her hand in his, gently stroking the area where she'd sliced her hand when she first arrived. She expected to feel pain, but there was none. She pulled her hand away and unwrapped the bandage, letting the linen fall to the floor.

The wound was gone, and there was no scar, no evidence that she'd been injured at all.

"You're magical."

"No, I'm not." She stared at it, wondering exactly what this meant. "Maybe it's this place. Have you ever been hurt?"

"Never." The word held wonder, as if he'd never once thought about his lack of injury.

"It has to have something to do with the witch, then." She put her head on his shoulder. "Tell me about the place where you found me."

"What about it?" She felt his shrug. "It's just a clearing in the forest."

"Is it where this 'test' takes place?"

"Yes."

"Then that place means something. We need to go there. Now."

"Not now." He took her hands to keep her from rising. "Can't you hear the winds?"

She listened carefully and for the first time heard the howl of wind outside. "How did you hear that?"

"When you are alone, you hear everything." He tweaked her cheek, then reached behind her and picked up her book.

"What is this?"

"It's a romance novel." She winked at him. "They're my guilty pleasure. They're stories of love and well, sex. This is how the storytellers of my time tell their tales."

"Why do you feel guilty about it?"

"Do you want the scholarly answer, or do you want to know what I think?"

"Both."

"Very well, get ready for a lecture."

Chapter Eight

Venise had given her fair share of lectures in her life, but none of them had been delivered while she was naked. They always said to visualize your audience naked to help with nerves, but she'd never once thought it should be the other way around.

She tried to stand but he held her close to him. "Where are you going?"

"To get a tunic."

"I think not." He tickled her side. "I like you just as you are. Now, tell me the story."

He thumped his finger against the book and she held it out. "This is called *Ticket Me More*, by one of my favorite authors, Tia Fanning."

She showed him the cover, which featured a man and woman locked in an embrace. It also featured handcuffs, a pair of stilettos and some flowers. He pointed to the handcuffs.

"These are?"

"Used to bind a person's arms together. The man in this is a police officer. He enforces the law."

"She has broken the law?"

"Well, she's, um, yeah, she's attracted his attention by speeding."

His face wrinkled in confusion. "Speeding?"

"In her car, which is a boat with a motor, only it's used on the land, with wheels." She chewed on her lips. "I don't think you understand, do you?"

He shook his head and she sighed. "Never mind, that's for another discussion. First, let's talk about romance novels. They're mostly written for women, and they contain a lot of coupling."

"I like that idea."

“Me too.” She flipped through the pages. “Some people say the novels are nothing more than porn for women, that they hold no literary value. When a storyteller came to your home and provided you with entertainment, the story always held some sort of moral at the end, right? It distinguished between good and bad.”

“Do your romance novels do that?”

She moved her hand from side to side. “They are more for entertainment, to provide women, and sometimes men, with an escape from the problems of everyday life. I use them for escapism, to forget my work and just enjoy the tale.”

“Why do scholars think that bad?”

“Not all of them do, but there are some people who think writing about sex is bad. People don’t always agree on things.”

“Some things never change,” he whispered. “I am happy to take part in your guilty pleasure. Now, tell me the story.”

“Yes, sir.” She settled herself into his lap, loving the feel of his arms around her as she read to him of the flower shop owner and her brush with the law, and then her brush with the lawman.

During the first sex scene, she felt him stir, the rigid feel of his cock pressing against her thigh.

“I take it you like the story.”

“I do.” He put his hand between her legs and traced her slit. She was wet and it opened easily for him. “You are wet and ready for me. Does the story do this to you?”

“Yes, they do make want a man.”

He nibbled on her shoulder. “Yet you have no man in your life. How do you release your tension?”

“How have you taken care of yours these years? With your hands, right?” When he nodded, she bit her lower lip. Should she tell him about her other method of release? Hell, why not. “Plus, I have a vibrator. It is another device, only this one is shaped like a penis. It vibrates and I can use it on my clit, or fuck myself with it.”

“It provides you with pleasure?”

“Yes, it’s not like having this—” she traced his rigid cock “—inside me, but it works in a pinch.”

Their fingers explored, his inside her wet folds, hers along his hard length. When he put the pad of his finger on her clit and pushed, she swore she might come. But he didn't apply enough pressure. His touch was light enough to stir her, but not to make her climax.

"Tell me more."

Venise tried to catch her breath. She didn't want to read. She wanted to come. "Let's play first."

He shook his head, a seductively wicked glint in his eyes. "Tell me more. Now."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll act like the lawman in this story. Doesn't he give Melanie a ticket for breaking the law by her speeding?"

Venise's heart leapt in her chest. One of her favorite scenes in the book was when Michael spanked Melanie. She didn't have to search for it, because she knew exactly where it was in the book. She flipped to it and cleared her throat, then she described how Michael had her kneel on the bed, her bottom bared for a spanking.

Rugoff turned her so that she sat with her back to him. He spread his legs and she settled between them, his cock nestled between her ass cheeks. He snaked his arms around her, cupping her breasts and capturing her nipples between a thumb and forefinger.

He rubbed and tugged them, the tingle spreading down to her pussy. She didn't want to read anymore. She wanted to fuck.

"Rugoff."

"Tell me more."

She giggled, thinking how the story was titled *Ticket Me More* and he was demanding that she tell him more.

"You are taking too long." The command in his voice made her shiver.

"Sorry," she said, even though she wasn't. "Let me continue, then. Let's see, where were we? Melanie was on the bed and..." she cleared her throat before she continued reading, "... *Twirling her nipple in his fingertips, he placed his other hand on the curve of her ass. 'So, you know you were a naughty girl for breaking your promise not to speed?'*

"Yes," she responded breathlessly.

He tweaked her nipple as he delivered a sharp smack to her rear end. Melanie gasped. He massaged the red print on her cheek, and resumed caressing her breast.

The pressure on her nipples increased and when Rugoff spoke again his lips were right against her ear.

“Is she being punished?”

“Yes.” She pressed her ass against his cock.

“Do you like to be punished?”

“Yes.” She tried to control her breathing. “The fantasy of being spanked is another of my guilty pleasures.”

“Guilty. That means you’ve done something wrong.” He nuzzled against her neck.

“It can also mean that it just makes you feel guilty, which can be fun sometimes.”

“And bring about a spanking.” Venise shivered as he nibbled on her earlobe. “I believe you’ve been guilty and need a spanking.”

His hands had not left her breasts yet and her nipples were plump from his attentions. She wanted to tell him she would take anything he gave her right now.

“Stand up, naughty girl.”

Excitement raced through her as she obeyed his command. She wanted to tell him he’d absorbed Michael’s personality perfectly, but she didn’t want to spoil the scene. When he stood, he led her to the bed.

“Kneel on the bed, with your ass high in the air.” Venise shivered as she knelt. Reading about Melanie’s spanking always thrilled her, and led to a stimulating encounter with her vibrator. She’d never found a lover to spank her though. Until now. When he’s slapped her ass during their lovemaking, she’d wanted to scream at him to do it more. Now he was doing it without her asking.

She’d barely settled into her position when his hand came down on her ass. The strike was hard, the tingle painful yet full of pleasure at the same time. He slapped her ass again, and again. Her clit pulsed in response and she wiggled her bottom.

“Hold still.” His deep command sent shivers up her spine, and when he slapped her ass twice more, she closed her eyes and gave herself up to the pleasure of finally experiencing something she’d always dreamed about.

Rugoff continued to spank her, the slaps varying between hard and soft. She moaned and simpered as he spanked, and when he finally caressed her burning behind, she thrust herself back at him.

“More please.”

“Step off the bed.”

A pleasant ache spread through her as she stood, turning her head slightly to look at him. “Please?”

“No more right now.” He kissed her gently before settling her on the bed face down. She heard rustling behind her and she turned her head to look, but his sharp, “Turn back around,” made her do just that.

What was he doing? She was ready to fuck, despite the soreness she felt from earlier, and he was messing around behind her. If she screamed at him to get over here and take her, would he spank her more, or would he fill her with his hard cock?

She didn’t have time. He was over her quickly, pressing her into the covers. She closed her eyes and anticipated the feel of his cock pressing into her.

When it didn’t come, she looked back at him.

“Tell me about this vibrator.”

“Rugoff!” She wiggled against him. “I’ll tell you later. Fuck me.”

“No, you’ll tell me now.” He thrust against her and she felt the promise of his cock hard against her.

“I already told you. It’s shaped like a penis, but it’s made of…” she searched for a word he would understand, “…different material. Batteries power it, much like the computer is, only they’re smaller. You turn it on by twisting the base and it vibrates, which is why it’s called a vibrator.”

He shifted on top of her and then she heard a humming noise, one she knew well. She turned her head to see him holding a vibrator, one she recognized. It was only about four inches long, but she always took it with her when she traveled. She’d put it in one of the cosmetic bags in her purse when she’d left the hotel, not wanting to leave it there for someone to find if they broke into her room. And then she’d forgotten about it.

Rugoff must have seen it when she’d spilled her bag onto the chair.

“Oh good lord.” She flushed as he passed it in front of her face.

“Like this?”

“Yes, that’s a vibrator.”

He turned it back and forth, examining it. “Show me how you use it.”

“Rugoff.” Shyness soaked into her even though they’d fucked like bunnies for the last day and a half. She’d never used a vibrator in front of someone before. It was a private thing she did when no one else was around.

“Show me, or I’ll never spank you again, and I can tell by how wet your core is that you enjoyed that very much.”

She huffed out an angry breath. “That’s blackmail, and on top of that, it’s just plain mean.”

“Do it.” Oh lord, she loved it when he used that deep, commanding voice. It was exactly what she thought a romance hero sounded like, only he was flesh and blood.

Using the vibrator in front of him would force her to lose every inhibition she’d ever felt. But it would be worth it. He moved off her and she felt his loss acutely, until she saw him sitting with his back against the wall, watching her. He fisted his cock, then licked his lips as he looked held up with vibrator with the other.

“Come and get it.”

Her senses reeled at the invitation. “What can I have? The vibrator, or your cock?”

“You can have the cock once you’re one with the vibrator. Not before.”

Spurred on by the idea of her reward, Venise hurried to her hands and knees and crawled toward him, snatching the vibrator from his hand and lying down so that he had a perfect view of her pussy. She spread her legs before switching the vibrator to high.

Its whirring sound made her shiver, and when she touched it to her clit, she didn’t know how she held back the need to come. She undulated her hips as she moved it around her hardened bud. She could hear Rugoff’s labored breathing and she had no doubt his gaze never left her.

She moved the vibrator around, determined to let the feeling build, to keep the show going for him.

“Wider.” She obeyed, running her free hand over her breast. “You’re glistening with the need to be filled. Can that tiny thing please you?”

“It does the job unless I have the real thing.” She wiggled her hips as she moved the vibrator again. She hit the right spot and soared as her orgasm peaked.

“Rugoff! Fuck me, please.” Her hips rocked back and forth of their own accord as if seeking out a male body to slide between them. “Please!”

His hands were on her thighs now, stroking her. The vibrator still whirled between her legs but she no longer held it on her clit. It teased her swollen lips, making her want to feel him inside her even more than she had before.

“Rugoff.” Her voice was soft now, pleading. “I’m begging you.”

He lowered himself onto her, sliding his length against her folds. “Do you really want me inside you?”

“Yes.” He folded her legs, grasping her around the ankles.

“Keep the vibrator tight between your folds.” He slipped inside her the minute the words were out of his mouth, then started to thrust setting a slow pace that she thought of as sweet torture.

He’d slid into her, lowering his head to capture her lips in a deep, searing kiss, his tongue invading her mouth and making her feel as if they were one. When he pulled back out, he lifted his mouth from hers and stared down into her eyes.

She kept the vibrator placed next to her clit, afraid if she touched it directly she would shoot off again, and she wasn’t ready for that yet. She was afraid if she climaxed he would take it as a sign that she was ready for things to end, and she was nowhere near ready.

He captured her lips on a down thrust, his body moving the vibrator over just a tic. It touched her clit, sending the climax she’d been holding onto soaring through her veins. He captured her scream as she came and she tightened around him. At the same time she screamed, she felt him pulse inside her as he reached his peak.

Their moans of pleasure mixed until they sounded as if it they were coming from one voice. He lifted his lips from hers long enough to catch his breath. She’d barely felt air enter her lungs when he kissed her again. And again. And again.

Venise wondered if she’d ever feel anything so intense again in her life.

“So good,” she whispered when he dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. “If we keep this up I may be dead within the week.”

“Never,” he said, tumbling to the side of the bed before setting up. “No one can die from extreme pleasure. Do you need something to drink?”

“Yes, please.”

She watched him walk to the table, the most perfect specimen of manhood she’d ever seen. She needed to thank Mrs. Westergard when they returned for sending her down here.

Thinking of the woman who'd arranged all this reminded Venise they needed to be devising a way out. If the witch answered the questions they'd put to her they might find a way. If not, then they needed to find a different way.

"Did you remember to put the paper with the questions on the table?" She took the glass he held out for her, taking a deep drink.

"I did." He sat down next to her, pulling her into his arms. "In the morning we'll find out whether or not she's in an agreeable mood."

"I wonder if it's possible that the witch found a way to come back. Do you think it's possible that she's actually Mrs. Westergard?"

"I don't know." He stroked her hair. "I remember she was an older woman, with nary a wrinkle on her."

Venise shivered, then pushed away from his chest. Mrs. Westergard had been older, but didn't look her age.

"I wonder if..." she jumped up and went to her purse, taking out her phone and praying the battery was still good. A quick check showed she had one bar left. She flipped to photos, and then called up the one she'd taken of Mrs. Westergard.

He was behind her now, and when she turned, she saw the look of shock on his face. "Do you recognize this woman? Is she the witch?"

"No." The color had drained out of his face. When he spoke, there was a hitch in his voice and she saw a tear slip from his eye. "That's my mother."

Chapter Nine

“How did you capture her in there?” He tried to grab the device from her, but she sidestepped him. Could it be possible his enticing new bedmate was the witch in disguise? Were he and his brothers not enough for her vengeance? Had she found some new way to torture the remainder of his family for how his father betrayed her?

His stomach felt as if someone were jabbing sharp sticks into it repeatedly and his palms started to sweat. This wasn't what he'd expected at all. To see someone from his past life brought to him in such a strange fashion was disconcerting, to say the least.

He eyed his swords, judging which would be best to kill a witch. But Venise couldn't be a witch, could she? She was too tempting, too beautiful to be so cruel as to torture him when he was already in Hel.

He thought again of his swords, but before he could move toward them, reasoning soaked into him. He needed to think before he acted. Venise couldn't be the witch. The panic she felt when they'd met had been real. And why would she come to him now, after an eternity alone?

“Did she send you here?”

“Yes.” She touched him lightly and sparks spread through him. “I thought she was crazy when she told me the story, and then pushed me toward the chair and... I think she's expecting others, too.”

She'd paused, as if an idea had just occurred to her. “What if she's tried all these years to free you and your brothers? What if she's finally discovered a way out?”

“By sending you here?” He licked his lips, resisting the urge to kiss her. The way she looked at him made him lose control of his senses and think only with his manhood. “That defeats the purpose, don't you think? If she has power now, and had the ability to send you here, why didn't she just take me out instead?”

She put the object she held into his hand and it made a beeping noise. He stared at the image of the woman who had given him life. "Can I speak with her?"

"No." Venise stopped walking and whirled toward him. "Unless..." She grabbed the object back and pressed the buttons on it. She waited a few moments, then shook it, her frustration evident. "Damn it! Why send it down here if I can't use it? So much for their great coverage commercials."

She pressed the phone back into his palm then sat down and picked up a roll. "Maybe it was your mother who's sent the food all these years." She took a sip from the coffee and he went to the table, picking up another cup. His hand shook a little, but he supposed that was to be expected by seeing this likeness of his mother captured in her little device.

"Why would you say that?"

"Maybe she made a deal with the witch. She couldn't stand the thought of her sons in hell, so she fed them daily. And she couldn't stand the thought of you being alone, so she sent you a companion." She paused as if something had just occurred to her.

"What is it?"

"When I arrived at her home, she acted as if others would be there. It stands to reason if she sent me to you then..."

"She sent women to my brothers, too," he finished the sentence for her.

"But why now?" They said they words in unison and they both laughed.

"Jinx, buy me a drink." She picked up her cup and took a sip. How she could drink this delicious brew so slowly was beyond him.

"What does that mean?"

"It's a thing where I come from. When two people say the same thing at once, the one who speaks about it first gets a prize, and it's usually that the other person has to buy them a drink."

He considered this for a long moment as he looked over her luscious body. "That means it is like a prize, this drink?"

"Exactly." She took another bite of her roll, then held out one for him. He stepped closer and bent over, closing his lips around her fingers and taking the sweet morsel into his mouth. He licked her finger before he released her and chewed the food. After he'd swallowed he savored the lingering taste of sweetness, missed with the saltiness of her skin, made his rod stir, not that it had stopped doing it since she'd woken.

Rugoff eyed the coffee, then let his gaze rake her body again. He dropped to his knees in front of her, gently spreading her legs apart. Not that it took much effort. At the first application of pressure, she spread for him, hooking one leg over arm of the chair and giving him a perfect view of her beautiful core.

He traced her slit, pushing his finger inside to feel her soft, wet folds. Then he leaned over and placed his tongue directly on her nub, pushing it into her supple flesh. Her body jerked in reaction and he pushed harder, the little nubbin throbbing under his tongue.

He slid his tongue over her slowly, enjoying the silky feel of her as her hips moved ever so slightly as if the feel of him entranced her.

Then he sat back and winked at her. "I am unable to buy you a drink, since I have no coin. Perhaps this will suffice for your prize."

Rugoff took a healthy swig of the coffee into his mouth. He swirled the hot liquid around as it warmed his cheeks, his teeth and his tongue before he let it slide down his throat. Then he leaned back in and claimed her tasty treat.

Her sharp gasp let him know the feel of his warmed tongue provided her with a new sensation as he licked and nibbled on her enticing flesh. He relished the taste of her mixed with the sweet coffee as she rolled her hips in appreciation and cried out her delight at his attentions.

She fisted her hands in his hair, tugging gently. The feeling shot straight to his cock and he fought the need to possess her, to rise and bend her over the table, pounding himself into her as if he could reach the center part of her body with his hardness.

Her pleasure first, he said to himself as he took another drink, warmed his mouth one more time, then returned to his feast.

"Rugoff, I, oh..." Her cries of desire spurred him on, and he sucked and licked harder, flicking his tongue over her tip, delighting in the way her whimpers increased. He repeated the action with the coffee one more time before he shifted slightly, sliding a finger into her warm opening.

She lifted her hips and mumbled, "More, please, I'm begging you." The soft words were like music to his ears and he added a second finger, his tongue never leaving her nub. He licked in gentle rhythm with his thrusting. When her sighs increased, he tried to match her, and when the hold on his hair tightened, he nibbled on her hard little bundle, his rod almost bursting when she cried out her release.

She thrust her hips at him so rapidly that he was afraid his teeth would bring her more pain than pleasure. But when she held his head down as she stiffened, he knew that hadn't happened.

"Oh my stars," she said when she finally relaxed into the chair. "I'll never say jinx again without wanting that sort of prize for winning."

Rugoff stood, then grasped her and turned her none too gently, bending her over and taking her in one hard stroke.

"Fuck yes," she cried out, thrusting back at him. He took the invitation and grasped her hips tightly, pounding himself into her, in a hard, demanding rhythm that he could tell she loved as much as he did.

He grabbed her hair much as she'd done to him, tugging lightly as he pounded her. Her soft whimpers of delight increased his passion and he thrust harder. "Touch yourself, now."

Her quick move to obey made him shudder. Her cries rose to a fever pitch as he thrust inside and he imagined the pleasure she felt as she stroked herself while he claimed her. When her walls clamped down hard around his cock, he knew she'd climaxed again.

The feeling was too much and he gave one final thrust, offering her everything that had built inside him as he'd pleased her. He rested one hand on the table to keep himself from tumbling down on top of her, then he leaned over and kissed her shoulder. Her body trembled under him and he stroked her side, thinking his banishment was worth the cost if his reward was the beautiful woman under him right now.

Chapter Ten

Venise stretched, then looked around the room. The warmth from the fire had lulled her to sleep in the chair. Of course, it couldn't have anything to do with the fact they'd fucked like bunnies for the past weeks.

Every morning they'd woken and searched for answers from the witch, or from Rugoff's mother. But nothing had appeared. She knew that meant she needed to take matters into her own hands. They'd gone over reasons for her arrival, and possible scenarios for her helping him out of his predicament, but it had all been to no avail.

When they weren't talking about the curse and all it entailed, they were having sex. Lots of it. Her body had never been so deliciously sore in all her life. At one point, he'd teased her that maybe his mother was waiting until she was pregnant, or as he said, with child, to bring them back to the real world.

The discussion had left her with conflicting emotions. She's always wanted to have a child, but not here, in some realm where they'd been banished by a witch. When she had a child, she wanted a hospital with every modern convenience, including drugs. Lots of drugs.

Before the actual birthing process, though, was the conception. She and Rugoff had used absolutely no protection since she'd arrived. They'd been so caught up in each other that she hadn't thought about it until he'd brought it up.

What would happen if she had a child while they were still here? Rugoff would have to deliver their baby. Did he know how to do that?

She mentally kicked herself for even allowing that thought to enter her mind. It wasn't until just recently that people went to hospitals to have babies. Even her grandmother had been born at home. That fact might be true, but deaths from childbirth had been higher in the past, too.

Even beyond that was the bond that came to a couple when they had a child together. She and Rugoff definitely had a connection, one that she might even possibly describe as love if things kept going the way they were. Right now, she wondered what would happen if she were yanked out of this hellhole and he wasn't.

Losing him would be painful, very painful, something that might actually take her heart and tear it shreds. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that living without him would be pure torture. She supposed what she thought might develop into love was already there. The question was did he feel the same way, or was he just happy to have company after hundreds of years with nobody to talk to except the walls and the trees outside the cave.

If that's the way it was, she just wanted to crawl under a rock and die.

"Stop it," she whispered to herself. "You're imagining the worst when you need to think positively."

She glanced at the table. It was full of food, including cheesecake, something that had thrilled her when she'd seen it. What it hadn't contained was new batteries for her computer or phone. Both of them had died not long after she'd shown Rugoff the photo of Mrs. Westergard, who'd turned out to be his mother. And she hadn't seen fit to replace them, despite the number of times Venise had asked.

Of course, she hadn't seen fit to provide her with any clothing, either. Venise still wore tunics from Rugoff's stash of clothing. She could have worn the clothes she'd come in, but the tunics were more comfortable. And they were easier to get in and out of, which brought her back to the idea they'd been fucking like rabbits.

Which made her wonder where Rugoff was. They hadn't been out of the cave since she'd arrived. When she'd asked about going outside, he reminded her of the snow and extreme cold that had greeted her. It didn't stay snowy all the time, Rugoff had said, but when it was, it was an extremely dangerous time to venture out.

Still, she wanted a chance to go and examine the area where she'd landed. Perhaps the two of them were meant to go there together and that would transport out of this place.

"A magical hotspot."

"Magic?" Rugoff's hands were on her shoulders, massaging away her cares.

"I'm thinking about the tree where you found me." She stood and turned to him. "We need to go there, see if there's vibes there that might send us back to the real world."

She saw his disbelief immediately, even though he tried to mask it. “You don’t think it will work?”

“Venise, I’ve been in that area over and over, and I’ve never felt anything that might hold magic.”

“Really?” She batted her eyelashes at him. “Even when you saw me?”

“The only magical time of my life.” His deep voice made her body shiver with pleasure. “But it wasn’t the area that was enchanted. It was you.”

Warmth spread through her, but that always happened when he was around. This time, though, there wasn’t a sexual feeling about it. There was a deep down, sense of belonging that she’d never felt with anyone in her life.

“That’s a very sweet thing to say, but there has to be something about that spot, some reason why I landed there. Is it where you face your annual task?”

“I have faced the demon there before, yes, but it’s not always in the same place. The area varies each time it arrives.”

She ran her hands down his arms, then linked her fingers to his. “We need to go there, just the same, to see if we can get a clue as to what is happening before the demon comes.”

“Why?” The sadness on his face made her heart feel as if it might break. “Are you so ready to leave me?”

“No. I’m not talking about just me, I’m talking about both of us.” She squeezed his hands. “Don’t you want to leave this place? Maybe if we’re together, we can touch the tree where I came in and it will zap us to 2010.”

“Or it will take you from me.” His voice wavered, and for a moment, she thought he might cry. She put herself into his place. How would it feel to finally have a companion after spending several hundred years alone? His fear was normal, she thought, but they had to at least give it a try. If it sent her back, she would just hunt down Mrs. Westergard and demand that she either bring Rugoff back or send her back to him.

That idea shocked her. Would she condemn herself to a life here, away from the world of computers and phones? The answer was simple. To be with Rugoff, yes, she would.

“I don’t believe that for a second. I won’t let you stay here alone, I swear it.” She cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand. “I love you, and I would never do anything to leave you.”

This time the tears threatened her eyes, but she didn’t hold them back as he did. She let them flow freely, not caring if he didn’t return the sentiment or not.

“You have my heart, as well. It is why I don’t want to go there. Magic cannot be controlled, and if I lost you, I would surely die.”

The silence surrounded them and when he leaned over and placed his forehead against hers, she felt more connected to him than she ever had. His skin was warm, his touch comforting.

He squeezed her fingers and she sighed. “We have to try. Your mother sent me here to try and save you, and if all we do is sit around and screw, then we’re not honoring her wishes.”

Laughter bubbled from his mouth and savored the sound of it. “Perhaps you’re right. It will still be cold outside. We need to make sure we are dressed properly. I will gather what we need. You stay here.”

“Yes, Sir.” She saluted him, giggling at the confused look that passed over his face. He may have an English dictionary running through his mind, but he still wasn’t sure about some customs. Hopefully she’d have a lifetime to teach him everything she knew.

Chapter Eleven

For some reason it felt colder outside than it ever had before. Rugoff followed behind Venise, enjoying the delicate sway of her hips as she walked. When they got to twists or turns he would point her in the right direction, but he wanted to make sure he had her in his sights at all time.

If an animal came out of nowhere and attacked her, then he would be able to defend her. But if she vanished, there was nothing he could do. He hated the idea of going back to the “magical spot,” as she termed it. At least in the cave he felt safe. It was the place where he had lived forever. Nothing bad would happen to her in there.

But out here? He grasped the hilt of his sword just a little tighter. There was no telling what could happen out here. He didn't want to deny her the right to travel outside the cave, but right now, he hated the idea she was in danger. If anything happened to her, he wasn't sure he could survive, even though he was sure his physical body would not die.

They came to a break in the trees and he hurried up to her. “This way.” He pointed to the right and they went through an arch into the clearing where he'd first seen her, laying in the snow, her unique bags scattered around her.

He remembered finding her in the clearing, then chasing her through the woods before coming back with the fur only to have her fall from the tree she'd climbed up in an effort to escape him. He thought about carrying her back and stripping off her cold and wet clothing, and about how frigid her body had felt as he'd cleaned her wound and bound it, about how it had healed almost by itself within a few days.

Memories of her smashing her fist into his face made him smile. The smile widened when he thought of the first time he'd slid his manhood into her welcoming warmth.

“Venise.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “Please, let us go back.”

Rugoff hated the plaintive tone of his voice, but the feel of this place had changed. Always before, especially when the snow was gone and the weather grew warmer, he'd enjoyed the clearing, even if he were by himself.

Right now, though, he felt as if the world would come crashing down if they took another step toward where she'd landed.

"Rugoff." She gave him a bright smile. "Don't be a pessimist. I swear to you, I won't leave."

Her words were wonderful to hear, but he knew that she might not be able to keep them, especially if the witch decided she'd been there long enough. She took a step toward the center, and then another, and another.

Rugoff stiffened, drawing his sword from his belt to make sure it was at the ready, just in case. But nothing happened.

He glanced at Venise, who wore a fur he'd fashioned for her that covered her from head to toe. He'd also put a pair of his foot coverings on her, stuffing them with material to make sure her feet stayed warm.

From the look on her face, she wasn't happy. He wondered if she really believed that, like the romance novels she'd talked about, they'd step into the clearing and things would change for them immediately.

"Damn it." He recognized her words for what they represented: frustration. She walked to the tree and put her hand against it, and he hurried after her, fear slicing through him that she would disappear before he reached her.

But she didn't. The air didn't change, no animals or magical beings appeared, and Venise stood in the same spot, running her hands over the bark as if she suspected a different spot would produce a different result.

"Venise." She didn't answer him or even acknowledge that he'd spoken to her. He took her hand and she turned to him, her face brightening.

"That's it. We need to touch. Since we're both going back now, that will bring about the power. I fell before, but this time it will suck us back up."

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close, kissing him deeply. Then she clasped his hand and placed it on the tree, putting hers over it.

Nothing happened and he could feel the disappointment flood her. She went limp in his arms and he held her close, hoping his touch would remind her that she wasn't in this alone, that they were together and things would be fine.

“Venise.” He whispered her name in her ear, but she didn’t respond. “Listen to me, tomorrow I’ll ask the witch for some answers.”

“And she won’t give them. This is where your mother dumped me, not the witch. I had hoped that she would want to give us some answers, but I guess I was wrong.”

They couldn’t stay out here forever, and right now, she seemed rooted to the spot. He needed to capture her attention, much the same way the men in the novels she spoke about captured their women. He had to let her know her life had changed.

No one was here when he first landed in this world. He’d spent months trying to figure a way out, trying to find a route that would provide him escape. And he couldn’t let her do that.

What he needed to do was help her learn there was no way out of this land. But they could face it together.

“Tell me, Venise, in your romance novels, do the Viking heroes take their heroines with care, or do they dominate them and let them know they are their captives?”

Confusion spread over her gaze and she turned from him as if she wouldn’t respond.

“Answer me, right now.”

“They’ve changed,” she said, her voice heavy with the disappointment he knew she felt from not being able to find her magical spot. “In the early days of romance novels, the heroes would take what they wanted.”

“As a good Viking would.” He took a step back and watched as her eyes widened. Then he leaned over and grasped her behind the thighs. He threw her over his shoulder and turned back toward the cave, intent on reminding her they were in this together, and that she was a captive here, the same way he was.

Her body bounced on his shoulder and she imagined this was the route they’d taken when he’d first brought her here, only that time she’d been unconscious. In the weeks that had passed, she’d thought long and hard about a way out, but it seemed she hadn’t thought hard enough.

She’d been so sure that touching the tree would send them back, or at least summon the witch, or Rugoff’s mother, who would listen to what they had to say.

How could she have been so wrong? She’d gone over folk and fairy tales in her mind repeatedly and there always seemed to be a way out, or a lesson to be learned. What was the lesson here? And what was the way out?

They were at the door to the cave now. Rugoff didn't put her down as he undid the latch and slid the portal to the side. Once on the other side, she tried to slide off his shoulder, but he firmly smacked her bottom.

Through the padding, the swat didn't hurt, but she knew it had happened and shock raced through her. He'd never done anything like that before.

"You will behave, captive, or I will find rope." He repeated the words she'd said to him when she'd taken him that first night, reminding him that she was basically the raider at his home.

Excitement coursed through her as he re-latched the door and turned toward the main part of the house. That thought made her giggle. This wasn't a house, it was a cave. What was the old saying, "*Home is where the heart is?*" Could a cave be considered a home?

She supposed she'd find out soon enough, since it didn't look as if they were going anywhere in the near future.

Her body continued to sway as he stalked across the floor, and then he unceremoniously dumped her on the bed.

"Rugoff, I—"

"Silence, captive. I did not give you leave to speak."

"Excuse me?" She tried to sit up but he pushed her back down. The intense look on his face sent a chill through her, as she couldn't quite read it. Had something else happened at the clearing? Had he somehow been taken over by something that changed his personality? Or was he just pissed at her because she'd insisted they go?

He undid his winter coverings, tossing them aside without a care for where they landed. She wanted to tell him that he needed to put them back into the niches where they belonged.

"*A clean cave is a happy cave,*" she thought as he got to his tunic and stripped it off. His leggings followed suit and he now stood before her, naked and fully erect. The sight made her mouth water, and it made her forget all about the failure in the clearing.

She reached for him, but he batted her hand away, taking a step back. "Take off your clothing."

There was a hard bite to his voice that she'd never heard before, and she wasn't sure that she liked it. She shook her head ever so slightly, wondering exactly what the hell was going on.

He watched her through lowered lids, then stalked to the wall of weapons, searching them for a few moments before selecting a wicked looking knife.

As he moved back toward the bed, armed with the steel, Venise finally moved, crawling to the top of the bed as fast as the heavy garments she wore would allow. She pressed against the wall as he took the knife and stabbed it into the bedding.

The hilt of it stood out, wavering just a little. She watched it, then lifted her gaze to find him staring at her, his expression hard to read. "I will not ask again. Either take off your clothing, or I will do it for you."

The implication was clear. He wouldn't help her undo the laces as he'd done so many times in the past. He'd cut them from her.

Her heart raced at the idea and she stared at the man in front of her. She didn't know him. He hadn't even been this way with her when she'd first arrived and they couldn't speak to each other.

"Listen, I don't know, um, who..." She broke off and looked around the room. There was no way out of this situation.

"So be it." He picked up the knife and advanced on her, standing on the thick mattress and walking, his movements making it sway and causing her to lose her balance. She fell onto her stomach, the bed continuing to move as he walked.

She rolled toward him, then scrambled off the bed, running to the table and putting it between them. He stepped off the bed and moved the knife to his side, his grip still firm.

"You cannot hide from me, nor can you outrun me. You are mine, my prize to do with as I see fit. You will obey me."

"And you can kiss my rosy red ass. What the hell happened to you?" Whatever it was, she didn't like it. The sweet Rugoff who thought first and acted second was gone, replaced by a Viking that... Realization dawned on her as she thought about their discussions on romance novels and how the captured heroine would bend to the hero's will.

"I don't want to play a game," she said, shrugging out of the fur. "Let's just leave it be, shall we?"

He didn't answer her, but from the glint in his eye, she could see that he didn't want to listen to her. He took a step toward the table, stopping to fix her with another one of those penetrating stares.

This was a game, wasn't it? From the look on his face, she wasn't exactly sure. It was a little disconcerting to see him standing there with that knife in his hand.

"Rugoff."

“Undress!”

If there was a roof on this place, she was pretty sure his yell would have lifted it off its frame. Her heart beat just a little faster, and this time there was excitement mixed with the trepidation. There was no telling where he would take this. Well, she was pretty sure where it was heading. The hard cock gave her a pretty big hint. Maybe she should play along. Maybe it would help her to get over the disappointment she felt right now. No, not maybe. Definitely.

“Listen, I realize you’re upset, but...”

“Silence!” He moved toward her, his stride no longer hesitant. “I tire of your disobedience. You must learn that you belong to me now!” He slammed the knife into the table, the tip of it now embedded in the wood. “You will undress this very instant.”

“I think not.” She backed up, putting her hands on her hips. “Why don’t we just sit down and discuss this. I realize that...oh!”

He lunged for her, moving around the table faster than she ever thought possible. She ducked out from under his arm and ran toward the bed again, stopping long enough to realize that going to the bed wouldn’t help. She needed to find someplace where she could either hide from him, or keep away from him while she tried to talk.

She headed for the hallway, remembering as she was partway there that there were only two rooms this way. The first was the bathroom, the second the bathing room. The sound of water rushing over the falls sounded as if they were amplified by the best stereo system as she entered the room. It was either that or the pounding of her heart that sounded so loud.

There was only one place to go, and that was into the water. It wasn’t deep water, with just enough to cover a person’s waist when they were sitting, much like a bathtub. She quickly pushed off what passed for shoes, then stepped into the warm flow.

She’d only taken a few steps when she realized her error. Clothing grew heavy as it got wet, and it slowed her down as she moved toward the waterfalls. She lost her footing and fell, the water soaking through everything she wore.

She heard a splash, the sound of him getting into the water with her. She got back up, moving as fast as she could. Maybe she could maneuver around him and get back out.

Not that getting out was a good idea. No matter whether she was in or out of the water her clothing was now soaked, and there was no way she could outrace him.

He was right behind her now and she bent down, thinking she could repeat the movement from the under room, ducking under his arm and eluding him once again. But this

time he anticipated her move and he grabbed her around the waist, tossing her in front of him so that she landed on her hands and knees.

Venise twisted and turned as he put his body over hers, pushing them deeper into the water. She hated to admit it, but this rough behavior was turning her on. Wetness had formed inside her and she imagined him mounting her and riding her in a very primitive way.

“Did I not tell you that you were mine?” He pushed the tunic up, exposing the breeches she wore. She gasped when she felt the cold steel of the knife against her skin. She heard the pants fabric tear and imagined him using the knife to make a nick so he could tear them the rest of the way.

He was inside her in seconds, pushing hard into her wet folds, claiming her with actions that backed up his words that she was “his.” His thrusts were hard and jerky, the pressure making her clit pulse with desire.

Damn but this felt incredible. She rolled her head from side to side, her hair getting wet. Then she threw her head around, the wet strands slapping her as he continued to pound into her. His thrusts drove his cock deep inside her, sliding back and forth over that sweet spot that made her feel as if she were losing her mind.

Hard, wonderful strokes drove her on, and when he wrapped his hands in her hair and tugged, she came, her orgasm slamming into her with such force that she felt as if she might split in two.

Rugoff’s cry of triumph mixed with his climax and she felt him fill her, the warmth spreading through her as he clasped his arms around her and kissed her shoulder. Her legs and arms trembled, as they remained locked together for several long, satisfying moments.

Then he left her, making her feel alone and abandoned. He pulled her to her feet and turned her, clasping her face in his hand and kissing her deeply, his tongue claiming her as it never had before.

She melted into his arms, feeling warm and wanted.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No.” She glanced up at him. “I suppose that was your Viking self, reminding me of your true nature.”

His deep chuckle made her laugh. “That was me, claiming you, yes.”

“You can claim me again and again. I loved it.”

“And I love you.” He kissed her forehead and pulled her head against his hard chest. “I’m sorry your plan to leave didn’t work.”

“I don’t care.” She rubbed her cheek against him. “If I stay here forever, at least I know I’ll be here with you. It only matters that we’re together.”

“I love you, too.”

She’d never heard sweeter words in her life, and she knew that, even if they were stuck in this hellhole, at least they had each other to depend on.

Epilogue

Mrs. Westergard's eyes filled with tears. How long had it taken her to find a way to help her suffering sons? The repercussions of her husband's betrayals ran deep.

She'd left her husband's court when her sons had disappeared. She'd known what had happened, and she'd tried as hard as she could to find a solution, to find a way to bring her sons back; all to no avail.

It wasn't long after she left that she heard the emerald had disappeared, and that her husband blamed her, and was on a search to recover it, and punish her for taking what was his.

Soon afterward she'd found the witch's sister, who had shown her the box that housed the emerald, told her she'd fashioned a lock with three keys and distributed them amongst Rugoff, Benedikt and Egill.

"Your husband killed my sister, and since the loss of his sons didn't seem to bother him, I took what did matter the most. The emerald. He will know what happens to it, and once a cycle, he will be forced to battle his sons for the keys. If he can beat them, the emerald will be his. If not, he will suffer time and time again."

Mrs. Westergard had tried to convince the witch that her husband wasn't the only one suffering. Her sons were stuck in limbo. Alone.

And so the witch had proposed a solution. If the sons could find their true loves, and could face one final battle when the three of them would fight against their father, then they would be released.

So Gunnmarr's queen had changed to Mrs. Westergard, endowed with ultimate powers and eternal life from the witch's sister, who took pity on her as she cried for her sons. She'd then gone on a hunt, using ancient tomes and modern day spells to search for the three women destined to be her sons' mates.

And finally she'd found them. She closed her eyes as Rugoff's contentment settled over her. He was happy as he held the sweet, willing woman who loved him in his arms. They were together, which meant all that needed to happen was to unite Benedikt and Egill with their loves, and watch as they defeated their father.

A knock on the door pulled her from her musings. She hurried to the door and pulled it open.

"Come in, come in," she said as she motioned the young woman who stood there to hurry inside. "You must be Lilliana. We have much to do, so don't dawdle, child. Come in and have a seat in my very special chair."

Author's Note

Writing is a solitary business, as everyone knows. But it takes more than a writer to make a book. In this case, the series that will feature the sons of Gunnmarr: Rugoff, Benedikt and Egill, started with a phone call from my editor one night.

I was sitting at my computer, as is often the case, my fingers gliding over the keys when the phone rang. She opened the conversation with “Oh My God. You have got to see this photo.”

She directed me to my inbox where I found the photo that went on to become the cover of *Captured*. I was enthralled, to say the least. We spent the next two hours (thanks given at this point for cell phone companies that allow customers with the same firm to talk for free) discussing plots and characters and looking at other photos we could use for the series.

The first result of that conversation is the story you have just read. It should be noted at this point that, no matter how much planning goes into a story, my finished product is always different than what I intended it to be. It turned from a Viking only story to a Viking that had been banished to another world by a witch, and has to be rescued by his soul mate.

Times that by three and you have *Captured*, *Enslaved and Hunted*, featuring Rugoff and Venise; Benedikt and Lilliana; and Egill and Abella. Each brother and their newfound lover have to come to terms with their life as it is to escape to a better place. The stories build one on top of the other until the three brothers are reunited in *Hunted*, and face their final battle together.

I hope you'll enjoy meeting the three brothers and their ladies, since I know I loved creating them.

Thanks to my editor, Tiff, for her never-ending patience, and to Leigh and Jess for the same thing. I also want to offer my thanks to my friends who don't mind when, in the middle of a conversation about various topics I blurt out, "What do you think about this for a plot point?"

In *Captured*, Venise and Rugoff have a fun time reading *Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning, one of my best friends and a wonderful author. As a side plug, this title is available at Resplendence Publishing and it is great fun.

Take care until next month when you will get to meet Lilliana and Benedikt.

Happy reading!

Mel

About the Author

Melinda Barron loves to explore Egyptian tombs and temples, discover Mayan ruins, play in castles towers, and explore new cities and countries. She generally does it all from the comfort of her home by opening a book.

Melinda loves to lose herself between the pages of a book. The only thing she loves more is creating stories from the wonderful heroes and heroines that haunt her dreams and crowd her head. She believes love is for everyone, not just those who are a size 2. Her books are full of magic, suspense and love, in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Mel currently lives in the Texas Panhandle with two cats and a file stuffed with new ideas to keep her typing fingers busy, and your heart engaged.

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Find Melinda Barron's *Desires of the Lamp Tales* at
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Wish Me Up, Rub Me Down

With no love life to speak of, BBW Anya Bartholomew lives only for her job. This dedication has paid off. As a successful advertising agent, she has risen in the ranks of her firm to be the top money-maker.

But at the insistence of her two best friends, who claim she needs a break from work, Anya takes a weekend vacation to the small town of Pleasant, Maine. While shopping at an antique shop, she rubs a lamp that looks as if it could belong to Aladdin himself.

Things will never be the same.

Back at work on Monday morning, Anya finds that her boss has given her a new account...for a lamp factory. However, her clients—two very handsome, very sexy men—are more than what they seem.

They're Pleasure Djinn. And they have come to fulfill five of Anya's most secret sexual wishes.

Aliya Baban and the Cave of Pleasure

Advertising agent Aliya Baban is beautiful with a capital B. Unfortunately, she's also a witch with a capital B. In her twenty-eight years of life, she's managed to offend almost every woman she has ever met.

But she doesn't care, really. That's just the way life is.

When her boss tells her to get the *Cave of Pleasure* account, or else get a new job, Aliya takes her party invitation—and the strange lamp she's received—and attends the nightclub's grand opening, ready to do battle for her livelihood.

Matuse is more than just the owner of the *Cave of Pleasure*...he's a pleasure djinni. And Aliya has rubbed his lamp. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. Though he intends to bring intense pleasure to her body, it's also his job to make sure his "she-devil" changes her wicked ways.

Will Matuse be able to help Aliya overcome her painful past? Or will Aliya fail to make the five heartfelt apologies she needs to make to the five women she has hurt the most.

To Rub, Honor and Obey

Moreen McGee is a perfect example of how poor decisions made in youthful rebellion can haunt someone for life. Now on probation for ten years, she serves her court-ordered community service at a center for troubled teens in the hopes of stopping other kids from taking the wrong path.

But when one of her young charges pickpockets a wallet from her high school nemesis, Aliya Baban, Moreen decides to put the illicit skills she learned as a teenager to good use...by breaking into Aliya's apartment to return the stolen wallet, thus keeping the kid who stole it out of trouble and out of jail.

However, once she's in the opulent Manhattan flat, Moreen can't resist the urge to take one small token from the woman she still blames for her own downfall—an old, neglected oil lamp that she's sure Aliya will never miss.

Moreen accidentally summons a gorgeous demon-turned-pleasure djinni named Paran, and he's not too thrilled with the theft of his property. Moreen has rubbed his lamp, the contract is sealed. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. And Paran intends to use this time to help his little felon learn some very important lessons, including the true meaning of the words *honor* and *obey*.

Smoke, Fire and Desire

Scientist Rhylie Dawson works hard, but when it comes to play she's pretty reserved. Until her friends take her to the *Cave of Pleasure* in New York City. She's there to celebrate her birthday, and maybe, just maybe, get lucky.

What Rhylie doesn't know is the *Cave of Pleasure* is run by Pleasure Djinn, and they're eager to show her that there's more to life than just work. On stage in front of a bevy of male dancers, Rhylie is told to choose one for her special birthday dance.

She picks the fireman, and quickly learns that where there's smoke, there's fire, and a great deal of desire.

Also Available from Resplendence Publishing
The Not Quite Wicked Series

***Wolf in Men's Clothing* by Dakota Rebel**

Little Red Riding Hood has nothing on Rhys. On his way to his grandmother's house, Rhys' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately for him, there is a big, bad rescuer watching and waiting to sweep him off his feet.

***Just Right* by Bronwyn Green**

When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werewolves. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

***Open Sesame* by Mia Watts**

Alister Baban overheard a business discussion that netted him and his Uncle Cassimer a lot of money. When the Simsim Group stock crashes and declares bankruptcy within weeks, the owners immediately suspect the Babans of playing dirty.

Oz Adamo, one of four brothers who owned Simsim Group, agrees to abduct Alister to obtain information and win back the lost pensions of former employees.

Tied to a bed and lusting after his captor, Alister fights the sexual attraction he has for Oz. They want information and he isn't about to give it. But Oz loves a good challenge, and shrewd, serious, sexy Alister is naked and his—at least for now.

***Heart of Ice* by Brynn Paulin**

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim...until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

Handcuffs and Lace

Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law Enforcement Themed Stories

***Search Me Baby, One More Time* by Melinda Barron**

Wren Thornberry's life isn't going according to plan. She let her father talk her out of marrying Bryan Stockard, the man she loves, and moved halfway around the world. Now she's back home in Texas, babysitting her grandmother while grandma and her boy-toy work through their list of sexual exploits, making themselves the talk of the town.

But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: a police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren *assume the position*.

***Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning**

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her *Battery Operated Boyfriend*, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the "living" world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he doesn't seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention...using any speed necessary.

***Cuff Me Lacy* by Demi Alex**

Three months is way too long to wait for some simple, low-down, straight forward sex. It's not like Officer Chrissie Hansen is asking for prince charming to offer her the love of a lifetime. All she wants is a good orgasm that she doesn't have to work for alone.

At least with "The Bull" she knows what to expect. But when Patrick MacKlick returns to her life and tempts her with new options, she discovers that lace can imprison a heart better than handcuffs can.

***Stripped* by Celia Kyle**

Sometimes life just required tequila...and vodka...and a shot or two of whiskey for good measure. Jasmine Wright, Jazz to her friends, has reached that point. And now all that liquor is making her clothes fall off—in the middle of the street. Good thing a friendly neighborhood police officer stops to help.

Sheriff Ian Blackwell has loved Jazz since high school and then some. When their relationship burned out so many years ago, he wasn't sure he would recover. Now he's getting a second chance, and he won't Jazz slip away from him this time. He has her naked and at his mercy, and he's going to keep her that way. Forever.

***Going Commando* by Catherine Chernow**

Bounty hunter Shyra Lawrence listens to her favorite radio station one morning where the DJ's are discussing "going commando" —*a.k.a.* wearing no undies. Captivated by their conversation, she decides to shed her panties in favor of the freedom that wearing no underwear brings.

Enthusiastic, Shyra sends an email to her best friend, Donna, detailing the delights of panty-freedom, but unbeknownst to Shyra, she's hit the send key...to the wrong email addy!

When Derek Grayson opens his emails that morning, he discovers that his #1 employee and top bounty hunter has sent him an erotic, enticing message about going commando. Derek has always been polite, professional, and so damned attracted to Shyra, it's almost painful. Working day in and day out with voluptuous woman has sent Derek's hormones into overdrive on more than one occasion.

Now, Shyra's shed her panties and Derek's got all he can do to contain his lust when she announces that she's... GOING COMMANDO.

***Handcuffs and Lies* by Bronwyn Green**

Sometimes promises to friends are the hardest to keep. Undercover police officer, Michael Tanner, promised his dying partner that he'd take care of the man's little sister. Trouble is, after her brother's death, Doctor Tori Spinelli wants nothing to do with Michael—or any other cop for that matter.

Tori has always fought against overprotective men and deception. Forced into protective custody with Michael, she's now faced with both in the same package. Despite their differences, Tori falls in love with him, but how can she trust a man who lies for a living?

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