

WARRIOR'S PRISONER

L. R. WARDS

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CHAPTER ONE

Through the ear-splitting noises of battle cries combined with the loud clashes of metal on metal as sword and armour met repeatedly, Urthraine was no less than arrogantly impressed with the way his sons fought.

Suddenly distracted, he deflected sword blade, slew the man with a slap of his own, and took a moment to watch his sons. Bothvar particularly was a force to be reckoned with and he was only sixteen. He was able to get glimpses of the boy's powerful skill through the battle.

Dust stirred, hovered over the combat and mixed with the pouring sweat off the warriors making friend and foe barely distinguishable, but Bothvar was visible not only because of his incredible height, but his ferocious battle roar and fighting style that set him apart despite his young age.

Suddenly Bothvar's helmet was knocked off by an unguarded blade and instead of Uthraine being worried, he found himself grinning at the fierce expression his son wore. In fact the man who knocked his helmet off stepped back at it and his hesitation caused his death. He lunged forward without pause and skewered the man before turning and taking another opponent in one smooth movement. It was artful and skilled and Urthraine swelled with pride. Bothvar was fearless and would take on those that were twice his size without faltering.

Urthraine knew that both of his sons would grow into the characteristic Gierrier size, the signs were evident. They were tall, lean and powerfully built and another decade of fighting

would put the massive muscular bulk that was common of their race.

Grunewald, his other son, was barely fifteen seasons, but he was not too far in height and skill from Bothvar. Against his better judgment he had his younger son engage in battle also. He was eager to prove his worth to his father, so Urthraine allowed him despite his misgivings. Unknown to both of his sons he had made sure that several of his most experienced warriors flanked them. They would not be impressed if they knew that their father was protecting them. It was not so much for Bothvar, but more for Grunewald. He had Bothvar on the battlefield since he was fourteen although tradition stated the men had to be sixteen, he had known Bothvar was capable and now Grunewald.

Although it was expected that a Gierrer King was to raise his sons as the most powerful and cunning of the Gierrer, it still would pain him to lose either son. He had lost his wife through the birth of his daughter, and be damned that he would lose any more of his family.

Now he managed swift glimpses in his sons' direction between opponents as they fought side by side. It was obvious that Bothvar was the greater skilled and protected Grunewald well. Maybe he shouldn't have been so overprotective, because by the look of it, his sons had things under control without the use of his warriors. It was then he knew the Gods had gifted him with strong and magnificent sons.

Bothvar was the politician already, logical and even tempered. However, a man just had to look into his eyes and see the unmistakable character of his birthright; highly intelligent and a born leader. Urthraine's warriors already followed

Bothvar's every command. This was a right that had to be earned, for the Gierrer do not follow just anyone even if they are of royal blood. The skill of battle and intelligence had to be proven, and since Bothvar was fourteen he had done just that. Taking on two even sometimes three men in battle and dispatching them fearlessly with skills of a warrior that has seen twenty years of warfare. It brought the Gierrer to their knees before him. Just like a true future King, Bothvar stood with his chin raised in self-regard above the kneeling warriors, arms crossed at their chests and their heads bowed. He was humbled at their allegiance and proud of his right to proclaim his birthright. Urthraine swelled with insurmountable pride in witness of that day for a Gierrer to be so young to command such respect was unheard of. Uthraine himself was in his eighteenth year when they kneeled before him and that was thought to be legendary.

Unlike Bothvar, save for the intelligence, Grunewald had the temper of a trapped boar, but when others fought with such passion and rage, it distracted them and ended up getting them killed, but not Grunewald. It intensified his skill and awed Urthraine's warriors for such a young boy to have such talent. He was more like Urthraine in that regard and he trained him to manage and use his temper as an advantage. He found himself smiling despite the death around him. Both of his sons had inherited his lofty traits in one way or another. Yet, they were close as brothers despite their differences and had a bond so strong that not even death would break it. His heart swelled in his chest over them.

It wasn't to long after that the enemy ran for the trees and those remaining to fight were quickly killed. Urthraine removed the blade of his sword from the midsection of a man who fell to

the ground still alive. He stood over him for a moment before he drove his sword into his heart taking his life without a mere thought.

Turning, he saw his sons approach stepping over the dead. The spoils of Bothvar losing his helmet were evident. A long deep gash was present on the side of Bothvar's handsome face, though the young man did not seem to notice as a grin splayed over his features at their victory. Blood spilled down his face and onto his armour in a steady drip creating a steady crimson trail down his breastplate. When the Gierrer were in the throes of battle pain was not an option. They were raised from their first breath to accept this.

"You are bleeding boy." Urthraine simply stated with an expression to match, not wanting to show his alarm at the size of the wound that just barely missed his son's eye. Gierrer were supposed to be strong. Wounds were a tribute to their battle and were looked upon as an honour. He was even more proud at the way Bothvar handled himself, for the smile on his son's face must've certainly hurt the wound, but he did not show it.

Bothvar reached up and felt the gash and still grinning spoke, "Only a flesh wound father."

Urthraine laughed, "That does not look painless. I think I could fit my hand in there. I'm sure you weep like a woman inside." His answer was a shrug and a widening grin.

Grunewald spoke up then, "My brother has no feelings father, have you not noticed? Why woman fall at his feet and he does not notice barely a simper from them. They cling to him like he is the son of a God and he does not even spare them more

than a glance. Already he had over a dozen women pledging their oaths to him.”

“It is because they know my talents as a lover. They had no equal.” He boasted causing Grunewald to snort with laughter and Urthraine to chuckle.

“Such words for one so young! When you open your heart to a woman some day and you will eat those words.” Urthraine offered with a knowing grin.

Bothvar scoffed and shook his handsome head, “No father, I am in no short supply of women in my bed now, why would I want to open my heart?”

Urthraine bellowed with laughter at his son’s arrogant statement seeming immune to carcasses and the coppery scent of blood around him, “Son, you will realize that we have no choice on that matter. The Gods have made sure that there is a woman for each one of us that we would pledge our undying love and devotion to. Your mother was mine and because of her I will never love another. You will rue the day when a female opens your heart and stirs those emotions. Each Gierrer here who has taken a mate has spoken those very words that you just proclaimed, and every Gierrer who has opened their heart has been made a fool of for saying as much. Your warrior heart rules you now Bothvar, do not speak so confidently of that which you know nothing.”

The statement caused Bothvar to cease his grinning and purse his lips. He didn’t understand that kind of love and devotion beyond the act of sexual gratification. Being a legendary warrior at such a young age gave him his pick of the

most beautiful Gierrer women for his bed mates. He rarely ever slept alone as it was and rarely with the same woman. He could not imagine being devoted to one woman. However, he also knew his father held great wisdom and his advice was never insincere. "Aye father, I hear you."

Uthraine nodded at his son's acknowledgment and placed his hands on each one of his sons' strong armour clad shoulders while his eyes glinted, "It is a proud day for me to finally fight side by side with both of my sons." His eyes focused on Bothvar, "Go to the Therar and have him fix the crater on your face son. Like everything you do, your first battle scar will be impressive too." He grinned while complimenting him.

Bothvar smiled at his father's tribute and slapped his brother on the shoulder, "Grunewald too, father has proven himself has he not?"

"Aye." His eyes fixed on the younger son, who beamed at his approval, "You fight like a man twice your size. Now enough of our bragging! Grunewald, you need to have your leg looked at." He indicated to the trickle of blood making a path down his leg from a gash in his thigh, "It looks like you have no feeling either."

Grunewald looked down at the wound in surprise at the same time Bothvar chuckled.

"You were saying...?" Bothvar said.

Grunewald looked at him and shrugged; he had barely felt the slash when it happened and thought his opponent just grazed him. "It must be the rush we get during a battle. I did not

feel it.”

At the same time in an adjacent Kingdom in a land that joined Uthraine’s a young girl was bearing witness to a terrible act. She screamed as her mother’s back bled with the last stroke of the whip. She had endured five lashes already and because of the existing scar tissue it had not bled until now. Her father stretched and pulled his arm back again for another lash and when she went to scream again her brother covered her mouth with his hand and whispered harshly in her ear

“Do you wish for our mother to hear your anguish Runa! Stay silent!”

And as quickly as he seized her he released her. Runa knew why. Her father would not approve of Erlend’s warning, or even touching her because he would most likely punish their mother more if he noticed. Public displays of emotion were forbidden. She was thankful that he didn’t notice and despite her trembling, she suppressed a shudder at the horrific scene. When five more lashes sliced her mother’s back, she visibly trembled, but did not scream again.

I will stay strong for her, she thought and flinched as another whistling sound of the whip sliced the air before it slapped her mother’s back. Her mother was strong. With each slicing lash she released a scream but did not fall. Maybe it had something to do with two of her father’s personal guards that held the ropes that held the ropes around her wrists, stretching her taught in between them. Regardless, her mother was strong and watching that whole shocking scene, Runa knew there wasn’t any way she would still be standing if it was her. However, this

wasn't the first time her mother was punished, but this was the first time her father insisted that she witness it.

She did not know why her father whipped her, but the charges would have something to do with her protesting over something he did. She looked up at her brother. His expression as usual was unreadable. He was seven summers older than her, but already showing the signs of a true Esbiorn male. He was unemotional, withdrawn and always held his chin at an arrogant angle. As if feeling her gaze on him, suddenly his eyes flicked to her and with it, a hint of anguish before they clouded over and he returned his gaze to the horrific scene before them. It was the only time Runa would remember from their childhood that he had displayed an emotion. It was so brief, she was wondering if she had imagined it.

When her father finally ordered the guards to release the ropes her mother stood on her own feet for a moment visibly trembling, then collapsed. Then by some miracle had the strength to push her self up by her arms shakily. Bits of her gown were shredded off her back along with her flesh and she was thankful she couldn't see her mother's face. It would break her heart.

Runa watched her father coil the whip up in his hand and walk around to the front of her. He knelt down and said something in his low commanding voice and she slowly and silently nodded. Then he stood and told his men to take her to his chamber where she would learn the rest of the lesson to obey him.

He was cruel, thought Runa, so cruel, and she hated him. Now more than ever. Her mother was beautiful and now she was

covered in scars. Not her face, he would never touch her face, but the rest of her was damaged. It was a sign that she had disobeyed him more than once. Runa had never been whipped, but then again she was not promised to a man yet. When a male was chosen for her, she could be treated in such a way if she disobeyed him. For now, it was up to her father to punish her when she disobeyed and thus far, she never did. He watched her father set his peircing eyes on her after her mother was dragged helplessly from the room. He clutched the whip still as he began toward her and every cell in her body wanted to run away from him in terror, but she knew what would happen if she did, so she stood strong. Now she realized as he approached that Erlend was probably subjected to this constantly and it was no wonder that he was steeled against a reaction when she was not.

“Runa.” He said

She bowed and kept her gaze averted because Esbiorn women were not allowed to stare directly at the men, but this time her father made her. Her reached down and tilted her chin so she was staring directly at him. His icy blue stare frightened her, no, terrified her, there was no emotion there.

“Now you see my daughter, what happens when a woman disobeys her mate? You are eleven summers now and need to understand what happens if you disobey.” She heard a creaking noise as her father squeezed and released the whip in his fist almost as a forewarning.

Runa heard Erlend shift his stance and wondered if what her father said to her bothered him. She did her best not to show fear when he spoke, but she was certain he could feel her tremble.

“Do you have any questions?” He asked her.

“No...yes.” She finally found her nerve. It was a rare opportunity to ask her father questions.

“Good. Ask me.”

His voice put a shiver through her because it was so cool. How could anyone not let what happened affect them. She made sure she chose her words very carefully. “What did mother do to make you angry?” She saw his face darken in rage for a moment before he gave her an unemotional smile

He reached up and caressed her cheek. “My beautiful Runa. That is a good question.”

Erlend cleared his throat, but her father did not seem to notice. She knew that he disproved of her asking such a question. However she made sure that she worded it to put the blame on her mother not her father. It would displease him if she asked him *‘tell me why you beat and mutilated our sweet beautiful mother’*. Which is what she wanted to blurt out, but she knew her father and his temper and now she knew the consequences of raising his ire. So she rephrased her question.

“Your mother tried to inform me how to treat one of my slaves. She was misguided in thinking she could tell me what to do. So you see Runa, you must learn your place now. I would be saddened to think that your mate would need to ruin your flawless flesh like your mother made me do to her.”

Made me do to her? Runa wanted to shout at him. He

chose to do this to her, not her mother, but she didn't want to be the one stretched between the ropes with her back opened up like a butchered animal. She steeled all her courage. "Of course father, I understand." Her voice shook but he either didn't care or didn't hear. He gave her a smile of approval before turning and walking away still clutching the whip in his hands. Runa waited until he left the chamber before she turned to Erlend, "What did mother tell father to do with the slave?" Erlend would not strike her for talking so boldly to him, she was sure of it.

"Some things you do not need to know Runa." He said quietly without looking at her.

"Erlend, is our mother so terrible?" She saw him clench his jaw at her words.

His eyes settled on hers before she turned her gaze. He thought about not telling her, but then again, did not telling her protect her? No it wouldn't. He took a deep breath and released it while she waited. She stood with her head bowed. He spoke in a low serious tone, "He raped a slave no older than you, our mother tried to prevent it. In his rage he killed the girl and you just witnessed what he did with our mother." Her eyes shot up to meet his and he watched the horror fill her eyes before the tears started to fall, "Runa, you must never disobey him. Do you understand? I can only protect you for so long before our father sees this. And when he does, he will not touch me, he will go after you. So now you understand the ways of our people fully. Do not provoke him or any other Esbiorn man."

"Like you?" His eyes clouded over with anger as he reached down and grabbed her elbow causing her to flinch although he did not apply pressure to cause her to do so. Men

did not touch women in public except to discipline them. Ignoring her reaction, he pulled her from the throne room into a vacant hall and pushed her back against the wall to make her face him. Then, he quickly glanced down both sides of the hall before he leaned toward her. If she could have backed through the stone she would have from his piercing gaze. However, when he spoke he'd meant to sooth her and it was in that moment she realized his anger wasn't directed at her. For some reason she had thought that Erlend was going to beat her for her insolence when instead, he only wanted privacy so he could explain himself.

He pointed a determined finger in her direction, "Do not fear me Runa. Don't *ever* fear me." When she relaxed a little he spoke in the same low voice that registered impeccable control beyond his years. "I will never lay a hand on you or our sister Asta. I would just as quick kill anyone who did." His expression was very serious, "Now listen carefully Runa because for your safety I will never repeat this. So you must not forget my words."

She nodded slowly

"I do not feel the same way toward women as our father does. Do not mistake my indifference toward our mother's situation as agreement for what he has done to her. If it were in my power I would have stopped him, she knows this and was brave for both of us. You need to understand what happened here today so it will not happen to you and you must pass this on to Asta. I do not think I could keep quiet if it was you or her up there and I struggle to think what the consequences would be if I acted against our father. There is more at stake than me to give my life for one woman. There will come a time when I will be the lord of this land and changes will come in its wake. You must

stay strong until then.”

She was looking down at her feet. His words were shocking to say the least. Erlend was an Esbiorn male. They were expected to follow in their father’s footsteps, yet what he just admitted was treason.

“Runa?”

“Aye, Erlend I have heard every word.” She said softly. Her brother had never explained himself to her before. She always thought of him as her father’s son. She also knew that aging changes everything and when her father willed control over people it was granted. Would Erlend always remain true to them or would he finally see some truth in their father’s harsh laws? Regardless, she would cherish the words that he spoke because it had been the first time since she could remember that he talked of caring about any of them. She realized in the throne room during that horrific display that he cared for their mother, but she wouldn’t have seen it in his eyes if she hadn’t stared at him, because he seemed so unmoved by their father’s actions.

Erlend stood straight and stared down at his beautiful sister. He had meant every word. He loved both of his sisters, but Runa had a strength in her that was rare in Esbiorn women. She was intelligent beyond her years also. She had to know some truths to keep her safe. With his warning, he hoped that she would be hiding her strengths from her father now so he did not see them. If he did, he would break her. Erlend knew more of his father’s cruelty than their own mother could even fathom. He had witnessed untold horrors of what he was capable of and had learned to hide his emotions at an early age. His sisters’ words interrupted his thoughts.

"You must be careful too Erlend." She slowly brought her sapphire gaze up to meet her brother's in a rare gesture of forwardness.

"Why do you say that?"

"You let your grief show when father was whipping mother. It was only for an instant, but I saw it, so father could see it if he looked your way. Until then, it seemed like it did not matter that her back was split open."

He saw the concern on her face and actually smiled down at her. He was right, she was intelligent. He would heed her advice and take precaution. "Aye I hear you Runa. Now go to your lessons, before he wishes you to witness another."

She nodded, turned and ran down the hall to disappear around the corner without hesitation.

Satisfied that she was gone, he turned on his heel and headed back to the room where the stone floor was still wet with his mother's blood. Why their father insisted Runa see such a display infuriated him. She was pure, and selfless. It wasn't a necessity. But he knew his father and knew that his reasons for doing so was because she was her mother's daughter. He was concerned that Runa would be defiant like their mother. That is why he told her the things he did after she compared him with their father. He was hoping that she would remember his words in the future, so she would not be subjected to the same torture. He inwardly cringed at the image of them being under their father's whip, and made a silent vow to both of his sisters, that he would die first.

CHAPTER TWO

Six years later

Runa glanced around the confines of the large tent that she had found herself in. Not knowing how much time had passed and how long she'd been unconscious, she began to panic. Crawling out from under the warmth of the warrior's pallet she stood in the cool air of the tent. More time passed and she began to relax a bit realizing that warriors weren't going to rush in the tent and attack her and with them, one warrior that made her blood turn ice-cold. The one she gave herself to.

Anguish knotted in her gut at what she had done, and she absently folded her arms over her abdomen while she trembled. Her life as an Esbiorn female was over.

More time passed, and she began to shiver from the cold, but didn't not want to get back in the fur pallet, his pallet. Also, she was only wearing her undergarment. Glancing around the tent, there was no sign of her gown. She took a deep breath, and actually found it within her to calm herself a slightly and try to piece together the events before she had passed out. It still wasn't far from the terror that she'd experienced earlier, but it did give her a little reprieve. Shivering still, because her clothing was still damp from the force of the rain, she shifted her gaze to the inviting furs. She shook her head ignoring the urge to crawl back in them and instead focused on the events that brought her to her fate.

Prior to being exposed to the torrent of rain, she was sound asleep, warm and dry in her covered cart with her sister and her mother. She released a sob. Where were they? What

did he do to them?

Suddenly she heard sounds outside the tent, and knew that there were several of those big warriors guarding the entrance. They were the biggest ferocious men she'd ever seen. Even in the dark of the night through the force of the rain, she caught a glimpse of their tremendous height. It was shocking to her because her people were quite small in stature except with a few males being known for such height, like her brother Erlend, but certainly not near as lofty and broad as these men.

There was only one race on their world known for such unequalled stature; these were Gierrer warriors, pronounced *Gyar*. Their brute strength and size was well known with her people. The Esbiorn would tell their children that if they did not behave the Gierrer would come for them and it was usually effective because of the stories passed around over their brutality. Their lands bordered hers and war had waged between them in the past. She had never seen a Gierrer warrior in her life. She was quite sheltered as a high born Esbiorn woman, and was not allow venturing outside of Anthor Castile in all of her years until about a week ago. However, she had heard the stories and as far as she was concerned they did not do these men justice. They were more terrifying and bigger than she could ever have imagined. She openly shuddered.

Her people were small but swift and devious in their tactics which offset the size and strength of the Gierrer. However a long time had passed before war had broken out between their lands, with exception of small skirmishes. This probably had something to do with both of them being preoccupied with the Mohrs to the west. She had only known through talk of the males, because women were not to be allowed involvement in

politics, that the Mohrs were allying themselves with the desert people, the Zilns, to the south of Gierrer. Her father, the King of Esbiorn, had decided to make his own alliance with them and betroth her to the Heir of Ziln which they accepted. That was where she was headed when they were attacked by the Gierrer. Unfortunately there was no other way to the Ziln lands without passing through Gierrer and they had been discovered. They could have risked travelling through the Mohr's lands, but it would have taken much longer, and her father wanted the union to happen as soon as possible. She was thankful when he allowed her sister Asta, and her mother to accompany her, because she was never allowed outside of their castle walls before in her whole life and she was terrified at the prospect of journeying to unfamiliar lands alone.

Footsteps outside the tent caught her attention and deep masculine voices grew louder as they neared it. The rain had long since stopped since she had woken and the rushing calm that followed all rainstorms created the ominous echoing of every slight sound. She looked around for a place to hide, but found none. There was the large pallet of fine furs that she had leapt out of earlier, several stools, a chest and nothing else. No weapons of any sort, not that she knew how to use them, or would even try. At the foot of the pallet, a large torch burned in a carved stone bowl on a pedestal providing a moderate amount of light. It flicked and pulsed an odd orange flame that illuminated the tent a soft glow. Voices again and she felt her panic rising. She knew that it was the warrior Lord coming to claim what was due to him. She had given her oath to save her sister and her mother and he accepted. An oath from an Esbiorn woman was her life, she could not break it regardless of the shame it would bring her.

Runa blanched in fear when the large man pulled back the flap and filled the doorway as entered the tent in full armour. She stood beside the pallet, unable to move at the ungodly sight of his true size. *By the Gods' blood, he was huge!* She knew he was tall from a quick glimpse earlier, but didn't know the thickness of him. When his men had found her it was already dark and she was dragged out into the rain before him under the meagre light of a few torches. She was too terrified to examine him further and the force of the rain blurred her eyes and kept her blinking as it assaulted her face.

She did not know their language either, she wasn't schooled in it. Unlike the men, the females of her people were schooled in other ways. So when they spoke to one another it was foreign to her.

Now her captor had entered, ducking low to clear his head from the top of the entrance. He'd already removed his helmet, holding it under his arm and she had to stifle a gasp. She was drawn to a scar that ran from his temple to his jaw, just barely missing his right eye making him look like fierce. And those eyes! They had to be the most startling. They were a piercing silver blue and his gaze was directly focused on her. She lowered her eyes immediately only after catching another glimpse of his impossible height.

Another man just slightly shorter, not to say that made him less menacing in height, followed him in. He also stared at her. The dark hair and piercing eyes were character of the Gierrer, whereas her people had golden hair and mostly blue eyes. She only knew this because they had Gierrer women slaves.

The warrior said something in his language bringing her

head up to the two men again. A short discussion ensued before she saw him nod toward her while looking at the other man who gave him an odd look before he nodded in return. He then focused his attention on her.

“My Lord wants to know how old you are woman.”

She almost breathed a sigh of relief, *this one spoke her language!* She could find some hope in that and maybe reason with them. Surprisingly, his dialect was almost perfect, with just a hint of accent. Whoever schooled him did well.

“Woman?” the man said again, impatience lacing his voice.

‘Eighteen summers!’ She blurted quickly, not wanting to test him.

“Your name?”

“Runa, from Anthor castle in Esbiorn.” She answered. Her mother’s words desperate and pleading, rang in her skull. *Stay strong Runa, stay alive...submit and stay alive. You are the daughter of the Lord of Esbiorn. They will not kill you.*

He gave her a curt nod, seemingly satisfied. She could feel the other ones gaze on her the whole time.

“You are the daughter of Edgar?’ Her response was a vigorous panicked nod.

He relayed the information to the warrior Lord without sparing her another glance. However, the warrior lord’s gaze

remained on her throughout it all and she quickly averted her eyes.

At first, she didn't know what they did with their mother. She only knew it was her and her sister Asta that were pushed toward the larger man who stood before her now. Although, he was in full armour and his helmet was covering his fierceness at the time, it was his voice that gave him away in the tent.

Submit. Her mother's words rang when she clung to her right before they were separated.

She knew he was a lord. He had that air about him. Not only that his warriors were many and fierce and obeyed every order he gave without hesitation. Her father's men weren't ready for such an attack when they escorted her mother and sister through the village. They were all dead. She was sure of it. Her mother screamed the words at her as they were torn apart, leaving her and her sister Asta to face the man who stood before her now.

Stay strong.

She grabbed her sister Asta's arm and made her kneel with her in the mud.

Submit.

Asta was terrified but did as her sister bade. She sobbed as they knelt in the mud before their captor, keeping their eyes averted. She could feel his eyes on her. He even approached her enough for his feet to fall below her gaze, but she didn't budge and she whispered the same to Asta. *"Do not look at him. He is*

Gierrer, he will kill you if you do so."

She heard him snort, but she still didn't move. His voice barked through the noise of the pouring rain and suddenly she and her sister were hauled to their feet. Asta sobbed again. Runa whispered harshly for her to remain silent. Then rough hands came up and gripped both their chins turning them up to face him. *By Gods he was tall!*

Their faces were turned side to side in unison as rain pounded the top of their heads. She was sure by the way his head alternated back and forth between the two that he was examining them both thoroughly. It would not be hard to determine that they were sisters, because their appearance was similar. They were barely a summer and a winter apart so that they looked almost like twins. A torch provided enough light for him to compare the two. How it stayed lit in such rain, she did not know, but it was more of an orange light than a yellow-amber one. The same light was in the stone bowl beside her now. It was unusual to her. She did not know that fire could be such color. The Gierrer had many ways that her people did not know about. Even though it seemed their race was more primitive because of their reliance on their warrior skills, they were advanced in many ways. She didn't know which ways they were advanced in, because she had only heard talk, but after seeing that strange fire in the stone bowl, she began to wonder if they were more intelligent than she first thought.

She reflected back to her capture while the warrior lord was examining their features. She managed to keep her gaze averted through his perusal. Thinking about it now, she remembered that his grip was steady, firm, and not the least bit uncomfortable. His hand was calloused, but warm on her cold

wet skin. This made her think that he didn't intend to hurt her or her sister, but merely look at them in the light of odd orange flame. Then her hopes were shattered. Just as suddenly as he grabbed the both of them, he let go and barked another order to which Asta was being pulled away from her. Asta screamed in terror and Runa's heart split in pain over the fate of her sister as she desperately tried to grab for her but the hands that held her were strong. She lost her composure and pleaded with him to release her sister and she would go willingly in her stead. He kept walking away seeming not to hear her pleas. She screamed at him through the thunderous noise of the pouring rain, beseeching in her language, hoping that he understood. She continued to plead watching his broad receding back as sobs drowned out her words. Then as she felt all hope was lost she saw him stop through the blurry blanket of rain. He did not turn around. It was as if he was weighing her words carefully. He must have said something because one of his men approached him, but she could not hear them speak through the tumult of the downpour. It was agonizing and she was shaking all over from the cold and the terror. Now, she thought that maybe he was asking his man what she had said, because he used the other man in the tent as an interpreter. After an agonizing moment he slowly turned around. Again he spoke abruptly and his men stopped separating her and Asta. Runa grabbed her sister and held her tightly to her.

The warrior lord walked back to her to her, still hidden by his silver helmet, and ignoring her sister, he gripped her chin again to bring her gaze to his while saying something else and one of his men came forward.

"My Lord wishes an oath from you that what you said is so." The other man said.

She blurted without hesitation, “I swear on my father’s house and as an Esbiorn woman!” *To save Asta from these men.* “I am yours to do whatever you wish!” She sobbed.

Asta cried out, “No Runa!”

The silence was laced with gut wrenching suspension as he studied her, and if she didn’t know better she would have thought he was smiling beneath his helmet. He continued to stare at her for what seemed like an eternity. *He was deciding, she thought, if he would accept her oath of loyalty.* Finally, to break the tension, another armour clad man came up at that time. He did not wear a helmet, but she still refused to look at him. Being forced to look at this one was bad enough, and at least she could not see him looking back at her. There was a conversation between the two, but it sounded from the tone that they were almost arguing.

“I will not fight you, I would not resist. I am yours in body and soul.” She added softly hoping to push the decision in her direction. “Please My Lord.”

At those words she felt him suddenly still. The other man groaned at her words and turned away ceasing the argument. Then he released her while turning and speaking abrupt and loud, causing loud cheers from the other warriors. He continued to speak to his men and to ultimate relief her mother was brought forward and Asta was pushed toward her. It was then she realized that he took her oath. She began to weep; her mother and her sister would be safe.

“What did you do?” her mother shouted through the rain.

“Keep Asta safe!” she sobbed.

“Runa!” cried her mother, as she was suddenly grabbed about the waist and set in front of the warrior lord on his grey war horse. It snorted at the inconvenience and reared up causing her to fall further into his lap. He gripped her tightly enough to make her wince as he easily brought his horse under control. She felt such overwhelming anguish and despair she finally succumbed to it and fainted. She awoke sometime later on a large bed covered with furs.

When she first woke up, she suspected from the size of the tent and furnishings that she was in her captor's tent. Feeling light with clothing, she lifted the furs and gasped noticing her state of undress. She wore only the mere thin undergarment, a *dray*, that upper class women owned to keep the over-clothes from chafing their delicate skin. It was still damp from the rain so she couldn't have been out for long. Despite the chill of the night air, she jumped out of the bed and looked around. It did bring her back to the question. Who undressed her? There were no women in the raiding party, and she doubted very much that Gierrer brings women with them when they did go raiding. That didn't leave her much doubt. The thought of her dampness cause her to recall that the warriors stood in the rain, half without helmets seemingly not to notice or feel the torrent of the downpour, while even now she shivered. It gave her an idea of their discipline.

Her thoughts were pulled back to the present when the man turned and said something to the warrior lord in his language. She could only conclude that it was the larger of the two that had undressed her and left her in such a state. From the

possessive way he looked at her, she knew it was him that she had sworn an oath to in the rain. She flushed clear to her toes as the image of him removing her clothes while she was unconscious. Would he have taken liberties with her then? She shivered thinking that he very well could have and there was nothing she could have done then or now, to prevent it. She knew nothing of the Gierrer traditions and shuddered again wondering if she would be passed around after he used her. It was what her father would do to his slaves. Runa tried not to succumb to the numbness in her legs and head that her terror caused. She would have to do her best to please him so he would not release her to his men. She knew it would not be easy, for she had never been with a man before, but had been taught well for the task. This brought her back to her state of undress. She could have hopped back into the furs when they came in, or stayed where she was. She decided to stay where she was unsure of the strength of her legs. Without realizing it yet, she had made a wrong decision.

If she wasn't in such haste to get out of his bed; she would have removed one of the thick furs and covered her revealing image, especially when the taller warrior began to look her over with obvious interest in his sharp gaze, pausing every now and then on the generous curves of her feminine body. She was already flushed from her earlier thoughts, but he didn't help any. Her chills were momentarily forgotten in the heated scrutiny. It seemed like an eternity before he lifted his gaze back to her face and she instantly averted her eyes. Yet, she could still feel the heat of his gaze on her face. He sighed and turned away from her to his man and there was an exchange of words again before the other man turned back to her.

“You are an Esbiorn woman.” Said the other man.

It wasn't a question, "Aye." She responded trying not to tremble.

"We know of your oath and what it means. My lord will expect that you to submit and obey him without hesitation.'

She nodded quickly not protesting. She saw him shift his stance and sigh almost in what she thought was disappointment over her response which bewildered her. Did he expect the opposite?

"Woman, do not disappoint my King for taking your oath."

Her head shot up and she stared at both of them in surprise. Then her eyes searched out the taller of the two. King? She searched his expression to which he actually grinned. It was a handsome arrogant grin and it took her totally by surprise, because it was almost as if his menacing demeanour faded with it. However, she could now see the distinctness that set him aside from the rest of the men and even though she thought he was a warrior lord, she did not realize that he was King of the Gierrer. She suddenly had to steady herself realizing that she just gave her self to the Gierrer King, her father's fiercest enemy! She quickly averted her gaze as the other man left the tent after another brief exchange of words.

Runa started to tremble. Did he mean to rape her? Quickly she corrected her thoughts. If he took her it wouldn't have been rape. He now had that right. Although, she was untried and despite being schooled in certain ways, she was terrified of the act. Not only that, the man was a giant compared

to her. Her head was barely level with his chest. How could he possibly fit within her? Most certainly he would crush her if he didn't end up killing her with the act. She was terrified to meet his gaze again as he walked over to one of the stools and sat. The stool protested by giving a series of woody groans but held. She could feel his eyes were still on her. What did she get herself into? Regardless of what she did, she could not take back the promise that she made to him and it was to save her sister.

She kept her gaze lowered until he cleared his throat. She glanced up at him and he indicated to his armour by tapping several long fingers on his chest plate.

She stifled a gasp...he wanted her to undress him! Of course. She would have to, it was her duty now. She was his. It was her responsibility as his slave. She stepped forward hesitantly at first and catching that hard stare, she knew she'd better hurry; he was impatient and by the way he leaned forward with one of his thick arms on his thigh to frown at her, weary.

His armour wasn't much different from her people with the exception of very light chain mail that surprised her how easily she could strip him of it. He leaned forward when necessary and back when needed, knowing exactly when she was to remove something else. She should have known, she could feel his eyes on her the whole time. Her hands fumbled somewhat with the belts that held his chest plate from the fear that she felt and tried desperately to control the trembling of her fingers. She chastised herself and did her best to steady them. At one point she leaned in front of him to unbuckle a strap on his other shoulder and nearly slipped and fell into his lap. It was his steady hand that pressed on her abdomen that stopped her. It was much akin to leaning against a boulder, with the exception of

if being undeniably warm. Even through her damp dray she could feel the heat of his hand. It stirred an odd sensation in her. She glanced down and found his eyes on hers. Blushing again, she quickly righted herself and turned and finished her task trying to ignore those eyes. Later she would realize that his eyes were always on hers and it wasn't just by chance that he was looking at her when she snuck peeks at him.

She wasn't prepared for the body she'd uncovered. It may have been covered in old scars, but that wasn't what surprised her. The mass of corded muscles that covered his bones was startling indeed. From his immense chest to his thick biceps and flat hard rippled stomach. He stood then and groaned stretching out his back while leaving his eyes resting on the top of her head. When he was done, he reached down and tilted her head up to meet his gaze. She tried to avert it, but he gave her head a very small gentle tip as if he disapproved, so she met his gaze and held it as he wished. He did wish it. It didn't bother him at all for her to meet his gaze, because the frown he first held dissolved and his face was now impassive. He tilted her face from side to side again, the whole time she kept her gaze firm on his. She saw a small smile start at the corner of his mouth then disappear. He then released her and looked down her body. She blushed again. Noticing her cheeks flush, he shook his head and turned away to her relief. Did he do that for her benefit? If she wasn't raised the way she was, she might have considered it longer, but she wasn't and a man could look at his woman for as long and hard as he wanted.

Her eyes followed his back as he walked over to his fur pallet, removed his leather skins that covered his bottom half to which she stifled a gasp and turned her head away, while he pulled back the heavy furs and crawled in. She had only gotten a

glimpse, but he was magnificent all over. His legs were thick with muscles and she blushed at the quick view of his bottom. It was firm, round, thickly muscled, and affected her strangely to see it. She had never seen a naked man before. Yes, women such as her were taught skills on how to please men, but that was their way, there were no males present, only skilled teaching females to describe the male form. However, she certainly did not remember a lesson on how bewitching such a masculine form could be.

Then she realized that she could feel his steel-blue gaze was on her again

“Runa” he spoke softly and she started, looking up at him.

He swung the furs on the other side of the pallet back, an indication for her to get in next to him. Again she involuntarily trembled. She had to obey him. She had given herself to this warrior. She took a hesitant step, then another.

He sighed in frustration and repeated her name in a way that reflected his impatient mood, to which she found her courage and dashed to the other side of the pallet, although the evening chill might have encouraged her a bit. He flipped the furs back over her and she shivered again. She wished she could have contained it because he obviously thought she was cold and reached over to effortlessly pull her soft form against his hard body. She did not remove her damp dray and thankfully he did not ask her to for it was still not enough to shield her from the feel of his warm body. Though, after a moment she felt as if she wore nothing. The hardness of his body could be felt as though she was naked. It was like sleeping next to stone. Warm, solid, stone.

She gasped and he actually chuckled at her reaction as he threaded his large arm between her breasts pulling her tight, resting his hand near her face and his chin on top of her head. She could smell leather mixed in with his own distinct masculine odour. It was surprisingly pleasant. She might have relaxed a bit if she wasn't so horrified at his closeness. She dreaded what would happen next, but he didn't move, and within a moment he was breathing deeply. He had fallen asleep!

A moment or two went by before she released a breath not even realizing that she held it. He actually didn't want her? She had given herself to him and he didn't take her like she dreaded. Of course she was relieved, but part of her couldn't help but wonder why. Was she not appealing to him?

She had seen Gierrer women and knew how beautiful they were with their dark hair and grey or brown eyes. Of course she was nothing like that and her body wasn't anything special. Gierrer women were shapely and voluptuous. Maybe she really didn't appeal to him. Although, what man, especially a man like him, would refuse such an offer? Especially since he took her oath. Esbiorn men just took what they wanted and didn't hesitate and that is what she was used to with her race. Yet this man didn't take advantage of something that was clearly offered to him. If she thought she knew men, she was completely wrong, because this man just countered what she was raised to believe.

As time went by with him breathing deep beside her, she began to let go of the terror that filled her earlier. The whole act of him taking her flashed violent images in her mind. Now, she could only think that maybe she had misjudged him. His arm flinched once and she remembered where it lay between her

breasts. It was almost possessive the way he held her against his solid form.

She didn't realize how tense she was until her muscles started aching when she relaxed against him. Her shivering had stopped also. There was an advantage of being against this large warm body. It wasn't too long after that the comfort affected her along with her exhaustion and she fell asleep.

The next morning she awoke to warm fingers tracing the contours of her mouth. Her eyes popped open, dilated and centered on his. His head was propped up on his other hand as he watched his fingers trace along her lips. They were rough, calloused, but gentle which surprised her. Then he lifted his eyes to hers and her breath froze in her throat.

The light of the day streamed through the thin membrane of the tent illuminating the interior and gave her a much better view than the night before. He wasn't just handsome, he was incredibly alluring, especially with the power that she knew he had within that large frame of his, yet he touched her with the gentleness of a child.

The men of her people were warriors too, but this man summed it up. None of her people looked like him, were large like him, or even capable of the gentleness he was now showing her. Although he was still menacing, powerful and—oh he smelled of leather and something else she could quite capture, but it did amazing things to her senses. Nonetheless, it was those eyes of his that held her captive now. He may have been fierce and terrifying the night before, but there was something in those eyes—her gaze dropped to his mouth unable to keep contact with his and she noticed one corner twitching as if he was resisting a

smile. Then he sighed and rolled away from her.

A cold draft hit her body as he flipped back the furs, got up, and pulled on his leathers. Again she caught a glimpse of his magnificent backside and felt her face heat up in shame of seeing a man in such a way. He stretched again, which just defined the thick corded muscles present in his back before he made his way to his chest and removed a tunic and cloak of warm scarlet and gold. As he was putting them on, she heard a ruffling noise that alerted to the tent flaps being pulled back. Glimpsing two men entering the tent unannounced she ducked her head under the furs. She heard something heavy get set on the ground. There was a brief exchange of words and she heard the flap of the tent open and fall back as someone was leaving. She chanced another look and saw the same familiar man from last night that entered the tent with her captor. He was looking at her as the other was pinning his cloak with a large jewel encrusted clasp, which she couldn't help but noticed made him look very regal. The scarlet and gold were in complete contrast to his ebony hair and made his silver-blue eyes look more silver.

"My Lord has instructed you to get dressed. We have just brought your chest. Make haste Lady, for we have a lot of ground to cover before nightfall. There is a warm basin of water and several clean cloths there" He pointed to the other stool.

She nodded and he turned and left. She wanted to thank him for bringing her something clean to wear, but she just couldn't find the words.

Her captor just stood there staring at her with his piercing eyes while buckling a leather sword belt around his waist. She lowered her head again.

“Runa.”

The sound of his deep voice went through her like a wave. She uncovered her face and forced herself to look at him, not directly at his eyes like earlier, but in his general direction. He sheathed his large sword with the resounding sound of metal on leather and casually made a gesture with two fingers of his hand for her to get up.

She paled. He wanted her to get dressed with him there! Again not wanting to test the fierce warrior’s patience, she quickly obeyed and jumped out from under the covers while he took a seat on a stool to observe her. Again, she started to tremble but knew she must obey him. She went to the basin and found it refreshing that he had made the allowance of warm water. She quickly washed her face, neck and hands, before turning to kneel in front of her chest. If he wished to see her naked, she must do it. The traditions she was raised by drove her to do what he wished.

When she promised herself to someone, she must obey him without hesitation. If an Esbiorn woman hesitated it gave her husband reason to beat her. She had seen it many times.

She opened the heavy lid and pulled out a soft blue gown and a fresh dray. She thought about turning away from him and showing her back, but she could not. She had offered herself to this man as a slave and must do his bidding. Just then she heard the unmistakable creak of the stool as he released it of his tremendous weight. Without turning to him, she heard him walked toward her. She saw his booted feet stop next to her legs and she froze. Would he beat her? Was she taking too long? *By*

the Gods, help me, she silently prayed hearing her heart thump in her chest. She couldn't move, even to look up at him knowing was just standing there looking down at her. If he struck her even once, his sheer size and strength told her that it would kill her.

Then, felt his strong hand on her arm as he guided her to her feet. Once more, he tilted her face up to him. She saw the frustration in his eyes and knew that whatever she was doing didn't please him. His hand released her chin and as soon as she averted her gaze he made an impatient sound of exasperation and turned her face back to his to see his brows knit together. Now she knew what he wanted, but it was difficult to fight her habits. He *wanted* her to meet his gaze. She nodded slowly that she would do as he asked. Regardless of the scar on his face, there was no mistaking the strength and handsomeness of his features there. He had a strong square jaw and by the look of him, she was sure the muscles there bulged more than once in apparent frustration as they did now with her. His eyes were framed by thick black lashes and hooded by thick brows of the same color, which were now raised while he scrutinized her in the light of his tent. His masculine lips pulled into a satisfactory grin that showed straight white teeth and it dawned on her that he knew she examined him also. She felt heat enter her cheeks at being so bold, and being caught.

Confident that she would now listen, he released her chin as his hand fingered one of her long thick golden braids. It only took a moment for him to undo the tie and braid to let her hair hang loosely over her shoulder and chest. He repeated the gesture with the other braid. When his fingers brushed her hair she felt a tingling in their wake. Was that fear? *No it wasn't*, she surmised. She had been afraid many times under her father's

rule, and now with this man and her unknown future, but this feeling was different. She knew it had to do with him and because she had never been touched by a man before so the feeling was unfamiliar to her. Even her brother did not ever touch her except for that one incident in the throne room. In any case, this was different....and pleasant.

Approval entered his expression as he lifted a few locks in his fingers, feeling the soft texture. Runa kept her face tilted up to his, like he requested, although it felt so wrong. She was doing her best not to weep when he took such liberties with her and insisted silently to herself that this was his right. He kept his eyes on her when he lifted several strands he was caressing to his nose and inhaled deeply while smiling.

When his large hands went to the material on her shoulders she lost her courage and finally flinched. She had tried to prevent it but couldn't. Inwardly she chastised herself. She was his slave, and he may do what he will, she tried to square her shoulders and not do that again. He actually paused bringing his steely gaze to hers and lifted one eyebrow reminding her of her oath. She took a deep breath nodded slightly that she would obey forcing herself to remain still. His eyes stared at her for another moment almost unnerving the courage she brought forth, before he continued slowly pulling the garment off her shoulders so the material pooled at her feet.

Now naked, she resisted against shrinking from him again. Then, he stood back and looked down the length of her and she shivered as those eyes again paused on certain parts of her body. A striking smile lit his features showing her that he was pleased with what he saw. The only relief she could find in this was that her thick golden hair managed to conceal most of her

breasts from him, but that did not last. He stepped up to her and in a swift but gentle motion, brushed her long golden hair back over her shoulders, letting it cascade softly past her waist to her bottom, before stepping back again to rake his heated gaze down her body. She wanted to instinctively cover herself, but knew the large warrior would be displeased, so she restrained from doing it and fisted her hands at her sides.

She was trembling from his scrutiny and his nearness as he stepped up and looked down at her with definite approval. Before she knew it, he cupped her face in his large hands, lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. She wasn't sure on how to react to the unknown feeling it gave her. One thing was for sure, she could no longer feel the coolness of the air around her as a warm heat entered her every being. He held her head gently and coaxed her mouth open with his thumbs on her jaw. Now, her nakedness was completely forgotten in the heat of his lips on hers. When his tongue probed for entrance she groaned against his mouth. When she parted her lips to allow him access, he captured her mouth fully. His hands held her head tightly as his tongue caressed hers, pulling her against him. She felt a need build within her that set fire to her limbs and when she thought she would burst into flame he pulled away from her causing her to cry out. He stared down at her for a long moment while her whole body flushed at her behaviour. Now he was no longer smiling, his gaze was not filled with approval or satisfaction. It was smouldering. She found her own hands bracing herself against his chest not missing the hardness of the muscles beneath his tunic and try not to give in to the sudden weakness in her knees. His hand caressed the line of her spine and gently brushed her bottom.

Maybe it was the fact that she openly shivered under his

gaze or the small gasp of embarrassment that she released when he caressed her, that caused him to step back, pick up her clean dray and slide it over her head. Yet, the desire in his eyes remained. It made her think that tonight she would not be so fortunate to avoid being taken in his bed. He handed her the gown and went to his trunk to pull out another cloak with the same scarlet and gold colors, but a different pattern. When she finished dressing, he wrapped the cloak around her shoulders. She was thankful; it seemed to keep out the chill and it was huge. He practically had to wrap it around her twice before clasping the ends together. Again there was that odd sensation when his hands brushed over her body as he did this. Not only that, the memory of his lips still branded her mind. For the first time, she realized that he was being gentle just like in the rain when he held her chin. It caught her off guard because she expected him to be more forceful like his appearance reflected and like her traditions warranted men to be. In fact, everything this man had shown her had been gentle and non-threatening except for the night before in the rain. Yet, was he brutal with her then? The answer was no, he wasn't. She kept waiting for the dam to break, but it didn't happen. Though she had only known him a few short hours, she was somehow a little relieved at this knowledge.

He waited as she put on her shoes and he spoke to the men outside the flap of the tent. When she was done, he took hold of her upper arm gently and led her out to the light of the day. Several men went in as soon as they left. They must be packing up his things.

Suddenly she stopped. The scene before her was astonishing. There must have been at least a hundred warriors, all big, and all fully armoured, except for her captor. The sight was overwhelming. She had never seen such height and mass in

men.

Chapter Three

Bothvar turned and looked at her. She stood with her mouth agape at his men. Intimidating must have been an understatement. He felt her tremble again and did not miss the slight quiver of her beautiful bottom lip. He knew women from her race were sheltered and she may never have seen an army of Gierrer warriors before. That was unfortunate. He didn't want to frighten her anymore than she already was. Fact is, he would have taken her last night if she wasn't so terrified of him, but his better judgement stopped him, so instead he had a restless sleep while his loins burned unforgivably for the soft voluptuous body pressed to his. He smoothed and deepened his breaths making her think he was asleep, so she relaxed and drifted off soon after. She smelled like wildflowers and the dampness in her hair just made that scent stronger. When he dipped his face into her golden tresses and inhaled deeply, he groaned. The night was not easy. Despite her terror now at seeing his men and her fear of him, she chose to step closer to him. This pleased him.

He knew when he first saw her kneeling in the mud and the rain that she was what they were looking for. It wasn't until he had her stand up to face him that he was taken back. Even in the dim light of the torches his men carried, did he ever see such beauty. From her full parted rosy lips, to wide sapphire innocent eyes, he was captivated. He turned his head to her sister and noticed the same features, but not as well developed yet. Back to her, and her flawless pale complexion, which was framed within a heart shaped face. It was obvious who the older one was though they did not look far apart in age.

“Take this one, she is the eldest!” He told his men while turning away from the two, “Send the other home safe with her mother and what remains of their escort.” Bothvar didn’t kill them all. It was a pathetic fight. Who would send a woman of royal blood through his lands with an escort of twenty men? He would have sent at least a hundred. For his sister, he would have sent two hundred and Gierrer warriors could kill an average of ten men apiece on a good day. He turned away.

Then her voice pierced the rain pleading with him when he separated her sister from her. At first he ignored her. She would be under his protection and the protection of his men until he discovered by what treachery that she was on his lands. Then she uttered that fateful oath and something within him awoke. *I am yours to do whatever you wish!* He paused surprised at her words. She was offering herself to him? Did she have any idea what that meant? Even as he thought the words, the iron fist around his warrior’s heart loosened. He was thankful for the thunderous downpour for it hid the crack in his voice.

“Ralf, “He turned to one of his men, “ask her if she means what she says.”

“My Lord, you don’t wish her to know you speak her language?”

“No, not yet...she is Esbiorn. I can’t trust her until I know more about her.”

“Aye, My Lord,” Ralf understood. He turned to the woman and asked her if what she said was true.

She swore it was.

Against his better judgment, he slowly turned around. If he had half a brain he would leave with the intentions that he originally snatched her for. However her words seemed to exhibit some hold on him and lured him back to her making it almost impossible to resist. It was like he was no longer in control of his legs. "Hold Brim!" He yelled to the man pulling the sister away. She thought he was taking her sister, but in reality, it was her he was keeping. But the oath she gave, he knew of it and knew what it meant for her to say it. He gripped her chin again to make him look at him again. It would help him make his decision. She resisted but he held her firmly. God's teeth, even in darkness, the rain, and the small advantage of the torch his man held, she was unbelievably beautiful. He knew he had an unfair advantage for he still wore his helmet and could not see his face and the smile that splayed over his masculine lips. The rain had soaked her hair and through her clothing making it cling seductively to every ungodly beautiful curve and as he tilted her face up to his the drops bounced off her flawless creamy skin. He knew that if he accepted her oath he would be bound to her as much as she would be to him. However, she did not know this. He knew that the men of her people took many women, including slaves to their beds. She thought she was giving herself to him as a slave, sacrificing her virtue to save her sister. It was beyond admirable. An Esbiorn woman's virtue was their life. If she had lost it to anyone besides the man chosen for her, she would be ruined, but she was willing to do this unselfish act knowing the risks for her younger sister. She would not be accepted back by her people as a high-born woman, but a common slave regardless of her birthright. He had only intended to capture her and keep her in his fortress for a bargaining piece. Now she had changed that and something within him wanted to accept her oath...badly.

Grunewald came up at that moment overhearing the words she spoke, “Bothvar, are you considering....?”

“Look at her Grunewald. She was created in the image of a Goddess. A man would have to be mad not to accept such an oath. Our women do not hold such beauty.”

Grunewald stared at her for a moment. Bothvar was right, but, “By the Gods man, do you know what you are doing? You do not know her.”

“Aye, but she is also selfless, besides beautiful. Who would resist such a prize? I think that is enough.”

“But she is *Esbiorn*.” Grunewald stared at her again. He had heard her begging to exchange her sister for her. Like Bothvar, he did not miss the genuineness in her words. Grunewald turned and looked at her sister, who in the rain, you would not be able to tell was sobbing if it were not for her red swollen eyes and her parted full lips. Looking at the both of them proved that Esbiorn women were beautiful. He had seen a few women from that land but these two were more beautiful than anything he had ever set eyes on. The youthful vulnerability of the younger sister made her equally as striking as her sister. Although they looked very similar, it was the fact that one instructed the other that distinguished older from the other almost immediately when they were set before them. It was with that and after close scrutiny that you could now see the differences between them. She kept her eyes on her sister, but refused to look at any one of them. It made him angry because the Esbiorn men treated their women no better than their slaves.

“That does not matter.” Bothvar stated, unconcerned.

"If the stories are true she will be fearful of you, our people and our ways. Are you prepared for this? Are you prepared to open your heart to her?" After a brief pause his brother spoke.

"Aye. It has already started, so I am." Bothvar confirmed without removing his eyes from the beauty in front of him.

Grunewald gave him a look of utter shock at his confession. He never had thought he'd see the day that one woman would cause the ancient stirring of a Gierrer warrior's heart like Bothvar's. "Then Bothvar," He inclined his head, "I support your decision with my life." Grunewald stated with profound respect; "have her if you wish it. I will not protest your choice."

"Good." He was pleased that his brother supported him.

The woman Bothvar was fixated on spoke again. Her words were pleadingly soft and loaded with such a sorrowful promise that caused Grunewald to groan and turn away. He did not blame Bothvar at all for what he said next. As it was, Grunewald had near knelt in front of *her*. She must have known they were discussing her fate from their tone, because Esbiorn woman were not taught the other languages of the realms.

"I accept her oath!" Bothvar said loud enough for those surrounding them to hear. This caused an ear-splitting roar of approval from his men causing the women to flinch. He turned away speaking abruptly, "Give her sister back to her mother, and give her to me. Mount up!" Bothvar shouted as he mounted his stallion.

She was passed up to him almost immediately and in the process ended up disturbing his horse who didn't approve of the extra weight. He had neglected to realize how hard and slippery his armour was and gripped her tight as his horse reared. He feared he hurt her when she fell limp against him. He pulled his cloak around her to shelter her from the rain and rode his horse hard for the next hour to reach his camp. Reining his horse in, he called to Grunewald to help him dismount. He didn't trust anyone else to feel what he had through the wet clothing.

Grunewald rode up beside him, dismounted and took the woman's flaccid body while Bothvar dismounted. His servant arrived at that moment and Bothvar gave him the reins to his horse.

"God's blood, Bothvar. What did you do to her? You managed to kill her with fright already and she has not even seen the rest of you." He grinned.

"Do not jest Grunewald, and give her to me, I've got to get her out of those wet clothes before she ails. She is mine now, and I do not wish to lose her soon, or at all."

"She weighs no more than a small child." He passed her back to Bothvar.

"Aye, but there is no mistake that she is all woman." He grinned before turning and entering his tent to Grunewald's laughter at his back.

Laying her down on his pallet, he knelt on one knee beside her and removed her gown, but left her damp

undergarment on, because he did not trust himself not to touch her more than he needed to. Even though she was his, to take advantage of her while she was out cold was barbarian. Even if she did present such a tempting morsel; the damp cloth clung beautifully to flesh and he could easily make out the detail of her full breasts, tiny waist and voluptuous hips. His hand lingered longer than it should have. He allowed his fingers to trail down her delicate jaw, slender neck, over her glorious chest and halt on her flat stomach. He lifted her for a moment and her head lolled toward him and her full lips parted while he pulled back the furs. Her sweet breath wafted against his neck. Sweet God, she was tempting! Before he changed his mind and acted on the lustful thoughts he slid her easily under the thick soft furs. He didn't lie when he spoke to Grunewald. She was definitely a woman, not a child. He was thankful it was dim in his tent; he'd seen enough of her tonight to rouse his desires for a fortnight.

He did not expect her to be awake and standing half naked when he re-entered several hours later with Grunewald. Wild fear registered in her eyes. Yet she stood strong and remained unmoved without noticing that her fingers entwined in her dray nervously causing the material to climb up her creamy perfect legs almost to the knees. It was fortunate for him, because with the way her dray clung to her, it barely left anything to the imagination. However, it also caused a stirring in his loins.

"By the Gods, save me." He murmured while guiding his eyes over her achingly.

Grunewald averted his gaze in respect and turned his attention on Bothvar, but not before he had seen what Bothvar commented on. "You are in trouble already. She is beyond naïve on how she presents herself."

“Ask her how old she is and her name.” Bothvar said watching her and ignoring his brother’s words. He already knew that he would start slaying his men if they so much as looked at her with a fraction of what he was feeling and if she didn’t know how to present herself in front of them, he would be doing just that.

“You are going to keep up this pretence? She is yours now. It is not necessary.”

“Grunewald, you know as much as I do about the female Esbiorn ways, which is not that much. We cannot be sure that her oath is as strong with the Gierrer as it would be with the Esbiorn men. I will let her know in my own time.”

“Very well Bothvar.” He turned to her and asked the questions that Bothvar requested and she answered, from what he could tell, honestly. It was difficult to keep his eyes focused on her face and not follow Bothvar’s suit and study her beautiful body. However, she was not his woman, she was Bothvar’s and it would have been disrespectful, regardless of how tempting the woman was. Not only that, if Bothvar began to open his heart to the woman, he would not hesitate to beat him to a bloody pulp over her, brother or not. The change in a Gierrer is an about face when they take an oath from a woman and even though Bothvar’s steady temper was legendary only being unleashed when necessary, this woman had just changed all of that. Already he could see the possessiveness in Bothvar’s expression. So he did his best to keep his eyes off her body. Then on his own he asked her if she would basically not protest Bothvar’s requests, she quickly agreed that she would obey him. He didn’t understand how this meek little thing could possibly open

Bothvar's heart. He needed a woman with fire and passion that would challenge him in every possible way, but nevertheless, it did happen to Bothvar and maybe his brother was right, the woman had something in her. He just didn't see it.

"See Bothvar, she has no will of her own. You have your work cut out for you."

"There is wilfulness there Grunewald, I have seen a glint in her eyes," he reassured, "I just need to help her find her strengths."

"Aye, I wish you a good hunt." Grunewald obviously missed that glint, for she visibly trembled. He knew that if Bothvar were to take her tonight, she would not protest. But he knew Bothvar better than anyone. He wouldn't take her tonight to give her time to understand that Bothvar wasn't a beast and maybe adjust to her new arrangement. Although, he doubt if he could if she was his woman, her beauty was unsurpassable.

"Get some sleep." He said to Grunewald, "We will leave early for home."

"Aye." Grunewald allowed a smile, "I would say the same to you, but I do not think you will be getting any sleep tonight. Try not to scare the wits out of her." He ducked out of the tent before Bothvar acted on the fierce gaze he gave him.

Bothvar turned his attention back to the frightened beauty. She had her head bowed again. It was quite frustrating to say the least that she would not look at him especially with those revealing sapphire eyes. He sighed heavily and took a seat on the stool watching her patiently. He abruptly cleared his

throat then, because she did not move to look at him or remove his armour, which was now her duty. He usually had the young Gils do it, but there was no way he was bringing that young man in here with her clad as she was. He would only have had to thrash him after he instantly fell in love with this woman, his woman. If he did such a thing Gils mother would never give him peace.

She hesitated only momentarily until she noticed the obvious impatience cross his features, then she rushed over and did as he bade, and despite the trembling in her hands she managed very well. It surprised him actually. What astonished him more were the lustful feelings that arose when she brushed against him every now and then as removed each piece. She was so soft and warm, despite the chill in the air. It could have something to do with the flush that had not left her body since he arrived. Grunewald was right, he was not going to get any sleep tonight. His loins burned with such desire, but he would not take her tonight. He ached to, but she was so timid, he knew if he did, it might cause her to be more afraid of him. One of his hands hovered around her waist when she was busy with his chest plate belts, but he pulled back without touching and she did not notice. He knew his size terrified her, as did his features. When she near fell on his lap he stilled her with his hand and had to stifle a groan as his large hand spanned over her soft flat belly. By the Gods this would be a test of wills tonight!

When she was done, he stood and stretched the aches in his muscles while staring down at the top of her head. Once again he made her look at him. Yes, she was going to be a difficult woman to conform to their ways. Although he did see some wilfulness in her eyes, so maybe not as difficult as Grunewald thinks. He released her and walked over to his pallet,

removed his skins and crawled in. He turned to see her still standing by the stool. He became frustrated. Would she just stand there all night with a damp drape until she became ill? He knew her traditions dictated her duties now, so it was in her to please him. He spoke her name and pulled back the furs for her to get in knowing that she would not disobey. Again the wilfulness displayed itself when she resisted at first. He spoke her name with more frustration and she practically bolted to his side. He should have insisted on her removing that damp drape, but after pulling her close, and feeling her body through the thin material, he thought against it.

Then to see her in the same light of the day was too much for him to bear. Prior to that, he realized that she had been stealing looks at him, which just made him more lustful, not that he disapproved, just the opposite. Now he knew she had some curiosity towards him. It pushed him past patience to see her, all of her. He was going to try and ease her into this, but there was no way he could set aside his needs much longer. Regardless of her being frightened of him, he had to see the rest of her. She'd given an oath. He knew the Esbiorn ways. A woman's oath was her bond, she could not break it. Not only that, he had accepted her pledge. She belonged to him now. Undressing her was delicious and kissing her was unequalled to any other. Her lips were full, soft and inviting. Her body was lush and faultless. When she responded to him, he near set aside his initial oath to leave her alone. However, did she respond to him because she was raised to do so, or was it because of his kiss?

His meagre caresses and the dim light in the tent did not do her body justice the night before. In fact, he could have stood there all day and just stared at the perfection, but she was getting chilled again. Yet, he had to give her praise; she stood there like

he asked even though she did not want to despite her initial withdraw. There was no doubt that she would not resist him bedding her tonight. Not only that, he knew that she would not allow herself to resist. For her, it would be shameful after what she had promised him. They were a good fortnight from his home, and he would go mad having him next to her and not be able to touch her like he wanted to from the first moment he had laid eyes on her.

A cool wind gusted around Runa and she was very grateful for the cloak. It actually distracted her from the large warriors that stood around her, because it felt like all pairs of eyes were on her. She couldn't help the blush that crept up into her cheeks. Her new master bellowed at the men and they suddenly set to moving about packing what was left. His horse was led forward then and snorted loudly. She shrunk from it causing her to step back against him. Suddenly a strong hand came about her waist to steady her. It was then she realized that the horse did not have a saddle. Regardless, he released her and easily swung up onto the giant creature. She shuddered as he held his hand down to her. Reluctantly she took it and was effortlessly swung up behind him. Now, she understood the cloak fully. Her gown rode up her thighs but the cloak was so large it cascaded over the rump of the horse, wrapped around and concealed her bared legs. She gripped his waist fiercely and also discovered why he did not wear his armour or his horse a saddle. They would have been hard and uncomfortable riding against. Again, was this for her benefit? He spoke to the man that she had come to realize was his constant companion and no sooner did he say something when he came forward and gave her a generous piece of bread and a flask of water.

“We are in a hurry lady, you must eat and ride. We regret

this inconvenience for you.” He spared at look at Bothvar who just nodded his thanks.

She gaped at him. How she was supposed to do that with the restless stallion prancing under her knowing that she would need both hands to hold on to the massive man in front of her? More shockingly, the man apologized to her! Men do not apologize for anything. Was it a trick?

They rode most of the day, with a good ten warriors behind him. The rest were obvious to follow. Even these warriors would have been a force to reckon with. The stopped briefly several times once to eat and a few more so she was allowed some distance into a brush to relieve herself. He must have known that if she ran she had no place to go for he always stood a short distance away with his back to her and his hands clasped behind him waiting patiently. It took her the first couple of stops to realize that his posture wasn't one of a man at ease. His feet were braced firmly apart and his head was always moving side to side as if scanning the scenery for any kind of threat. Yet, he always seemed to know when she was within sight and would turn to greet her with a curt inclination of his head before taking her arm and leading her back to the men.

Dusk had blanketed the sky when they entered a large village. They came to stop in front of an inn. He lowered her to the ground as his man went through the doors and made arrangements.

A young man came forth at that time to take the reins from him. Her captor spoke sternly to him while slapping him upside the head with one of his large hands causing her to flinch and gasp. Runa didn't realize the young man's mouth was gaping

as he stared at her. Her captor's sharp voice and cuff to the side of the head from one of his thick hands diverted his attention while flushing profusely.

"Boy, that is my woman you ogle! Best turn your head before I remove it with the dull end of my sword!" Bothvar shouted at the lad who near toppled over from the impact and averted his gaze. The anger over a woman was new to him, and it was the second time he experienced it. He swore to himself, he hadn't even bedded her yet and he was threatening anyone who looked at her with death. Even more surprising was how quickly it surfaced and how hard it was to contain. Grunewald was more of a passionate man, but Bothvar was not. However, since he accepted Runa's oath, he felt an instant change in him. Urthraine had warned him many times what happens when a Gierrer opens their heart to a woman, and if this was any indication of what was to come, Grunewald was right. He was in trouble.

"My Lord, I regret my actions." He blurted quickly and took the reins trying to compose himself. He had never seen a woman so beautiful in all of his life. He bowed in respect to the King, "Please forgive me." He dared not look in her direction again. Their King was generous in many ways to his people, but his legendary fierceness was unprecedented toward those who opposed him. Now he had a woman, and it would be worse.

Bothvar snorted. Truth is, he felt sorry for the lad. He knew how hard it was not to stare at her. In fact, his men could not even help themselves when he emerged from his tent this morning with her in tow and they *knew* better than to cross him in this state. He had threatened to cut off all of their ears if they stared at her like that again and it got them moving, because he

meant it. He could hear Grunewald chuckling to himself.

"You are frightening her Bothvar." Grunewald offered approaching him.

Bothvar looked down to Runa's frightened cerulean gaze and swore again.

"My lady." Grunewald took it upon himself to explain, "Do not let our King's temper frighten you." He shot an accusatory gaze to Bothvar, "He just doesn't like to have men gape at you."

"Gape?" she said in total disbelief.

"Aye." He said as he turned and walked away.

Runa watched the man walk away before she brought her eyes back to her captor just to see him shrug while looking down at her, but not denying the other man's confession in the least. She was so stunned at what he had told her that she didn't realize that she stared at him while conflicting thoughts raced through her brain. Why would this man, a King, who could have any woman, display what was no less an act of jealousy? Men didn't do such things! Or did they? Again she didn't understand this warrior race and felt very off-balance by it.

Finally realizing she was staring at him she quickly averted her gaze only to have him draw a large hand around her and pull her against his chest while he bent down and kissed the top of her head completely shocking her, before he released her. Then he slid his hand down her arm and he took her by the hand to lead her inside the building. There were already many people

in there enjoying drink and food. The odour of fresh baked bread overwhelmed her and suddenly she became very hungry.

His men had already started filtering in as they occupied tables in the far corner. He bade her to sit with him and she pushed the chair aside to kneel on the floor beside him. The look on his face incredulous, as he stopped her from kneeling by taking her arm, and pointing to the chair showing his meaning.

She shook her head causing him to frown and raise his brows in question. She averted her gaze again. He sighed and turned her face back to him. She wasn't sure how to tell him that she couldn't possible sit at the table.

"Grunewald!" He bellowed causing her to flinch and the now familiar man to jump to his feet and trot toward him. He said something to him. There was no mistaking that his voice was thick with frustration.

The man named Grunewald looked down at her, "What is the problem woman?"

She averted her gaze, "I can't sit at that table with the men. It's forbidden." She said pointing at the chair that her captor tried to get her to sit in.

Grunewald scoffed, "forbidden! Your people *are* barbarians." He said it like he didn't doubt it before, "Where do you intend to sit then?"

"I kneel at his feet." Because her gaze was averted she missed the appalled looks that the brothers shared.

“Like a dog?” Grunewald spoke with complete disgust mixed with an expression of incredulousness.

She snapped her head up to him at his words. It incensed her to be compared with an animal. She quickly averted her gaze before he caught the look and kept her words soft, “It is our way.”

Grunewald did not miss the defiance and smiled despite the harshness of his words, “You will sit with his Lordship, daughter of Anthor, or you will go hungry.” Maybe Bothvar was right, and there was some defiance there after all.

She felt a stab of anger at that statement and her face flushed. She was famished, but she was also shamed. To sit at that table as a man was unheard of! She still wouldn’t budge or look at either man. “It is shameful.” She muttered.

“Woman. Do not provoke him.” Grunewald stated seriously wiping the smile from his face to try and look stern. By the Gods she *was* stubborn. If it were any other person, including a Gierrer warrior, they would have instantly obeyed Bothvar.

She spared a glance at the man towering above her he referred to who was now frowning with his pale eyes focused on her. It was frightening and unnerving. Inside her stomach was tossing about making her ill. Her father would have struck her by now, yet she remained rooted to the spot. What possessed her to act so boldly? Was it because she feared betraying her traditions more than she feared betraying the warrior? She ducked her head again refusing to move at his gentle tugs. Then, she heard him sigh in frustration, bend over and scoop her off her feet. She screamed and the warriors in the tavern erupted

banging their flasks on the tables cheering him on.

She was plopped none too gently in a cushioned chair making her wince and he sat beside her. She tried to get up, but he merely put his thick hand on her thigh and pushed her back down finishing the action with a firm stare when she looked at him. She flushed in such shame and frustration that she near wept. Her father would whip her for such insolence. The man named Grunewald sat on her other side, probably to prevent her from bolting if she got a chance. "You will be tied to it if you do not still yourself." He warned again.

Appalled, and knowing he spoke the truth, she stopped squirming. She could feel her new lord's frustrated steel gaze on her, but did not look at him. She diverted her shame by taking in her surroundings.

The behaviour of the people in the tavern was unlike anything she had ever seen. Several of his warriors were set upon by the tavern wenches who managed to snake onto their laps. Her jaw dropped at the groping that followed after. Men were fondling their breasts as the women leaned into them while laughing continuously at whatever they said. She glanced up through hooded lashes at her captor who paid the scene no heed. How could woman behave in such a way? It was unheard of. Public affection was not common for her people especially in such an open display of sexual play.

Runa was given her own dish as he was his. Something else she wasn't used to. Her men served their women from their own plates. Suddenly she lost her appetite. Not only was she thoroughly shamed over her actions, her thoughts kept roaming to her new lord. He would be expecting her to follow through on

her oath tonight. She glanced at the receding sun outside the tavern windows and then briefly at him. There was no mistaking the look in his eyes that he just flashed her. His hand remained on her thigh until his food was brought. She itched to push it off, but knew better and was thankful that he removed it to feed himself, leaving a cold imprint as the heat vanished from that area.

Serving wenches brought around flasks of wine to fill their cups and she immediately covered her cup with her hand.

Grunewald snorted his disgust, "So, your women are not allowed spirits either."

She spared him a glance, "No, we are. I just do not think..." A strong warm calloused hand pulled her hand off her cup so the servant could fill it. She stifled a gasp at the firm but gentle grip and turned to look at him. He just shook his head slowly while a bemused smile set on his face.

"Methinks you'd better eat too besides drink, or he will feed you. You do not need our permission to eat lady. Just do it." Grunewald spoke up while taking a large drink from his cup, "Besides, I think you may need to relax, I have never seen the likes of someone as uptight as you, man or woman."

At that warning, she eagerly took a drink from her cup and popped some food in her mouth causing him to laugh. He obviously thought that she did not eat because she was waiting for someone to feed her.

She noticed that her new master drank quite a bit of wine, but for his large size, she supposed that it would take a lot to

affect him. She kept her eyes cast down to her plate most times, while the merry making went on around her. The man named Grunewald and her new Gierrer lord frequently talked with one another. She was disappointed that she could not understand what they said, because with the chuckles and laughter, she knew they were enjoying the conversation they were having and she would have liked to understand this man who would take her to his bed tonight.

At one point he leaned his elbow on the table and his other arm went across the back of her chair so he could turn and give Grunewald his full attention as he spoke to him causing him to lean toward her. From the heat of his body, she knew that if she were to turn around and face him, she would end up burying her face in his chest he was so near. As it was she did not want to draw attention to herself, hoping that he would forget about her and keep drinking the wine so she sat perfectly still. Maybe she would get lucky enough and he would be too drunk to take her. Just as the thoughts entered her mind, he pushed his plate away when finished and gave a disapproving look at hers and the meagre appetite that she had. He sighed again and shoved it away from her, took her hand gently but firmly and stood, bringing her with him. His hand was calloused and large but was quite warm. She did not resist because she could not.

She looked at the rest of the men who were still involved with their drink and their women. Hoping none of them paid them any heed and they didn't.

He spoke to the man named Grunewald who answered him and pointed to the stairs obviously giving direction to their room.

Runa was led around the table to the stairs almost too quickly for her small legs to keep up, but she managed.

Grunewald watched the couple leave and did his best not to laugh out loud at Bothvar's possessiveness toward the maiden. Even though his brother spoke to him throughout the meal, his eyes were always on her. She practically wished herself invisible, by sitting so still. Yet, Bothvar must've shown great restraint because he was sure from the look on his face, that he wanted to pull the woman on to his lap and embrace her. The way his arms remained on either side of her throughout the evening said as much. In fact, if anyone came into the tavern, no one would know that there was a woman between them because Bothvar kept her body so shielded from the others with his large frame. This change in his brother amazed and intrigued him. He knew that he to someday would experience it, but to see Bothvar, a legend among the Gierrer to be so helplessly controlled by the unfamiliar emotions, was astounding. His accounts were the stories told to children at bedtime in hopes that the males would someday accomplish as much and the females could claim such a prized mate. Not only his combative skills, but his ability to rule a warrior race with such controlled power worthy of his birthright. The man had reason to be arrogant of such a position, but he was not. He never took the satisfaction of earning such a title. He fought everyday to gain the respect and earn the right to be who he was. That didn't mean he wasn't arrogant over other things, because he was. Women still threw themselves at his feet and pleaded with him to accept their oaths. Also, he was still the strongest and fiercest warrior the Gierrer had and knew his skills were unsurpassable. However, after last night, the women were done with, and Bothvar had other worries besides his next battle. Now, he had opened his heart to a woman, and a new battle would begin. One he wasn't familiar with. If you were to match

Bothvar's skills on the battlefield with his affections for his new mate, woe the man who got between them.

Bothvar opened the door to a fair sized room, with a large bed. The room had been warmed by a small fire which gave a dim orange glow to the room with the surviving embers. He released her hand and turned to shut and lock the door, which she took advantage of the freedom and found herself backing into one of the corners.

He removed his cloak and pulled his tunic over his head laying them over a nearby chair revealing his naked muscular upper torso, before he turned to her and held out his hand. The glow from the fire licked and flickered on the rippling muscles of his body and again she felt that odd sensation course through her. His steely gaze met hers to beckon her closer.

The cool surface of the wall flattened her back as she practically pinned herself to it with her eyes on him. She knew her duty and she must obey, but it still didn't make this any easier. However, she did manage to hold his gaze, because she knew it displeased him not to. She took a deep breath and reached down deep inside herself for all the strength she could find. She had to please him. If she did not he may just give her to his men. It was that image that helped her hide her terror and know that she had to give herself to him.

So, she started thinking. She thought of how considerate and tender this big warrior was with her last night and all day today. She thought of how every time he put his hands on her, it was gentle even though he was capable of fierce strength.

Moreover she thought of how he insisted she have all the

discomfort taken from her with his consideration of the armour, the saddle, and the allowance of her privacy. This is what gave her the strength to go to him, because even in her own kingdom, being a princess, she had never experienced such kindness.

“Runa.” Came the unmistakable command.

“My Lord.” She said in her language, answering him respectfully. His coaxing gentle voice seemed to give her that edge to push away from the wall and take a step, then another.

“Bothvar.” He said standing straight as she neared him. He waved her closer. She did as he bade, although slowly, but he was patient and waited until she was close enough to touch. His large rough hands rested on her hips, but again he sighed and removed one to tilt her chin up to meet his gaze, which she somehow had managed to avert again. When she locked her gaze on his, he put his hand to his chest, “Bothvar.” He said again, more gently, and softly.

“Aye.” She dipped down respectfully, “My Liege Lord Bothvar.”

He smiled at the use of his name on her tongue, but she needed to show him that she meant what she said yester eve. She was his, and he had spared her mother and her sister for her. He had shown her tenderness and generosity. He had forgiven her the traditions of hers that he was displeased with. This was it, the time that she would be truly his, and no turning back. “I gave an oath that I promised you my body and my soul, my lord, and you shall have it.” Her hand came up and caressed the line of his jaw as she tried to keep the shakiness out of her voice, but the trembling in her hand betrayed her.

A slow smile started on his handsome face and became a widening grin of approval. He gave her the faintest of nods.

She blushed and averted her gaze. He indicated that he didn't know her language. Could he possibly know what she said?

He reached up and undid the clasp on his cloak that she wore, unwrapped it and tossed it on top of his. His rough, but tender hands came up and caressed the soft flesh of her cheek as he leaned down and touched his lips to hers.

Again, she was surprised at the feeling. Despite his menacing size, his mouth was gentle and warm. Not only that, but he took his time and only progressed in his seduction when she responded to him. Did she respond to him? No doubt she did, especially when she parted her lips in a gasp at the thrilling waves that began in the pit of her stomach and vibrated out to her limbs. His tongue caressed the parted lips and she thinks that was when she moaned against him.

Then he pulled her against his hard form. She gasped at the proximity. The thin material didn't keep her breasts from brushing against his hard muscled body. She knew he felt it too, because his embrace tightened for a moment before he eased off. He obviously knew his strength and had the will to control it around her.

He ran his hands up her back until one of them threaded in her hair tilting her head back so she could look at him again. It was all so strange to her that she didn't know what to expect, but she certainly didn't expect the warmth that his lips brought

to hers. Somehow he had managed to lift her clothes over her head, so she stood naked before him. He groaned and kissed her again, more firmly while one of his hands cupped her breast.

She didn't know if it was because she was afraid of him or if it was from the unfamiliar, yet erotic feeling of him touching her, that kept making her knees weak. Her lips parted in a gasp at the provocative touch. He took advantage and used his tongue to sample the inside of her mouth. She groaned at the euphoric feeling he created with and wrapped her arms around his neck. Suddenly, he bent down, scooped her up and kneeled on the bed laying her in the center of it. He then removed his animal skins and joined her but he kneeled beside her and took his time looking over her body. Then he placed the palm of his hand on her abdomen and slowly moved it up her body, over her ribs, between her breasts, then up her neck to her jaw. She watched as he examined every caress he made as he reversed the path and added his other hand to the sensual touch. She was afraid but not terrified. Maybe it was the look of fascination in his eyes that made her feel more relaxed and the way he touched her, that made her know that he wasn't going to hurt her. Before she realized it she reached for him, and he stayed her arms with his hands while centering his eyes on hers. The glint in his pale eyes let her know that he was impressed with her forwardness and it seemed to cause a hunger to enter his expression.

Before she could let the fear in her recover, his warm hard muscular naked body was pressing on hers and she could feel the strength and size of his maleness against her belly. He brought his mouth to hers again and to her surprise she began to respond with less hesitancy than before. The heat that welled up in the pit of her stomach was unbearable until it seemed to sear her insides. Suddenly something within her let go and all of her skills

erupted at once, but not from memory, this was instinctual. Her arms flew about his neck and she kissed him with all of the excitement he created within her. Her tongue fought and caressed his while she writhed beneath him.

His hands separated her thighs with her hardly even noticing as his lips trailed hotly down her neck to capture one of her full breasts. She cried out. Then she felt his hand down there exploring and probing making her eyes shoot open and center on his in wonderment. The feeling from it was unfathomable and she tossed her head back and released a cry of pleasure. The unparalleled feeling it was giving her was intolerable and she arched toward him for more and tangled her fingers in his hair.

Her passionate responses to his caresses surprised him. He could not hold back any more, he had to have her. He reached down and opened her thighs and settled between her legs capturing her mouth with his smothering his groan, before he lifted her hips and entered her slowly at first. God's blood! She was tight! But he knew now that her body was ready for him, for she was moist. If she hadn't been, he doubted he could have fit within her. He felt the barrier and had to pause. He wanted her badly, but in all his lust and desire to claim her as his own, he did not want to hurt her.

She threw her head back against the furs and gasped at the delicious invasion.

"Runa" he spoke softly in a strained voice, and she brought her gaze to his wide-eyed and wild with desire. She could see he was holding back, almost trembling from restraint just to be gentle with her. She knew his massive size could hurt her and knew that he had yet to break her innocence. So, she did what any Esbiorn woman would do and encouraged him. She

wrapped her legs firmly around his hips and grasped his head with her hands raising her mouth to his in a frantic desperate response.

Whatever control Bothvar was exhibiting came undone with her coaxing, he thrust through the resistance and her tightness enveloped him as he sank deep within her. He growled at the rapturous feeling and buried his face in her neck. Despite her small size he had fit perfectly.

She froze at the searing pain. He lifted his head to stare down at her. One of his hands came up to wipe the single tear away that escaped her eyes. Then he lowered his head and brought his lips to hers again. His hand roamed to her breast and caressed the soft flesh, but he didn't move within her even though he thought he would die if he couldn't. Not until she started to respond to him again. When she finally did he slowly withdrew and plunged into her a second time releasing a feral groan. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders and she said his name.

Then he began to glide within her steadily and she found herself moaning again and again as something fantastic suddenly welled up inside her. Something that she couldn't describe but knew it ebbed from their joining. She clutched at his shoulders and tightened her thighs at his hips as he took her further thrusting harder, until she cried out as the most exquisite feeling exploded within her in waves of ecstasy. He thrust twice more and roared his release.

He rolled to the side and brought her with him covering her body with the thick furs that adorned the bed to keep her warm.

“God’s blood.” She whispered, “Was that a real?”

He sounded like he was stifling a chuckle. She raised her head to look at him. It must’ve been her tone of awe that made him laugh because she knew he wasn’t a stupid man. He could read her well, she figured that much out. In fact, he wasn’t the least bit surprised that she was innocent. He’d expected it. Despite everything he outwardly portrayed as a Gierrer, his tenderness with her was consistent from the beginning. He didn’t have to be and she knew it. She found herself having the overwhelming desire to weep. She had never had someone treat her so tenderly and to be from her father’s worst enemy. She took a deep breath to stop the tears from falling and it worked.

He reached over and pulled her on top of him, which she did not protest. His strong thick arms wrapped around her as she laid her head on his chest letting out a satisfied sigh. She was sore, but did not mind how she got that way in the least. The elder women never mentioned or taught them that it was so incredible to be with a man. Of course it helped that the man she was with, was so pleasing to the eye. Not only that, he made sure she enjoyed it, and took his time to ensure that she was not afraid. With her innocence came the man’s possession of her according to her traditions. She was his. With a sated smile on her face she drifted off to sleep.

She suddenly awoke with the first rays of dawn and it had occurred to her that she still laid on him in the same position as last night with her flesh against his. Her head came just beneath his chin and with every breath he took; she rose up and down ever so slightly on his magnificent body. She lifted her head and realized that he was awake staring at her with his blue-gray eyes

that seemed to see right through her. His hand came up and caressed her cheek and he said something.

“Good morning to you too, My Lord.” She smiled down at him.

He returned the grin and then his hands reached down and cupped her bottom adjusting her so her face was directly above his.

His smile made her catch her breath. There was no denying now, that he was handsome, regardless of the menacing scar, which did not seem menacing anymore. Was it because of the pleasure he had given her last night or the kindness he had shown her? His hand felt hot on her bottom and unexpectedly something started to stir within her. When she looked at him now, his grin changed. It flattened out and his eyes started to darken to more of a cloudy grey, eliminating any trace of blue.

She knew what he wanted and as his woman, she could not hesitate, nor did she want to. She lowered her head and pressed her lips against his. This was what she was schooled for. When a man took her innocence, she belonged to him. It was her ways that told her she must please him endlessly when he willed it. Despite that, she certainly did not expect the feelings he evoked in her, and she wanted it again. Suddenly she could feel his fingers enter her and she lifted her head to cry out at the delicious feeling that started again. His lips captured her breast that was presented when she arched her back.

Sweet God! He thought. This woman is shameless in her wanton desires for him. She was perfect.

A Goddess.

Mine.

No one could guess that this was the same woman who sat timid and afraid among men and women, especially since she was so forward in last night while she was still untouched and now, just a short time after he had taken her. He had awoken before her in the morn, and his thoughts had drifted to last evening when she boldly wrapped her elegant warm thighs around his hips and kissed him to release him of his restraint. He had come undone. His lust ruled his body and he plunged into her maybe to hard trying to get as deep as he could. But with his gentle caresses, she responded again to him more than he was expecting. She did not seem to notice that he had lost all restraint, for she writhed underneath him, moaned and cried out her pleasure. God's teeth, he was burning up with need for her! Her soft warm flesh stretched out on top of him, her golden locks spilling over his chest and onto the bed, and fresh memories of her wild passion towards him, began to heat his loins again. When she raised her head and spoke, he melted inside at her smile and her words. He wanted her again and she knew it.

Chapter Four

He knew of the Esbiorn women's ways and that they were taught to pleasure, but he just didn't expect it to be this astonishing. Now, when his fingers slipped in her, she was already moist for him. Knowing that she desired him, just made him rage with lust and harden his manhood to stone. He would have doubted her innocence from her responses to him, if he didn't feel the barrier break himself. He lifted her easily and positioned her on to his shaft and a when a feminine moan

escaped her, he thought he would come undone. He sat up quickly as he sank within her, gripping her tightly and she wrapped her legs around his back. His mouth captured hers none to gently, but she didn't protest. It was when she started speaking in her language of her desires of things for him to do to her, that he lost control, flipped her onto her back, and plunged into her in rapid succession.

It still didn't stop her wanton cries, which made him thrust harder. Any caution that he would have taken with her because of her small size and inexperience had been pushed aside over her responses to him. He was hardly able to hold back his climax until she screamed her release. He roared with his and collapsed on her. Quickly, he rolled to the side taking her with him as not to smother her with his weight. He was still breathing heavy as her hand came up and caressed his chest. *By the Gods that may have killed another!* He thought with bewilderment for he knew his size and strength. Yet she took him, all of him, like they were meant to be together. They *were* meant to be together, he thought.

He looked down at her, but she was engrossed in touching his body while leaning up on one elbow. That pleased him. She was taking liberty to know him and his body. However, he could not get past the fact that he may have hurt her. It was too soon after their first coupling and he was not gentle with her the second time. He spoke her name and she looked up at him. He raised his eyebrows and caressed her bottom. It only took her a moment to catch his meaning and she blushed and gave a brief shrug of her shoulders causing him to smile at her. It meant that she was sore, but it was worth it.

He rolled over and pushed her gently down on the bed,

lowered his head and kissed her gently on the lips, then the cheek, and finally the forehead. She returned his smile and tucked her face into the crook of his neck. He could feel her warm gentle breaths on his flesh. His arm circled around her back and pulled her tight to him. They had to get going, but he would delay his rising this morning, just to spend extra time with her. Not only that, but the gentle persuasion of her soft warm flesh was quite convincing to tarry. Right now he was very pleased with his decision to accept her oath and it could only get better from here.

A while later, Bothvar patted her bottom to get her out of bed. She abruptly lifted her head and set her sapphire gaze on him. He kissed her briefly and passionately on the lips before he rolled away and got up. At last she understood and arose herself. Light of the day flooded in through the single window of the room and bathed her flawless body in warm light allowing him to actually see how perfectly made she was. He stilled as he watched her and her long golden tresses swinging down her backside with every movement. Already he felt himself stiffen with want. Never in his life had he been so lustful towards a woman or harden so quickly after having one, but this was no ordinary woman, this was his mate, his life.

His.

Knowing he could not take her again without hurting her he finally, reluctantly dragged his eyes away, and got dressed as did she. Although, it took all of his might not to drag her back to bed again. She stood boldly naked in front of him and stretched her aching muscles, with none of the shyness she had displayed prior to their lovemaking. He shook his head and practically bit his tongue at the magnificent sight, unbelievable. Obviously, he

still had much to learn about Esbiorn women.

After she dressed, he picked up her cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders. Now he was glad he had provided it for her. It had kept her warm and made her feel more secure and less exposed. Not only that, the fierce possessiveness in him that had developed over the last day made him want to keep her completely covered from the other men.

Before he took her arm and led her down the stairs, he leaned down and brushed his lips gently across hers. He found himself touching her continuously since he accepted her oath. He shook his head mentally. No matter how much his father tried to prepare him for this, he would have never believed the powerful feelings that had taken hold of him over her. Feelings that he'd never experienced before in his life. It would certainly take some getting used to, for he was almost mad with obsession.

Outside of the Inn, his men had already mounted up and were waiting on their large warhorses for their King. At least forty more of his men had caught up to them last night. The rest were bringing the camp supplies and another forty were escorting Runa's family back through his lands to Esbiorn safely.

Grunewald met him at the door to the Inn. "I am surprised you rose so early." He teased as he nodded to one of the world's two suns that now rose high in the sky indicating that it was mid morn.

Bothvar followed his gaze, "Aye, it was difficult brother." He smiled.

"It is good to see that you did not kill her with your lust."

He looked down at the top of Runa's head who kept her gaze to the ground. He frowned, "And you still have not cured her of her ways."

"Lust?" Bothvar's brow went up.

"Aye, you were practically a rutting brute at dinner last evening. I am surprised you let her eat with the way you stared at her all through the meal. I thought perhaps you killed her with it. She is so small after all."

"Aye she is, but she accommodated me nicely." Bothvar answered with a telling grin, causing his brother to chuckle, "Now enough talk of my woman, or I will delay our leaving longer." He looked down at the top of her head. Back was the meek woman, gone was the passionate Goddess. This was something he thought he could tolerate for now. She would become more aware of their customs, but as long as she was free with him behind closed doors like she was only moments ago, he wouldn't insist.

"As you wish Bothvar." He handed a small bundle to Runa and spoke to her, "*Here lady. Thanks to your King, you must eat and ride again.*" Without looking at him, she took the wrapped bread and cheese and said thank you as she blushed. It was obvious that she knew it was her fault that Bothvar was delayed. He frowned, a Gierrer woman would be proud that she delayed the King from his men. Especially since Bothvar never tarried over a woman.

"We travel through the thieves forest Grunewald, so be on guard." He said changing back to the warrior.

“Aye, the men already know that you chose to go through it.” It was quicker than circling the forest which would have taken several days longer. Unfortunately, it was where most vile criminals hid and robbed the noblemen that chose to travel through such a place. Bothvar had ridden through many times. Not many would challenge him or his enormous army. The several times that they had been set upon ended up in bloodshed, with no loss to his own men. The men that dwelled in the forest had skills that could not compete with his well disciplined army.

The young man that had ogled Runa the day before brought his stallion forward making sure that he kept his eyes on the King and not his woman. He preferred that his head remain attached to the rest of his body. The large warrior King gave him more than enough coin for stabling his horse, more than he deserved, he thought, before he watched him effortlessly swing up onto the big Stallion. He hurried away with his pocket full and a smile on his face.

Bothvar held his arm out for Runa who grasped it without hesitation and he easily lifted her up behind him. He felt her adjust herself close behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He placed his hand on her thigh as he nudged his stallion to a trot. His men followed closely behind. Grunewald trotted up beside him.

Runa was glad she was able to thank Grunewald this time for his generosity. She blushed when she figured that they were discussing her and why Bothvar tarried. She was humiliated. What else would they be doing alone in the Inn? All his warriors would know too, now that they all stared at her.

She could not wait to get on with the long day's ride, just

to avoid the stares of the warriors that seemed to have tripled since last night. They were a magnificent sight to behold. All wore armour and embroidered red and gold cloaks, except Bothvar who only wore his cloak. They sat astride enormous horses. She guessed that they were needed to carry the great weight of the warriors and their armour.

Bothvar reached for her. She grasped his hand and he swung her behind him thankful to bury her face in his back. What she didn't count on was the discomfort between her legs. The added pressure of the horse was no less than painful as the full account of her coupling the night before. She winced, but managed to make sure no one noticed. It would be a long day today.

That evening when they stopped, Bothvar helped her down not noticing her wincing at the discomfort she was feeling and spoke abruptly to his men. About twenty warriors raised their swords and cheered before turning their horses and riding off in different directions. He hopped down off his horse and pulled her next to him again while surveying his men with intelligent eyes. The remaining warriors set to building several fires and laying their pallets beside it. Satisfied, Bothvar called for Grunewald and when he jogged over to them, he spoke to him briefly before releasing Runa and leaving. Runa went to follow him but Grunewald placed his hand on her arm stopping her.

“Bothvar needs to speak with his men. You will stay with me”

She watched his receding back and actually felt anxious when he disappeared through the crowd of armoured men. She turned and glanced briefly at Grunewald before looking down at

her feet. "Are we stopping?"

"Aye, we camp here for the night. Our King is in a hurry for home as are we. "

"My lord..."

He shook his head, "Grunewald."

She blushed, "My lord Grunewald, I am to sleep out here?"

"It is Grunewald Lady. You need not address me that way. As for spending the night here, we regret this, but the next Inn is at least a day's ride through that forest and we will not attempt to pass through it in the darkness of night. There are murderers and thieves in there, and it would place us at a disadvantage." He had seen the apprehension and fear in her expression, "Do not fret Lady, we will protect you. Bothvar will make sure that no harm comes to you on his life."

Her jaw dropped, and she actually looked at him, "He would do that?"

Grunewald was puzzled, "Aye, of course." He raised his brows, "Why would you think otherwise?"

Bothvar returned then interrupting them. She stepped into his side willingly and he wrapped his thick arm around her waist.

"Bothvar, your woman thinks she is not worth your protection. You should let her know that you can understand

her. It may set some of her worries to rest."

He sighed and stared at his brother, *"I will take that into consideration."*

Grunewald shook his head at his brother. That had meant that he would not do it. He understood Bothvar's reasons, but he did not think that Runa could be a threat to them. She was too timid. Although the Esbiorns have deceived them in the past and trickery was something they were fond of, but this woman seemed genuine. Whatever Bothvar's reasons, Grunewald would support him and not let Runa know. *"So you say Bothvar, but I think you are being too careful. There is no harm she could do to us being as frightened as she is."*

"It is best that I do not answer questions from her yet Grunewald. Also, it is best that she does not know much about us in case we do not make it home and she is captured by the Mohrs or the Zilns."

Grunewald finally understood. Bothvar's motives were to protect her also. He shook his head conceding, *"Forgive me Brother, I forget that you are always thinking beyond the present."*

He placed his hand on his brother's shoulder, *"Your concern for her does not go unnoticed Grunewald. I am pleased that you are protective of her."*

Grunewald tipped his head toward Bothvar's men, *"Not just me Bothvar, your men too. I assure you that they would all die for her just as soon as they would die for you. The likes of her they have rarely seen and the fact that she is your woman,*

gives them reason to." It was no secret that his men admired his fierce strength and power. Not another King of the three lands that bordered theirs fought along side their men, only Bothvar did. Bothvar gave him an expression of pride at his words.

"That is good to hear Grunewald." He had not heard the talk of the men, because he was too occupied with Runa. They would not criticize him over it, it was known to happen among the Warriors, and because he was their King, it gave them a greater understanding. He still managed to be responsible in his duties and with Grunewald's support, his men did not lack command.

Ralf came up, *"My Lord, the perimeter is secure and the hunting party came back with a good meal for us all."*

"Aye Ralf, get settled and eat. We leave at the first show of light."

"Yes My Lord," He spared a glance at Runa before leaving.

Bothvar led her over to his pallet next to one of the fires and Grunewald settled on her other side. She had come to realize that Grunewald's presence on her other side was going to be a common occurrence. Conversation ensued among the men over the next while, as the meal was being roasted. Of course she didn't understand anything, but Bothvar kept his hand on her knee the entire time and every now and then he would look down at her and squeeze it letting her know that she wasn't forgotten. Someone handed her a strip of roasted meat, which she ate because she was famished. It was actually quite good. Bothvar handed her a small waterproof sack and indicated to her how to

drink out of it when she gave him a confused look. She managed to spill some down her chin and he laughed. She frowned at him which made him laugh harder. His finger came up and wiped a drop from her chin to which he put to his lips while his blue-grey eyes stared at her. She blushed and turned away. He chuckled then turned and started talking to another man who addressed him. It was about that time that she realized that the men were vying for his attention, and when they spoke to him there was no less than admiration in their eyes. Not once could she remember such a look from her father's men.

The evening wore on and she found herself very tired besides sore from the long day's ride while he was engrossed in carrying on jovial conversations with the others who joined them around their fire. Not only that, she was very sore from him taking her the night before even though she told him otherwise. She indicated to him that she wasn't because she had enjoyed it so much. She blushed at the images that came flooding back to her. He was very desirable. She had found herself thinking about their love making over and over again throughout the day and it constantly caused familiar twinges of pleasure in her belly. His strength and his body were impressive as was his gentleness with her. Through all of it she still had the fear that he would pass her around when he was no longer satisfied. She involuntarily shuddered. She had decided that morning that she would not allow that to happen. She had made a silent vow. Either she keep him satisfied, or she take her own life. She knew what happened to the slaves that were passed around by the men. Quickly she shoved the images out of her mind and spared a glance at his handsome profile. He talked with a man that sat on his right. The man had spared her a few glances during their meal, but she noticed only when Bothvar wasn't watching or speaking to him. He wasn't the only one. Then she remembered

the incident yesterday morning when they emerged from his tent and a hundred pair of eyes were on her, followed by his threatening bark towards his men, who all turned and busied themselves. Then there was Grunewald's confession at the Inn. She was smart enough to know that he must've threatened them for looking at her. What she didn't understand was why.

The night fell and before she could stop it she suddenly yawned. Soon she was trying to hide a series of yawns and began to fight her eyelids from closing. Not only was she tired, but her aches and pains didn't subside. She could not help but lean against him so she did not fall over while fighting sleep. Unexpectedly she felt him shift. She sat straight and noticed that he had removed his cloak and folded it up placing it on his lap. Then he pulled her close and guided her down across his crossed legs. She would have protested but she was so tired she did not. When she lay down he adjusted her cloak to cover her up and she folded her legs under it

"She must be tired, she did not even resist a public display of affection." Grunewald spoke

"Aye," He adjusted her hair over her shoulders, "She is already asleep." He laid his arm across her hip while staring down at her peaceful form. "Maybe it has something to do with the darkness of the night adding some cover, or maybe she was too tired to protest like you said. I would like to think that she is starting to feel some comfort among us."

"I think she is tired." Grunewald chuckled. "I still do not think it would be so easy to change her traditions."

"If I may." Cut in Ralf, "I think we should be focusing on

all the wanton wenches that our King has left behind now that he is taken. I for one would like to claim the lusty Celia so that she may weep of her loss while treating my loins.” This brought a round of raucous laughter and cheers to the group.

Bothvar laughed and shook his head, “You be careful there Ralf the lusty wench has a dark side to go with her charms.”

He feigned an incredulous look, “I do not intend to talk to her.” Jested Ralf, bringing another round of noisy cheers and laughter to which he promptly grinned wide.

“Runa.”

Bothvar’s voice woke her. She opened her eyes and noticed that she was stretched out beside him and they were covered with both of their cloaks. Her head was nestled against his shoulder. She sat up and looked around. Grunewald was saddling his horse and some of the others were just beginning to stir. She remembered him pulling her upper body across his lap last night as she fell asleep. She must have been so tired that she did not even stir when he lay down and stretched her out beside him. She quickly tried to prevent the pink entering her cheeks, but with that and the position many of his men had seen her in this morning was too much and she turned red.

Bothvar chuckled and sat up after she did, remembering Grunewald’s words from last night as he watched her cheeks burn with color. He gave her a generous piece of bread and cheese that they had gotten from the Inn the day before. She took it and smiled at him before she turned her gaze away. He reached up and turned her face back to him so he could lean down and give her a tender kiss on the cheek. He was fully aware

that if he were to kiss her like he really wanted to, it would embarrass her further. So for her sake, he decided against it. Actually there was more than just a kiss he wanted to give her, but she was no common woman, and dragging her off to the bushes for a tumble was out of the question though it was sorely tempting. He stood up and stretched out his stiff muscles and she stood with him.

Before long they were on horseback again. As usual Grunewald rode beside them with the rest of his men behind.

“Did you rest well?” Grunewald asked.

Runa nodded trying to prevent another blush. Was he teasing her because of how she had slept the night before? She could not tell until he spoke again. Then she realized that he was concerned for her.

“That is good to hear. We do regret rushing you, but it is necessary.”

“You do not need to explain yourself to me Grunewald.”

He looked incredulous, “Why not?”

“I am just a woman.” She explained.

Bothvar and Grunewald exchanged a glance before he spoke again, “That is an insult to you. A woman of your breeding has every right to know why we inconvenience her.”

Runa did not answer. She did not know what to say. Grunewald just told her that they basically are regretful of her

treatment. But she was their prisoner, and Bothvar's slave which gave her less respect than an Esbiorn common woman.

The look of disgust that crossed Grunewald's face was unavoidable. He reined his horse around and rode away. Although he wasn't the least bit angry with her, he was furious with all of Esbiorn. Runa was indeed a rare flower, yet treated no better than their own slaves. What really surprised him the more he got to know her, was the fact that she was of royal blood and still had those subservient beliefs. What of the treatment of the other women that race had? If Runa had less rights than a dog, which is how he interpreted her customs, he could only imagine how the other females were treated. This brought a wave of anger to him because the Esbiorns had Gierrer slaves.

Runa watched him go and did not miss his expression. She should have kept her mouth shut and not said anything. She had made him angry and she felt terrible that she had angered him, because he was kind to her.

They entered the forest that Grunewald had told her about without hesitating and half the day had passed without an incident. It was when they passed through a particularly dense wooded area. Bothvar suddenly reined up and quickly drew his sword. The rest of his men followed suit as they automatically formed a fierce barrier around their king and Runa without exchanging a word.

She did not know what caused them to react in such a way, for she did not see or hear anything. Her hands tightened around Bothvar's waist while he spiralled his stallion about scanning the brush.

When they were attacked, it was swift. Suddenly there were loud roars that burst through the calm of the forest and men seemed to come from everywhere with their weapons drawn. Then the noise of metal clashing on metal and screams of dying men filled her ears. Then, Bothvar's horse reared and she lost her grip and she fell with a scream until she hit the ground with a hard grunt forcing all of the wind out of her. She rolled over on her side and pushed herself up with her arms trying to force herself to breathe as the bloody battle continued all around her. The large legs of the horses that Bothvar's men rode spun and circled in the forest floor around her. A man came through the throng running toward her with his sword over his head. She froze in fear. Then she saw Bothvar. With a loud earthy thud, his large leather clad feet appeared directly in front of her as their swords met in an angry clash of metal. Then she realized in complete panic that he was not wearing armour. He had no form of protection and it was for her comfort that he had done so. She screamed again as the man he was fighting brought his sword down, but Bothvar blocked the blow with ease, and then despite his size, he spun fluidly and with amazing speed to impale the astonished man on his blade. She watched him kick the dead man off his weapon and turn to another. He fought fiercely and his blows were meant to kill.

The fight had ended as quickly as it begun, with many bodies of their attackers bleeding into the ground staining the earth red. Runa remained where she was, frozen in terror at the violence. Not only that, the force of her fall had jarred her and she was not sure if she could stand. Regardless of the ear-splitting noise of battle waging around her, she could not take her eyes from all of the dead bodies.

Bothvar turned after he scanned the area. His men had

killed all that had not escaped. “Is there a man down?”

“Nay.” Came many replies.

Then he turned to Runa who was staring at a lifeless man only a good ten feet from her. Her face was blanched and her chin quivered. His heart felt heavy in his chest at the sight. He ran and kneeled down in front of her, dropping his blood stained sword and gripping her upper arms, “Are you hurt?” she was visibly trembling.

She still stared at the dead man in shock.

“Runa? Are you hurt?” He spoke more loudly and gave her a small but gentle shake. There was no mistaking the concern that laced his voice.

She slowly turned her face to him, her eyes widening slowly. Then frantically her hands started searching his tunic under his cloak feeling his body for any injuries. “You did not wear your armour because of me.” She managed a small sob, “It is all my fault.”

“No Runa, I am unscathed.” He had figured out that she was searching his body for wounds.

She suddenly stilled and spoke without looking at him, “You...you speak my language.”

“Aye.” He noticed that everything he told her was taking too long for her to understand. There was something wrong with her.

At that moment she did not care for the deception, she was just thankful that he was not injured. Grasping the cloth of his tunic in her fists, she clung to him, not caring who saw her and buried her face in his chest.

He kissed the top of her head, "I am fine. I promise. Do not fret about me."

"You had no armour on." She whispered in anguish

"A small detail." He smiled down at her pleased with her concern, "There was never anything to worry about."

She turned her head and stared at dead man again.

"Runa, look at me." He cupped her face.

She did.

He saw an odd vacancy registering in her eyes. Although she sounded well, she was not, "Are you hurt?"

"I-I do not know."

"Come. Stand up." He helped her to stand.

She winced as he helped her up, but it was just her backside that felt bruised, and she was too ashamed to tell him where else she hurt. However, the fact that she could stand seemed to satisfy him.

He embraced her, "Thank the Gods you are unharmed." He pulled her away from him and stared down at her, "At least

physically. I regret you seeing this tragedy. The memory of it will fade with time, Runa. Look at me until we leave this place. Do not look at anything else.”

She nodded and did as he asked.

Grunewald came up with the reins to his horse at that moment. He had seen Runa fall and Bothvar dismount to protect her as several of their attackers moved toward her. Some of his men as well as Grunewald surrounded her with their horses. Their attackers must have known they were coming. The group was at least eighty men, but no match for forty Gierrer warriors. He did not know what they had hoped to accomplish, but every one of them that did not escape, lay dead or dying, with no casualties of their own. Several of them went around and killed the survivors, ending their pain, while Grunewald saw to help Bothvar with Runa. She may not have been hurt so much from the fall as she was with the event that happened around her. He was positive that she had never seen a battle before, much less one as bloody and swift as this was.

Bothvar kept her face turned away from the corpses by pressing her head to his chest, and spoke to his brother in their language, “*There are no casualties?*”

Grunewald smiled with satisfaction, “*Not us.*” He nodded toward Runa, “*Is she well?*”

“*Nay, she needs rest. It is all a shock to her. We ride for the Inn tonight. Maybe a fresh meal, wine, and a hot bath will set her right.*”

Chapter Five

Bothvar was right. As she lay in the tub, he washed her gently and spoke softly to her, suddenly after several hours of his coaxing, she turned to him as if jarred out of some distant thought. Prior to that he had led her to their room and ordered a bath. She had not spoken to him, but continued to stare blankly at the walls.

“You are sure that you did not get hurt?” her soft voice brought a look of relief from him.

He sat back on his heels and smiled as he lifted his eyes to hers and found her looking at him. , “No, Runa. I am much more skilled than those fools. You are concerned for me?”

She blushed, “Of course. I could not live with myself knowing you were hurt because of me.”

Selfless, he thought. “A choice I would gladly make any day.” He admitted.

“Do not say such things.” She frowned. It was unheard of for a man to claim devotion to a woman.

He chuckled, “It is good to see that you are feeling better. Enough to argue.”

By the Gods’ toes he was right! She was arguing with him. Panic began to fill her. “I-I...”

Bothvar saw the look on her face and gave her a reassuring smile while sliding a large hand along her cheek to

cup her jaw so she would look at him. “Do not worry little one. I would not harm you.” He said softly while his eyes searched hers.

Her mouth fell open at his confession not sure if she should believe him. The man was capable of complete violence after what she had witnessed, but he just said he wouldn’t harm her. How could she not believe him? He’d proven his tenderness towards her over and over again. She had refused to obey him at the inn and sit, instead of kneel, she just argued with him and not one hint of anger crossed his handsome face. However, there was frustration. What is it about this warrior that made him so generous toward her? She was a slave, a concubine, nothing more, yet he treated her with the respect of a high born woman. Respect that she could never fathom in her own kingdom.

A knock at the door interrupted them and Bothvar leaned over and kissed her on the lips gently before he rose and answered it.

“My lord...I...” Runa was suddenly aware of her nakedness and the fact that she was sitting in a bath. It did not matter to her if he saw her in such a state of undress now that she was his, but she still didn’t know the Gierrer traditions about their women. All she did know was her own people’s traditions, and if it were her people who had a Gierrer slave, she would have been passed around frequently and beaten if she did not please the men. However, Bothvar did not indicate that he would do such a thing. He had been careful with her and surprisingly she found him a bit possessive. He had made sure he was always touching her in one form or another in the company of his men. Esbiorn men did not show such affection. People did not touch

in public, only behind closed doors.

He turned and put his finger to his lips indicating for her to be quiet before he opened the door a crack. A glint of humour was in his eyes over her bashfulness.

She was relieved to see that whoever was on the other side was not allowed in, and Bothvar retrieved a tray of food and a flask from whoever it was and shut the door. He set them down on a nearby table, picked up a large piece of cloth off the bed, and came back to her, "Come Runa, our meal is here." He held the cloth up and she got out of the bath without the shyness earlier and allowed him to wrap her in it. She was not the least bit shy of her body around him. She was raised to please the man who took her, and that meant open nudity only to him. He held her tight while he rubbed her dry. She thought the air would be cold, but it was not. He had a warm fire glowing in the hearth and his hands on her body seemed to remove whatever chill there was. He slipped a clean drape over her head and pulled her hair out allowing it to cascade down her back.

"Do you feel better?"

She looked up at him briefly before turning her head, "I do my Lord, thank you." Her words caused him to smile. She turned her attention to the soft cloth she now wore, "Where did you get this?" She fingered the fine material with her hands.

He smiled with as she looked down at the fine piece of cloth he gave her, "There is a cloth maker in town. I had Grunewald purchase it."

"Thank you."

“I am pleased you like it. I would have bought you many more, but do not have a way of carrying them to my home.”

“Why would you do such a thing?” she said with bewilderment.

It was a ridiculous question. Why would he not want to purchase fine things for her? He sighed and stared down at her, “Enough questions Runa. You must eat.”

She knew she angered him again and did not push it. She did as he bade and ate, while trying to forget the ferocious battle that she had witnessed. Instead she focused through the shock and haze that began to fade from her mind and focused on Bothvar and the magnificent way he fought. He was right; his skill was unmatched compared to the men that he had killed in front of her. Then, what she had tried to prevent flooded into her memory. All that death. She brought her misty eyes to his and saw that he was already watching her with intensity. There was genuine concern in his grey-blue gaze.

He paused while taking a drink from his cup and his voice was laced with worry. “The dead men plague your mind. You are not well, are you?”

Slowly she shook her head,

Without taking his eyes off her, he set down his cup and held his hand to her, “Come here.”

She stood, took his hand and let him pull her onto his lap. She knew it was bold, but she did not care. She needed the

comfort of his strong arms around her.

He held her tight and kissed the top of her head, "It will pass Runa. You are stronger than you think."

She nodded knowing he could feel the action against his chest. Right now she just needed to feel safe.

For the rest of the evening he tenderly cared for her, feeding her bits of food off the tray and caressing her while speaking low in his language. His voice was filled with encouragement even though she didn't understand the words she began to feel greatly comforted. Then when she had eaten her fill, he'd taken her to bed and slowly made love to her. For all of the tenderness he'd shown her had worked. She no longer felt the terror of the battle around her and as she lay in his arms while the rhythm of his breaths told her he was sleeping, she hoped this would never end. He had made her realize over the past three days that she was born and raised in a prison and he had freed her.

A fortnight passed quite quickly as they traveled through his lands and with it her tragic memories of the battle in the forest. Bothvar was right, but his constant encouragement of her strengths aided her in putting it behind her. Runa could not have been more pleased with her captor. He had shown her things that no lesson from the elder females could have taught her. Although, her own responses to him continued to surprise her, he had made this all too easy for her. There had not been one night that he had not taken her, sometimes twice. His body may have been fierce and largely magnificent, but his gentleness is what made her succumb to him over and over again. He no

longer needed to pull her along beside him, she came willingly. Further, his hand still managed to find hers at times, mostly to reassure her in the unfamiliar territory and people of the villages that they passed through.

It was surprising that the villagers and townsfolk recognized him and cheered as he and his men rode through, but they must have been a sight, scarlet and gold cloaks that covered large men in silver armour. Except for Bothvar, who wore his tunic instead. She felt a sense of pride with all of the warriors astride large stallions and keeping in stride with him. Such respect had to be earned not willed.

Dusk dusted the sky in amber golden light as they broke through a clearing to a tremendous sight. Runa gasped. In the distance she could see a vast castle that seemed to be born out of the rocky cliffs it was set against. The fortress was surrounded by a massive stone wall and all of it was perched on a hillside overlooking endless green meadows to a village on the shore of an immense body of water, the likes she had never seen. Lights now flickered through the windows of the houses and she could hear the water brush the beach. It was beautiful.

Bothvar adjusted himself so he could see her face. From the glow of wonder on her face he knew she was pleased with his lands. He patted her thigh and nudged his horse forward who sensed that home was near, whinnied and broke into a full gallop.

Bothvar's men were right behind him cheering at their pleasure of being finally home.

Runa held tight to Bothvar as the horse led a full out race

to home. She kept her eyes shut and pressed his face to his back at the fear of falling, but she didn't. Even when he reined up outside the gates of the fortress she still didn't open her eyes.

Bothvar could feel her clinging to him and chuckled as he nudged his horse through the large gates and into a raucous of cheering. Their king had returned home. He urged her to loosen her grip and dismount when he stopped by swinging his leg over the neck of the stallion and hopping easily down to the ground. He watched her mouth fall open from the commotion that ensued.

Men, women and children came running forward as he reached up helped her down as a young stable boy took the reins from their King. Women threw themselves at their warriors who were grabbed, kissed or tossed over shoulders of the returning men.

Again she couldn't believe the bawdiness of affection the women displayed and stood with her mouth hanging open at the sight. Children were picked up and tossed in the air with playful adoration the likes she had never seen. Fathers were kissing their chubby cheeks and ruffling ebony curls. Within minutes, the huge courtyard was packed with cheering people. Bothvar greeted as many as he could with a proud smile. All the time, he held her hand firmly and every time she tried to withdraw behind him, he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze for her to remain where she was.

Suddenly a steady calm came over the yard as people began to notice the yellow haired woman beside their King and turned to stare at her. She lowered her gaze and pressed herself to Bothvar's back, who only chuckled and pulled her back out, slipping an arm around her waist. She must look an odd sight

with her golden hair among all the dark heads.

The man named Grunewald stepped in front of Bothvar and spoke to them causing them all to take pause and took at Runa who had now been drawn out behind Bothvar with his urging. What surprised her next was that they all bowed toward her.

She was no more than a common slave and because she was Bothvar's that gave her some measure of respect? Her father had plenty of slaves and most times he abused them. She cringed thinking of some of the things she had seen him do, and quickly pushed them from her mind. He had given her no indication that he possessed the same traits and she vowed not to disobey him to discover if he did.

Bothvar could not blame his people, Runa was indeed a rare beauty. Many of them had never seen and Esbiorn woman, and even if they did, none could compare with what he brought home. Tonight they would feast on his return and his new Queen.

It was barely a moment after Grunewald introduced her to his people when he was approached by a dozen or so of his men that saw him ride in casting glances at her and asking for an audience. He knew exactly what they wanted and staring down at his new mate, who could blame them.

The men patiently waited for Bothvar's time as he turned and motioned for a woman nearby carrying a basket of herbs. Without even the slightest hesitation, the woman set the basket down and trotted up to him and bowed. He spoke to her for a

moment, and she nodded and replied while looking at Runa. Next he called out several names, and the warriors stepped forward. Runa didn't understand what he said but from the way they all glanced her way, she knew it was about her.

Bothvar then turned his attention to her. He gave her a smile and bent down to kiss her on the forehead. Then he nodded toward the woman who gave her a smile also. "You need to go with her Runa, I have pressing matters that cannot wait. I have been away for awhile. I will do my best to join you as soon as I can." He squeezed her hand and turned away from her to approach his men. She watched his receding back for a moment before turning to the other woman, as she was just reaching for Runa's hand.

She took her through the double doors to the interior of the massive fortress. Speaking the whole time she pointed at tapestries, furniture, hallways and doors as she pulled her along with her. Obviously she didn't know that Runa did not speak her language while she explained about the surroundings. A noise behind her caught her attention. When she turned around to look she noticed five warriors following her closely. She stopped and so did they. What was this? She should have known that he wouldn't trust her not to run. What he didn't know was that she had no place to go. She was no longer innocent; her father would have her publically whipped if not killed. At least now she knew what Bothvar had told the men he singled out of the crowd. They were to watch her.

The woman led her through a large wooden door into a chamber which was furnished with various cots, weapons, chairs, chests and tables. The warriors all remained there while one of them opened another door within the chamber. It led to a larger

chamber which housed rich furnishings, a huge bed, an enormous fireplace that now glowed with a generous fire warming the large room nicely, surrounded by large chairs. The woman let go of her hand then and bowed before leaving through the doors. She turned in time to see it shut and by the sounds of it, lock behind her.

Large windows allowed the moon to shine its light into the room and lend a hand to the fire's glow to light the room. Something caught her eye and she walked over to it.

There was a piece of clothing lying across the foot of the bed. It must've been left for her. It was a scarlet gown of sorts that she was unfamiliar with. To say the least, it was very beautiful with gold embossed lace down the bodice, sleeves, and hem. It was fit for a very wealthy woman. She didn't think her mother possessed such a garment. She had difficulty putting it on. She struggled with the lace at the bodice, and it was a little lopsided around her waist, but she wasn't sure how to use the cords at the sides so she left it loose. At least she had something to wear other than the clothes that she had to endure that last two weeks. She had to hand wash her garments at night and allow them to dry overnight leaving her nothing in his bed but her nakedness. She smiled, not that she complained.

There were several doors leading off of the main chamber that she inspected. One led to a long stairway going down. She closed the door and went to the other. Another room with a mirror, table and chair and all the toiletries a woman could possibly desire. She sat down and combed out her yellow tresses. Why did he have such a room? Did he have a wife, a mistress, or maybe slaves that pleased him as she had. She felt a knot form in her stomach. She did not have a right to feel jealous. It was

not allowed of a slave. Still, the thought had her conceal a sob and bury her face in her hands. What would become of her when he tired of her? An Esbiorn woman had loyalty and ways of pleasing men bred into them. What about love? Were the feelings supposed to be there too? Burying her face just allowed the images of his gentleness toward her become vivid and grow. She raised her head and looked at herself in the mirror. Despite no tears falling, her eyes rimmed with redness on trying to prevent them.

She heard the door open then and her name called. It was him. She patted her cheeks quickly hoping that the pinkness there would distract him from her eyes. Then, she jumped up and quickly went to face him.

There was no mistaking the approval in his eyes at the gown, but he grunted at the way the dress hung on her. He approached her in several long strides and turned her to retie the cords himself. She gasped as he pulled the cords tight and while chuckling at her reaction, he pulled the dress down to snugly fit on her round hips revealing too much of her breasts. It was so different compared to the clothing she was used to. He turned her back to him and nodded.

“Much better.”

There was no mistake he was pleased with the gown. She averted her gaze again blushing and again he directed her stare back to him.

“You must look at me Runa.”

She noted his frown, he had noticed her eyes. To her

surprise he shook his head slowly and pressed his warm lips to her forehead while his rough fingers caressed her jaw gently. She stepped into him and his other arm circled around her back pulling her to him.

“You are upset.” She was troubled about something and he itched to take away her pain for he felt it to. The Esbiorn females were so subdued, and from what he had seen so far, unjustly so. She was so fragile in many ways, despite her unequalled beauty and her royal heritage. So, why was she weeping? He had treated her with no less measure of respect than she deserved. Of course she missed her family, but no harm had come to them. Unfortunately she did not know that. It was regretful, and he would tell her later now that they were safe in the confines of his castle. He was pleased that she accepted his comfort so readily. It made him realize that it wasn’t him who displeased her. He kissed the top of her head and pulled her back making her look at him. Her eyes were showing signs of improving already. He gave her a reassuring smile as his fingers played with the golden threads of hair that she had just brushed. Her hair color was mesmerizing and only added to her beauty. God’s blood she could be bald and no one would notice because she was that magnificent. He kissed her then and she responded to him. She always did, without hesitation. He reluctantly pulled back from her. “What bothers you?”

“It is nothing.” She answered.

His eyes studied her face, “I will not push you Runa, but you must be more honest with me in the future when you understand more of your place here. Now, a glorious feast awaits us, and my warriors will not eat unless I appear, so we must go.”

She knew he was trying to comfort her and she tried her best to show that she was okay. What did she do to deserve such attention? He was pleased at the gown and from the looks of his expression it fit her like he thought it should. Of course she wasn't used to such tight clothing around the bodice and waist, but she would wear it for him. Even though she had been with him for several weeks now, it took the colors on the gown to suddenly realize that these were his house colors. He then took her gently by the elbow and led her to the door of his chamber. She, of course, didn't protest.

He banged on the door twice, in which she heard a lock give and it opened.

She hesitated. Now, there were at least ten large men standing on the other side. They walked through them and they all fell in step behind him. His personal guard! It dawned on her. Her father never had more than two at all times, but they were well skilled. Though by the looks of these men, her father's could be bested easily.

He led her down a long hall, a flight of stairs, another hall which opened up into a large grand room that had pennants of his colors hanging from the wall. The room was huge. It had to be to seat the fifty or so men there. Actually she remembered this hall, that the woman had pulled her through so quickly that she did not take the time to notice much of the décor. The tables surrounded the room leaving a large floor space open in the middle. He led her to his table where several of his warriors had already seated. What shocked her most were the women that sat at the tables also. She knew he insisted of it from her, but there were no other women with them at the time. Now, it became obvious to her, Gierrer women sat beside their men. She

stopped. He turned and looked at her as the other men, his personal guards took their seats beside several other women or fellow warriors. All the men and women sported the dark appearance that he had. With several exceptions of dark brown to black hair, but she was the only yellowed haired female there. He led her to a seat beside his, and she took it with a slight hesitation, still not used to sitting at the table to dine. Then he sat beside her.

The meal in itself was unsurpassable and she practically gorged herself. Then she was momentarily distracted by the music that began to flow into the room.

Minstrels made their way to the center of the room and played while a bustle of servants continued to serve the men. His hand had made its way to her thigh where it stayed most of the evening. She had come to like the reassurance it gave her. Meanwhile, he spoke with his men seated beside him. As usual, the man name Grunewald sat on her other side. She noticed that no woman sat with him, although she did not miss the inviting stares of many of the servants. Surprisingly so, not as many of them looked the same way at Bothvar. He was by far the most handsome man in the hall, with

Grunewald a close second and yet none of the beautiful women turned to him?

His hand came up and brushed her hair off her shoulder causing her to look up at him. His thumb caressed one of the dark circles under her eyes. "You are tired." There was concern in his voice that did not reach his expression.

She knew that he had appearances to keep up in front of his men, and knew that it would be a weakness to display such.

He was gentle with her in bed enough to leave her satisfied of his affections.

It was true, she was weary, but in no hurry to leave his side. Regardless of being in the hall among a room full of people she didn't know, she felt safe beside him. Not only that, what if she left and one of those attractive women came and slid onto his lap like she had seen the past days with his men and the tavern women.

"I am not so tired my lord." She offered.

Despite her confession, he did not believe her. "Runa I will not have you tire because of my selfishness to have you with me." His steely gaze rested on hers for a moment, noticing the look of surprise on her face, before he turned and raised his arm up in the air. Several women came over at the moment and he spoke to them. They bowed and one of them grabbed Runa's hand. He stood pulling her chair back.

She gave him an unsure look.

"Go with them Runa, they will help you settle for the night. I cannot leave yet." He explained with reassurance, "I will join you as soon as I can."

"As you wish." She stood, giving in to the encouragement and followed the constant tugging. She looked over her shoulder at him before she disappeared down the hall, but he had already taken the seat next to Grunewald who had bent toward him in discussion. Did he want to get rid of her to be with other women? She began to feel the dread creep into her. Would he come to her later? Doubts began to fill her that she hadn't been

able to please him and he had grown bored. Would he turn elsewhere now that he was home? There must have been a great many women that vied for his attentions.

They reached his chamber and several warriors were milling about in the ante chamber and when they saw her enter, one of them opened the door to Bothvar's chamber. Once inside Runa was able to really look at both women. One of the ladies was older but the other was maybe just about Runa's age. She had brown eyes that matched her mousy brown hair and she smiled from the first moment she grasped her hand. She instantly made her feel better. Surprisingly they led her to another room off the main chamber much like the other she had found but there was a staircase at the far end of the small room.

They led her down the winding stone stair case and the further down they went she felt a deepening humidity. Then the stairs opened to a large chamber with a large pool of steaming water in the middle. It was the most incredible thing she had ever seen. The pool seemed to have been chiselled out of rock for the stone surrounding the pool was all one continuous rock not laid stone. The younger of the two women led her to a series of slotted windows and pointed out one of them. Runa leaned forward. The windows were only wide enough to allow escaping steam but her head managed to fit through. She saw that this side of the castle was part of the cliff and far below was a river. It was obvious that the long stairway led below the castle into the stone. The water must be heated from the fires within deep within the earth. She had never seen such a wondrous sight. A bath? They were going to bath her? For the first terrifying moment that she had been captured to the hard long travel to his home, she gave a full smile.

“Kadlin.” Said the younger with her hand on her chest she turned to the older woman who nodded.

“Ingun.”

“Runa.” She said mimicking Kadlin’s gesture.

Kadlin grinned and started undoing the cords on the dress.

Runa groaned when she sunk in the large steamy pool, while the women cleaned and washed her. Of course she had servants such as this at home, but she didn’t expect that here. She had submersed to her shoulders and discovered that there was a stone seat chiselled out of the rock for people to sit on. It was exquisite. She could have stayed there endlessly, but at the urging of her servants stood and stepped into the cloth they held for her.

Ingun had her seated in the room she discovered when she first arrived with all the toiletries while she brushed out her hair while she remained wrapped in one of the softest absorbent cloths she’d ever known. Kadlin brought in thin silver garment that was to serve as her night clothes. She held it up with that same eager smile and nodded hoping for her approval. The garment was stunning, but it only meant that these women knew what he meant to do to her tonight and what he had been doing to her every night since her capture.

Runa blushed and turned her head toward the mirror catching Ingun’s gaze in it. Ingun just patted her shoulder reassuringly, before continuing brushing her hair. To Runa,

nothing reflected in her eyes or her expression that indicated to her that her behaviour with their King was shameful.

Ingun said something to Kadlin who left the garment and bowed leaving the room quickly.

It was Ingun who finished smoothing her hair and dressed her in the garment which felt like heaven on her skin. Where do they find such luxuries? She turned Runa to face her and actually let her stern expression dissolve for a moment as she touched Runa's cheek. It was a gesture of reassurance Runa thought. It was very kind of her to do that.

Then she heard the unmistakable sound of the door opening and heavy footsteps into the room. She couldn't conceal her excitement and relief at him finally being there and not some other woman's chamber.

The familiar deep voice said something gentle to Kadlin and she giggled in response. Ingun turned to leave after she gave her a comforting smile and said something in her language that was supposed to be encouraging, before she left the small chamber. She heard his voice again and Ingun's for a brief moment, kind and respectful.

The unmistakable sound of the door shutting and locking pierced her ears like an arrow. It seemed like an eternity since she'd seen him last and it was only a few short hours. She knew he was still out there. She could hear him moving about and undressing. So she made her way out to his bed chamber. He caught sight of her and paused letting his eyes rake over her form heatedly.

He growled and reached her in a few strides sweeping her up in his arms and kissing her cutting off her squeal of surprise.

Chapter Six

The next morning she awoke with a start at the knocking at the door. Bothvar called out and was answered. She didn't understand any of it. He said something brief before turning to Runa and pulling her back down next to him again. His steely eyes held the dark lust but his gesture of only caressing her cheek with his calloused hand meant he wasn't going to act on it. "I have got to go Runa. I will send your maids in." He leaned over and kissed her.

"They are my maids?" She said in astonishment.

"Aye. I chose them myself after we arrived yesterday. I will only have the best serve you." He caressed her side. What he didn't tell her was that over five hundred women waited eagerly requesting the honour. Ingun was his mother's maid and she recommended Kadlin. He knew he could trust them both with his most precious possession.

She flushed and before she could say anything else he leaned over and kissed her thoroughly again before getting out of bed.

"Will you be long?" Her lips tingled from it until she watched his magnificent nakedness in the day light, then the tingling was forgotten replaced head to toe with a searing heat.

"Aye, my kingdom does not run itself. I will do my best to see you later." He turned and gave her another look knowing

that she was watching him. “Runa, that does not help my discipline when you stare at me with such naked desire.” She blushed and pulled the blanket over her head. He laughed.

She could hear him gather his clothes and pull them on while chuckling. She couldn’t peak out from under the covers again. She was too embarrassed. She heard the familiar banging on the door, followed by it being unlocked, and shut again as he left.

“How is your woman?” Grunewald asked as he followed his lord down the stairs to the main room. He was waiting in the antechamber for Bothvar to rise.

Bothvar just smiled and Grunewald laughed.

“I wish you’d kept the sister.”

Bothvar looked at his brother, “I only needed one. The oldest one.” *The most beautiful one he’d ever laid eyes on.*

“Ah yes Bothvar, but as you can see. I don’t have a woman.” Grunewald teased.

Bothvar laughed, “In time then. We will see what I can do to appease you.”

Grunewald shook his head, “Not likely. The yellow hair is very captivating. Her sister was just as appealing.”

“The mother was distraught enough.”

“True.” To take both daughters would have been

unforgivable. They revered and respected their women, even though the Esbiorns did not. They treated them like livestock. Not allowing them any freedom. That is why most of their people had never seen an Esbiorn woman, because ones such as Runa were kept within the confines of Anthor fortress. Peasant woman that were captured, were rare and still did not glow like Runa. Grunewald's disgust was evident when Runa refused to sit in the seat next to Bothvar. To treat a female like a dog was inexcusable. He and Bothvar were schooled well in the ways of the three other kingdoms that bordered his. Their father made sure of it. It was essential for warfare to protect their borders.

Runa was from the House of Anthor in the north. It was a much colder climate. They had heard through spies that she was promised to wed the desert Prince in the far south as was their sister had when she disappeared. It didn't take long for Bothvar to determine that Runa's father was responsible for the disappearance of their sister when he heard of the betrothal. It would have caused an unwanted alliance surrounding his brother's kingdom. It was when they were passing through his land that they captured her, it was a moon from her homeland and not too far from his fortress. Her men were easily defeated. He was actually disappointed for Bothvar had brought a hundred of his strongest warriors, which was a waste. Grunewald expected a good battle. They got none. Her men surrendered almost on sight of Bothvar's magnificent army. They were a smaller race, unlike theirs. Their size must've been very intimidating. *Still*, thought Grunewald, *they should have defended their women to the death*. Instead they let them go with barely a protest. Bothvar sent the mother and sister back to their lands with the escort and without the fair Runa. Her beauty was unsurpassable, even with her clothing covered with mud, her hair wet from the rain and her face kept bowed, Bothvar made

the discovery by forcing her to face him and tilt her head up to see the fine feminine beauty she had. Grunewald himself had to stifle a gasp, but Bothvar got to touch her. Her large, bright blue eyes were surrounded by a pale perfect complexion, full lips, high cheekbones, and a perfect straight petite nose. In the darkness of the evening, she was unmistakable. Bothvar stared at both of them for a bit, judging which one was the eldest. It was obvious when she kept instructing her sister, but other than that there wasn't much difference between them. She had pledged herself to Bothvar to save her sister. It was admirable. Although Bothvar wouldn't have harmed her and had every intention of sending the mother and youngest daughter back home unharmed. He knew an Esbiorn's oath was an unbreakable promise. To Grunewald's surprise, Bothvar accepted.

There were many females who have tried that in the past to claim Bothvar, but it was up to the male to accept them. They could bed them willingly, but to accept a pledge was unbreakable except through death. Their women had that freedom. They didn't have to remain innocent until a male accepted their oath. To a Geirrer warrior it was a lifelong oath. He would take no other and neither would the female. He was sure Runa didn't understand what she did, but it was too late. She was now Bothvar's. An Esbiorn woman saves herself for her future mate and he knew that she was innocent when they captured her. They were watched endlessly by guards and maids to keep the royal women such a way. It was their custom. No one else would accept her now. It wouldn't be that way when they found his sister. She would be accepted back to their Kingdom without scorn. Grunewald squelched his rage. He knew how they treated the slaves they had in the north. There would be hell to pay if she was abused in any sense. Bothvar reassured him constantly that their sister was royalty and would be treated as a royal slave, not

a common one. It still didn't make him feel much better.

"Does she ask about her sister and mother?"

"Nay, but it is only a matter of time before the questions begin. She is still unsettled and feels too attached to her traditions. I do not think she will ask for a few days yet, when she begins to find her will."

"I am surprised brother, that you left her side so easily. You were in such a hurry to get home and I know it wasn't to tend to overdue events. I could have done that for you."

"I had to, she needs time to adjust. Not only that, I suspect the raid in the forest was to claim her. My enemies had word that I have taken a woman. I did not want to risk that again. I need to keep up my skills." He sighed. It meant that if he were to bare future sons it would have been with her, and those that opposed his rule would kill her to prevent an heir. It is not often a Gierrer opens his heart again. So the sooner he gets her with child, the better.

She had difficulty with their ways, and to keep her in his bed would not help her learn any sooner. However, like the past few weeks he awoken with a fire in his loins for her. This time, he ignored it as best he could. He couldn't keep claiming her like a rutting stallion. He knew she was raised to please men, but to take such advantage of this custom was making him feel guilty. He had to go work off some frustration. After a morning meal the sword play would begin in the courtyard. They were a warrior people, and as such kept their skills up when idle. He would participate today to try and take his mind off of the jewel in his bed. The disputes that happened among his people in his

absence could be settled later.

“Aye. They were bent on getting to her.” Then almost as if Grunewald read his brother’s thoughts, he added, “You had best get her with child as soon as possible.”

Bothvar laughed. “Now I know you are my brother.”

Runa heard the door open again and in stepped Kadlin and Ingun with a pile of cloth. Ingun bade her down into the room with the bath and washed her again. She was embarrassed that evidence of last night was still on her. Ingun paid her no mind. She started weeping without even realizing it. If Bothvar severed her oath she would have nowhere to turn, nowhere to go. Her mother would even refuse her.

Ingun wrapped her in the soft cloth and made a soothing noise. Runa realized that she was humming a sweet lullaby to make her feel better. She managed to smile at the woman, who’s soft brown eyes were quite sincere.

Kadlin came in at that moment with a beautiful overlay of sheer cloth, red in color with gold trim. His colors again. They slipped the garment over her head and the cool feeling it gave her was equally as soothing. Although the sheer cloth was thin, there were several layers of it making it impossible to see through. Then Kadlin produced one of those tight pieces of cloth that went about her waist up to her breasts. It was the same scarlet color and she drew it tightly about her waist. She wasn’t used to such clothing and it took her breath away when she tightened the cords. Her clothing was made of thicker heavier material because of the climate she lived in, but she had to admit, she

liked the soft feeling of the Gierrer's cloth over her familiar coarse material.

Ingun combed out her golden hair and left it unbound. Runa tried to get her to braid it but she refused and instead pulled back the hair that drifted over her face and bound it behind her head allowing her tresses to flow to her waist. Her hair looked lighter in sharp contrast to the scarlet cloth, but she actually liked it.

Both women stood back with pleasing looks while they studied her appearance and Runa blushed. Ingun tsked at that and Kadlin grabbed her hand leading her to the door. She rapped on it and the door unlocked and swung open. She took a deep breath. The five warriors were waiting. Then it dawned on her. They weren't Bothvar's guards, they were hers! Did he think she would escape? She had nowhere to go. Maybe it was for his enemies, their size and fierceness were overwhelming, and she looked insignificant compared to them. Who would try and attack with such men surrounding her. They were fully armed and nodded to her with an unmistakable measure of respect. She averted her gaze quickly as was custom. Kadlin had to do some extra urging to get her out of the room.

Grunewald hit the dirt hard with an oath, causing dust to billow around his large form, although he still didn't release his sword. His brother stood over him grinning.

"God's blood Bothvar, I don't need you to kill me." The men that watched roared with laughter. His sword arm ached from the blows that Bothvar delivered. Then he planted a foot in his midsection shoving him off his feet when he found an opening.

“You whine like an old woman.” He laughed reaching down to clasp his brother’s arm and pull him to his feet. Sounds of metal on metal and the grunts and roars of other men were heard in the courtyard as his men practiced their skills.

“If you are so frustrated, maybe you should just bed her again.” Grunewald teased causing Bothvar to bring his sword down on him again just in time for him to raise his sword to defend his jaw jarring blow.

Then Bothvar stilled and his eyes focused past him.

Grunewald turned to see a glorious sight as did the rest of the people in the courtyard, men and women alike. There was no mistaking the flow of gold walking through the crowd of people with her two maids and five warriors in tow. Sounds of the surrounding wind could only be heard as she made her way through the yard with urgings from her maids. If the woman actually looked up she would notice that all eyes were on her, and as she passed they bowed their heads in respect, but she didn’t. She didn’t have a clue how important she was being Bothvar’s woman. She was reserved to her ways and kept her head bowed to the ground in front of her.

Bothvar grunted, “This is ridiculous.”

“I agree.” Stated Grunewald. “They are barbarians. Who would not allow such a prize to be displayed.” He kicked a pile of dirt in frustration. “We should have taken the other sister.”

Bothvar turned his steady steel-blue gaze on him as he suddenly realized his brother’s meaning, “I see Grunewald. You

should have said something before." Bothvar had mistaken Grunewald's comment this morning. He actually desired Runa's sister.

He shrugged, "You were right, the mother would have been desolate."

"Still," He said angrily, "To have such prized women and suppress them to mere equality of a dog like you said is wrong. If I had known it was so bad, I would have taken the other sister and the mother, to keep them safe."

"Aye, but after taking the Princess of Anthor as your own, I am sure we will not see the last of them. Wars have been waged for less, yet for such beauty I would gladly wage my own. I think that the King of Esbiorn has another daughter to betroth to the Ziln when he finds out that we have taken the first. I may get a woman yet." His eyes brightened.

"True." Bothvar grinned. "Are you sure you want to open your heart as I have. It is taking great restraint not to remove the heads of my own warriors for just admiring my mate."

"For beauty such as that, we would all risk it." He said with amusement.

Runa followed the lead of her companions as they led her through the courtyard. She kept her gaze averted because there were many men present obviously practising their swordplay. Women weren't allowed to witness such skills, although she did notice that there were many woman there watching, even cheering. She nearly fainted at the sight. Her father would have had all those women whipped for such brazenness, although she

always wished she could see it, she couldn't bring herself to watch. Their two cultures were so different, she was beginning to realize.

They passed through two tall thick metal doors that were guarded by several more warriors to the outside of the walls of the Castle. She knew the Castle was built on top of the cliffs and was surprised to see that a high stone wall prevented her view of the river below. She would not have noticed it when they rode up the day before because her face was buried in his back with her eyes closed. It trailed a long ways down to the ocean that the river flowed into. The wall was quite old and probably prevented the loss of livestock and more likely, small children off the cliffs. She followed the two women down a long path, her hair whipped off to the side as wind flowed off the water.

It was beautiful. She stood in awe. She had never seen such a large body of water. They had small bodies of water, but nothing this vast. It heaved and washed the sandy shore. She was delighted as the two maids pulled her toward it. She looked around, there were many women and children there delighting in the pleasure on a warm day. She stood and let the water washed over her toes and she actually laughed at the tickling feeling it gave her and it was warm.

Something else she noticed was that there were a great many warriors lining the beach carefully watching for their safety. She allowed her gaze to sweep along the shore. They were everywhere. Did they put so much importance on their women? Her custom would not even allow the high born women to leave the fortress. It was a very rare occasion like the journey she was making with her mother and sister. Slaves gathered herbs outside the walls, but not the Esbiorn women. It was their

form of protection. The men would find it trivial to guard them, when they could be doing other important things. She scanned the expression on two warriors close to her. They did not seem displeased. In fact they seemed to take this duty quite seriously. One of the men turned his gaze on her, he bowed his head and she gasped and lowered her gaze. It was Ingun who tilted her head back up much like Bothvar did to meet the warrior Lord's blue grey gaze. Again he bowed. Ingun then turned her to her soft brown eyes. She gave her a reassuring smile and shook her head, tapped under her chin twice with her fingers. Runa then realized that Ingun wanted her to meet the gaze of Bothvar's people. She paled and shook her head in return. Ingun then fingered the fine scarlet cloth Runa wore and tapped under her chin twice more. She didn't miss her meaning. These people knew she was with Bothvar and were showing her their respect. How could they not? He was King, it was customary. But she was no longer innocent, and a slave. She was ruined. How could they possibly show her respect? She was nothing more than his concubine. Unexpectedly she started crying again. She was so confused. She didn't know these customs and was fearful of understanding them.

Kadlin came up at that moment and hugged her causing her to weep even more. They treated her with such revelry which she felt so undeserving. She gave herself to their lord as a mere slave to save her sister.

A familiar voice rang in her ears. She knew it was him but she couldn't raise her head to him, she was ashamed at her public display of emotion. He was answered by one of her guards. Then she felt Kadlin being pulled from her and in an instant she was pulled against the familiar hard body. He was embracing her, in front of everyone. She wept harder. Public displays of affection

were also forbidden, it was strictly for the bed chamber. Yet he treated her more like royalty than her own people did in the two days she was there. It was too much for her to bear.

He tilted her head back to look at her. His steely gaze held a softness of understanding. He brushed the tears from her eyes and kissed both of her cheeks gently as if that would stop her tears. She felt foolish and again he refused to let her avert her gaze.

“Runa.” He said her name with a softness that said he understood her conflict with the customs. “You should not weep. You are safe here.”

She nodded and buried her face in his chest. She could feel the rumble of his deep voice when he spoke to his warriors. Soon after, she could hear them turn and leave. He’d sent her guards away. To ease her embarrassment it seemed. When she finally lifted her head, she noticed that her maids were gone too. It was just him. She unconsciously wrapped her arms around his waist, bringing her tighter to him. Maybe this was a dream and she would wake up soon. Regardless, she knew if she let go that she would have to face the reality of this situation again.

He didn’t mean to follow her, but watching her walk through his courtyard lured him.

Grunewald chuckled as he watched his brother sheath his sword and follow her without saying a word.

When he saw her weeping he asked Brim what the problem was.

“I have no idea, my lord. She stood in the water for a

moment and Ingun tried to get her to meet young Bjorn's gaze and she just started weeping." He felt at a loss on what to do.

Bothvar grunted, "Take the men and leave Brim, she is shamed. That is what makes her weep. It is the Esbiorn blood in her." Brim waved his arm and told the men to head back to the fortress while Bothvar turned and dismissed Ingun and Kadlin. He then pulled her into his embrace.

He returned his attention back to her, patiently waiting until the tears stopped. He caressed her back soothing her. This was difficult for him to see a woman so oppressed. His sister would be appalled if she were treated as such, and more than likely stick a knife in the gut of someone who forced such behaviour from her. Grunewald and he had a strict understanding of the Ziln ambassadors that their sister would be given the same freedom as she had in Gierrer. Bothvar was going to refuse their request, but it was Lenore, his sister, that insisted she go. He and Grunewald argued with her for three days, but she insisted. Bothvar could not refuse her request, because it was her life to do with what she wished. If she wished to be wed to the Ziln Prince, then there was nothing he could do or say to dissuade her. He wished she wasn't in there when the ambassadors asked for her then she wouldn't have known. Lenore demanded that it was her choice to help Gierrer. If they were allied with the Zilns they could defeat the Mohrs. She was right of course, but he wasn't willing to sacrifice his precious sister, he loved her too much. Defiantly she lifted her chin and told him she was going, and it was with a broken heart that he allowed her to do so.

He returned his attention to the warm feminine body pressed against him and remembered what his father told him

when he opened his heart to a woman. No amount of advice could have prepared him for what he felt for Runa. He was protective, possessive and couldn't get enough of her in his bed. In fact, everything about her was addictive. It was a far cry from the women he'd experienced before. Once he opened his heart, it made love making a thousand times more pleasurable. However, the feelings of possessiveness were foreign to him, to the point where he could be deadly about them. If one of his men even touched her without his permission, he felt he could kill them without hesitation. By the Gods, even when they looked at her, it raised his ire. He could never understand why when other men professed as much, but now he understood fully. Although, he would never worry about another man touching Runa, because they were all well aware of what happens when a man takes a mate and he was their king.

Chapter Seven

The next morning she awoke. Bothvar was still beside her sleeping. Daylight just barely peeked the sky dousing the room in the pale light of dawn. Sitting up, she looked around. Something was wrong and it woke her. Was it a nightmare? Suddenly she felt an overwhelming flood of dizziness, then without warning she leaned over the bed, wretched and threw up onto the floor. She felt a strong hand on her bare back as she wretched.

"You are with child." Bothvar spoke with certainty as a sense of pride went through him coupled with arrogance that he was so potent to get her in this condition so soon.

An icy wave of dread coursed through her at his words. How could that be? She threw up again.

She heard him shout and the door unlocked, which was the last thing she heard before she passed out.

Several voices pierced her dreams and her eyes opened to Ingun, Kadlin, and another woman she didn't recognize. Grunewald was there as well. Ingun sat beside her and wiped her brow with a damp cloth. Her head and gut hurt. She saw Ingun's eyes brighten when she noticed Runa awake. She said something over her shoulder and in an instant Bothvar was beside her, pulling her into his arms and Ingun stood up and backed off.

Runa looked around the room trying to remember what happened before she lost consciousness. Then she remembered what he'd said to her .

"I am not." She stated softly remembering his words.

"Yes you are." He said gently while smiling at her denial, "Are you feeling better?"

She buried her face in her hands and wept.

Grunewald was stunned, *"What is wrong with her? Is this another Esbiorn custom? She should be overwhelmed with happiness."*

Bothvar looked at his brother and gave him a look of helplessness before turning his attention back to her, "Runa you should be proud to carry my heir." He said with surprise, "Are you not?"

"I gave you an oath my lord," she sobbed, "I aim to please you."

He was confused at her confession which did not make sense with her persistent weeping, "Which I accepted, but you do not seem pleased with this."

She tried to sit up and he held her tight.

"Be still woman. You are ill."

"I do feel better." She looked at everyone, "Why are all these people here?"

"Because you are with my child."

"That's impossible." She whispered her denial again, so no one else could hear, "We have been together only a short time."

"It happens." He said with unmistakable pride.

She felt like she was going to be sick again,

She must've paled somewhat because Ingun was suddenly beside her, wiping her brow.

"My lord," she managed to get out, "I'm in a state of undress."

"So?"

"All these people...I'm...ashamed." She was covered to the shoulder in the glorious furs that dressed his bed, but it wasn't enough for her.

“Ah yes, your ways.” He sighed and turned his head and spoke to the group. They all bowed and left, even Ingun who didn't seem to happy about it.

“My ways are necessary for me.” She said after the door closed and they were alone.

“Not anymore. Not here. You should be proud to look as you do.”

Despite her pallor her cheeks pinked, “There were many people here.”

“People who will see you through the birth of our child. They will see you in a worse state. They have done this many times, that is why they are to attend you.”

“And your man!”

He laughed, “Nay, he was just pleased and wished to share in the news. Now tell me why you are not pleased with producing an heir for me.”

She lifted her head to look at him, he allowed her to sit up this time. She took a deep breath to build up the strength to stare at him as he wanted. “I gave an oath to please you my lord. It is not the child. I am pleased that this makes you happy.” In fact she was overjoyed with the news, it was her uncertain future that frightened her.

“Runa, “He sighed in frustration, “...set your oath aside. Do you not care for me?”

She nodded without hesitation, "Very very much." She admitted.

"Then you do not care for children?" The look on her face was so shocking that he regretted saying the words.

"I love children!" she blurted

"Runa, you are not making any sense. You care for me, you love children, but you do not seem pleased to carry mine."

She shook her head, "I am very happy to carry your child. It's just that when I give you a son...if it is a son..."

"It is." He said confidently.

"What if it is a girl?"

"It is not a girl. You will give me a son."

His confidence in the gender of their unborn child surprised her, "How do you know?"

"We have our ways," He stated, "Now continue with your explanation."

She nodded, "After I give you a...son, are you are going to- to- be done with me?" She nearly choked out, not wanting to ask him if he would give her to the rest of his men. She couldn't bear to ask.

"Why would I do such a thing? You gave an oath, I

accepted." He said incredulous.

"Until you release me of it..." She added.

"Certainly not!" he barked causing her to start. He steadied himself, she was too timid and he forgot himself. He reached out and brushed his fingers across her cheek, "Only a fool that was half crazed, blind and stupid, would do such a thing. I am none of those things."

She shook her head, "So I am to be your slave forever?"

He looked at her disbelieving then burst into a fit of laughter. Everything made sense to him now. It was no wonder she wept constantly since they arrived. He understood that she may have thought that in the beginning, but after the past few weeks he had mistakenly assumed that she knew she was more than that to him.

She just stared at him in surprise, unable to speak. When he finished he shook his head at her.

"Woman, what makes you think you are my slave?"

"I gave myself to you."

"An offer that I accepted." Her brow pursed and he laughed again, "You think that I would have you as a slave. Woman, in my land we do not bed our slaves, only free women. If a man wishes to bed a slave, he must free her, or ask to have her freed from who owns her. You are no slave."

Her jaw dropped, "What? I don't understand."

“You are not my slave, Runa....you are my woman, my mate. I understand that I allowed you to think that in the beginning, but as the days went by with the way you have been treated I thought you would understand your place here.”

Now she really did feel like passing out.

“Why do you think you wear my colors, sleep in my bed, and dine beside me? Why do you think I have five to ten of my best warriors guarding you at all times? In my realm we revere women; they are free to choose their own mates, free to bed whomever. They may offer themselves to a man for more than just a bed-mate and if the man chooses he accepts and they stay together. If he does not, she moves on. We prize their intelligence, their skills and their beauty.” He reached out and caressed her cheek again, “Our women our precious to us, do not mistake our customs with yours. You gave me an oath and I accepted and now I have given you a child, a son. “

She was overwhelmed with his confession, “but you don’t know me enough to allow me such privilege!”

“I knew what I wanted when I first saw you.” He explained softly, “When a Gierrer takes a mate, it is his destiny to open his heart to her. I had no choice. I could not ignore the powerful surge of emotion when you gave me your oath. They are feelings that I myself am having difficulty adjusting to because we are born with a warrior’s heart and live for our strength, our skill and our intellect. However, now that I have you everything that I have been raised and trained for is not as it seems. Now I know it will take you time to become familiar with our customs and the ways of the Gierrer.” He sighed again, “I

also know your customs. We don't agree with them, but there is nothing I can do to change that. However, I can change your ideas of how women should be treated. You are a queen Runa. You will start acting like it."

A queen! Her eyes became as wide as saucers.

"Now you carry my child. I will have an heir. We are all pleased at this." He kissed her forehead gently, "I am especially pleased that you are able to bear a Gierrer warrior. You do not realize how important you are to my people. Did you not understand this when my warriors guard you so carefully? They watch you closely on the shore, in the forest and within my own impermeable castle."

"I did notice, but I thought it was so I would not escape."

He laughed, "Really? Runa I would track you easily. I do not need my warriors for that."

"You would?"

"Aye."

"do your warriors not find it beneath them to guard a woman?"

"They feel privileged."

Her mouth fell open, "*Privileged...*to guard a woman? Gierrer warriors?"

"Privileged to guard *you*. My warriors contested for the

position. When we first arrived here, that group of men that approached me came to ask for the honour to protect you when they heard I'd taken a mate. I chose one of my best warriors, Brim, to command the ten that look out for you. He is well trained, intelligent and hard to beat. All the men that guard you have taken mates, except Brim, but I trust him as I would Grunewald. Do you not realize, you are the only one that can bear my heirs?"

She shook her head rapidly trying to absorb everything he was telling her at once....*privileged, queen.....with child...a Gierrer warrior child.*

He explained, "Runa, I have never taken an oath before. When I did, it opened my heart to you. I have never felt for another woman as I feel for you. I would sooner die and give up my kingdom than lose you."

At those words she felt joy enter her heart and for the first time she gave him a smile without sadness in her eyes, she threw her arms about his neck and held him tight. He returned her embrace.

"I did not realize how you felt Runa. I could not comprehend that you thought I would no longer want you." He buried his face in her hair. "Never, ever fear that. You will be given the freedom you desire within my fortress, in the village, and, if you wish, the beaches. You will be a recluse no longer."

"I enjoyed the water yesterday. I thank you for that. We are not allowed to venture like that in my land, we are protected within the fortress."

He scoffed, "No Runa you are hidden. Such beauty you possess and you are not allowed to present yourself. It's unheard of. Women are not trivial to us. They have the power that is essential to the future of our race and are treated as such. Free women have the freedom of choice on who they wish to be with. However, once the male agrees she must listen to the will of her mate. It is a small sacrifice that she gives up to be with him." He gave her an amused smile, "Although, most subjects are open for debate."

"I would never...!"

He laughed again, before continuing. "I'm not surprised by this, but, I must inform you the final word is mine. As your King it is your duty as my Queen, my mate, because you have chose me. But that does not mean you cower in my presence, do not meet my or my men's gaze. You must."

She shook her head, "It's forbidden."

"No longer. You are now a Gierrer woman, not Esbiorn."

"Why did you take me?" She allowed a sob to escape her.

"That is not your concern, not yet." His tone of voice stopped her from pushing him. Then his tone changed to being soft and gentle, 'Are you not happy? Do I not please you?"

There was no denying that in the short time she had known him that she cared for him deeply. He treated her better than her own father did, and with the most tender hands. She could not fathom such treatment if she had not experienced it, "You do." She admitted softly, "But my mother...my sister..."

“Are safely home Runa, I did not harm them. I am not a monster.” His voice rang with sincerity.

She released a sigh of relief. If her warriors captured ones such as her, it would be different.

“Do I not make you feel like a Queen?”

She didn’t take long to answer, and when she did, her words were full of sorrow, but not from his treatment. It was from her own upbringing and how the women on her race are treated. “It’s so different from what I’m used to.”

“I know this Runa. Now you know of my bond. It is my hope despite your ways, that you not leave me and take my child....”

“I would never!” She blurted quickly. No one would take her in. Her father would whip her in shame and have the child taken from her. It would never even occur to her to remove the child from its father. Her hand went to her flat abdomen, “*never*.” She repeated quietly. Most importantly, she could never leave Bothvar. Even the thought of it hurt her to her bones. She knew she loved him more than her own life. He had shown her things she never fathomed and treated her better than a queen of her own lands.

“I believe you.” He said softly tilting her face up to his. “If you do, I will find you and bring you back to me no matter the cost. Even if it kills me.”

“You speak the truth.” She whispered with her eyes full of

wonder.

"I do. Once an oath is made, it cannot be broken. It is a bond that is as old as time with the Gierrer. This is a sacred promise that bounds us to our women. When I accepted yours, it unlocked my heart to you and no other. I will only be loyal to you. Even if you die before me, I cannot take another in the same way. You are mine and I don't intend to let you go."

"I have never heard of such a thing." She said softly as she reached up and caressed his jaw with her fingers in awe of his confession.

"It is bred in us. It is this bond, this unity, that gifts us with a loyal race and gives us our strength as warriors."

She actually smiled at him, "Thank you, Lord Bothvar."

"Bothvar." He returned her smile, "We are alone, the title is not necessary."

She boldly laid back into his strong embrace. And he kissed the top of her head. His customs were so unlike hers, but she would try her best to please him.

"Now that you understand my devotion to you, did you mean what you said a fortnight ago at the inn? Or was it your upbringing that prompted such an oath."

She remembered what he was referring to and sat up to look at him, "Aye my lord, at the time I meant it, "she blushed, "Even more after that night with you."

He chuckled and raised a brow, "You say?"

She flushed further, "Aye, you were so...patient, and gentle...and well...I never expected as much, and for it to be so..."

"...real?" He stated with a hint of amusement using her words from the inn after he had taken her innocence. His fingers caressed her cheek.

She lay back against him to try and hide the ever increasing color to her cheeks, "Aye. The feelings that you started in me are so...foreign..." She confessed. "The elder women have not spoken of such emotion."

"It should have been no different; it was your first time. I am not a rutting brute, although I have come close to it with you."

She actually giggled at his words, "A rutting Brute, my lord?"

"At least that is what Grunewald has referred to me as of late."

She laughed again, "Grunewald speaks to you in such a way? Does your man not fear you?"

He snorted, "My men fear me when they should. Grunewald only when he needs to. He is my brother, this gives him a head start."

Again she laughed at his jest. "It all makes sense now. You look alike."

He was silent for a moment, thinking. "Are your responses to me and my touch, is that not what you are trained to do?" It was a question that haunted him, her responses to him. Was it her training, or was it because she wanted him as much as he did her?

"In so much my lord, but I did not expect to enjoy it as much as I do with you. My reactions to you are not expected. I was not trained that way."

He groaned inwardly at her words, "This pleases me Runa."

She was elated to know that she pleased him. "How is it you know so much about my people?"

"It is necessary for war. To know your enemy gives you an advantage."

"Do you think I am your enemy?"

He chuckled, "No. You are my woman. If you are referring to my deception, I had to be sure. I know the ways of your men, not so much of the women, but what we do know seems to be accurate. It would be my undoing if I opened my heart to a treacherous Esbiorn female that is more loyal to her kind than her mate's. It still surprises me that the women of your people are so abused."

"I did not realize we were," there was unmistakable sadness in her voice, "until I met you."

“There is much more for you to learn about us.” His hand continued caressing her, “And much more I would like to learn about you.”

Bothvar had left her for some time explaining that he had matters to deal with that had been avoided long enough since he returned, while her maids, Ingun and Kadlin, had readied her. One who called herself Thora had entered the chamber shortly after and bowed. She was actually able to speak her language although a bit broken at times. She had explained that she was her *Therar*, a medicine woman, and gave her a drink.

“It will help with the illness in the morn. It must be taken the night prior.”

Runa placed her hand on her belly.

Thora laughed, “Do not worry My Lady, it will not harm the babe. It will help him grow well and aid in a healthy birth.”

Runa felt reassured and downed the contents of the cup.

Just before the evening meal, Bothvar came to escort her. As the service commenced, the minstrels gathered to the middle of the floor to play for them. It was the second time she noticed something odd from her traditions and he must’ve seen the questioning in her expression.

“Runa, do not be afraid to ask me anything.” He reassured.

She nodded, hesitated for a moment, then spoke, “Why

do your women not dance?"

Borthvar gave her a surprised look, "Dance?"

Grunewald cut in, "I would not protest to that!"

Bothvar laughed, "They have never offered. I doubt they would even if we begged."

Grunewald laughed.

Runa's brow puckered again as she showed her disapproval, "It is with great pride that we dance for our men. Do your women not appreciate your protection?"

"Grunewald, my woman is serious." His eyes never left hers as he spoke to his brother.

She lifted her chin, "I am, my Lord."

His brows went up in question, "You say you would dance when you cannot even meet our servant's gazes?"

"It is different."

"How so?" He sighed in frustration again, "Runa, you must look at me when you speak."

She forced her gaze up to his and tried to ignore how his blue grey eyes affected her, "We are trained and raised in ways to please our men. Dancing is an art that we devote our lives to. It is one of the few things we are allowed for expression."

He pointed to the center of the hall, "You would dance for me here in this room, in front of fifty warriors, their mates, servants and our slaves, when you shame under a small scrutiny of an embrace by me in front of them?" This was incredible and it didn't make any sense.

"Yes, My Lord." She replied strongly, "I would."

"Bothvar..." Grunewald's voice had changed from amusement to a serious tone with an edge of warning, but Bothvar spoke cutting off his words.

"Then do."

"My lord?" she could tell by the tone in his voice that he was frustrated with her and by the look on his face, he did not believe her.

Grunewald again interrupted and Bothvar raised a hand to cut him off, "If my woman wishes to dance for me. I wish to see it."

She actually grinned at him, which made his brows knit together in confusion. Yes, she was well disciplined in the proper ways of a woman from her kind, but dancing was different, it was their freedom. She nodded as he stood and raised her with him.

She did not know what he said when he spoke to the people in the hall, but it caused an uproar of praise which made her immediately blush. He leaned down. "You flush at the attention. I do not think you can do this." He hedged.

She raised her chin again, "I will. Instruct your minstrels

for a spring lyric.”

“As you wish.” He did just that.

The music began and Runa made her way around his table with her head bowed and her hands clasped in front of her like a beaten slave.

Grunewald leaned to his brother, “You are asking for trouble brother.”

“She won’t do it.” He said with confidence.

“Bothvar, even with her just standing in the middle of the room, she draws attention. She doesn’t need to do anything. She shines like the brightest star in the darkest sky.” He indicated to the people in the large hall, “If you would take your eyes off your beautiful woman for but a moment, do you not see how everyone stares at her.”

Bothvar did just that. Grunewald was right, not one male warrior looked anywhere else but his wife. It was then he realized he had made a mistake, she wasn’t only desirable to him, but everyone else who did not have mates, which was most of his army.

He should have stopped it right then and there but then she stretched out one arm and one leg and raised her face to his, he was momentarily spellbound. Her eyes were unmistakably on him. Then she bowed and spiralled on one leg as she kicked the other out in front of her with the smoothness of flowing water and her long yellow hair spinning with her.

“God’s blood...” he choked out as she moved around the

room with such grace and beauty that it should have been forbidden in all kingdoms. He suddenly realized why her kind was so suppressed; they could conquer foreign lands with such a display.

Grunewald was speechless as were the rest of the audience.

She spun toward Bothvar again in a sensual sway of her body. He'd never seen a woman move with such ease nor knew that a feminine body is capable of such fluidity. He wanted to stop her, but he'd goaded her into it. He deserved this.

Barely a moment after the last note ended Bothvar growled and abruptly shoved himself up from the table. She had stopped in front of him, lowered her gaze and clasped her hands in front of herself. She didn't notice that he was no longer in his seat.

The whole hall was silent for an uncomfortable pause and she began to feel like no one liked it when suddenly a tremendous roar erupted. She flinched at the noise and managed a glance up to the faces and they were cheering loudly while banging their cups on the tables. She couldn't suppress a smile. That is, until she saw Bothvar. There was unmistakable rage in his expression. She felt the blood drain from her face at the vision. Images flooded back to her over her father's rage with her mother. It looked as though he was going to strike her. She had seen the look in her father's eyes before he unleashed his rage on someone.

He'd rounded his table and approached her in several strides, and astonished her by picking her up and tossing her

over his thick shoulder which caused another eruption of cheers. She squealed at the humiliation and hid her face. Though she could not block out the noise, even Grunewald's who wasn't cheering but bursting with laughter as Bothvar carried her out of the hall.

He didn't set her down until he was alone with her in his chamber. He plopped her on the bed and continued to pace back and forth in front of her. He was angry at himself and full with raging desire all at the same time.

She tried to bring her gaze to him, but she couldn't. She knew he was angry. She just didn't understand why. He told her to dance. She did.

He stopped several times and stared down at her, before he began pacing again. He walked over to one of the large windows placed his hand on the stone encasement and looked out.

"I have upset you." She stated softly.

"Damn rights!" He stopped and sighed trying to calm the rage in his voice. Without looking at her he knew she must've cringed at his harshness, "I'm not angry with you Runa, as much as myself."

"I don't understand."

"I know. That is why I can't be angry with you. Grunewald warned me." He turned and walked toward her. He could see she was trembling again. He had frightened her. It was the last thing he wanted to do, and tried his best to prevent.

He stared down at her for a moment waiting for her to meet his gaze, but she didn't. He felt guilty for frightening her. The woman had enough of that in her life. Releasing a frustrated breath he went down on one knee in front of her. "Runa look at me." He said softly.

"I cannot." She hiccupped, trying to withhold her tears.

"Woman, look at me." His voice took on an apologetic tone.

This made her meet his gaze.

"You cannot do that again."

Her delicate brows went up in protest. It was her tradition. She loved the freedom and expression it allowed her. Now, he was asking her to set aside the one thing she enjoyed. Well, besides his lovemaking.

"At least not like that." He sighed again trying to get control of his anger. "You didn't do anything wrong. You did what you were told. I was foolish to allow it. I didn't think you could, because of the way you present yourself."

"I explained...."

"Yes, I know. I didn't believe you. I regret it. It won't happen again."

"I would be whipped if I told a lie."

"No you will not!" He bellowed, causing her to flinch, and

him to try and soften his voice, "Not by me, not by *anyone*. I have told you we think highly of our women." He gritted his teeth trying to withhold anger at her confession. Beating a woman was cowardly, "Furthermore, no *one* touches my woman for I will kill them before they take their next breath."

"You must have some sort of punishment for disobedience." She said in astonishment, not believing him.

He saw the look of surprise on her face and frowned. What horrors she must've seen. "Physical punishment for our men, not so much our women and if our men are punished, they deserve it, and know they do. If a man raises his hand to a woman, and if the crime is not warranted, then his punishment would be tenfold. That is our way. We are a large people, but our women are still small, not like you but enough that a blow from any of us would cause undue damage. It is not permitted, unless it is an extreme case. Women are dealt with in other ways if they disobey, but not as you think." His voice became deadly serious, "Runa, as I said if anyone laid a hand on you, my woman, I would surely kill them. Even if they touched you without my permission in any way that indicated they had interest in you, I would kill them. I find myself even threatening my men when they look at you with desire in their eyes, but then I realize they can not help it because of your unmatched beauty. Not only that, I would have no warriors left if I went around slaughtering all of those that lusted after you."

"Beauty?" Her head began to whirl with all of the things he was saying. No one had ever spoken to her with such devotion and praise. Except Erlend when she witnessed her mother being whipped, but even so, it was only a fraction of what the Gierrer King said.

“Aye.” He took her hands in his, turned them over and kissed each palm slowly while watching her, “Surely you know that you are the most beautiful, desirable woman in my kingdom and I would boast, all kingdoms.”

“You jest.” She flushed bright crimson. No one had ever told her such. It caused her to suddenly feel good about herself. A wonderful feeling enveloped her as she put the whole scene together. Here was this huge fierce warrior, a king, kneeling on the floor at her feet, professing his devotion to her. She felt tears form in her eyes and begin to fall as her fears began to leave her. For the first time in her life, she felt as though she was safe

“And” He added shaking his head at her words, “You gave yourself to me. I will never abuse such a gift. I swear by the Gods’ wrath that I would never lay a hand on you in anger. You *must* believe me.” He saw the tears fall and the emotional turmoil fill her sapphire gaze along with affection for him.

She reached out and placed her hand on the side of his face feeling the coarse stubble over a muscular jaw. It was one of the hardest things she had ever done, to touch a man without his permission, but she found her courage after what he professed to her. Her blue gaze searching his face for any indication that he was deceiving her, there was none. What she didn’t mistake was the smouldering look that entered his eyes at her touch. “I danced for you, to please you my Lord.” She whispered.

He groaned and pulled her into his embrace to kiss her forcibly before he lifted his head, and spoke, “Woman, there is nothing I can complain about. You have pleased me in more ways than you can imagine.”

Despite her tears she laughed for the first time since they had been together and her arms slid about his neck as he kissed her again.

He lay awake the next early morn when the knock came at the door. Runa was nestled in the crook of his arm. Her leg stretched over his thighs, her golden mane flayed over the furs. He was awake for awhile and smiling to himself. There wasn't another time that he could say he had been happier. She loved him, as he did her.

"Aye!"

She startled from her sleep, and he held her gently while pulling the furs up to cover her body. He was beginning to agree with her and Grunewald about needing to keep her more hidden, especially after her display and the lustful eyes in his great hall last night.

Grunewald entered and spared a glance at Runa while speaking in their language so she didn't understand. "*We have a visitor.*"

"*Who.*" He answered in the like. His brother's face was serious.

He nodded toward Runa who squirmed under the fur a little more so only the top of her golden head appeared. He couldn't say Esbiorn or Anthor in his language because it was the same word as theirs. "*Her brother.*"

Bothvar raised both of his brows, *“Where is he?”*

“Outside the walls with twenty of his men. He’s asking for an audience.”

Bothvar thought for a moment, *“Allow him in with whatever escort he’s brought. Feed them, but do not offer them refuge”* It was obvious that the Prince of Esbiorn didn’t want to be seen as a threat or he would’ve shown up with more of an army.

“As you wish.” Grunewald turned and left.

Shortly after, Runa peeked out from under the thick fur, *“Is he gone.”*

“Yes. You can reveal yourself again.” He wouldn’t allow his dark mood to affect her, so he resolved to teasing and keeping it from her.

She shoved against him playfully.

He grinned at her as he turned to get out of bed, *“As soft and warm as you are, Runa, I have matters to attend to.”*

She stretched next to him, and ran a delicate hand down his spine *“yes my Lord.”*

He groaned and forced himself to get up. She didn’t have any idea the affect she had on him. He leaned down and kissed her passionately.

"Stay here until I send for you."

"What is it?" She began to understand the meaning in his words when he used that tone.

"Not your concern Runa. Just do as I ask." He gazed at her.

"As you wish." She answered without delay causing him to give her an appreciative smile.

Bothvar dressed all the while his eyes on her and he was pleased that she watched him under her thick golden lashes. He bent down and kissed her once more before leaving. "You are not making this easy." His answer was a seductive giggle.

Chapter Eight

Grunewald was waiting for him in the outer chamber, "As a sign of peace they came unarmed." He spoke as they walked toward the great hall.

"Pity for him." Bothvar growled.

Grunewald grinned, "I see a night with your woman has not softened your temper over her dancing."

"If you wish to keep your tongue Grunewald. Hold it." He spared him a dark scowl. Bothvar didn't need to be reminded of Runa's glorious display in the hall the night before.

Grunewald just laughed in I-told-you-so way.

When they entered the hall, he saw one man stand ahead of five others. He turned and looked at Grunewald his brows raised.

“They rest are in the courtyard. He insisted, not I.”

“Another gesture of good faith I suppose.”

The Prince of Esbiorn spoke firmly, “My name is Erlend. I come in peace, King Bothvar. ”

“So you say.” He motioned him forward, “You and I can discuss what brings you.” He motioned toward a large hearth with two comfortable chairs.

Erlend looked at his men who were clearly nervous from the size of this man, as was he, but he refused to let that reach his expression.

“I give you an oath Erlend, that no harm will come to you.” Bothvar enjoyed the fact that he made them apprehensive

Erlend nodded at those words. He turned and spoke to his men telling them to wait outside with the others. They protested, but he reissued the command with an air of authority of his royal heritage and they quickly complied. He knew an oath from a Gierrer warrior was his life. He’d seen Gierrer warriors before, and was familiar with their common size of over six feet, but these two were easily closer to seven. He had never seen the like, and in fact, thought it wasn’t a possibility. Erlend was tall for his people but was still barely came to the man’s shoulders. He wasn’t armed either, but he was sure that wouldn’t stop him if

he wished to kill him with his bare hands. He took the seat opposite of Bothvar while glancing at Grunewald.

Bothvar saw the gesture, "He is my brother. He stays." He said indicating to a servant to bring them some wine.

"That is fair." He said eyeing the large fierce warrior.

"Explain what brings you here."

"An alliance."

"No." Bothvar started to get up.

"Lord Bothvar, I urge you to listen. You and I are not so different." There was no mistaking of the large man's expression of anger at that statement.

"We hold the lands in the North, we would make a good ally Your land borders two other Kingdoms besides ours. Our land borders two, including yours."

"I'm losing patience Erland. Say what you will and leave."

"We need your alliance to guard our lands against the Mohrs."

"What of the desert people." They constantly threatened the Gierrer, and Bothvar knew that the Esbiorn King had sent Runa to wed their prince in hopes for an alliance to fight the Gierrer. Elrend did not know, that Bothvar knew his father's plans.

“What of our sister....” Grunewald piped in.

Erland’s expression softened slightly, but still kept his voice steady. “We did not harm her.”

“You lie!”

“Grunewald.” Bothvar cut in calmly, without looking at him, but kept his eyes steady on Erland, “You must go for a walk.”

Grunewald turned and stormed out without another word. Bothvar allowed his expression to show anger, yet his voice was a steady deadly calm. “I know of you northern people’s ways towards women. My sister Lenore is a prized female in our lands, for her beauty and her royal blood. If as much as a single hair is missing I’ll kill you myself.”

Erland expected such a response, he would have done no less for his sisters, but he stood his ground, “I would never harm your sister Lord Bothvar. She remains untouched and safe. I will have her brought to you before the next sunrise, to show you my intentions are true.” He stood. His expression was stern, “The desert people have deceived you Bothvar. They have allied with the Mohrs. They would have taken your sister and tricked you.”

“Your people have been no different.”

“I am not my father’s son!” Erland defended letting his voice rise for the first time, “I know our ways are old. My father is rigid. I tried but can’t change him. If he will not change I will take his Kingdom myself. The Mohrs are increasing their allies.

The desert people are strong fighters, but fear you. But with the Mohrs as allies, they may take your lands and then ours. There is nothing to stand in their way of this if Gierrer falls..”

Bothvar scoffed, “They may try. We live to die in such a way.”

“That is why they haven’t yet. They are cunning and know you value women. Your sister was to be a pawn.”

“You have good word on this?” Bothvar’s brow went up.

Erland nodded. “I do. I will return your sister. She will tell you that we did not harm her. It is my measure of good faith that you can trust me, not my father.”

“Agreed. When you come before the next sunrise, we will discuss this further, *after* I speak with my sister.” Bothvar stared at him for a moment, “Why did you come unarmed? Do you not think that I will kill you for even attempting to show your face?”

“Because Gierrer King, unlike my people, you are known for your honour. I was willing to take the risk myself to see if it were true. It may be the only way I could get you to trust me, besides returning your sister.” Erland turned to leave, then hesitated and turned back, “My father wanted me to kill her Bothvar, after she was used by his men, to enrage you. Perhaps causing you to err in some way and prove to the Mohrs that he would make a strong ally to take something you care about and risk your ire.”

Bothvar felt the heat rising with his rage, “You confess this to me. In my house!”

Erland stood his ground and kept his voice calm, “I had no intention of doing as my father bade. I took men loyal to me and slaughtered the desert people’s escort they sent to retrieve her. I have two sisters of my own. I myself, could not deal with such a loss.”

Bothvar calmed himself at Erlend’s confession. There was no mistaking that his affection for his sisters was genuine. “I think Prince of Esbiorn that we have much to discuss.” He knew that Erland did not know that he had his sister. It was at least a full moon ride to his lands, there wouldn’t have been enough time for notice to be sent.

“On the morrow then?”

“Agreed.” Bothvar

Grunewald re-entered the hall when he saw Erland and his men leave the fortress. He took Bothvar’s advice and walked off the anger he was feeling. Bothvar informed him of Erland’s visit.

“Why did he not just bring her back to us now?”

Bothvar smirked, “Probably because we would have killed him on the spot.”

“True.” Grunewald smiled at the thought, “When we speak to Lenore, we will know if he is sincere.”

Runa joined Bothvar that evening to dine. He did not ask her to dance again, despite the urgings of his warriors, which had

abruptly stopped when he bellowed at them. Loud enough to rattle the few birds that perched on the rafters above the hall, causing them to fly about.

That was one time she was thankful that she did not understand his language, because by the looks of their faces except Grunewald who suppressed a smile, it must have been scorching. His mood was solemn and he did not share why, so she did not ask. He would tell her if need be. He kept his hand on her thigh possessively throughout the night. She only heard Grunewald's soft chuckle beside her after Bothvar's display. She would have liked to dance for him again, but knew from his show of anger the night before that it would not have been wise to ask. Also, despite the drink that Thora had been giving her, she found it difficult to keep food down. She knew that it would be a lot worse without it and accepted it each evening. Despite the lure of the food, she did her best to eat as much as she could while resisting the sickness it caused. She did not want to burden Bothvar with this news. As it turned out, he knew.

"You are still ill." Bothvar stated while looking at her plate which did not have much food missing.

She gazed up at him and nodded.

"Runa, you must eat for the sake of our son." His brows
rose in concern.

"Yes, My Lord, I am trying my best. If I eat any more the food will come back up, then what I have eaten will be lost."

"This will not do. I will have Thora make something stronger."

She became concerned, “My body is not used to such medicines; maybe that is why they do not work as well. I worry that it may harm the babe.”

“Impossible.” His hand left her thigh just to caress her cheek, “Thora is the best of her kind in detecting anything out of the ordinary with her potions. You must know I would have no less responsible for your health. I would only have the best in charge of my kingdom’s brightest jewel.” He smiled at her, “These ways have been around since my ancestors. I swear by them. Not only that Runa, it is the strength of my son that you carry that makes you ill. He will be a strong warrior.” He said radiating pride.

She did not know how he was able to determine the sex or the strength of the babe that she carried. She just summed it up to wishful thinking and hoped that he wouldn’t be disappointed if she had a girl. She nodded, “All right my Lord. As you wish.”

Dark grey eyes focused on the lovers from across the hall laced with jealousy. Celia had offered her oath to Bothvar many times and he refused as he did many other women. Then she hears that he takes an oath from an Esbiorn woman without even sampling her. Her eyes narrowed as she saw Bothvar caress the woman’s creamy skin and she raged. What gave her right to illicit such adoration when she had given herself to him many times to prove her loyalty. Never did he look at her in such a way. Last night had been the event that angered her the most. Not only was the woman beautiful, but talented and brought about every male’s lust in the hall. She ached to get such looks from just Bothvar and never had. Bothvar coveted the woman like no other she had ever seen. He was possessive and adoring

towards her. Celia raged inside again. It should be her sitting next to him. It should be her being filled with his flesh and oh how she missed his strength and his hands on her body.

She knew she wasn't the only Gierrer woman that wept herself to sleep that night she heard the news that he had taken a mate. To top it all off and further her envy, she had heard the woman was with child, Bothvar's child. Already? A child that she tried to have with him to try and get him to accept her, but that blasted Thora witch made sure that his seed was not to take root, by giving him the tea from a *suct-bar* tree that prevented such. She was hoping that he had forgotten to take it at least one night with her. Then he would have to accept her oath, if she had his heir in her belly, like that blasted wench. She ached to claw the blue eyes out of her beautiful face, but there was no way she could get near her, she was guarded well. The woman was guarded at all times, by her maids, warriors and Bothvar himself. Not only that, she knew there were other ways to get what she wanted. She would have to be patient for an opening. The only thing that would separate a Gierrer woman from his mate was death. When they accepted an oath they opened their hearts to their mates and they remain so until death. Then the heart closes for another if there is another. She intended to be Bothvars' other. She would comfort him over the loss of his mate, and worm her way into his heart.

That night, when they were alone, Bothvar pulled Runa next to him and she nuzzled her lips into his neck.

"You must rest Runa." It was undeniable the ache that she caused in him, but he knew she was having difficulty with her condition, even though she didn't protest. He could not be

selfish and take her every night like he had been.

She stared at him, her sapphire eyes laced with desire, “I rest well my Lord when I have been satiated by your touch.”

He groaned, “Runa that is not the response I was looking for. Do you not know that I worry about you?”

She managed a smile, as her hand caressed the length of his thick arm, “Aye. That is not unlooked, but I sleep better when I have felt your warmth in me.”

He started at her words and came undone, “Woman, you are a vixen!” He growled as he rolled her onto her back and covered her laughing mouth with his and took her like he did every night before, making her wild with passion. When she woke in the morning he was gone from her side. She ached at the empty space in their bed.

As promised, before the next sunrise Erlend brought Lenore to Bothvar.

Lenore ran across the hall into the arms of both brothers. They took turns picking her up and giving her crushing embraces.

Erlend watched the display. He actually envied the devotion this family felt for one another. His people wouldn’t dare display such affection in public, it was considered a weakness.

“Are you hurt?” Grunewald asked her.

“Why? No, not at all.” She explained casually as if nothing had happened.

He raised one brow and tipped her face up to look for any mark that mentioned otherwise.

She narrowed her gaze and slapped his hand away, “I am fine.

Grunewald looked over her head to Erlend and nodded his thanks for returning his sister. Erlend nodded back.

Bothvar approached him, “You have kept your word.”

“I have.” He said as if it was no surprise. Erlend was an honorable man, despite his people's deceits in the past. He was aiming to change their ways, but needed the warrior king's help.

“That has earned you my audience Erlend. Return tonight. We have much to discuss.”

Erlend bowed in respect, “My Lord.” He turned to leave when Bothvar spoke again.

“I am in your debt for this.”

Erlend shook his head, “No. My family owes you. This would have never happened if it wasn't for my father.” He looked past him to Grunewald and Lenore for an instant before he turned away.

Grunewald picked up Lenora and embraced her again.

Erlend left and Bothvar turned to his two siblings. "Lenore, we must speak."

She giggled as Grunewald pinched her rosy cheeks. She pushed at him and walked toward Bothvar who again embraced her.

"It is wonderful to be home." She grinned.

"You weren't mistreated?"

She couldn't hide her blush, "No brother. Erlend was kind to me as were his men."

His eyes narrowed, "How kind?"

"It's not what you think." She defended. "I am still untouched." She raised one brow, "But if I weren't....?"

"Enough Lenore..." He cut her off, "I don't wish to quarrel, you just returned."

"Then...do not ask questions that I have answered." She gave him a ravishing smile.

He sighed, "Agreed."

Runa entered the hall then with her warriors and two maids in tow. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw Bothvar pick up one of the most beautiful women she'd ever seen in an embrace. Grunewald was there also. Runa felt ashamed coming upon them. She tried to turn around but ended up foolishly bumping into one of the massive guards that he insisted

following her around. She grunted and looked up to see an expression of surprise on his face, then fear as he looked over her head at Bothvar and took several steps back. It took Runa a moment to understand that she had accidentally touched him and Bothvar's words from a few days ago were still in her mind.

...if anyone laid a hand on you, my woman, I would surely kill them. Even if they touched you without my permission in any way that indicated they had interest in you, I would kill them

"Runa!"

She heard Bothvar's voice but still tried to leave.

Kadlin grabbed her arm to turn her toward him. She gave Runa a confused look. He was upon her in several long strides while Grunewald took the beautiful woman's arm and started speaking to her, casting glances at Runa. It was obvious he was talking about her. Runa couldn't understand what he was saying because it was in their own language.

Bothvar leaned down and kissed her causing her to blush outright. "My Lord..." She meant to protest but he cut her off.

"Today is a good day Runa. My sister has been returned."

"Your *sister*!" She stared at the woman incredulous. Now she could see it. The black hair and silver grey eyes; eyes that were now focused on her in bewilderment. Instant relief flooded through her. She was jealous, how unheard of! Now she felt more than foolish. He had told her...and retold her, that he was loyal to her. Not only that, she had no right to experience such

feelings. Although she was to remain loyal to her mate, the males could take as many lovers as they wish. She had to reminding herself that she wasn't in Esbiorn anymore. It was just such a shocking change because their lands bordered each other. There had to be some familiarity. She cocked her head in confusion, "Where was she?"

He dismissed her guards and her maids, "I need to discuss that with you but later."

"My Lord....about the generous escort..." she paused.

He raised his brows listening.

"Do...well..."

"God's blood woman, say what you want." He tilted her chin up to meet his exasperated expression, "And this is getting old." He was referring to him not meeting her gaze.

She blushed, but did as she was told, "do I need such protection within your fortress? I feel so foolish having so much attention drawn to me.."

"It is on you if I dress you in rags Runa." He stated thickly, and fingered her hair.

She flushed again, but managed not to divert her gaze, "Maybe I could do with one good warrior by my side and..."

"No."

This time the redness hit her cheeks over frustration and

by the look of his expression he knew it.

He sighed, "Runa, I could do such a thing, but it would only take one time and you could be taken from me..."

"I don't understand..."

He ran his hand through his hair in frustration, "Word has already spread that I have a mate and she is with child. You do not have any idea the enemies I have."

"Maybe if you removed your guards, people would not know who I am."

He grunted, "If you could have seen every pair of male eyes on you the other night when you danced for me, you would not question my motives. People would know who you are just from the way you carry yourself."

She shook her head, "I do not know what you mean."

He placed his hands on her hips, pulling her closer, "I find it hard that you do not understand." His blue-grey eyes probed hers, "You are a rare and precious beauty. The likes my people have never seen. Your golden hair set among our dark locks is the first to gain attention, then they see your flawless face, your desirable form..."

Her eyes shot wide, "My Lord...Please!"

"You asked." He grinned, "Come to think of it..."

Grunewald kept their sister with him when Runa entered

the hall. Bothvar was momentarily distracted when he saw her, and turned without barely a word to be by her side.

“Who is that woman?” Lenora asked in awe when she entered the hall. The walls in the great room seemed to practically glow in her presence. He thought she must have been a prisoner by the looks of the warriors around her. That is until her brother kissed her passionately. Almost at the same time Grunewald answered her question.

“She is Bothvar’s mate.”

She swung her surprised gaze back to her grinning brother, “Bothvar has taken a woman?”

“She will have his child.”

She had to conceal a squeal of delight as not to alarm the two who were deep in conversation.

“Grunewald, when may I meet with my new sister?” she said with obvious excitement.

Just then Runa screamed as Bothvar tossed her over his shoulder and carried her off down the hall.

“I think that won’t be too soon. That is a regular occurrence around here of late.” He rolled his eyes.

Lenora let another generous smile spread across her face. “I see that he is pleased with her.”

“That, sister, is an understatement.” He threw his large

arm on her shoulders. Now that I have you alone, we need to discuss some things.

She shot him a look, "I have answered everything. I told Bothvar I am fine."

"Perhaps." He eyed her, "but only physically. Something else ails you."

She raised her chin, "I am tired Grunewald. I am going to have a sleep before we dine tonight." With that she turned and walked away.

Grunewald sighed, maybe Bothvar can talk some sense into her.

An hour later, Bothvar pulled Runa's naked form on top of his. She rested her cheek against his chest. "Runa, we must talk."

She lifted her head to look at him without his encouragement. The tone in his voice was familiar. She would not like what he had to say.

"Your brother is here."

She gasped and shot off him toward the bottom of the bed.

He sat up and reached for her and she pulled away, "Runa." He spoke softly, "What is wrong?" he did not mistake the sheer terror that crossed her face. The same terror he recognized the night he stole her from her mother.

A tear rolled down her cheek, "He's here to take me back." She choked out. She shook her head, "Don't let him Bothvar....please." Her hand went to her belly fearing for her unborn child.

His eyes followed the gesture, and he ached at her sudden fear, "Runa, he doesn't know you're here....come here and be calm..." His arm stretched toward her.

She hesitated momentarily before complying and went to him, curling on his lap and cradling her head against his shoulder. His strong arms wrapped around her protectively.

He could feel her tremble. That angered him. It disturbed him to see her so frightened. A high born woman such as her should be proud, not timid. "Your mother and sister would not be home yet. There is no way he knows."

"You are positive about this?"

"Yes, he returned my sister she was south of our lands. He would not have had time to venture north, nor cross their path in any way. He returned her safe and untouched. I owe him a debt." She trembled and he didn't miss her meaning, "No, Runa, no debt is worth giving you up. You are worth more to me than you think." He felt her move herself tighter to him. "What makes you think he was sent to retrieve you?"

"He does my father's bidding, does he not?"

"No, he swears he does not. I believe him for the most part." His hand rubbed up and down her back, "Do not worry, I

will protect you here. As far as Erlend knows you are on your way to the Desert people."

She shuddered again, "A union I did not ask for."

"My sister was sent for such a match when she went missing. You brother claims that was your father's doing. Is that so?"

"Our men never discuss warfare with their women. I would not know this. I can tell you that my father is a cold man who has ice for blood." She said with unmistakable dislike, "My brother does care for us but does my father's bidding because he is our King."

"Is your brother capable of harming a woman?" Bothvar did not miss the look on Erlend's face when he watched Lenore. Yet, she claims she was untouched and he believed her. Her eyes still held the innocence of a maiden.

"There was a time I thought he was like my father, then he did something unlike an Esbiorn male, something that protected me. So, in my heart I would say no. I think my mother was able to influence him somewhat."

"I will trust your heart then." He kissed her tenderly before continuing, "Your brother is going to return tonight and together we are looking at plans to Ally our kingdoms."

She sat up and looked at him, "Do you think that is wise?"

He nodded, "Yes I do, for the future of both our kingdoms. We have other lands that border ours, and regardless

us being known for our fierce warfare, there are other ways to defeat us.” He took a deep breath to tell her the next part, “He needs to know I have you.”

Her eyes widened, “He can’t...”

“He must Runa. In good faith her returned my sister, I must return the favour and let him know that you are well.”

She trembled again, “My Lord, if my brother finds out I am here, he will be furious.”

“You are my woman. Not a slave, not a concubine. He has no rights to you. As soon as you set foot on my land, you belonged to me.”

“Bothvar, the men from my land will find my behaviour unacceptable. This behaviour that you insist from me has had women whipped and scarred for less. I am terrified.”

Anger prickled him seeing terror on his beautiful woman’s face. His expression grew dark, “I will protect you. Any man that threatens you will not feel his next breath. We will dine alone without my men, just Erlend, Grunewald and us. I will see for myself his reaction and judge what must be done.”

“Bothvar...” she tried pleading.

“I have decided Runa. Do not debate with me on this.”

She stiffened but didn’t argue knowing it would be pointless.

Chapter Nine

That night Erlend was led to another room by Grunewald. He came unarmed again to make his intentions clear. It was a good choice because when he saw Runa, he reached for his sword and came up with an empty fist. His sister quickly ducked behind the Bothvar. "Runa!" He bellowed.

"She has done nothing wrong." Bothvar cut in, "And you will not speak to her like that again Erlend, she is mine."

He could feel the rage building, "She is not!"

"You sent her to the same people that you denied our alliance with. Does this mean that you meant to ally with the desert people and have deceived me?"

He tore his eyes off of his sister and back to Bothvar, "I have not! I would rather have my sisters and mother there before war broke out. They would have been safer."

"You stole my sister, I stole yours."

"I never *touched* Lenore." His eyes burned at Runa, "I see you cannot say the same!"

Runa ducked behind Bothvar again. He could feel her trembling hands pressing on his back. His voice was a deadly calm, "Do you mean to beat her Erlend?"

This caused Erlend to flinch and face Bothvar. He had seen his father whip his mother many times, it was a memory that he tried to suppress. He stood straight staring at him

directly, and calmed his tone a bit, "I have never beaten a woman in my life. I have told you I wish to change our ways. Runa and Asta are precious to me."

"I see, so you meant to try and run me through."

"Damn rights! You have defiled her." He roared.

Bothvar shook his head all the while keeping his voice calm and his posture straight and assured, "She is my mate Erlend, not a slave."

Erlend's expression softened somewhat and became sceptical, "What did you say?"

"I said she is my woman, my queen. We do not rape women here. She swore an oath that I accepted. It is our way."

His sharp blue eyes darted to Runa in a voice was much calmer now, "Runa, does he speak the truth..."

"You accuse me of trickery?" Bothvar's brows went up.

He returned his gaze to the King, "Lord Bothvar, you and I do not know each other well enough to fully trust one another. Runa cannot lie to me." He turned his attention back to his sister who peaked out enough to nod twice.

He stood still staring at the pair of them in disbelief. He watched Bothvar gently take his sister's hand and pull her out from behind him. It was evident that she was frightened. "Runa," He reassured, "I swore I would never harm you. Do you not remember?" She let out a sob and nodded, while Bothvar

pulled her to him soothing her with his words. Erlend felt a knot in his gut. He'd frightened her. It was the last thing he ever wanted to do. Regardless of their father's strict laws, he would have liked to embrace her, to show her that he was happy that she was safe, but he resisted against it. His traditions still controlled so much of him. His father had grown more brutal as he aged, and to Erlend it was too much to bear. Their women excelled in beauty and maybe he was biased, but his sisters above all, and to destroy such was inexcusable. He knew an alliance with Bothvar's people would be a great advantage to them. His people would be free to cross their borders and understand Gierrer traditions. He would be able to embrace his sister without her being whipped. His culture was becoming old and barbaric and he had had enough as did many of his people. The Gierrer had a fierce reputation as warriors, but lived in peace with their women. After have come to know Lenore and her stubborn ways over the last few days made him think he wanted this alliance more than anything. Truth is he fell in love with her. She slapped his hand off when he'd touch her telling him that he did not have her permission. Her piercing eyes holding such defiance and warning whenever he demanded she do something he ask. He never bedded her, he was truthful, but he wanted to, badly.

“Erlend, “ Bothvar interrupted his thoughts, “I have done this in good faith to return the favour for my sister, by letting you know your sister was safe. She states that you are a good man, do not prove her wrong. Come sit and dine with us if you no longer feel like killing me and we will discuss your ideas.”

Erlend wasn't angry anymore as the scene unfolded before him. What better mate to have for his sister than a Gierrer warrior Lord. It would almost solidify the trust that he

wished to have from him. The other option was to ask him for Lenore. However, he was unsure that Bothvar would agree to this, knowing his people's ways towards women. Although he still wanted Lenore, it would have to wait. He moved forward and took the seat that Bothvar indicated to and was surprised that Runa took the one next to him. It wasn't because he expected her to sit on the floor; he was surprised that she didn't protest. He watched Bothvar reach over and raise her chin so her gaze met his. He could see the shame in their depths. Now he knew, it did bother her to go against her ways. It must be difficult for Bothvar to have such a timid woman after meeting Lenore and knowing the extreme differences in their customs. He suddenly felt guilty for being a part of the same ways and accepting them for so long. Runa was beautiful, yet she was dulled in his land. She was treated with less respect in his lands than Bothvar treated his own slaves. It was unforgivable. She was of royal blood and should be recognized as such. What kind of representation does that give others about their people when they see her fright so often? He wanted to ease her fear, "Runa." Her sapphire eyes focus on his face, "Do as your king wishes. You are no longer bound by your traditions. He precedes them." He could see the tears well up in her eyes, but she somehow prevented them from falling.

"You see, " Bothvar leaned toward her, speaking gently, "Your own brother releases you from your duty as an Esbiorn woman." His hand slid to her thigh reassuringly.

She still couldn't get past those words her brother had spoken. She couldn't even respond to him because she was overwhelmed with the weight that suddenly seemed to leave her. If Erlend could forgive her for her boldness, then she would have to forgive herself.

Erlend turned his attention to the King of the Gierrer, "Now, we certainly have much in common. You have allied yourself with me through this match Lord Bothvar." He indicated to his sister.

"Regardless," Bothvar intervened, "You do not value your women as much as we do. So it does not say much."

"I value my sisters," Erlend defended flicking his gaze to Runa, "even though our traditions are old. What would you have of me to prove my loyalty to this alliance?"

"If you wish for me to help you raid your lands and overthrow your father," Runa gasped, but Bothvar continued, "I must have something more to show that it would not be a trick. How can I be sure that you did not make the same promise to the Mohrs?"

Erlend thought only thought of one, and he said the words before he thought twice, "Give me Lenore."

"Over my corpse!" Shouted Grunewald as he pushed up from his chair. He remained silent until now. His words were still echoing off the stone walls of the chamber when he leaned menacingly toward Erlend.

Bothvar's brows raised. So he did not mistake the look that Erlend gave Lenore that morning.

Erlend stood his ground, trying to ignore the large man who stood over him and continued, "You value your sister like nothing I've ever seen. Allow us to unite, it would seal our

Alliance.”

“My sister will not be treated like a common dog!” Grunewald shouted.

The insult brought Erlend to his feet, facing the large man towering over him without the least bit of a sign that he was intimidated by his enormous size, “She would not be treated in such a way! You have my oath to that.”

Grunewald snorted, “Your people’s oath did nothing for us in the past!”

“A wrong that I am trying to right!” he bellowed back.

Bothvar sat back in his chair with his arms folded in front of him and watched the two men with their faces inches apart, yelling at one another, but neither one made a move to the threats they called and Bothvar knew why. It was his home, therefore they needed his permission.

In all her life she had never seen Erlend raise his voice to anyone. When he spoke people would listen, but here he was challenging a man bigger than him, for a woman, “Stop them, “Runa begged, “Erlend will be hurt. He is unarmed.”

“You are right Runa,” Bothvar squeezed her thigh in assurance, then addressed her brother, “Would you like a sword Erlend?” All three of them swung their gazes at him. Two were angry and one was in shock.

“I would!” Barked Erlend as his eyes focused back on Grunewald.

"I agree brother!" shouted Grunewald.

"You mean to kill my brother!" Runa gasped in horror, "Bothvar...."

"Hush woman, this is not for you to decide." His steel gaze focused on her to silence her next protest. He then spoke to one of the guards in his tongue, who then stepped forward and handed Erlend his sword, hilt first.

He'd barely had it in his hand when Grunewald had unsheathed his and swung with a roar. Erlend managed to raise his blade to deflect with a grunt and the strength of the warriors blow coursed down his arm rattling his teeth.

Runa screamed and the door of the room suddenly filled with other warriors. Bothvar called out to stop them from interfering. Instead they tried to file in enough to view the scene as the two men swung relentlessly at one another.

Runa grabbed Bothvar's tunic, "I am begging you My Lord, please stop this."

He looked down at her frantic expression and shook his head. She bowed her head into his tunic and sobbed unwilling to watch.

Aware of Runa's anguish, knowing that he would comfort her later, Bothvar shifted his gaze back to the battle. He had to admit, Erlend held his own against his brother. He had his own skill that equally matched Grunewald's. It was impressive.

“Stop this!’ Lenore pushed her way through the men as roughly as she could, even smacking a couple of them on their thick arms to get them to move out of her way. They quickly stepped aside.

Runa brought her head up, the swordfight instantly ceased at the woman’s words. And the two men turned toward her.

“You fools!” She shouted at them as she approached the two. “Grunewald, you have no right!”

Grunewald took a step back as she set her furious gaze on him. “He comes with good intentions and you attack him! He was unarmed!”

“Not now.” He defended uneasily. Lenore was a force to be reckoned with when she was angry and by the Gods was she angry.

She angrily shoved at him.

If Runa wasn’t so distraught she might have found the gesture amusing, for she only moved herself away from the large man’s form who now had a bemused smile on his face.

She then turned to Erlend, “Have you no wits? Grunewald was born with a sword in his hand and a temper to match!”

Erlend lowered his sword, his expression was unreadable, but he kept his gaze on Lenore.

She thrust her hands on her hips and tapped her foot

impatiently after his lack of response, "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"So *you* think." Erlend finally added.

"I *know*." offered Grunewald with an arrogant lift of his chin.

"Cease your tongue brother!" snapped Lenore with a glare over her shoulder.

Runa blanched her words and she heard Bothvar chuckle.

Lenore turned back to Erlend, "What are you trying to prove?"

"It is not woman's business."

This time Grunewald laughed because he could see his sister's back stiffen with rage.

"You had better adjust your tongue Erlend, or I'll have it removed." She pointed her finger at him, "You come claiming peace, but fight my brother. What possesses you?"

Runa near fainted at the way she spoke to her brother, but he only stood still and stared at her, expressionless. She could not tell what he was thinking, if at all, anything.

Lenore glanced to Grunewald who was still laughing, "Best you get from my sight brother, or I'll run you through myself!"

He was still laughing as he bowed to his sister and walked from the room sheathing his sword, taking the others with him, "Come men, the fun is done. I need a flask of wine." There were hearty agreements.

She turned back to Erlend, "Answer me."

"Not until you calm yourself. You sound like squealing *bathar*." He finally spoke.

Her eyes widened before narrowing in rage, "You had better pray you can run faster than me." A bathar was a short squat four legged creature that lived in the swamps. Although it was tasty to eat, you had to kill them quickly because of the dying squeals they let off was enough to hurt the ears of a deaf old man.

"Enough." Stated Bothvar, stifling a chuckle. "I have seen enough. I agree to your request Erlend. The rest is up to you."

Erlend looked at him and bowed his head in appreciation

"What request?" Stated Lenore while looking back and forth between the two of them.

"Erlend has offered himself for you." Bothvar explained.

She focused that familiar steel gaze on him, "You have?" The fury left her features and was replaced by astonishment.

Erlend nodded.

A beautiful smile spread across her face, "You really have! Oh Erlend, do you really want me?"

“Aye Lenore.” Erlend stated

She stepped toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist without hesitation.

Runa was shocked what had happened next. Erlend lowered his head on top of hers and embraced her. She would have never believed it if she didn't see it with her own eyes. However, Lenore seemed to understand everything about him perfectly.

“Runa.”

Bothvar's voice brought her gaze back to him.

“There was no worry here. Grunewald would not have hurt him. He is a guest in my house. He only wished to teach him a lesson.”

She narrowed her eyes, “I was frightened for nothing?”

He smiled at her ire, “It is nice to see that you can be angry with me.”

She huffed and turned her eyes away.

He chuckled, “Lenore, come get Runa and leave us. Erlend and I have much to talk about.”

Lenore reluctantly left Erlend's embrace while she walked over and settled her eyes, now filled with kindness on Runa, “Come lady....we have much to discuss.” She took her hand.

Runa squealed when Bothvar slapped her bottom causing her to jump and follow Lenore out of the room. She cast a final glance over her shoulder to see her brother and Bothvar clasp an arm in a union. Her brother was tall for an Esbiorn man, but he still only came to Bothvar's shoulders.

Lenore led Runa past Bothvar's chamber door to another. The warriors that followed, were dismissed by her as she pulled her in the room and shut the door.

"They drive me mad, I swear. My brother is being ridiculous."

Runa laughed.

Lenore looked over her new sister, "But I can see why. You are a beautiful woman Runa."

Runa blushed, "So are you."

She smiled, "Of course." She accepted the compliment easily.

Celia watched Runa with carefully veiled eyes. She sat by the fire in the great hall in one of the large chairs that Bothvar usually occupied. Brim leaned against the hearth watching her intently, with one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other on the mantle. Scowling, she knew that he wouldn't leave her side unless he suddenly fell over dead. He was as thick as a hundred year old tree trunk and fiercely loyal. She knew that it was his duty to protect her when Bothvar was occupied with his endless tasks. His poise may have seemed relaxed, but she knew the

Gierrer. The fact that his hand rested on the hilt of his sword, and the way he watched her wasn't a posture of relaxation. He watched her for fear of removing his eyes off her if something were to happen, and his hand was on his sword to be able to withdraw it in a fraction of a second to lessen the time reaching for it.

She flicked her eyes to other men. The rest of the warriors milled about not too far away. Two of them took up a skirmish in the middle of the large room practicing their skills wrestling. Brim must have felt it safe enough to allow them some freedom within sight, because the two in the middle of the hall had their swords on the floor near them. She smirked, *Always on guard, the Gierrer*. The other two of her guards watched with some others that were already present when Runa and her guards entered the hall.

Her eyes darted back to the stunning Esbiorn woman. She had her legs folded up under her and seemed to be concentrating on some needlework. Celia seethed silently. She recognized the colors of the cloak she was mending. It was Bothvar's. If it wasn't for her she would be the one to mend his clothes. She wondered if he made her moan with want like he used to do to her. That Esbiorn witch had no stake to him.

If she were to approach Runa now it would not seem as threatening. She wasn't sure if Bothvar would protest if he was near, but she did not want to risk it. So she would try to approach her when he wasn't about. She glanced up at Brim. Surely he would allow their Queen some allowance to have a friend.

She had already set her plan in motion. She had to give

her favours to several men in the village that were less than moral, but did not care as long as she got rid of Runa and claimed Bothvar. She started across the hall toward her. This would be as good as time as any to introduce herself and wile her way into Runa's trust. She had been watching the woman, and knew she was naïve. She casually walked around the head table where Bothvar, Grunewald and their best warriors sat with their women all the while her eyes centered on Runa. The woman's magnificent golden hair was so long it draped over her right shoulder and onto the arm of the chair as she sewed.

Celia had only watched Bothvar's mate from a distance, but nothing could have prepared her for how beautiful she was the closer she went to her. She was about forty feet away when Brim took his attention from the woman and shifted his gaze to her. Celia ignored him. She had seen him with Bothvar many times when she had gone through the Ante chamber to their lord's bed. She watched him erect himself and actually tighten his hand on the hilt of his sword. Celia ground her teeth. Did he actually think she would harm her here? Not only that, what would make him think that she was a threat? She cursed and stopped at his warning. She even tried smiling generously but Brim shook his head. Celia couldn't contain her anger and actually stamped her foot before she turned around and walked away.

Bothvar entered the hall just then and they stared at each other as they walked past. She gave him a generous smile which was not returned. In fact, his gaze was full of suspicion. She made her way to the hall that led to the kitchen, partially hidden behind a tapestry to watch the exchange.

Bothvar knew if Celia was around there would be

mischievous. He regretted taking that woman to his bed, but there were nights that he was full of lust and needed release. He should've known better when she begged him for her oath soon after. Yes, he did use her for his need but that was as far as it went. It did not take him long to realize her motives. She was beautiful, but there was nothing else about her that attracted him. The last time she asked him to take her oath he got impatient and scolded her. When she persisted, he warned her not to anger him. Then the tears came. He'd only had her a few times but she persisted on trying to win him. She must have thought him a man to be easily manipulated. She tried to embrace him and he placed his hand in the center of her chest holding her at bay while giving her an indifferent stare. That was when he saw the rage enter her eyes. He smiled at her, "I always suspected Celia that you were not as honeyed as your words." He watched her purse her lips and stomp away. That was a few days before he rode to collect Runa. She had not approached him since. A Gierrer warrior was not emotionally vulnerable in the least, until he opened his heart. Runa could easily hurt him more deeply than a thrust of an enemy's sword.

Speaking of Runa, she glanced up when he approached and gave him a generous smile. She was everything Celia was not; trusting, pure, loyal, and beautiful throughout. He raised his hand for her to remain where she was and motioned to Brim.

"My Lord?" Brim bowed.

"Celia did not reach her?" He nodded toward Runa who had resumed her sewing, but glanced at him.

"Nay. She tried."

Bothvar nodded, "You and the men may take your leave." He looked past him to Runa, "I will be with her now."

Brim bowed again before he left calling to the other four relieving them for the rest of the day.

Bothvar made his way to Runa who looked up at him again and renewed her gorgeous smile. He doubted that she was able to get another stitch in her cloth when he entered because he noticed her hand shake slightly. Her returned her smile and bent down putting his hands on either side of her on the arms of the chair and kissed her passionately. He knew Celia watched and she needed to learn her place and understand the unbreakable bond he and Runa shared. She helped him by placing her hands on either side of his face and responding to his kiss. He knew Runa shamed at such public display, but he had actually never enticed her publically. He grinned inwardly knowing how he affected her and her lack of resistance to him.

Runa totally forgot about her surroundings when his warm mouth assaulted hers. She did not even realize that he had removed the cloak she was embroidering from her lap until he took her hands and pulled her out of the chair before leading her out of the room to his bed chamber.

Celia was sure she would ground her teeth into ashes at that scene. It should be her sitting there receiving such caresses. Soon, she would take care of her.

Chapter

Erlend sat beside his father, while his mother kneeled on

a cushion at his father's feet. The King of Esbiorn was a menacing sight. Although his blond hair and beard had had long since turned gray, his piercing blue eyes were more pronounced in the contrast. Erlend had returned home a few short days ago and told his father that they had done as he asked. The warrior lord's sister was dead, and his men attested to it. His father was pleased. He had sent a messenger to the Mohr's of his success and offered an alliance. His father made it no secret of how proud he was of his only son. Erlend took the praise with a false smile. Inside he raged. It was no proud task to tell his father that he slaughtered a defenceless woman. More so, he had to leave Lenore in Gierrer. Already he ached with an unmistakable emptiness. The woman's uncommon spirit had aroused emotion in him the likes he never experienced before in his life.

His mother and sister had returned home untouched and through them Edgar already knew of Runa's fate. What bothered Erlend about it, was he didn't seem to care and was considering sending Asta to the Zilns in Runa's stead.

A commotion in the hall lifted their eyes as to Erlend's ultimate dread; his sister and Lenore were dragged in. His eyes darted to his father who stood abruptly when spotting Runa.

"Runa?" It was hard to recognize her in the rich clothing that she wore, but her unmistakable beauty was not.

Erlend's mother stifled a gasp, but remained where she was.

Runa's father came down the stone steps to take her face in his hand, "By the Gods! My daughter has returned." He turned her face toward his and realization dawned on him and

his expression grew deadly, "And ruined!" He shoved her away with a glare.

Runa kept her eyes to the floor. She knew he would know that she was no longer innocent. She was terrified for the fate of her unborn child. Bothvar's child. It was a terrible fate that awaited her and she began to tremble.

Edgar turned and looked at Lenore, obvious interest in his voice, "Who is this?"

Runa's gaze darted past her father to Erlend "A maid who was out walking with me when I was found. She is a peasant girl named Gwyn." Runa blurted which got her a backhand across the face and Lenore screamed.

Erlend rose to his feet quickly. His heart felt like a lump in his throat. He instinctively went for the hilt of his sword, but then felt a soft hand on his.

"Not now, my son, you will lose."

He turned to see his mother. Her eyes laced with understanding at his intentions

He swallowed hard releasing the hilt, his eyes went Runa who was clutching her face, then to Lenore. She looked at him and he shook his head subtly. She gave a brief nod in understanding and lowered her gaze before she was discovered.

"I did not ask for your words Runa!" The King of Esbiorn stood straight and set his icy gaze on her, "You are no daughter of mine." he said enunciating every word as if it was distasteful.

She sobbed and clutched her face where he struck her.

He turned back to Lenore, "Stand the wench up." His men did just that.

Lenore kept her gaze averted as Runa told her to.

"A comely wench." He grasped her face again. What he did not expect was the woman to slap his hand away.

Lenore could not help it, it was instinctive. She knew her mistake when he struck her as he did his own daughter.

"The witch!" He exploded.

"Father, let me have her." Erlend stepped forth. He could not take it anymore. It was rash for him to speak up, but it was that or he run his father through with his sword if he touched her again, bringing the wrath of his father's loyal guards down on them all.

The King's brows rose as he turned to his son, "You would have her?"

"Aye." Erlend's expression revealed nothing. "I fancy her." Although hatred raced through him, he was able to keep his voice a steady calm. There was only the slightest tremor of rage when he spoke and it had gone undetected. It had taken him years to hide his true feelings from his father. Now, he wanted to run him through so badly he tasted it for striking sister and his precious Lenore. His mother was right; there were too many men loyal to his father present. He would lose.

The king smiled at his son. He knew it wasn't like him to take slaves. This pleased him. As much as he wanted her himself, Erlend deserved something for his loyalty. "Have her then. You can tame her. When you grow bored with her, I'll have her."

"Take her to my chamber," he spoke to several guards who did his bidding, "And do *not* touch her!". They bowed their understanding, while dragging her away before turning his stare on Runa. Guilt overwhelmed him. How was he to save her from their father's wraith? In all of this she looked up at him with eyes of understanding and it took every will of his being not to bend down and cradle her.

"As for my daughter!" He turned his fury back on Runa, "I should give her to my men!"

Their mother appeared at the King's feet, "My lord, she is your daughter. You can not treat her like a common whore."

"Get off me woman!" He bellowed, now raging, "Have all the women gone daft? She has whored herself out, why should it be any different here."

"Father, " Erlend spoke calmly gaining his father's attention. He had to do something before he followed through on that threat as he knew he would, "She wears the colors of the Gierrer king. Did you not notice?" Inside, his gut was in a mess with anguish.

The king stared down at Runa for a moment, "so she does." He crouched before his daughter again while fingering the

rich material, "Tell me Runa, have you given yourself to this man?"

She didn't know what Erlend had planned, but she knew her brother had reasons for making her father know of her Gierrer King. Her jaw ached where he had struck her, all she could do was nod.

"She gave him her oath to save Asta and me!" blurted their mother.

"Hold your tongue woman!" he spared a glance at her before turning back to Runa, "An oath? You are more cunning than I thought. Did he accept this oath?"

"Aye." She managed weakly causing her to wince at the pain of speaking.

He surprised her by laughing, "Then are you with his child now."

She felt an icy wave wash over her, *How did he know?*

He did not mistake the look of shock on her face when he asked the question. "God's blood! This is too good to be true!" Not only did he have the Gierrer warrior King's woman, he had the Gierrer heir in her belly. It was the edge he needed to conquer that undefeatable man's kingdom. He knew of the devotion they had to women. He knew that if King Bothvar had taken Runa's oath, then she was his until death. He would come for her and he would be ready.

Erlend shook his head, no one could say his father was

not an intelligent man. He knew the Gierrer customs well. All he had to do was plant the suggestion in his head and his father carried the scheme further. It was the only way Erlend could come close to protecting Runa from a public whipping, or worse. She had to still be useful to their father in some way.

Her father stood, "Throw her in the dungeon. No man is to touch her else they deal with me. I know that Gierrer King has spies in my fortress. If he were to find out that she lost the child or came to harm, he may not want her."

What Erlend's father did not know and he recently found out himself, is that the Gierrer accept their women no matter what had happened to them, but there was no way he would reveal that to his father. That way he would know that Runa would remain unharmed, for now.

She screamed as she was hauled off none to gently.

Chapter Ten

"Bothvar, you must calm down." Grunewald offered, "Erlend will send word." He was raging with agony, but knew it did not come close to what his brother was feeling. Losing Lenore was bad enough, but Runa was sheer torture. Day after day he watched Bothvar suffer. It was unbearable. The warriors spent all day practicing their skills so they would be ready when word came. Grunewald knew that if the King of Esbiorn had them, Erlend would get word to them. Erlend's love for their sister was true, so he knew he could trust him.

Bothvar had been in a rage when he found that she had snuck out with his sister for a moment of peace from his

warriors. Kadlin was found near dead and dread washed over him. He had sent scouts to the three kingdoms to find out who had her, but his sense was Esbiorn. It was hard for him to concentrate with the terror of his sister, Runa and his unborn child's well being. Grunewald was right. His anguish was distorting his thoughts. He was thankful for his brother, who may have felt only a fraction of his anguish, but was still able to function. He had relied on him. If it was Grunewald's mate, the roles would be reversed. He had opened his heart to Runa. She was part of him now, and he was distraught over her abduction.

Two moons had passed since and he had not a restful night. However, he knew he could not charge blindly after Esbiorn. It was what he was expected to do after losing Runa, but he resisted. There would be a trap and all would be lost. It was the worse possible anguish he could possibly imagine but he held fast to the thoughts that Erlend would do his best to protect their women.

"My Lord," Ralf burst in on the brothers then, "A rider from Esbiorn!"

Bothvar recognized the man as one of Erlend's trusted as he quickly rushed through the hall to meet him. Bothvar and Grunewald approached the man in the like charging stallions.

"My lord," the man bowed in respect, "I bring word that your sister and your queen remain unharmed."

Bothvar's relief was immediate. He placed his hand on his brother's shoulder to steady himself.

"Thank the Gods!" Blurted Grunewald.

“My lord Erlend has done his best to protect them without being found out. Our King knows the daughter of Anthon is with child and plots to use both of them to trap you knowing of the strong bond you hold with your women.” The man stopped to catch his breath, “His ire was rising when I was sent because there was no word of your attack as of yet. It bewilders him. Erlend has asked that you hold back and he will find a way to remove the women from the watchful eyes of the King. I was sent under the guise of the King’s messenger to inform you of your woman’s capture.”

“Bloody hell! I will not give that satisfaction until I see the bastard run through with my sword!” Grunewald raged causing the man to flinch.

“Brother, “ Bothvar interrupted, “We are famous for such tactics, let us try something different it will catch the King of Esbiorn off guard.”

“Aye, damn well it will! But I do not like it! To lose such satisfaction is agonizing!” He burst.

“I hear that they are alive and unharmed. It gives me what I need to remain where I am.” He said to Grunewald. Although he was feeling what Grunewald was, he was King of his people for a reason. His voice was a deadly calm and there was no mistaking his rage. “I ache as much as you do, but there are other ways to extract revenge. We will take everything from this man and strip him of his lands, his title, and his women. Then we will make him beg for his life before we kill him.”

Runa tried her best to be strong, but the confines of the

cells stripped her of every strength she had. It was crude with a small pallet of straw and an old blanket in the corner. In another corner there was a pot to relieve herself in but no fresh water. She was tossed into it like a stray dog and left there for at least a full day before her jailer brought her a tray of food that was not even fit for insects. She threw up at the sight and tossed it in the corner to try and ease her retching. The Jailer hardly paid her any heed. Thanks to Erlend, her father had left specific orders that she remained untouched. She sobbed, not just over her predicament, but her father intended to use her to kill Bothvar. He said that if she ever left he would find her and kill whoever had taken her from him. He meant those words and now because of her carelessness he would suffer. She curled up on the pallet into a ball sobbing.

“Runa.” Cam a soft familiar voice.

“Mother!” She crawled across the floor and reached for her mother’s hands that came through the bars.

“Oh baby, I am so sorry” Her mother sobbed trying to comfort her. “I tried reasoning with him, but he would not budge. He even denies the child you carry.”

Runa leaned her forehead between two bars, “I do not blame you.”

Her mother pulled a small cloth satchel out from under her cloak, “I brought you some bread and dried meat.”

“Thank you.” She took the satchel.

“I will try and sneak down here as often as I can. Erlend

has spoken to the jailer and gave me permission. He is working on your escape, but he is under the watchful eyes of his father who feels that his son is worthy of more tasks.” She stated seething. “He bears his presence for your sake. So stay strong Runa.” She kissed her daughter’s forehead. “I will try and return on the morrow.”

Runa grabbed her mother’s cloak when she went to get up, “Wait? What of Lenore.”

“She is safe. Erlend keeps her confined to his chamber and under his watchful eye to protect her from the rest of the men and most of all, his own father. She is a handful for sure but endures the submission to survive. I must go daughter.” She gave her a final look before getting up and disappearing down the hall.

Lenore had tried every possible exit out of the chamber she was thrust into, all doors were locked, and the only windows were perched high above the ground. Even if she did escape, she had no place to go. Not only that, if she was found by one of the Esbiorn men, she knew from their brutality now, that they would not hesitate to ravage her. She anguished over Runa. Erlend managed to save her life and body from being ravaged, but what of Runa, her new sister? When she was dragged from the hall, the King was threatening to give her to his men. What kind of a father would do such a thing?

It seemed like an eternity before she heard the lock in the door give and her heart skipped a beat as Erlend stepped in the room alone. She watched him search the room, then his eyes registered relief when he saw her. She ran to him. He embraced her.

“Where is Runa?”

“She is safe, for now.” His hands brushed her hair off her face as his blue eyes scanned it, “Are you hurt?” He looked at her face where his father hit her, a small bruise had formed there, and her lip had swollen slightly. His eyes narrowed, “Blasted animal!”

“I am better than I look.” She managed a smile

He kissed her gently on the forehead, to avoid hurting her lips, before lifting his head, “I died a thousand times when he struck you.”

“I am grateful your mother was near.”

“you saw that?”

“Aye. There was no mistaking the murderous rage on your face.” She shook her head, “Your emotions almost made you foolish.”

He kissed her cheek, “A fact I never had to deal with before I met you. Are you sure you are alright?”

She buried her face in his chest and wrapped her arms around his middle, “I fair better than your sister, I am sure. It is a small penance than what she deals with.”

“Aye.” He said solemnly. He has done his best to protect Runa. He even threatened the jailer despite his father's words of no one to see her.

“The King said...”

“I know what my father said!” Erlend barked, “Am I not my father’s son?”

“I—“

Erlend repeated himself with more harshness, “Am I not my father’s son?” he leaned closer, “be careful jailer. My mother wishes to see her daughter. You will let her.” The jailer looked like he was going to protest again, but Erlend pulled his sword, “I will not hesitate to run you through and if you take my threats to my father who do you think he will believe?”

The jailer stood with his mouth agape. “Yes my lord.” He conceded.

His mother had been able to get Runa some decent food and water and report back to him.

“Erlend, is there nothing else you can do? She is distraught.”

“No. I have to be careful mother. Any mistake I make now is a risk for all of us, not just me.

“What do you mean?”

“I can not discuss this with you.” He said sternly.

She accepted his answer. She had to. He did not mean her ill by it, but Erlend was always very reserved in his words and

emotions "Who is this woman to you?"

"She is my woman."

Her eyes widened in shock, "But how...?"

"Mother, it is not your concern. I wanted her. She accepted me. There is more here than I can tell you but that is the just of it."

"Oh no....Erlend, you must not allow your father to have her."

"I will kill him first." His words rang of truth.

"I will try and keep your father occupied as best I can to distract him from her. You must keep her hidden at all times."

"I know."

That night Erlend lay next to Lenore. He had some solace in the fact that he could protect her. She had a difficult time falling asleep, and he still had not. She buried her face in his chest as he caressed the soft skin of her back until she settled and finally drifted off. His mind was plagued with worry over Runa, his mother, and his woman. He would wait for his messenger to return and slowly he would form a plan with Bothvar. It would take months, but he would deal with protecting the women the best he could without revealing his plans to his father and those loyal to him. His grip tightened on Lenore. Thank the Gods that he was able to save her from his father. He would have raped her brutally, and beat her spirit into submission. Lenore could never

fathom what his father was capable of. He had seen him beat his mother senselessly and leave her laid up for months over her disagreement of his brutal rape of her own slave.

Lenore sighed against his chest. He had never felt so devoted to a woman before and be damned if he would share her with anyone. He had worked so hard to win her over. Not an easy task. She was a hellcat when his men set upon the Ziln escort. He held her chin to look at her and she slapped his hand away. She had practically tried to kill him when he took hold of her. Threats of his death screeched out of her. He finally had to tie up her claws and gag her to shut her up, but not before she had raked her nails down his face drawing blood. God's teeth, half of his men thought she was possessed and were afraid to touch her.

"Maybe your father was right and we should kill her," Erik chuckled looking at Erlend's wounds. Erik stood and watched Erlend finally wrestle the woman to the ground and tie her up.

"It is tempting." He snarled while tying her feet together, "At least I am not afraid to touch her."

"She has claws and I like my wounds to come from other men." He laughed

Erlend stood up, and pointed down to the wide-eyed bound and gagged woman on the ground, "That is more vicious than any man I have fought." He wasn't sure if she could speak his language, but at that moment, he really did not care if she understood him or not. By the look of the narrowing of her eyes and the way her cheeks pulled up under them he knew she did.

She was smiling despite the gag in her mouth.

Now Erik roared with laughter. Not only with Erlend's exasperation, but the woman's mocking expression as well.

Erlend turned to chastise his men, "You are cowards. She is but a woman!" he snarled, "Throw her in my tent, if you are not too afraid of her now that she is bound. No man had better lay a hand on her either or they will deal with me." He turned and walked away cursing while Erik was still trying to stifle a chuckle.

He camped deep in the woods almost a full moon's ride from the Gierrer fortress. That meant he would have had to endure her next to him in his tent for that long. He could not trust his men enough to not place their hands on her if he left her with them because there was no denying that the woman was beautiful and they were used to helping themselves to their female prisoners. Her grey-blue eyes were large and striking and set in a perfect pale complexion. Her hair was as black as ash and magnificently soft with a hint of curl. It hung loosely down her back and when she was angry, which was all the time, she tipped her head down to stare at him angrily through her thick ebony lashes causing it to fall about her face. Her eyes would darken with her fury and seem more vibrant with the contrast. There was no mistaking that the woman knew she was beautiful and was effective at using her looks to her advantage.

It certainly did not do well for his mood. She had to sleep beside him and regardless of how daring she was, any woman who looked the way she did would arouse lust within a man half dead, half stupid and even half woman, regardless of the claws she possessed. Not to mention how exquisite her exotic body was

to him. She was smaller than most of the Gierrer slaves they possessed, but taller than his sisters. He felt he could span his hands around her tiny waist and her rounded hips and perfectly round breasts made a devastating contrast to such a tiny middle. He chastised himself as he began to imagine her naked and moaning beneath him cutting the image short. It would not do him any good to think of such things when there was so much at stake. He had to keep his needs in check and refrain from touching her. It was then that he realized that he was thankful for her temper because it kept him otherwise occupied.

Unfortunately he had to leave her tied most of that time and only unbound her legs for travel and so she could relieve herself. He had tied a long rope to her bound wrists so she could have privacy.

She certainly did not appreciate the effort. She came back the first time and threatened to remove his eyes with a hot stick while he slept.

“Why do you complain woman, you have your privacy.” Erlend thought he had been no less than cordial considering her threats towards him or anyone else that made the mistake of looking at her. Yet she spoke to him with such boldness that he was taken back although his feelings never reached his expression. He had never met such a woman.

“On a leash like a dog!” She spat back at him as she tried to walk by him but he stopped her and reached for the rope around her wrists.

“It could be worse, do not tempt me.” He said calmly as he untied the long rope, but left her wrists bound.

She glared at him, "You speak so bold for someone who has never been treated as such." Did anything rile this man? He had such indifference in his expression when he spoke to her that it unnerved her. She was not used to such treatment. She had free rein of her brother's fortress and his lands and had never been bound and treated like a slave before in her life.

His head shot up and he locked gazes with her giving her a cold stare, "Do not speak of things you do not know about."

Although his face remained emotionless, she heard the anger in his voice. She had come to figure this out about Erlend. He was skilled at keeping his thoughts and emotions from his expression and his gaze, but the tone in his voice gave him away. It was not pronounced, but if she listened carefully, she could catch his mood.

Unfortunately, he was mostly angry with her. "So you think you have endured such treatment? I beg to differ..."

He cut her off. "There does not need to be ropes Lenore, to feel the burn of the knots. Now shut up."

This time she saw his sapphire eyes darken with a warning. It was the first time he allowed his anger to reach his gaze. She had hit a nerve. She knew she pushed him but was too irritated to care, "You..." She started, but he quickly stuffed a cloth in her mouth before she could say anything else. She screamed against it as he tied it around the back of her head.

"I warned you Lenore." He stared down at her and grabbed her wrists as she made a grab for the gag, "Before you

try that, I will tie your hands behind you. I suggest you leave it be.”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed in anger knowing what that would mean. He would have to help her relieve herself, feed her and she would end up riding on his lap for the rest of the journey instead of behind him. She could not bear that, so she swore against the rag once and did not attempt to remove it again.

“It is good that you have your wits about you, despite your anger.” He knew what she was thinking and she was not far off.

It had taken almost a week before he could remove the gag besides feeding her, without her threatening him a slow death. It was amazing to see that she had so much stubbornness in her. One time she did mention on how her brothers would slowly gut him on her orders so she could actually see some emotion in his expression for a change.

Erlend actually turned his head away so she could not see the smile that tugged at the corner of his lips.

When he had finally decided to remove the cloth she was beside him in his tent on his pallet where she had slept for the last fortnight, “If you give me your word, I will remove that cloth from your mouth if you do not scream. Mark my words woman, I will find something more foul to stuff in there if you do not listen.” He had made a point on not going to bed until he was exhausted enough to know that he would actually sleep without such a beautiful creature sleeping beside him.

She knew now that he meant what he said for he did not

make idle threats. Her steel gaze focused on him and she nodded slowly.

He did and she kept her word. He was not used to a woman staring at him so much and with so much loathing, but he began to realize that he liked her looking at him regardless of the venom her gaze held. More so, he found that he began to admire her spirit. It made her...attractive.

Another week passed as they rode toward her brother's fortress while avoiding the small towns and villages. Each night she slept beside him in his tent, still bound. He knew that if he untied her she would more than likely follow through with her threats.

Then she said the words as he lay beside her, "Untie me Erlend and I will not make due on my threats."

He leaned up on one elbow and stared at her. His expression remained impassioned.

"Please. I can not take the aching in my limbs anymore."

"Swear it Lenore." He said quietly.

"I swear." It was then that she realized he wasn't as indifferent as he projected. What made this man protect his emotions so much? He was an Esbiorn male, and of royal blood. Lenore heard the horrifying stories of the treatment of women, but men were raised to be the superior gender. It just did not make sense. She stared at him for a long moment.

He was not harsh when he spoke to her this time. He was giving her a truce. Handsome, was an understatement to

describe his looks. She had never in her life seen an Esbiorn male and his blonde hair, now sun streaked from the heat of her lands, made his blue eyes startling. His body was a completely other matter. He was much leaner than she was used to, but there was nothing shameful about it. He was muscular, but not bulking like the Gierrer. She saw him washing his upper half once in their tent when he thought she was sleeping. It took her a moment to realize that she was gaping and was thankful that he had his back to her. He had a quiet strength about him that could easily turn menacing which seemed to command respect and she noticed when he spoke his men did not hesitate despite their reluctance to touch her. She knew her brothers had seen such men but they do not bring them back for slaves, they killed them or sent them home unharmed, depending on their moods. Esbiorn men could not be trusted. This was something she was raised to believe. However his sapphire gaze rattled her because at times she swore she could see tenderness there, but it never reached his expression. The men of her race had not issue with showing their emotions within reason of a warrior. When they were enraged you knew it. When they jested it was obvious, and when they loved, it was profound, but this man was so ominous because she never knew how to take him.

“And you will not try to escape.”

Her eyes narrowed. She was hoping he would miss that, “I swear.”

“Because if you do Lenore, despite my orders, my men may not heed my words if they see you alone.” He warned.

She raised her brows, “What do you mean.”

He sighed, "They are not blind."

She flushed pink. He thought she was attractive. It was the first time he had indicated that he had noticed.

Without a word he leaned over her and untied her arms. Then he sat up and untied her legs before lying down.

She rubbed her wrists while staring at him, "Do you enjoy treating woman as such?"

"Go to sleep Lenore."

She gave a sigh of frustration, "Why do you not answer my questions?"

He turned to look at her and found her gaze was on his, "You are in no position to be asking questions."

"Asking, or you answering?"

He reached beside his pallet and picked up the cloth used to gag her before turning to her with a raised eyebrow.

She pursed her lips. "Erlend."

He sighed in frustration and turned his head toward her again, "God's blood woman, are you ever quiet?"

"I am cold."

Now he felt like a cur. Without saying a word, he reached over and pulled her to him. It was not an option letting her get sick. To his ultimate surprise she settled right into him. He

stifled an oath. Having a woman that close was wreaking havoc on his body. First of all, she was beautiful. Secondly, he had not had a woman in a while and last of all, her uncommon spirit was beginning to arouse his interest in more ways than one. He had kept his distance for a reason. And lastly, she had spoken his name and it tingled the atmosphere around him. No, he did not indicate to her that he noticed, but he did.

When he awoke in the dim light of early morning, she had somehow ended up across his chest. Her ebony hair spilled over him and onto his pallet. Her milky soft thigh had snaked across his legs, and the worst of it was, her dray had hiked up past her waist and he saw the creamy flesh of her naked thigh stretch across him. It caused him to stifle a moan of desire. Although he'd kept his animals skins on, he was aching against them. He was afraid to move because he knew it would cause him more pain, but she did it for him. She awoke and saw herself in such a position, but made no move to correct it. Her gaze slowly slid down and up their connected bodies and settled on his sapphire gaze. Her brows raised in question.

“Get off me woman.” Did she have no shame?

To his surprise she smiled. “Why?”

“Are you trying to raise my ire?” He said sternly. She was audacious! What woman does such a thing?

“I raised something, I think, but not your ire.” She teased and almost laughed at the shocked expression. “So you are not so immune to emotion, Esbiorn, are you?” Now his expression was one of rage.

"You dare speak so boldly, get off me woman!" He watched her stare at him in thought, then he did not miss the sudden challenge that appeared in her eyes.

Her lips curled into a devious smile, "Make me."

He swore and moved so quick that she squealed. But he only rolled her on to her back and covered her body with his as his mouth captured hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. She was soft and warm and God's blood, tasted better than anything he had sampled before. His tongue delved into the hot recesses of her mouth and she responded to him without hesitation and full of passion, sucking and caressing his tongue with hers. Her warm supple body moved beneath him, and just before he had lost all resistance, he used every solid inch of his being to lift himself off before he regretted his actions. He sat on the side of his pallet with his back to her and swore a long string of epithets.

She said his name but he did not look at her. She waited a moment and spoke again, "Erlend, come back to bed."

He shook his head and did not answer or look at her.

She kneeled behind him and put her hands on his shoulders, "Do I repulse you Erlend?" she said softly.

"Nay woman." He lowered his head into one of his hands in frustration and his voice was thick with restraint, "But you should not touch me Lenore."

She removed her hands, "Do you not desire me?" she sat back on her heels feeling dejected.

He sighed deeply in frustration hearing the sadness in her voice, "Aye."

Hope built up in her, "But what would possess you to refuse...to stop..."

"I have no right..."

"What? That does not make sense, you are Esbiorn..'

He turned and looked at her, his sapphire gaze still lit with desire, "Whatever you have heard of my people, I am not a rapist Lenore."

"I never...."

"I cannot have you. Aye, I want you, but I made an oath."

"To another woman?" She felt her heart crush....but why? He had taken her from her lands, tied her, treated her with indifference the likes she never had to deal with before and she was hurt at his words. Was she going insane?

"No." he said, "I made an oath not to touch you."

"To whom?" she said incredulously.

"Myself."

She was stunned and it took her a moment to compose herself, "Well then, break it." She said angrily.

"I cannot."

She pounded her fist on the furs, "You make no sense Erlend! Why would you make an oath that you do not need? You say you desire me, it is a simple task to withdraw your oath." He looked at her for a while nearly driving her wild with impatience as she studied her thoughtfully.

"Have you ever been with a man?" Part of him wanted her to say yes, so he could take her right there and then. But the other part of him raged with jealousy over the thought of another man touching her before him. Surprisingly, he was relieved when she blushed and her answer was obvious. "Then, I cannot."

"Even if I desire you." She confessed.

He swore under his breath, turned away from her, abruptly stood and walked out of the tent without a tunic. He needed the crisp night air to help cool his lust.

It took him less than two weeks to realize that he wanted her, not just in a lustful way. He wanted to keep her for his own. In turn, he did not realize that she somehow stopped hating him and from her response, desired him. It admonished him. A Gierrer woman wanted him and there was no force, no coercion.

He had made an oath that she could not be touched and must be returned to her brother as she left. There was more at stake here than his need for her. Yes, he desired her from the first day he had touched her, but it was different evoking a woman's desire. He knew of the Gierrer women's ways somewhat. If a woman were to offer themselves to a man, it meant she wanted him, unlike his people who just took what they wanted from their

women.

Much to his chagrin, he had spent the rest of their nights in his captain's tent. He could not risk going back in his.

"Are you not afraid she will run?" Said Erik

"No, she gave an oath." He sighed, "And if she does, maybe it would not be a bad thing."

Eric laughed, "She has gotten to you Erlend, has she not?"

"Aye. Now shut up. I need some sleep or I will be finding a gag for your mouth."

Eric chuckled again.

He did not lie to Bothvar when he said she was untouched, although he ached to touch her. He scolded himself endlessly. It had only been a little over a fortnight with her and her wild independence captivated him. Letting her go was one of the hardest things he had ever done, when it could have been so easy to just keep her. It might have been easier to remove his arm and handed it over to Bothvar. However he had more at stake. He wanted to overthrow his father and bring peace between Esbiorn and Gierrer. His needs were not a priority. However, the King of Gierrer was a reasonable man after all and did not miss the affection he held for his sister. It was unfortunate that he only had a few nights with his new mate before he had to leave for home, without her. He couldn't possibly bring her back to Esbiorn. His father would kill her, then maybe him for taking a Gierrer female as a mate.

Lenore stirred, and he kissed her forehead again. She was confident and sure of her abilities meaning that he rarely had to explain his moods to her insecurities. It was an amazing contrast to Esbiorn woman who were raised submissive and constantly sought reassurance when their men became angry. That was not to say she did not love him, for she told him constantly. She also always seemed to understand his silence and did not pester him with questions unless she thought she could help.

“Did I sleep long?” she raised her head to look at him.

“No love, not long.” At the sound of her voice, his heart felt lighter, for he loved her beyond what words could describe.

“Did you?”

“No.”

“Some matters can not be solved if you do not rest.” She said with concern.

He smiled and brushed her hair off her shoulders, “Your words of wisdom do not go unheard. Go back to sleep.”

“You concern yourself with everyone else.” She said, “That you forget to look after yourself. It has taken me some time Erlend, but I now know you hide your concerns with that hard expression, except your words have a tone that give you away.” She reached down and caressed his flat, hard abdomen, “I am going to help you sleep.”

“Lenore...” he began to protest. She needed her rest, but the Gods help him, he wanted her.

She kissed his chin as her hand went lower causing him to gasp cutting off his words. She felt him go hard almost instantly, “See,” she spoke seductively as she raised herself above him, “Your body says as much.”

He grinned up at her, “My body says as much around you no matter where I am or what I am thinking.”

She laughed, “You are such a handsome man, Erlend, it is no wonder that you are not more arrogant than you seem.” Then as she lowered herself onto his hard member she moaned.

“God woman, you will have me undone before you have begun.” He reached for her and she came down and kissed him while she rose and sunk on him with such a controlled rhythm that he finally lost it and flipped her over on her back plunging into her hard. She tensed as she reached her climax and he followed with one more thrust. He rolled to his side taking her with him.

Chapter Eleven

The only visitor that Runa had was her mother. She dreaded her father finding out as the months had passed that she was sneaking down once a day, but he had not. She learned to endure the rats and the endless loneliness, but not the anguish wondering of Bothvar and the fate of their unborn child. She wallowed in dread at times, knowing that there would come a day that her mother would not come. Even with her belly growing and her fears worsen of no escape caused endless nightmares. At least she was thankful that the morning retching had ceased. At this time she would give anything to be wrapped safely in Bothvar’s strong arms.

Besides food, her mother would bring her clean clothes and take her dirty ones. She brought larger clothes when her belly began to show and when the cold winter months set in she brought extra furs. Somehow she had even convinced the jailer that fresh water needed to be in there daily. She did not know how her mother did it, but did not care as she washed her body the best that she could each day.

Sometimes she would just let her worse thoughts take over and she would weep during the night when the loneliness was the greatest.

Bothvar and Erlend continued to communicate through Erlend's messenger. Bothvar was eager at any word to ease his anguish over Runa and his unborn babe. Erlend was always kind enough to include some information on how she fared. The passing months had not gone any easier for him, it had only worsened his agony. Several of his past trysts insisted on leaving offers open for him, thinking his mate was already dead. He refused. One in particular, Celia, whose mind was as devious as she was talented persisted. However after having Runa, she paled in comparison.

"My Lord, at least help me ease your burden." She approached him one evening while he sat by himself near the hearth. Grunewald was a short distance away, as he always was with his brother. It had been months since their queen had gone missing and she knew Bothvar must have ached to have a woman by now.

"Nay, be gone Celia, it is not so." He waved a dismissive hand at her without even giving her the courtesy of a glance.

She tried her best not to show her anger and continued to plead with him as she had done every evening for the week past while he brooded in front of the fire.

“Enough, woman, you try my patience. I have a mate and you know the bond that is formed with it.”

“Not if she were dead.” She said the words too quickly and with it her scheming eyes revealed the truth. Bothvar was too intelligent to miss it. He shot to his feet and grabbed her wrist.

“You! You have betrayed us...your own people!” It only took Bothvar a few seconds to realize that she had her hand in Runa and Lenore’s disappearance. Such words she spoke had such venom in them. It could be the only reason.

“No,’ she protested wincing at his grip, “I did not betray our people, just her! The Esbiorn witch!” She spat.

“By the Gods, do you have any idea what you have done? Lenore was with her!”

“It was not meant....”

He flung her away from him causing her to sprawl across the floor. Several of his warriors overheard the argument and ran up to her picking her up, not to set her right, but to hold her for Bothvar’s rage.

“This is a crime Celia.” He stood over her with all her rage visible in his expression terrifying her beyond imagination.

"You can not!" She protested.

"He can." Grunewald cut in "You, in your jealousy has betrayed your King, your people and our honour."

"I am a woman!"

"No, you are not. You are a demon in a female's skin, for women do not behave so evil." Bothvar answered her with barely contained rage. He turned to his guards, "Confine her, Erlend's messenger takes her to Esbiorn, they can do with her what they want."

She screamed in panic, "My lord, you can not!" it was a punishment worse than death and not once in the history of the Gierrer has there been such a thing.

Grunewald stepped in as Bothvar left her, "Aye, he can. Do you think our people would disagree Celia? You are mistaken. Your crime is unforgivable. Not just Runa, but Lenore suffers at the hands of those barbarians and your own selfish needs are to blame. Consider yourself lucky that he does not kill you. I would have." He turned to the two warriors holding her, "If she says another word cut out her tongue!"

Bothvar talked with Erlend's messenger shortly after. He relayed the story to him and discussed what was to be said to the King, and what was to be said to Erlend.

Runa raised her head from her makeshift pallet at the sound of her name. It was one of the few times she was able to sleep and a man's voice woke her. She shot out of bed when she saw her brother standing there, "Oh God! Erlend!"

“Shhh, Runa.” He opened the door and embraced her when she grabbed for him.

She sobbed.

“I regret how you have been treated, but it was necessary to save your life.” His voice quieted, “I need to explain things quickly to you so you need to listen.”

She nodded.

“Our father has it in his head to send Asta to the Zilns in your place. We are smuggling you in the cart with her and our mother. The King has insisted that I see to her protection. So the fool has given me an opportunity to get you out of here.” He placed a cloak over her shoulders, “Are you well?”

She nodded again.

Erlend did not miss the gaunt look about her, but chose not to mention it. “And the babe?”

She held her swollen belly, “He is well too. I managed with your and mother’s help.”

“It will not happen again. I will die before I let you be treated like that again.”

She looked up at him, “All this time. I never knew you felt like that.” And even though he spoke the words, the emotions did not reach his expression. However, it was his voice that made the words truthful.

"I could not let you or Asta know, our father would have made you pay for my affection." He stared down at her, "we must go before the jailer notices you missing." He turned and called for Erik, his general, who carried the body of a young girl about Runa's size, took her in the cell and covered her with the blanket.

Runa gasped, "Is that..."

"It is a Mohr slave that was unfortunate to fall victim of one of our father's personal guards. Do not dwell on her, she is saving your life tonight" Erlend turned her head away and spoke to her, "You need to stay focused Runa. You and Lenore are going as Asta's maids. You are wearing the cloak as such. Keep your face hidden."

"I will do as you say."

He took her arm and led her out of the dungeon. He was thankful that it was still too early for people to be awake in the castle. It was a long walk to the covered carts in the yard and he did not breathe a sigh of relief until he had her safely tucked in with Lenore.

A hundred of his men were accompanying him and unknown to his father would not return as friends. After they had taken the women to Gierrer, they will return with Bothvar's vast army and take down the Esbiorn King.

A fortnight had passed and it was Bothvar who spotted the caravan first and heeled his horse to a full gallop. His men followed close behind. His scouts had come back telling him that

the Esbiorn escort was half a day's ride from their camp. He and fifty warriors out of the two hundred that he had brought with him, mounted up and took off at a gallop. He saw Erlend ride to the front and wave his arm.

He pulled up his horse next to him. "Where is she?"

"The first cart, my lord. She is weary. Travel has been quite difficult on her, so I warn you to be aware of her condition." Erlend stressed. He still held guilt for her being in their dungeons for the first six moons of her pregnancy and because of that he was protective.

"Aye, Erlend, I will heed your words." He nudged his horse.

Runa and her mother were in the first cart and her sister and her maids were in the second with Lenore. Runa's mother had taken it upon herself to monitor her daughter's health and didn't want anyone else near her. She looked frail to her, and knew it had something to do with the long stay in Edgar's dungeon. She seethed, he had put his own daughter down there and treated her with such shame that it intensified her hate toward him.

She didn't realize how Erlend had felt about his father until she saw him grasp the hilt of his sword when he had struck the Gierrer woman. She knew then that Erlend *knew* her and then she quickly moved to prevent him from a suicidal attack. She couldn't blame him though; the woman was beautiful and headstrong, such as the Gierrer ways. However, she still never expected such behaviour from him. Erlend was always inexpressive, and until that day, seemed fiercely loyal to his

father. Obviously there were a lot of things that she didn't know. More surprisingly, Runa was with child from a Gierrer King. Her Precious Runa. She couldn't protect her from the warrior when he had taken her. So she told her to submit to survive. To this day she regretted the decision. Runa never talked about him and refused to when she asked her. Was it too painful of an experience to relay to her own mother? She thought that maybe with time she would let her know if she suffered much at the hands of the Gierrer. Now, they were on their way to the Ziln and Erlend had slipped Runa and Lenore out in hopes to save them from the King's unforgivable wrath. But what would they do with a ruined Esbiorn woman? She hoped Erlend had something worked out because when she spoke to him of the Gierrer woman, he had confessed that she was his woman and in his confession he was not willing to let his father have her.

She looked over at Runa's sleeping form and guilt filled her. If only she could have prevented her daughter's suffering. She remembered clearly how menacing that warrior was. Just then the flap on the tent flew open and she screamed as a Gierrer warrior filled the entrance of the cart as he stepped in. She knew it was a Gierrer man, but did not hear any battle cries if the escort had been taken over.

Runa sat up then startled awake by her mother's scream. She took a moment to adjust over the sudden waking and saw what had caused her mother to scream. "Bothvar!" She screeched, launching herself into his arms with a burst of strength despite the horrible fatigue she felt.

He embraced her, kissing her forehead, cheeks then her mouth.

She wept and kissed him back.

“Runa!” Her mouth exclaimed, “What is this!”

Bothvar lifted his head, “Quiet woman, I haven’t seen my woman in six moons. Give us a moment.” He kissed her again.

Woman! “What did you say?”

He ignored her, “Are you hurt my love?”

She shook her head and sobbed, “Bothvar, forgive me.’

“Hush! I do not blame you.”

“But I snuck out with Lenore and Kadlin.” She sobbed again.

He smiled reassuringly, “It is understandable, I have smothered you since I opened my heart to you. It is I who should be asking for forgiveness.” He said as he studied her for a moment, finally taking a good look at her beautiful face. He did not miss the paleness of her skin or the circles under her eyes, “You are ill.”

“I am fine now.” Her hand traced his jaw and she smiled trying to dispel his worries. “I could have the worst illness imaginable and not feel it for the joy of seeing you again.”

He shook his head, and placed his large hand on her swollen belly while he embraced her again whispering tenderly in her ear, “My precious Runa, always worried about everyone but herself. I will make sure that you mend. I have brought Thora

and Kadlin they are in my camp half a day's ride from here."

"Lord Bothvar..." Erlend's voice came from behind him, "Do you wish to break for camp?"

"Erlend, what is going on?" Bera stood aghast at the whole situation.

Erlend shook his head at his mother for her to be quiet before returning his attention to Bothvar.

"Nay, we travel to my camp tonight. My mate is in need of medicine."

"As you wish. I'll tell the men." He turned to leave, and his mother got up to follow him out of the cart leaving her daughter with that menacing man. No one else seemed to think that it was odd that a Gierrer warrior just crawled in the back of their cart and her daughter went willingly to him.

"Erlend?" She said following him around the cart, "Please...?"

He stopped, sighed and turned to her. He wasn't used to explaining himself to a woman but Lenore was quickly changing that with him. "Yes mother?"

"Why is that man here? What is he to Runa?"

"He is Runa's mate and the King of Gierrer."

Her mouth fell, "So it is true what he said?"

“Aye.”

“But why do you allow him to do such a thing?”

He looked past her head for a moment in thought. He was raised not to disclose warfare or any other information to women, but this was his mother, and regardless, he did love her. “I have allied myself with the Gierrer King with the intent to overthrow my father.”

She gasped.

“You asked.” He said calmly.

“He is your father!”

“Nay, he is a ruthless bastard that empowers himself over us because of his title. I will no longer subject myself to that rule. We have other threats to our kingdom and he chooses to ally himself with those that will destroy us when Gierrer is conquered. He is not being wise in his decisions and I will not see Esbiorn fall because of this.”

“He will kill you.” She sobbed.

“Not if I kill him first.” With that statement he turned and walked away.

Runa felt the cart begin to move again. Her mother didn’t return and thought she must have went to Asta. Bothvar’s place was with her right now and she must have known this.

“Lay down Runa.” He ordered.

“Do not leave me please.” She begged.

He smiled, “I will not.”

She did as he asked and saw him do his best to remove the straps of his armour. “Let me help you.” She went to sit up and he placed a hand on her chest pushing her gently back down.

“I can manage. I have done it before.” It took him twice as long as it would for her to have done it but he did manage like he said. He then sat next to her and pulled her gently across his lap cradling her in his thick arms. She didn't protest in the least. It had been too long since she felt his touch. She curled her arm around his waist and her other was folded under her head while he caressed her cheek and ran his hand through her hair. His eyes were fixed on hers. “I have been empty without you.” He confessed thick with emotion, “there are no words that can tell you how I suffered over your fate.”

“And I you...” she looked up at him holding back the tears that threatened to fall.

“Never again Runa, will I let you from my sight.”

She smiled up at him, “I will never complain of the warriors that guard me from now on.”

He smiled, “Good because I'm doubling them.” His hand went to her swollen belly again, “He has grown.” Then his eyes lit up as he felt an abrupt push against his hand, “He is a warrior already.”

“Aye my lord, so much so that he keeps me awake at night.”

He grinned at her words,

Grunewald reined his horse toward the second cart where his sister was. He dismounted and went in. She practically knocked him back out of the cart when she jumped into his embrace.

“You are well?”

She grinned at him, “Aye....Erlend has protected me.”

Grunewald clenched his jaw, “He should, it is his duty.”

She narrowed her gaze on him, “Do not speak ill of the man who would have given his life for me and his sister Gruewald...or I’ll...”

He cut her off by laughing, then he gripped her face in his hands and kissed her forehead, “I will not then, if you are pleased with your choice.”

She grinned, “I am.”

His eyes then darted to Asta who had managed to push herself into a corner with her two maids and mother to get away from him. Her eyes were averted. “Is she well?”

Lenore turned in looked at Asta, before returning his gaze. “Aye. You frighten them. Not only that, they do not know of the alliance. The Gierrer are very intimidating when crawling

into their carts unannounced." She nodded to Asta's mother who had joined them. "She did not even know that her daughter was Bothvar's. She thought her daughter was raped by him and she was his slave."

"Esbiorn men do not share their knowledge with women." Grunewald explained then spoke with unconcealed venom, "They do not think females are worthy enough."

"I have come to see this. I will tell her what I know." She spared another glance at the frightened woman.

He nodded, "If you wish. I assure you she will appreciate it because our last meeting may have left some...unpleasant memories."

She raised her brows, "Really....so you and Bothvar are out for terrifying young women now?"

He narrowed his eyes on her, "It wasn't like that."

"No?" She looked at Asta again. "That young woman is about to faint at the sight of you."

He looked over his sister's head and noticed that she was right by the slight quiver of her chin. Suddenly he felt quite guilty for frightening her, but there was no other way to get what they wanted that night. He moved toward her and she tried to squish herself closer into the corner.

"Do not fear me." He said gently ignoring the other women

She instantly brought her gaze up to his.

He could see her bottom lip tremble.

He knelt before her, "*I will not harm you.*" He saw her eyes register a question but she didn't ask it.

He stared at her for a moment longer before he suddenly turned away and hopped out of the cart. He wanted to touch her. If she didn't faint when he spoke to her, he certainly would if he placed his hands on her.

He mounted his horse and rode to the front of the caravan to an even trot with Erlend. What he didn't realize is the drape of the cart opened and sapphire eyes watched him with interest.

"The women are well?"

"Aye." He turned to him, "Lenore speaks highly of you."

One of Erlend's brows went up as he stared back at Grunewald, "And...?"

Grunewald managed a faint smile, "You will do."

Erlend laughed.

"I will still be watching Esbiorn, so I suggest you do not become too relaxed."

Erlend laughed again, "Grunewald, I would never expect to do such a thing around you. If I do, I fear my head would no

longer be attached to my shoulders.”

Grunewald chuckled.

They made Bothvar's camp in the middle of the night.

Bothvar got out of Runa's cart and helped her down. He could feel her shake in his grasp when she tried to stand up and knew she wasn't as well as she put on. He bent down and picked her up.

“Bothvar, put me down!” She whispered harshly.

“No, you are not well. I will not have you strain yourself and suffer to dispel my worries.” He looked down at her with a stern expression, “Do not argue with me Runa.”

She wanted to, but he was right. She had not been well for several days now and didn't want to burden anyone with her problem. Knowing from his expression that arguing with him would be pointless, she nodded and laid her head against his chest.

Runa's mother was at his side in an instant, and all the fear she had toward Bothvar was overruled at the sight of him carrying her daughter. “Runa, are you ill?”

“Aye she is.” Bothvar answered her.

Runa heard her but being in Bothvar's arms for the first time in days, made the mask of strength she had, crumble and she suddenly felt quite weak.

“Woman, out of my way, she needs my medicine woman.”

“You intend to poison her.” Bera was actually arguing with large man. She listened to what Lenore had to say and of Bothvar’s devotion to her daughter, but she did not know that the Gierrer would take their woman back even if they had been taken by another and used. She had panicked thinking that Bothvar would have no use for her daughter if he thought she was raped by Esbiorn men.

He frowned down at her, “I would not!” He went to step around her and she stepped in front of him.

“I can take care of my daughter.”

He sighed in frustration, “This is no time to debate Mistress of Anthon, remove yourself. Runa is my mate first and that cancels your rights.”

“Mother,” Erlend came up then, “Move out of his way. He knows what he is doing.”

Bera looked at her son who remained expressionless and calm. She took a deep breath, nodded and stepped aside as Bothvar carried her daughter across the camp and into his tent. She turned to her son, “How do you know he means her well?” she was close to tears.

“Mother, he will not let harm come to her, he loves her.”

“You don’t know that.” The tears started to fall

“I do. I know the Gierrer ways, our father made me

know. On his life, he will do anything he can to make her well. You must let him try." He still couldn't bring himself to embrace his mother while she wept. It turned out, he didn't have too. Lenore brushed by him and held her.

He stood there for a moment watching. Lenore looked up at him with an expression of understanding. He nodded, turned, and walked away. His sweet Lenore knew the inner struggle he had and he didn't even have to say anything. He didn't realize how lost he was before he met her.

Chapter Twelve

Thora was making Runa drink something that tasted so bitter she gagged. Kadlin held her hand.

"Runa, drink." Bothvar spoke gently.

She tried again, but coughed.

"I will keep trying my Lord, but you should leave because I have other ways to make her drink this, and you will not like it." Thora said to him.

He knew exactly what she was going to do, for he had had it done to him when he was ill. Their medicine woman would take a flexible *agor* straw and shove it down her throat to pour the liquid down. It was not a pleasant procedure. When he was ten summers, it was done to him and it still took four full grown warriors to hold him down even as sickly as he was, to get the medicine in him. That is how unpleasant the whole event was. However, he was alive today because of it. He nodded and although he didn't want to, left. There was no way he could stand

by idly while they inserted the straw. Thora was right in asking him to leave.

Asta watched the warrior through the flaps of the tent she shared with her mother and maids. Although she was terrified of him when she had first seen him, his words were gentle despite his menacing size. She saw him walk over to the Gierrer King, who had a pained expression on his face. His eyes kept darting to the tent Runa was in and in an obvious show of comfort he placed his hand on the warrior King's shoulder and there were an exchange of words. She knew Runa was sick and her heart felt heavy in her chest. She wanted to see her sister. She didn't even know that she was back at Anthor and only found out when Lenore was speaking to her mother.

She also found out that Lenore was the Gierrer King's sister and the man she stared at now was his younger brother. He was handsome there was no question, Although he seemed foreboding, he wasn't as menacing as the King. In fact he had gentleness about him.

Asta had always thought that Runa was the most beautiful Esbiorn woman alive, although she herself never believed it, and she paled next to her, but this man looked at her with attraction in his steel-blue gaze. She admitted, she liked it. Then Lenore approached the two men. Grunewald and the King both put their arms around her. She was envious of the affection that they showed each other. Erlend would never do such a thing. He was raised in a strict society like she was. In fact, she never knew his true feelings towards either she or Runa, until he had rescued Runa from Anthor Castle's dungeon.

Asta had watched Lenore with the Gierrer men and she

was fascinated by her.

She found out that she spoke both languages, was outspoken and had somehow captured her brother's heart.

Her curious eyes guided back to Grunewald. He bent down and kissed his sister tenderly on the forehead while he embraced her, and she found herself wondering how those masculine lips felt on her skin. When he first came into her cart she was terrified. She remembered him in the rain that fateful night that her sister was taken from her. He had looked at her then, as he looked at her a short time ago in the cart. For the first time, she noticed it wasn't fierceness in his gaze, it was something else. Something she wasn't used to and it created heat in her belly. She wanted to ask him how he did that, but could not bring herself to ask the words. Then as if he sensed someone looking at him, his eyes raised to hers. Asta froze as he lifted his head and stared at her. Gods help her, but she could not tear her gaze away. He took a couple of steps in her direction and she still couldn't look away. Regardless of her upbringing, she *liked* looking at him.

"Asta, please close the flap, it is getting cool."

Her mother's voice interrupted her trance with the Gierrer man. She turned and looked at her, "Yes mother." She then turned her attention back to Grunewald who had taken a few steps more in her direction. She lowered her gaze off of his and could see him halt through her lashes. She then closed the flap and severed her view.

Grunewald was surprised at Asta's boldness. She met and held his stare. Nothing what he expected from her. She didn't

even back down when he took several steps toward her. He did not know what to do when he did approach her, but there was something beckoning in her deep blue gaze that made him move toward her. Then she suddenly turned away. A call from within the tent perhaps? When she turned back she lowered her gaze almost as an apology over the interruption before she pulled the flaps closed. Regardless, his heart did not miss the fact that she *looked* at him. She was interested. It was then that Grunewald understood what Bothvar went through the night they took Runa for he felt his chest tighten at the sight of her. Then a wave of feeling went through him. Feelings that he never had felt before towards a female. His sister he loved, but that was different from this. This was—desire.

Bothvar had spent the next three nights in Grunewald's tent. Runa was still quite ill and Thora and Kadlin tended to her well. They never left her side. Thora suggested he find another place to sleep, so they could see to her and not disturb him. He agreed. He stopped in frequently but she had shown no signs of improving. He knew she was sick because of the confined filthy space she had spent many days in and felt completely anguished and guilt ridden over her being ill. Seeing her with that straw sticking out of her mouth did not help his feelings any. In some ways he was thankful that the illness had left her unconscious. The days passed very slowly and he refused to move her, so they had remained at his camp. He had sent three messengers back to Gierrer Castle to inform the rest of his warriors their delay.

That night he lay awake with his hands behind his head staring at the fabric of the tent ceiling when Thora entered quietly.

“my Lord?”

Grunewald and Bothvar sat up at the same time. Grunewald was asleep, but like any Gierrer, he was attuned to soft noises while he slept. The difference in his reaction and Bothvar's was he instantly reached for his sword beside his pallet.

"Aye." He answered Thora, before speaking to his brother, "It is Thora." Grunewald grumbled something and the sliding of metal on leather was heard as he sheathed his sword.

"She is awake my lord, and calls for you. Her fever has broken."

"Thank the Gods!" Instant relief flooded through him as he jumped up and wearing nothing but his animal skins followed Thora out of the tent.

Grunewald remained where he was. Bothvar needed time with his woman.

When Bothvar entered his tent, Kadlin bowed and left immediately.

"Bothvar?" Runa said weakly.

He went to her side and kneeled on the ground beside her, "I am here." The straw was removed from her mouth, her color had returned somewhat, and from the scent of soap and the look of her still damp hair, she was recently washed. He made a mental note to reward Thora and Kadlin for their tender treatment of his woman. He reached over and caressed her silken cheek, "Are you better my love?"

“Aye...how long...have I been asleep?”

“Three days.”

Her eyes widened, “Three?”

“You were very ill.”

“I did not know.”

He pursed his lips, “It is not your fault. I should have stormed Anthor Castle and rescued you.”

She looked at him with her sapphire eyes full of sympathy, “No my Lord. It would have been suicide. My father expected just that.” She swallowed, “I would rather be ill the rest of my days than lose you.”

He stared at her for a moment before reaching over and gently lifting her into his arms. He lowered his face to her cheek, “You are more precious to me than you know.”

She turned her head and kissed him then surrendered to his embrace, content to have him near her again after so long.

Grunewald was awoken by the rustle of the flap to his tent. He sat up and reached for his sword beside the bed when he saw Asta stepping into his tent and let the flap fall. She stood quietly while he sat there in stunned silence at her boldness frozen in the pose reaching for his weapon. Regardless of the darkness of the night he could still make out her gold sun-spun hair falling about her shoulders. At first he thought he was

actually dreaming.

“Lady?” What in Gods’ minds possessed her to come to him in the middle of the night?

She came to him and kneeled on his pallet, “I have to speak with you.”

Regardless of her boldness, he heard the vulnerability in her voice. “You had better leave.” He tried to sound stern but his voice cracked making him less harsh. Her presence greatly affected him. When she spoke, her voice was laced with apprehension.

“Please do not make me leave. It was difficult to come to you.”

He noticed that she actually levelled her gaze with his. Was she not Esbiorn? “Why do you stare so boldly at me?”

There was a long pause of silence before she spoke, and her voice was shaky, “Because...you are so pleasing to my eyes...” she swallowed nervously while scanning his muscular bare upper torso, “And...I know you fancy me.”

Trying his best to ignore her words, he reached out and put his hands on her arms and he could feel her tremor, “Listen Asta, you must leave before you are discovered. Your brother will skewer me for even talking to you, let alone touching you.”

“But...I thought..”

Even in the darkness of his tent he could feel her flush

with embarrassment. He sighed heavily, “Do not think I do not find you desirable, but this isn’t the way. You are a high born woman. I cannot take liberty with you.”

“Even if it is given freely?” She offered weakly.

He near groaned at her confession, but stood his ground, “Aye.”

She lowered her gaze, “But I do not want to be *given* to someone else without my consent.”

“That will not happen now.”

Her head shot up, “How do you know?”

“Because Asta, you will be living with the Gierrer and we do not force women. It is their choice.”

“I will be living with your people?”

Grunewald had forgotten that the men do not confide in their women, “Aye. However, you are still Erlend’s charge. So you must listen to him.”

“So he *will* give me to someone.”

“He will let you approve of his choice or have a say in which he chooses. He has made it clear to me that his ways are old and he wishes to adopt the Gierrer ways.” His hands released her, but not before he brushed a tendril of hair back over her shoulder that obscured his view of her lovely face.

She lowered her gaze again and her voice was barely a whisper, "What if I choose you."

He was taken back, "you would do that?" It was not to say that he felt elated over her confession or the fact that his loins fired with it, but to him she seemed untouchable. He did not deem himself as handsome as Bothvar or as revered. It was true that he never had a problem with having woman in his bed either, but she had been nothing like he had ever seen or even hoped for.

She managed a meek shrug, "I see the way you look at me Grunewald. I know what desire is. We have been schooled in such ways...but your stare holds something different." She paused to take a deep breath to gather courage and continued, "...and despite your size and menacing image you portray, your touch is so gentle...and when you spoke to me in my cart three days ago...your concern for me was overwhelming....I am not used to such attention. I liked it." Her eyes searched his, "Then I began to watch you...I found that you are very desirable to me. I know I am not supposed to let those feelings interfere, but if I did not tell you, you would not know."

"Asta." His voice was strained, "Is this something that you are sure about even knowing you could chose your husband?" He wanted her answer to be 'yes', but inside he dreaded to ask the question in case she said 'no'. He wanted to make sure that her choice was because she wanted him, not because she wanted to be ruined so her brother could not give her to someone she did not approve of. There was no denying that he wanted her for himself the first night he had seen her in the driving rain. Now, her confession made him think this was a dream, and to good to be true. His heart jumped at her answer.

“Aye.”

It was his turn to swallow hard, “Then you must return to your tent before you are discovered missing. I will speak to your brother on the morrow.”

There was no mistaking the light in her eyes, “You would?”

She grinned and he swore his insides melted, “If you are sure.”

Without thinking she threw her arms around his neck and raised up on her knees just coming level with him, “I am!”

Her innocence, impulsiveness and the feel of her warm body was wreaking havoc on him. His voice was hoarse with desire, “Asta, you have to go, or I will not be able to stop myself from putting my hands on you.” He reached up and removed her arms gently from around his neck.

She jumped back and stared at him with obvious apprehension, “I apologize...I did not mean...”

“Aye. Just go...I will see you after I speak to Erlend.”

She nodded and got off his pallet to sneak out of his tent quietly.

He fell back on the furs with a curse. Now he would not get any sleep tonight with his loins in such a fire.

When Grunewald found Erlend the next morning he was

saddling his horse to accompany the hunting party for the day.

“I need to speak with you.”

Erlend turned to see Grunewald with a solemn expression on his face.

“You are sombre Grunewald. Usually you are jesting or ready to rip off my arms.” He stopped what he was doing because of this and turned to him. “Now I am curious.”

He took a moment to respond. “I have seen your temper. It concerns me when I have something to ask of you that might raise your ire.”

“So the Gierrer warrior fears me?” he grinned.

“Not bloody likely.” He defended while raising his voice in anger.

Elrend actually laughed, “That is the Grunewald that I am used to...ask me your question.”

Grunewald did just that and then waited. The Esbiorn prince suddenly stopped laughing and just stared at him with his usual unreadable expression for what seemed like an eternity. He waited for the burst of anger but as time passed he realized it wasn't going to come.

Erlend knew Grunewald would not jest about such things and by the look of him, he was sincere in his request. The large man shifted uncomfortably and he knew this had to have been difficult for him. Until recently, he didn't trust Erlend and made

that known. Now, he had come to him to ask him for Asta.

“Does she know of this?”

“Aye, she has asked me.”

“You do not jest?” Erlend was surprised. He thought Asta was terrified of the Gierrer because of her last experience with them.

“No.”

“My sister actually came and offered you her oath?” he repeated in disbelief.

“Aye.” Grunewald kept the fact that she had snuck into his tent in the middle of the night from Erlend because he knew he would be angry.

“But how did she...I mean, why would she think you were interested?”

Grunewald shrugged.

Erlend’s expression changed as his eyes probed Grunewald’s face, “Is there something that I need to know?”

“I have spoken to Asta twice for a very short time. I did not know she felt this way, but I will not lie and say I did not find her appealing. I have never seen the likes of both of your sisters’ beauty. Asta has confessed that she had seen me looking at her and knew she appealed to me.”

“Really?” Erlend’s brows shot up. An Esbiorn woman

would never dare approach a man without permission, but the look and tone of Grunewald made him know the warrior spoke the truth.

“Aye.” To Grunewald’s relief Erlend nodded.

“This is a great surprise, Grunewald, if you but know a fraction of our ways with women, you would understand how strange this seems.”

Grunewald nodded, “I know enough, and I know enough through Runa, to know that this is very unusual, but I want her.”

He studied him a moment again, “but Asta is precious to me.”

“As Lenore is to me.” Grunewald was thankful that Erlend did not push for when Asta had spoke to him, or he would feel obligated to tell him and then allow the man to beat him to a pulp. Regardless of how emotionally detached the man seemed, he knew different. There was no way Lenore would fall in love with a cold man. Not only that, he had seen the way Erlend looked at his sister. He loved her even though he did not physically display his affection.

Erlend nodded, “That is a good argument. I see your attachment to your sister, it is how I feel about mine. Your words do not go unheeded Grunewald, I will speak to Asta and then you will have my answer.”

Grunewald nodded and Erlend left to find Asta.

He found her outside her tent with their mother and her

maids. “Asta, I will speak with you alone.” She blanched at his words. It was obvious that she knew what this was about.

Bera looked at her son, “What is this about?”

“Do not concern yourself mother, it is to do with Asta and I.”

Bera raised her chin in defiance to her son, “Erlend, she may be your sister, and you are our protector but she is my daughter too.”

For the first time in his adult life, Erlend actually leaned down and kissed his beautiful mother on the cheek in respect. He pulled back from her to see her mouth fall open in surprise and tears brim her eyes, as he spoke gently to her, “Aye mother...she is your daughter, but this is a private matter that she will have to talk to you about. Do not mistake my respect for my sister as disrespect for my mother, because that is not my intention.” He gave her one of his rare smiles.

She was so choked up at the show of affection that she could not talk and only managed to nod. She watched Erlend take Asta’s arm and lead her into their tent.

Once inside he turned her to face him and released her, “Is it true that you offered yourself to Grunewald?”

His expression remained unreadable so Asta wasn’t sure if he was furious with her, or what exactly Grunewald had said to him. Did he tell Erlend that she had snuck into his tent last night? Asta’s cheeks flamed, but she didn’t say anything.

She didn't need to, Erlend had known by her reaction.
"Is that your wish Asta?"

She looked up at him and slowly nodded.

He stood straight and stared down at her. What an interesting dilemma. Both of the most powerful warriors of Gierrer would be his brothers through union with his sisters. Not only that, he had Lenore. It couldn't have been a better alliance and he doubted in all of his life would he see one such as this again. However, he wasn't willing to force his sister into anything without her consent, "Does he not frighten you? He has a fierce temper Asta."

She shook her head, "He has been nothing but gentle toward me."

"Do you think he returns your affection?"

"Aye, Erlend he does."

"You are sure? You do not have any experience in this way."

"He...looks at me differently." She confessed unwillingly.

Erlend's brows went up, "There is a difference between desire and affection Asta. Even though you have been schooled in such ways, you are untouched."

She flushed again, "I know this," She defended, "It is not a lusty stare Grunewald gives me. I know because Runa and I endured them from our father's guards every day." *Runa more*

than I, she added to herself.

Erlend was furious, they dared stare at his sister in such a way. The King's personal guards had special privileges at Anthon. They were allowed to help themselves to the most prized slaves and did what they would with them, such as the young girl that replaced Runa in his father's dungeon that was killed by brutal hands because she protested the abuse. He did not let his anger reach his features. It would have probably frightened Asta and she would have thought it was because of her. "There is one thing that you must first understand of the Gierrer."

Her face lit up as realization hit her, "Erlend, you will allow this union?"

"Aye. If it is what you wish."

She threw her arms around him.

After a brief moment of Erlend feeling awkward, he hugged her back with a little less enthusiasm but hoped that it was enough to let her know how he felt. He finally pulled her back.

She grinned at him, unable to contain her happiness.

He shook his head, suppressing his own smile at her delight, "Asta you must listen."

"I will." She said practically bouncing in place with her happiness.

Erlend took his time and explained why she makes sure

her choice was final because of the bond the men formed with the women. "It is not the same as the Esbiorn man who takes any woman to his bed. The Gierrer will die for their women. Grunewald will die for you. So take care when you act on impulse as you have done in the past."

Asta was impulsive. She was the younger daughter so unlike Runa who had the responsibility of the oldest daughter on her shoulders. She had to look, act and speak a certain way and if she did not she would be beaten. Asta had the same education but was overlooked when she erred. That somehow gave her a little more independence than Runa had. Although, when they were first attacked by the Gierrer it was Runa who gave herself to protect her sister, and it was Runa who had been brave while she trembled. She loved her sister for her sacrifice, more than she thought she could, and was thankful the warrior King liked what he had seen, or who knows what would have happened to her.

To hear that Grunewald would give his life to save hers just made her fonder of him. She had never heard of such a thing, for the Esbiorn men would just take another woman. This led her to ask a question, "Would you for Lenore?"

"What makes you say such things Asta?" Erlend said flatly.

She stared at him, "I think you would Erlend."

"Asta, you remember who you talk to."

She actually smiled.

He warned her again by narrowing his gaze on her, but

she still smiled at him, "Heed my words Asta. Do not forget what I have told you. Now you must speak to our mother about this and I will talk to your chosen."

Chapter Thirteen

Grunewald found his brother in his tent with Runa. By the looks of it, she had just fallen asleep and Bothvar was moving out from under her. He held a finger to his lips. Then, he went to his chest and pulled out a fresh tunic and put it on before following Grunewald out of the tent. Kadlin and Thora rushed back in when they saw Bothvar exit.

"Is she better?"

"Aye, much."

The look of relief on his weary face told Grunewald plenty. His brother had suffered much with Runa's illness. He knew he would if the same would fall to Asta, Which brought him back to why he sought out Bothvar, "Runa's sister Asta wishes to give me her oath."

Bothvar was stunned, "The timid creature that you frightened half to death, she confesses her affections for you?"

"She came to my tent last night after you left."

"I hope you did not tell this to Erlend." He smirked. "Because I am rather fond of you."

Grunewald grinned, "I am not suicidal Bothvar. He may look harmless enough, but he matched me evenly in the

swordfight despite his smaller size.”

“Grunewald, tell me that you didn’t...” Grunewald was a man after all, and Asta had the irresistible Esbiorn beauty.

Grunewald caught his meaning, “...No. I did not. I sent her away.” He furrowed his brow, “It was not easy.”

Bothvar laughed, “I know.”

Grunewald nodded, “She does not understand our ways. I told her I must speak with her brother before I can touch her.”

“Did you speak with him yet?”

“First thing this morn. He is speaking to his sister now. He did not give me an answer.”

“If this is what you wish Grunewald. I support your decision.” They were the same words that Grunewald spoke to Bothvar when he accepted Runa’s oath.

Grunewald grinned, “Thank you Bothvar.”

Bothvar returned his grin, “Just heed your own advice about the Esbiorn women being timid.”

He shook his head, “If she dances like Runa, I do not care how timid she is.”

Bothvar laughed.

Erlend appeared just then, “My lord...” he greeted, “Has your brother told you of his request?”

“Aye.”

“How is my sister?”

“She is healing. Thora is the best the Gierrer have. She awoke last night and some color has returned to her face.”

“That is good to hear. My mother and Asta are wrought with worry. May they see her?”

“Perhaps tomorrow, she is worn from fighting the sickness.”

“I will tell them.”

Grunewald was having a hard time waiting for Erlend’s decision, he fidgeted a bit but remained silent because he and Erlend had not always been on the best of terms and he did not want him to change his mind about Asta if he got him riled. He was thankful for his brother at that moment who asked the question.

“What is the news then, Erlend, of my brother and your sister?”

Erlend turned his eyes on Grunewald and as usual his expression was unreadable, “Asta insists that you are what she wants.”

“And?” Grunewald asked.

"I guess I should welcome you as a new brother." A slow grin spread across his face as he held out his arm.

Grunewald returned his smile and clasped his arm.

Bothvar laughed, "Have you ever heard of such? Our siblings all united as one family."

"I have not." Offer Erlend, "Yet it solidifies our alliance. I cannot betray such."

"Lenore would slay you while you slept." Added Grunewald with a wry grin.

"Aye. I would rather throw myself off a cliff then face her wrath again." The memory of her capture was still fresh in his mind.

Bothvar and Grunewald laughed knowing what ire their sister was capable of.

"I need to get up." Runa struggled to sit up and Thora and Kadlin helped to steady her as she turned and put her feet on the ground.

"You need to heal." Thora stated with disapproval, "Lay still my Queen."

Runa shook her head, "I have been useless for three days. I do not wish to burden anyone anymore."

Thora said something to Kadlin in her own language

which caused her to rush out of the tent.

Runa had an idea that Kadlin went to fetch Bothvar. She sighed in frustration, knowing that he would return and demand that she remain in bed. "At least just let me sit for a bit." She was able to actually drink the bitter drink that Thora gave her. She did not want that straw in her throat again.

Thora stood straight with her hands on her hips, "My lady, the potion gives you a false sense of feeling better, so it may work properly. You must remain in bed for yourself and the babe."

Runa looked up at her, "My bottom and back are sore Thora from lying so long."

Just then the flap of the tent opened and Bothvar's frame filled the opening while he stepped in with Kadlin right behind him. He frowned when he saw her, "Runa...lay down." Then he turned to the women and told them to leave. He wanted some time with her now that she was awake.

She glanced at him and nodded. It was that familiar tone that told her that there was no debate with his words. She pulled herself back on the pallet and he was suddenly beside her helping her lay down.

"It does you no good to struggle Runa. You will recover quicker if you listen to Thora properly."

She stared at him. It was getting easier to do so, especially when she had not seen his handsome face in many moons. He was right, she already felt exhausted from just sitting

for a moment. He must have noticed because he helped her get comfortable.

“My Lord, I just do not like feeling useless.”

He chuckled, “You are far from that Runa. Do not compare yourself with a common woman, you carry my child. This is not a useless task.”

He was right, but it did not help her mood any. However when he leaned down and gave her a tender kiss, she managed a smile.

“You will listen to Thora, Runa.” He added softly as his hand caressed her face, “The sooner you are better, the sooner I may have you at my side again.”

“Okay, my lord, I will listen. Will you stay with me for awhile?”

“Aye.” He stretched out beside her and pulled her next to him. He heard the longing in her voice and knew he missed her as much as she him. She laid her head on his chest with one arm across his abdomen as she moved tighter against him. He smiled to himself as his hand caressed her back.

Bera had to sit down as she absorbed her daughter's words.

“Mother?” Asta saw the blank expression.

Bera looked at her daughter, “Erlend is letting this happen?”

Asta nodded.

Both of her daughters now belong to Gierrer warriors. Those fierce men who have been sworn enemies of the Esbiorn during her ancestor's time are now united with them. Would she rather have them sworn to Esbiorn men and endure the cruelty that she has? No. But what of the cruelty of the Gierrer? She did not know much about them, and Runa would not speak of her time with them. Since Bera had heard Erlend's words over Runa being with Bothvar's child, she had honestly thought the King had raped her daughter and mistreated her. However, he was very gentle with her daughter and openly concerned for her when she fell ill. It was unheard of. A man being so attached to a female. Then again, she did not know of the Gierrer ways. If it were not for Lenore, she would know less. Lenore had explained much when Grunewald had left their cart.

Then she thought of Lenore. She was outspoken, opinionated and intelligent, and was able to tame her Esbiorn son. A task she thought impossible. It was obvious that Gierrer women were allowed more freedom than the Esbiorn. Not only that, Lenore could speak both languages, so she was educated. Despite her mannerisms, Bera really liked her and admired her. She wished her daughters had such opportunities as her, but they did not. Now she had to allow her youngest child, Asta, who was barely seventeen summers be with a man she did not know or trust yet. Her son surprised her again by listening to Asta's request for the Gierrer male. Erlend had that right over them and he granted Asta's wish.

"Mother...have I upset you?"

This brought Bera's gaze back to her daughter's. She managed a weak smile, "No, Asta. I just find this all very overwhelming. All of my children are united with Gierrer people. If this is what you wish and Erlend has allowed it, I am happy for you."

"Thank you!" She squealed as she hugged her mother before she turned and ran out of the tent.

She wandered through the crowd of warriors looking for Grunewald. However, she became crestfallen when she could not find him. Unbeknownst to her the large men moved aside to let her pass and followed her with their stares. She was so eager on finding him that she did not realize that she was by herself among so many men. When she finally felt the dozens of pairs of eyes on her she froze. She knew what men did to women and she had no escort or protection from the Gierrer warriors. She averted her gaze to her feet letting her fear get the better of her. Suddenly she heard a familiar voice and looked up to see Lenore shouting the men who immediately turned away from Asta. She did not know what she said but it was affective.

"Don't be such brutes, " Lenore chastised the warriors, *"You are frightening the poor woman half to death!"* She waved an arm at them, *"Turn your heads before she faints!"* Lenore approached the frightened girl while apologies followed her from the men. "Asta, do not fear them. They will not hurt you."

"They won't?"

Lenore gave her a reassuring smile, "No Asta, they just are not used to such a fair haired woman. You are a rare sight for them and that is not including how beautiful you are."

Asta shook her head, "I am not."

Lenore laughed, "I can understand your modesty considering your upbringing, but aye, you are beautiful." She took her hand, "Come I will take you back to your mother."

Asta stopped causing Lenore to turn around, "What is it?"

"I...I was looking for Grunewald." She admitted with hesitation and obvious shyness.

"What for?" Both of her brows rose in question.

Erlend must not have said anything to her about this morn's events, "I gave him my oath."

Lenore's eyes lit up, "You did?"

"Aye." She blushed.

"Did he accept?"

"He said he would speak to Erlend. Erlend told me that Grunewald did ask for me and Erlend consented."

Lenore grinned, "Asta this is wonderful news! Now I have two sisters." She hugged her tightly nearly squeezing the breath out of her.

Asta blushed.

Lenore released her, "Asta you have to come and visit with me for awhile."

“But Grunewald...”

“He is on patrol with a group of warriors.” She tilted her lovely head at her, “He is Bothvar’s first general, so he has duties to perform. He will return at dusk.”

“First general?”

Lenore laughed, “It looks like we have much to talk about.”

They did just that. Lenore started to educate her on the Gierrer ways, and more importantly Grunewald. Bothvar was the older brother and inherited the realm, but as far as Bothvar was concerned it was only a title. He always counselled his decisions with Grunewald, and allowed his brother as much say as if he were his equal. However, according to their laws, Bothvar was King so he gave Grunewald the highest title possible, first General of his vast army. He alone commanded the warriors with Bothvar’s direction. It was a great responsibility. Then she went on to talk about their laws, their women’s freedom and right to choose.

When it became late in the day Lenore led her to a group of warriors around one of the many burning fires. She sat her down next to them as the men handed them cooked meat from the days hunt and wine.

Asta noticed that the warriors were eager to serve Lenore and only looked at her with the utmost respect, not the lusty leers that she was used to from her father’s men. When she spoke to them there was no shortage of men to do her bidding. She was

astonished at they treated her.

“Do all the women get treated in such a way?”

Lenore looked at her for a moment not knowing what she meant. Then it dawned on her as one of the men handed her another flask of wine. She laughed, “Not exactly. I am Bothvar and Grunewald’s sister. They respect and honour my brothers by treating me well.”

“I could not dream of such a treatment.” She said in awe.

“You had better get used to it, because you will get the same.” She gave her an amused look before taking a long drink from the flask.

Suddenly there were shouts from men other than those around the fire. Asta couldn’t understand what was said, but several men stood and responded. Lenore turned to her with an eager smile, “Erlend and Grunewald have returned Asta.”

Asta could feel her heart beat rapidly in her chest as Grunewald came into view with Erlend by his side. Lenore ran over to Erlend who couldn’t hide his discomfort when she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Although, he did not seem to mind kissing her back. Grunewald stopped and talked to several men around the fire all the while his eyes kept focusing on her. He looked more handsome than he did last night now that he was hers. She watched as he finally made it around the group and stood before her. She was speechless while his steel blue gaze stared down at her with obvious desire. Without a word he took her hand and led her away from the fire until they were in the confines of his tent. He turned to her.

“Are you afraid Asta?” He said gently while cupping her face in his hands.

“No...” She breathed, “...A little.”

He smiled tenderly at her, “I will be gentle.” He promised as he leaned down and covered her mouth with his.

When Runa awoke the next morning, Bothvar still lay beside her sleeping. She adjusted her eyes and noticed that it was still early. She sat up and stretched and Bothvar opened his eyes to stare at her naked back. She felt his eyes on her and turned to look at him. A slow smile spread across her full lips. “My lord.”

“you are much better today Runa?”

“I feel almost new.” She lay down on his thick chest and sighed.

He chuckled, “Not so new to be with me yet Runa, please do not raise my desire. I already have enough trouble after so long without you.”

She lifted her head to look at him, “Then my Lord I will give you something that does not tire me so.”

He raised his eyebrows as she slid her hand down his abdomen and she raised herself above him.

“Runa,” He protested while reaching for her, but she ducked down avoiding his grasp with a sensual grin on her face.

Then as he moved to protest again, she took him in her warm mouth and his hands froze in midair above her head. He hissed through clenched teeth at the rapturous feeling. It had been so long for him, but he still worried for her and moved to protest again by claspng her head in his large hands but was immediately halted when her tongue began doing amazing things to him and instead of pulling her off him, he tightened his fingers in her hair as she continued to caress and suck his member with her sensuous hot mouth. Every time he neared a climax she would ease off, then when he began to relax she would do those wondrous things with her tongue all over again. Finally, when he thought he couldn't take it anymore his loins exploded and he roared his release.

She moved up beside him again as he breathed heavy for a moment before speaking, and when he did, he was breathless, "By the Gods woman, what did I do to deserve you and where did you learn to do *that*?"

She leaned up on her elbow to stare down at him, "I told you before, we were educated on how to please our men..."

"...You were untouched Runa." He had women do that to him before but not with such controlled expertise and certainly not from a woman who only knew one man.

"Our elders had their ways to teach us. I am too embarrassed to discuss it, but I am glad I pleased you." She grinned.

He was silent for a moment, "Pleased is an understatement." he rasped. "My toes are numb."

She laughed and he embraced her.

By mid morning the whole camp was packed up. Bothvar felt for the first time in months the suns were shining bright as he made sure that Runa was comfortable in her cart with Kadlin and Thora. The other woman travelled in the other cart upon his request. He allowed them some time with Runa in the morning, but did not want to tire her out. Yes, he was being overprotective as Grunewald and Erlend argued while listening to the endless protests of their woman, but he did not want to take anymore chances with her.

“Enough!” he bellowed cutting them both short. “I have made my decision.”

“By the Gods Bothvar.” Erlend protested, “I volunteer you to tell Lenore then, for I am not a stupid man.”

This brought laughter to Bothvar's eyes. “I think you will do well with our Gierrer ways Erlend, now that you understand the power that a woman wields.”

Grunewald laughed despite his frustration, “Aye. I agree.”

Erlend glared at both of them before he turned on his heel and walked away, but not without muttering over his shoulder, “Now I understand why you both chose Esbiorn women, they do not protest as much.” The brothers' roars of laughter followed him. He just shook his head in chagrin and kept walking.

Chapter Fourteen

The moons after he returned his mate home, Bothvar paced in the antechamber, most of his warriors had dissipated from the room unable to deal with his restless pacing and worry. All except Bothvar, Ralf and Grunewald remained. Erlend couldn't stand to hear his sister's screams any longer and had left sometime ago. Finally he couldn't take it anymore and pounded on the door to his chamber.

"Bothvar these things take time." Grunewald said hoping to calm his brother's fear somewhat.

"Listening to her pain is killing me!" He rubbed his large hands over his face.

Lenore stepped out of the room and narrowed her eyes on him annoyed for the interruption, "Calm yourself Brother, you are not helping her. She can hear your worries."

"How much longer?" He gripped his sister's shoulders.

"By the Gods Bothvar, she has a warrior's child in her, you need to give this time!" She seethed, "Grunewald, get him out of here and get him drunk to take his mind off of her. She hears him out here and it is making things harder for her. I will come find you when your son is born."

"Aye." Grunewald and Ralf half dragged him out of the room. Grunewald was thankful that he didn't protest too much.

When Lenore went back in Bothvar's chamber, Thora had already boiled the water and was laying out her tools beside

Runa.

Runa let another scream rip from her and arched off the bed as another contraction hit. Ingun and Kadlin had finished tying her hands and feet to the corners of the bed. Lenore sat next to her and soothed her hair.

“Runa you need to listen carefully.” The Esbiorn woman's body was draped with sweat as she struggled all night and day to push the child out. Her eyes darted to Lenore, “Your babe is too large to be born.”

Runa paled, “Bothvar...”

Lenore smiled down at her. Even in pain the woman was more concerned about Bothvar than herself. It made her admire her greatly, “It is alright, we have done this many times, but you must listen. Bothvar will not be without his woman.” She saw Runa regain some of her color just to pale at her next words.

“Thora needs to cut the babe out of your belly. Please do not be afraid. Gierrer babies are taken this way many times because of their vast size they do not fit properly.” Just then Thora handed her a small stick, “You need to bite down on this, it will help. It has healing properties that help dull the pain somewhat.” Just then Runa Arched off the bed as another contraction took her, but Lenore managed to shove the stick between her teeth. She actually lied to her. The properties of the stick really knocked the person out as soon as the bark was penetrated, but Runa was already scared enough. Inside Lenore was frantic. She had never seen such pain and she had seen plenty of Gierrer brought into the world, but Runa was unaccustomed to it. Not only that, the woman was small in

stature.

As soon as Runa turned her head to the side, the stick fell out and Lenore nodded at Thora to continue.

Bothvar only drank one flask of wine, but it did calm him somewhat. He waited by the large hearth in the Grande room for news. Many of his warriors were still milling around in the hall after they dined waiting for news of Bothvar's heir to the throne of Gierrer. There was a man playing a flute at the far end and he actually found it a bit soothing. It was better this way, he couldn't hear her screams. Grunewald took a seat next to him but Bothvar stood with his hand on the mantle. It was the babe's robust cry that brought his head up. Lenore entered the hall with it in her arms. He was already washed and swaddled when she gave him to Bothvar, "You have a large healthy son my King."

He stared down at his son as cheers erupted in the hall causing the boy to scream. He laughed, "He has a strong cry." He pulled the cloth off the babe's face, that he had managed to find its way there from the his wiggling, "I will name him Thrain, after our father."

"Aye, it is a good choice." Grunewald watched the babe open his mouth and let another cry rip from him, and he laughed, "He sounds like our father. He could fall the walls of this place with his bellowing."

Bothvar and Lenore laughed, it was true.

"I'll take him to the wet nurse." Lenore held out her hands

“Nay, let me keep him a bit.” Bothvar protested, “And he will go to his mother, not a substitute.”

“If you wish Bothvar.” She smiled, “but until she has rested, he will need milk.”

“How is Runa?”

She will be fine Bothvar, you can put your worries to rest. Kadlin and Ingun are tending to her. You may see her soon.”

He studied her features for a moment before returning his suddenly sombre gaze to his son who was now sleeping, “You always were a terrible liar Lenore.” He raised his head to her again, “Will she live?”

“Yes.” Lenore blushed, “She was frightened enough, she did not need you barging in there frantic.”

“Aye.” He agreed. Lenore had been right to lie to him in the antechamber. He was too distracted at the time to realize that she had lied to him then.

“We had to cut Thrain from her womb. She will heal, it will just take time.”

He studied her again. She told the truth this time.

“Then,” He handed the babe back to his sister, “I will see her now.”

“Bothvar...you have to...” but he was already gone from her sight.

“Leave him be Lenore, he feels he has put her through too much since they have been together.”

Lenore nodded, “She never complains.”

“It is her way.” Grunewald touched the sleeping babe’s cheek, who grimaced, but didn’t wake. “He scowls like Bothvar.”

She glanced down at the babe who was still peaceful despite the awakening noise in the hall celebrating his birth.

“you had better take Thrain to his Grandmother and Asta or they will bang down the door to my chamber.”

“You locked them up?”

“I had to. There were hysterical.” He had never had to handle hysterical women before, so he did the only thing he knew.

“You are too afraid to let them out Grunewald...” she laughed when he frowned at her, “I will do as you ask.” She left with Thrain sleeping in her arms.

Bothvar was stretched in a chair by the bed. Thora informed him that she would be asleep all night and not to disturb her or move her because there was a binder around her middle to help her heal. Once more, her hair was damp when he entered and smelled of soap, they had washed her thoroughly again.

Slowly the east sun began to rise in the sky and with it

Runa awakened. Bothvar was beside her, "Runa?"

She managed to smile, "How is our son."

He returned her smile, "Perfect."

"Can I see him."

"Aye. In a bit. How do you feel?"

She smiled but grimaced as she tried to move, "fine."

He put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently back down, "Thora wants you to stay in bed to heel."

"Bothvar my belly hurts." She stared at him in bewilderment.

"They cut our son out of you."

The previous nights memories came flooding back, "Lenore told me...I have never heard of such a thing." Her eyes brightened, momentarily forgetting the trauma, "What did you name him?"

"Thrain."

She thought on it for a moment.

"Do you like it,"

"Very much." She admitted without hesitation.

"It was my father's name."

“It is a very good name Bothvar. A perfect name for the Prince of Gierrer.”

An unmistakable smile of pride crossed his features as his hand caressed her cheek, “I will get our son and then you will rest.”

She nodded and he left.

He returned moments later with a bundle. She saw a tiny arm stretch up out of the cloth and when he kneeled on the bed and handed him to her she started to weep.

“What is it?”

She shook her head staring down at Thrain who started back at her with his blue wondrous eyes. “He is perfect.”

He leaned over and kissed her on the lips. “*You* are perfect Runa and thank you for such a strong boy.”

She had never felt so happy before in her life. She had her son and Bothvar.

Bothvar reached for her son and she held him tight, “Just let me keep him awhile longer.”

“I would, but it will not help you. You will have many days to hold him.”

She relented after a moment and let him go. “Can he not stay with us?”

Bothvar looked down at Thrain, who was awake with his eyes roaming around the scenery, "Kadlin and Thora watch over him."

"Bothvar, there is that room there." She pointed to the room where he had piled his belongings. "It is large enough for both Kadlin and Thora besides Thrain. There is more than enough space in the room you have given me, that we can share."

He gave her an adoring smile, and his heart ached with love for her. She did not know that he wished to have Thrain as close as she did, "If you wish it that badly Runa, I will make it happen."

She was overcome with relief. She did not want to have her babe to be raised by a servant.

"Get some sleep. I will send Kadlin in to sit with you awhile." He leaned over and kissed her again.

"Will you come back?"

He laughed, "Nothing could keep me from you. Aye, I will be back later." He turned and left.

Bothvar sat back in his chair at dinner. His elbow leaned on the arm of his large chair and his head rested on his hand. It did not seem the same without his mate present. Although, he did remain for the celebration, he really wanted to be with her. He looked over at her empty chair, then to Grunewald and Asta, who cuddled Thrain. The babe had been passed around continuously between feedings. He seemed content in a woman's

arms. He smiled to himself, as any Gierrer warrior was. First Lenore, then Bera, now Asta. When he gave that fierce hungry cry Kadlin stepped in and took him to the wet nurse. Something he did not approve of, but it was necessary for now. He knew that Runa would be a very devoted mother.

He went to Runa every night for the next seven days, until she could get out of bed. If she was sleeping, he crawled in beside her quietly as not to wake her. Then he would pull her close gently as not to hurt her. She would say his name in her sleep. Thora insisted on giving her the pain potions to help with her healing, but it made her sleep most times, and he missed her.

“I would like a child Erlend.” Lenore said while she lay next to him.

He smirked, “Woman always want babies when there is a new one.”

She frowned at him, “Do you not want to be a father?”

He set his eyes on her, “Aye.” He kissed her, “But there is a war coming. I do not want to leave you with a child and no mate.”

Lenore was surprised, “And instead leave me in my grief with no one if something did happen to you.”

He sighed, “Lenore, what if we lose? Would you want our child to be taken by my people? It is something I can not bear to think of. I know what they are capable of. My father has thrown children off of cliffs that our slaves have given birth to.” She paled at his words, “Now you know why I did not want to tell you.

Can you fathom what he would do to my son? I am the traitorous son of the Esbiorn King. He would torture my child and you before my eyes before he killed us all."

"he would do such a thing?" she gasped.

"Aye." He pulled down toward him so her head rested on his bared chest, "Why do you think I hide my emotions and thoughts so well. If my father knew what I was actually thinking, he would have killed me when I was a child."

"I did not know."

"Woman do not need to know things like that." He stated.

"Hmmm...I still have my work to do on you." She indicated to his previous statement which got her a chuckle from him.

Several moons had passed and Runa was beginning to feel the fading affects of Thora's cut in her belly. The woman had removed the pieces of thread that held the open ends together and now the wound looked like a puckered line below her belly button. Thora explained that she boiled the fine vines of the *Bora* vine and used those to sew up the inside. Not only do they have a healing affect, that they would dissolve after a while. Runa was fascinated and asked her many questions about how she removed Thrain. Thankfully Thora had patience and took her time explaining everything.

"Now enough time has passed, my Queen, that you may

enjoy your husband again.” Thora added while leaving.

Runa blushed, but the medicine woman did not acknowledge it.

“I will be back tomorrow.” She knocked on the chamber door, which opened and then she was alone with Thrain who wiggled happily about on their bed. She leaned over him and gave him kisses on his chubby cheeks to which he kept turning his head trying to capture that touch with his toothless mouth. When Bothvar wasn’t with her, she spent all of her time with him. Her mother, Asta and Lenore would pester her for him all of the time and she had finally decided to relent and let them have some time with Thrain, but it wasn’t easy. She was devoted to him. In Gierrer she was allowed to give him as much affection as she wanted, there were no restraints and she relished it.

Just then the door clamoured open and Bothvar stepped in. He saw them on the bed and grinned. Behind him stepped her mother, Kadlin and Ingun.

Bera rushed forward and held Thrain. She had a gracious smile on her beautiful face. “Runa, he grows every time I see him.” She hugged him and Thrain cooed, making her laugh.

Runa stood up, “Mother? Bothvar...what?”

“It is time my warriors see my wife again.”

“But Thrain...”

“...Will be minded by your mother. Do not worry,” He approached her and cupped her face in his hands, “Is it not much

to ask to spend some time alone with my lady?"

She flushed, "No my Lord. It is not." She had missed him so much she ached.

"We leave for Esbiorn in two days and tonight we celebrate. I want you by my side. Now go with your maids." He turned her and slapped her bottom causing her to jump and squeal.

"Really my Lord, I am standing right here." Protested Bera.

He laughed when she gave him a disapproving frown. "Then be gone woman or you will see other things that you may not approve of."

She tried to glare at him but amusement reached her eyes as she turned and left with her grandson.

The gown that Runa had been fastened into was one of the most beautiful she had ever seen. It had a burgundy bodice and a golden skirt that trailed behind her on the floor. Although she found it uncomfortable with no sleeves or material on her shoulders, Ingun and Kadlin gave appraising looks at her image. As usual the bodice was tight and her breasts were engorged with milk causing her already generous bosom to practically swell out of the top of it. She flushed furiously causing Ingun to chuckle as she wound soft ribbons of gold and burgundy in her long golden tresses. Runa stood in front of her mirror and marvelled at the subtle differences the tight bodice revealed after having Thrain. Her hips seemed more round, but her waist seemed to have regained it's normal size. Her eyes widened at the revealing

material of the bosom, and she tried to protest but Ingun cut her short saying something she did not understand, but was sure it had something to do with Bothvar's choices. She sighed in defeat knowing if this was Bothvar's choice he would not listen to her protests. Hopefully there were other wives there with similar dresses, so she would not feel alone.

She heard the familiar sound of their chamber door opening and without thinking twice she jumped up and rushed from the room knowing it was Bothvar. She heard Ingun laugh at her eagerness.

Bothvar stilled when he saw her. She had put every woman to shame at that very moment with her beauty. His heavy heated scrutiny caused her to blush clear to the perfect round mounds of her revealed breasts.

"No need to be shamed Runa, you are beautiful."

She managed a smile at his approval

"Come," he held out his hand, "I need to take you from my chamber before I undo what Ingun and Kadlin spent much time doing."

A current of desire arched through her and she seriously considered enticing him to stay, but he'd mentioned the celebration and she did not want to keep people waiting. She took his hand and followed him to the Great hall.

Cheers erupted when the couple appeared and music began to play immediately nearly drowned out by the raucous. Again Runa blushed furiously. It was too much. The Gierrer treated her with so much respect it was overwhelming. She took

her place next to Bothvar and Grunewald without hesitation.

Asta leaned forward to see past the large form of Grunewald to speak to her sister, "Runa, you are beautiful."

Even her sister's words made her blush.

"Thank you Asta."

Asta smiled, "I am glad you are well now. We have all been so worried."

Runa smiled back at her and looked up at Grunewald, "You are doing well too."

Asta blushed and pulled back behind Grunewald causing Runa to giggle.

Runa felt the familiar heated touch of Bothvar's hand as he placed it on her thigh and for the first time she did not care what people thought and leaned toward him as the feast was being served.

"By the Gods, no!" Grunewald said after Asta asked him something that Runa couldn't hear.

She turned to look at them and Bothvar was laughing loudly. Obviously he did not miss the conversation.

"But Grunewald..." Asta started.

"...No. Not while I still walk this plane." He added sternly.

Runa finally understood. Asta had asked if he would like her to dance for him.

“But Runa will too. We can...”

At the sound of his wife’s name Bothvar cut his laughter short and stared down a Runa who had turned her attention to him with a pleading look in her eyes finally understanding what her sister was asking.

Both of the men stated, “No.” in unison cutting off Asta’s words.

“What is the problem?” Lenore’s voice cut in, “If your women wish to dance, let them.” Bothvar and Grunewald turned their warning stares on their sister who was unfazed. “You are both being ridiculous.”

Erlend chuckled, he had heard about the last time Runa had danced for Bothvar from Grunewald and found it amusing.

She turned to him, “What is so funny?”

He leaned down to speak only to her, “The Gierrer are not used to our traditions. To see an Esbiorn woman dance is unequalled in beauty and grace. Your brother was unprepared for it last time and he was ready to challenge every other warrior in the hall for just looking at her with desire. Instead he carried Runa out of here and forbid her to do it again.”

Lenore grinned, “Bothvar was jealous?”

“An understatement from what Grunewald told me.”

She laughed, "I must see this dance."

Erlend shook his head, "Do not interfere Lenore, it is not your place."

She gave him a challenging look, "Nonsense and you can get rid of that disapproval in your tone," she leaned toward him and her hand slid up his thigh to his member causing him to cut his next words off, she felt him instantly harden. She turned her beautiful face up to his. His eyes suddenly darkened with desire, "I wish to see my sisters dance Erlend. If you will help me, I will do whatever you wish in our bed tonight." Her hand tightened on him.

"You already do." He said thickly.

"Aye, but there are some things I have not done yet." Her hand motioned him closer so she could whisper in his ear.

Erlend's eyes widened at the things she was describing. Then he suddenly lifted his head, "Let my sisters dance." He spoke to the two men who were still protesting to their women. His voice cracked a little remembering Lenore's sweet promises. "It is our tradition. If we are to mix our people, you must allow us as much freedom to express the virtues of our culture although they are few."

Both men turned to him incredulous.

"Do you know what you ask? The men were lusting after Runa like dogs last time this happened." Grunewald spoke up. "Now you wish for both our women to dance. It may cause a

war.”

“Nonsense Grunewald. You are only jealous to show what a beautiful wife you have to the rest of your men. You should be proud to show off her talents.”

Grunewald’s expression darkened, “You would allow Lenore to do such a thing?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” His brows raised.

“Because she is mine. My men know this. I am proud to display her beauty and know that it is me that shares her bed when every other man wants her.”

Grunewald shook his head, “I told you what happened with Runa.”

“Aye, but this is their way. You should allow them the freedom that you yourself complain about being suppressed under my father’s heavy hand.”

Grunewald growled. Erlend was right. He was suppressing her expression. He turned and looked at Bothvar who had heard every word discussed between them.

“I do not like it Grunewald.” He redirected his attention to Runa who was still pleading with him. He sighed heavily and waved his hand, “Your brother has a good argument. I you feel well enough you may dance.”

She shot to her feet with Asta right behind her not waiting for Grunewald's approval.

Runa leaned and whispered in Bothvar's ear, "It is all to please you my Lord, no one else." Before she rushed off after her sister.

Runa's words still did not make him feel better as he stood to announce to the hall that Runa and Asta would dance again. His words were drowned out by an enormous roar of cheers as the woman took their places in front of his table awaiting for the music.

Lenore was stunned. Now her brother's protests made sense. She had never seen such beauty and grace in a feminine body. She slowly smiled as she watched the faces of Asta and Runa's audience. A wild stallion could have ran through the hall and not drawn eyes off of the pair.

"What do you think?" Erlend interrupted her thoughts.

"I think I underestimated the female body. They are beautiful."

He chuckled

She turned to him, "I would like to learn that."

"That would please me."

"Would Asta teach me?"

"I think she would be happy to share this with you." He saw her expression of awe change slightly to disapproval.

“When Esbiorn women dance for you, does it illicit such desire as Runa and Asta do for the Gierrer?”

He laughed, “Now *you* are jealous of our tradition.”

She sat back turning away from him in a pout.

“Lenore, I only have eyes for you.” He added in a low voice so no one else would hear his confession.

“But...” She turned back to him and saw the desire return to his eyes and she suddenly felt silly for feeling jealous.

“...I am used to this.” He indicated to the liquid movements of his sisters, “It is no different to me then watching musicians play, “But that would change if you wish to get up there.”

“Would you really allow me to do this?”

“Aye.”

“So what you said to Grunewald was true.”

“I would be happy to show what a desirable woman I have.”

“You would not be jealous.”

“I never said that. I would kill another man if they touched you, but stares are harmless enough. I know whose body you desire.” He lowered his voice more, “I know what

makes you moan for my touch. Let them be envious of what I have.”

Now it was her turn to feel desire for him and she gave him a stunning smile, “My lord when you speak in such a way, I can think of nothing else.”

“Then you had better stop enticing me or we will be leaving the hall early and that would be rude to my sisters.”

“Aye.” She admitted blushing.

The only two in the hall that were not enjoying the display was Bothvar and Grunewald. Grunewald breathed a sigh of relief when the music that seemed to last endlessly, finally stopped.

The women made their way back to their husband's sides while the hall erupted in another ear-splitting cheer. Runa took her place beside Bothvar, but Asta was pulled onto Grunewald's lap in a searing kiss, causing more cheers in the hall.

Runa would have been appalled if Bothvar had done that to her and by the look of his expression he wanted to do just that but refrained himself for her sake. She knew such displays were common among the Gierrer, but it still appalled her. However Asta had seemed to have forgotten that there were others around with Grunewald kissing her, until he set her back in her seat and she blushed bright red. Runa thought she would crawl under the table at any moment.

The celebration carried deep into the next morning, when people started to leave for their beds, Bothvar took Runa's hand, “Come you are tired. It was a long celebration and you are not

used to such activity.” Erlend and Lenore had left some time ago, but Grunewald stood as his Brother did to take Asta’s hand.

“I should go see Thrain.” She told Bothvar.

He smiled down at her as Grunewald and Asta left the hall, “Nay, woman, I have other plans for us. Our son is in capable hands. Right now, I need you more than anything, and I will not delay it any longer or I fear I will die from want for you.”

She blushed from his words, but felt that familiar twinge of desire resurface, “Aye, my Lord.”

He scooped her up and carried her out of the hall. It only took a moment to strip her of her clothes and then his before they tumbled naked together lengthwise across his bed. His hot mouth devoured hers hungrily, but she did not protest and responded in full. His hands cupped her full breast and caressed the nipple with his thumb causing her to moan his name. His other hand caressed the length of her and pulled her thigh out from under him as his fingers delved into her moist warms. She cried out and arched toward him while he continued his assault.

“Bothvar...” She gasped, “I can not take it anymore...”

He removed his hand and entered her with such force, it pushed her head over the side of the bed, and when he thought he was too rough, she wrapped her legs around his hips to hold on making him lose all control as he fiercely thrust into her with raw hunger after many moons of celibacy.

She cried out every time he buried himself deep within her unaware of the words she was saying. However, Bothvar did hear her and without breaking rhythm, raised back on his knees,

gripped her hips and to continued to pound into her like never before until she felt that familiar tightening and explosive release. She screamed and he followed with his roar as his seed spilled into her, before he collapsed on top of her.

She ran her hands over his muscular back feeling the beads of sweat that began to form and managed to laugh.

He shifted his weight off of her and raised himself up on his elbows to stare down at her with his brow knitted in concern. "Did I hurt you?"

She grinned and rolled her eyes at the statement, "Not even close."
"

He chuckled, "By the Gods woman, that may have killed another."

"I am no other, My lord, Your body has trained mine well."

A sensuous smile played across his masculine lips, "You are endless in the ways you please me Runa." Her feminine cries of 'more, more' had him wild with want. She was so small compared to his large frame, and he could easily move her hips effortlessly against his to bury himself deeper than he ever imagined within her. She was right though. There was a time he could barely get his shaft into her, now she tightened perfectly around the length of him. He bent down and kissed her again, before he got off her and pulled back the covers to lure her next to him. She rolled onto her belly and stared at him while he held the blankets for her.

“No my Lord...we are not done yet.”

He raised his brows at her, “Runa....you must...” his words were cut off as she rose up on all fours and sensuously crawled toward him. Her plump breasts held perfect shape between her arms as she crawled up the length of his naked body. Her hair spilled off her shoulders and tickled his belly and chest.

“I think you are trying to Kill *me*.” He said hoarsely taking in the desirable image she gave.

“Nay, I missed my Lord’s flesh in me. I will not be satisfied with one tumble.” She kissed him.

He groaned against her mouth and entwined his fingers in her hair. Her words already had him stiff with desire again. She lowered her hand and caressed his hardened member expertly while she remained poised above him. Then before he could stop her she had pulled away from him to take him in her mouth as she had done before. And as before she tantalized and teased him until he thought he would burst into her mouth. Before he could she rose quickly and impaled herself on him, riding him with such wanton moans that he wasted no time grasping her hips tightly and groaning his release.

He went to adjust her and she refused, “Let me stay like this.” She lay down across him while he still remained within her. “I have missed our joining so much, I do not want it to end.”

He chuckled, “I will not complain, love.” He caressed her thighs that remained straddled over his hips. Within moments she was asleep. When he was sure, he gently lifted her up next to him so she could bury her face into his neck. That is how they

remained when they awoke the next morning.

In fact she was barely awake when she felt the familiar act of his fingers within her. She lifted her head and moaned his name.

Suddenly he flipped her onto her back and sat back on his knees between her legs staring down the length of her in the morning light. She smiled sensuously at him. It amazed him that she had absolutely no shyness being naked in his bedchamber compared to her being fully clothed in public. Even though she had explained her reasons for this, it was still surprising.

“Now it’s my turn to please you.” He said thickly, leaning forward he lifted her thighs up on his broad shoulders while his mouth covered her.

She gasped at the unfamiliarity, but it was quickly forgotten and she moaned at the erotic sensation of his tongue and mouth on her. When she felt the familiar explosion she could have sworn that she saw stars in the room.

Then he lifted himself up and gripped her hips again to pull her toward him. This time he was slow in making love to her. Caressing all that she had to offer until she began to respond again. Until she thought she could bear no more she felt herself burst at the same time he felt his release.

“I can not get enough of you woman.” He said hoarsely.

“Aye, me either.” She sighed and nuzzled into him and fell asleep.

He heard her deep, even breathing and suspected as

much. He had worn her out. It had been a long time for her to use such energy and she wasn't used to it. His hand caressed her back. It had occurred to him that she may be with child again after such a night. He had to leave early the next day and would be gone for many moons and again would miss the child growing within her. He had not taken the suck-bar root, but he should have. He was selfish in not doing so, but he wanted another son like Thrain. Perfect and strong. So they may grow together like he and Grunewald. It was a difficult decision, knowing how she suffered trying to have Thrain, but Thora said she would be ready for this next time and Runa would not suffer, so he agreed with her. He knew he should have discussed this with her and had every intention of doing so before he pounced on her last night, but as it happened it was forgotten in the passion.

Grunewald sat in one of the big chairs by the fire that Bothvar had occupied many times. Asta sat crossways on his lap with her legs over one of the cushioned arms as Thrain cooed away on her lap.

"Grunewald, I think your woman has set her aims on a babe." Bothvar spoke bringing both of their heads up when he entered the hall. Only Grunewald could understand what he said and sported a grin.

"Nay, not after what I witnessed Runa go through. I will wait until the memory fades a bit." He then spoke to Asta who was looking at him hoping to be let in on the jest, "Give Bothvar back his babe Asta. I think that is why he sought us out."

"Aye. My wife does not like him to be out of her sight for long."

Asta swung her legs off of the armrest and stood handing Thrain reluctantly to Bothvar, who took him easily and tickled his cheek.

“Good morn, my son.” The babe smiled showing his gums at the familiar sound of his father causing Bothvar to grin down at him.

“He knows you well, my Lord.” Asta watched the reaction.

“Aye, hopefully he does not lose that in my absence.” He turned and left Grunewald and Asta missing the crestfallen look she gave Grunewald.

Grunewald gave her a reassuring smile and held his arms to her. She sat back down on his lap, “Do not be sad. I will return.”

She looked up at him, “I have no doubt you will.” She managed a weak smile, “I have seen you practice in the yard Grunewald, I know your strength.”

It pleased him that she watched him. “Then why the frown?” his thumb traced her full lips while his eyes followed his movement studying her beautiful mouth.

She shrugged not looking at him, she really did not want to tell him. He may think of her as weak.

He gently cupped her chin and turned her face back to him. His steely gaze probed hers and there was no mistake of the concern that he had for her. “Asta, you must tell me when something bothers you.”

Holding his gaze this time, she nodded, "I have not had much time with you since we have been together and now you must leave. What if you decide you do not feel as I do and set me aside." His sudden laughter caught her off guard and it caused her to bounce slightly in his lap. "You laugh at my worries?" she looked at him crestfallen.

He tried to stop laughing over her confession, but only managed to bring it down to a chuckle, "Asta, you still have much to learn about the Gierrer. I thought Lenore explained it to you."

"Erlend said that you would die for me. Is that true?"

"Your brother is right, but that is not all of it. When a Gierrer male accepts a woman's oath, it holds true. I have opened my heart to you Asta, it cannot be undone."

"I have never heard of such a thing."

"That is why it is hard to accept. For me, now, there will be no more women, only you." He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, "it is a sacrifice well worth making."

She gave him a stunning grin, "You speak the truth."

"Aye."

She gripped his tunic pulling herself close to him, "Then Grunewald, you should take me to our chamber and show me how much you will miss me when you leave."

His eyes widened at her words for a moment then

narrowed with desire. He didn't even give her a chance to get off him. He just stood taking her with him as walked quickly out of the room.

Runa held Thrain close as the fall air breezed about them. The Gierrer were already mounted and in full armour. Asta and Lenore stood beside her along with hundreds of other women as they bade farewell to their men. Bothvar was the last to mount his war horse. He bent and gave Runa and Thrain one final kiss before mounting up. Without a backward glance he shouted to his men and they tore out of the yard. Runa held Thrain tight as she began to weep. Asta and Lenore stepped close to her offering their support but she could see the tears cresting their eyes too.

Bothvar had left a reserve of warriors at the fortress for their protection. The man named Brim was in charge of Runa's safety. Bothvar told her that she could trust him as much as Grunewald.

Chapter Fifteen

In the days that followed Asta agreed to Lenore's request to teach her how to dance in the Esbiorn way. The only place with enough room was the great hall, in which many of the warriors that remained behind hung about, but they certainly did not protest. In fact they would all show up about the same time of day just to see the erotic display. Runa would sit and watch with Thrain in her arms and instruct from her seat when Asta became flustered with Lenore because she wasn't catching on as fast as she thought she could.

"It is not easy Asta. We have been taught from the time we could walk." Runa offered.

“I am sorry Lenore.” Asta admitted, “I have never taught this before.”

Lenore smiled, “I do not take offense. I am clumsy compared to you two.”

It wasn't long before more of the Gierrer women began to show up and ask for lessons when they saw what Asta and Runa were doing. Runa was sure it was from the encouragement of their men that had come to watch frequently.

About a fortnight after the men's departure Runa was now up helping Asta instruct the many woman that showed up everyday for lessons. Bera held Thrain and happily played with him. Suddenly Runa stopped and stared blankly at Asta.

“Runa what is wrong?” She saw her sister pale instantly, right before she bent over and threw up on the floor.

The Gierrer women nearest to her rushed up and steadied her as she slumped to her knees retching.

“By the God's Runa!” Asta started crying thinking her sister was dying.

Thora appeared instantly as if out of nowhere and instructed Brim to carry her to her bedchamber immediately. Brim had already made his way to her when she slumped to her knees. He bent down and picked her up with ease and obeying Thora carried her from the hall.

Bera shot to her feet but could do little more as she held

Thrain when Brim walked by her carrying her now unconscious daughter. and when Asta tried to follow her sister, one of the Gierrer who Asta had come to know as Myn held her arm and spoke gently to her, "She is all right milady."

Asta turned her tear soaked face to a kind smile, "Your sister is with child."

"Again?"

"Aye, it is what our King wishes. She will be fine under Thora's care, do not worry. She is the best Therar the Gierrer have."

"But she was so violently ill.."

"...Aye, it is a good sign that the babe will be a strong warrior."

"A son?"

"Aye. It is how we can tell." She gave her another reassuring smile, "Your sister may be small milady, but she has the heart of a warrior, that is why our King chose her. She has already done this once." She nodded toward Thrain, who was now three moons old, "Next time it will be easier."

Time seemed to pass slowly for Runa. It had been seven moons since Bothvar had left and she was with child again. She had solace in the messengers that had appeared every two months to give them news. Anhor Castle had fallen under the brutal assault of the Gierrer. Erlend had killed their father with his own hand and proclaimed decrees freeing the slaves and

banning the brutal treatment of the woman. He had the strength of the Gierrer in his kingdom to make sure his orders were made law.

Asta laid beside her sister on her bed while Thrain crawled over them giggling and exploring the bright colours of Runa's gown. Lenore usually joined them, but had decided to practice her dancing for a longer time today. The three of them had become inseparable since the absence of their men. Lenore had been returning the favour of dance lessons with language lessons of the Gierrer.

"Asta, I fear that Bothvar will not return in time for the birth of his second child." She stared at the ceiling while Thrain tapped his hands on her swollen belly making her smile.

"It is important to you that he is here?"

She looked at her, "Aye."

"Runa, take comfort in the fact that he knows you are expecting another son and will try his best to be with you, because he loves you."

Runa blushed a little at Asta's words and withdrew the necklace that he had given her before he left with his face carved into the precious metal to stare at him. He told her to look at it whenever she missed him. Needless to say, she did it all of the time.

B era came in at that moment to take Thrain. He had started eating solid food not to long ago, because Runa's milk was no longer holding his appetite. "There's my boy!" Bera said causing Thrain to swing his head towards his grandmother at her

familiar voice and squeal. "Is my grandson hungry?"

"Hun-gee!" he said loudly causing all three women to laugh. He had started speaking small words, but his vocabulary was expanding every day. He called Runa 'ma-ma-, Asta was 'Adda' and Bera was just 'ma' because he hadn't gotten the 'grand' yet. Even Brim who had held him a few times was called 'Bim' and Lenore was 'nore'

Bera picked up the boy and grunted, "You have gotten bigger since this morning Thrain. Now I know you are a Gierrer." She looked at Runa and smiled, "Come Runa, you must get up more and strengthen your body for the next Gierrer warrior."

"Aye mother, you are right." She struggled to get up and Asta had to end up helping her. They both giggled at Runa's awkwardness.

Runa turned to Asta with an amused smile, "Just you wait. Grunewald is not small either Asta."

Asta's smile dissipated and she stared seriously at her sister, "I am not as brave as you Runa. I would love to give Grunewald a son, but he thinks I am not ready and after hearing about your last experience, I do not think I can bear that pain."

"Thora has promised me, I will not have any this time. I believe her. She can do the same for you."

Asta shrugged, "It is up to Grunewald when he wishes a child. I will be happy with whatever he wishes." She smiled, "I am not sure if I am ready to share his attention yet."

Runa laughed, “so that is the real reason.”

Asta blushed and turned away.

Bera shook her head and left the chamber. She was happy for the first time since the birth of her own children. Her daughters were safe and Erlend had accomplished what he had set out to do. She adjusted Thrain on her hip and several of Bothvar’s warriors fell in step behind her. It did not bother her. She knew Bothvar loved his son and Runa by the protection that followed them about in his own immense fortress. She would have asked for the same thing if her husband had allowed her.

Bothvar and Grunewald broke through the trees that crested the meadow overlooking his Kingdom. He could not deny the thunderous gallop of his heart as it came into view. Within the immense stone walls lay his wife and now two sons. He regretted not to have made it back in time for the birth of his second child, but he needed to remain in Esbiorn to support Erlend during the period of unrest as he took the throne. There were a few thousand men left behind to enforce Erlend’s rule, but he did not foresee a problem. It seemed that the people accepted Erlend’s laws because he was King and because he was of royal blood they accepted him as their King.

The rest of his own warriors not including the two thousand that lived in the town below the fortress returned to their own lands. He had gone to Esbiorn with close to ten thousand. It might have been a bit of an overkill because Anthor castle fell with loss of but a few hundred men. King Edgar was not expecting the attack and Erlend had gone ahead to find that

his father was unaware of his sedition

He and Grunewald exchanged an eager grin as he spurred his horse and with a warrior yell followed by his men, raced down the meadow towards home.

Thrain was walking by himself and Runa was doing her best to teach him 'hot' when he went near the fire. She occupied one of the large chairs with her new babe in front of the large hearth in the great hall and Bera sat on the floor watching Thrain. Thrain did get the general idea, because when he got close to the fire by himself he felt heat and started repeating 'hot, hot' before he turned away and toddled in a different direction.

They had not heard from Bothvar since Brim sent a messenger about the birth of his second son two full moons ago. Again Thora had to cut her son from her whom she named Magnus hoping that Bothvar would approve. She just couldn't leave the babe without a name. If he wished to change it she would not disagree because it is up to the father to name the sons. Runa smiled at her son who was now spinning in circles giggling. She pulled out the engraving that Bothvar gave her and stared at his image.

"Pa-Pa!" Said Thrain as he stopped spinning and focused his steel-blue gaze on something past Runa.

She slowly turned around to see Bothvar, Grunewald and a dozen other men enter the hall. She stood carefully unable to believe her eyes. Thrain remembered the image that she fingered often in front of him, but not once did he say the words that she tried to teach him until today.

Bera quietly reached over and took Magnus from Runa who seemed not to notice as her eyes focused on her magnificent warrior. The woman that Asta were teaching to dance dispersed immediately looking for their lovers and husbands when they saw the men enter. Brim had left Runa's side and walked over to his King and they clasped arms as they spoke for a moment. She watched Bothvar's handsome head nod and speak to Brim while his eyes kept darting to Runa.

A wide smile spread across his face when his gaze darted to the bundle in Bera's hands. He finally dismissed Brim and crossed the hall in several strides. Runa couldn't bring herself to move, and didn't have to because she wouldn't have been able to close the distance as fast as he did. Not only that, she felt her legs would collapse if she tried. He stopped directly in front of her, placed his hands on either side of her face and bent down to kiss her.

The noise in the hall as the warriors filtered in and the Gierrer woman threw themselves at them, was ear-splitting, but Runa heard nothing. She only felt the warmth of his lips on hers, and the longing she had felt burst forth as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Bothvar stood straight, but kept his eyes on hers, "I have missed you woman." His thumbs wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"My Lord," Said Bera who stepped forward with Magnus, "This is your son."

Bothvar gave Runa a wide grin of pride before he took the babe from Bera and held him up to examine him, "Another

Warrior.” He chuckled as the babe let out a brief cry at being moved quickly.

“Aye.” Said Runa.

“What is he called?” Bothvar shifted his gaze to her.

“Magnus.” She answered quietly, “You may change it if you wish my Lord.”

“Nonsense. It is a warrior’s name.” He repeated it slowly almost to himself, “A great name like Thrain.”

“Pa-pa” At the mention of his name, Thrain started clutching at Bothvar’s chainmail.

Bothvar laughed and gave Runa Magnus while he bent down and picked up Thrain who had stretched his hands up to him. Thrain started pounding his little hands on Bothvar’s chest plate saying “Pa-pa...pa-pa”

“How does he know?” He stared in wonderment at the little warrior.

“The etching you gave me.” Runa blushed. “I stared at it often and told him that you were his Pa-pa.”

Bothvar shook his head slowly at her, “You never cease to amaze me love.”

She blushed further.

“Kadlin,” Bothvar said to the woman standing nearby.

“Come and get my son.”

She rushed forward and took Thrain who went to her immediately.

Bothvar turned back to Runa, and spoke low enough that only she could hear, “I need some time with you first.”

She bowed her head, “Aye my Lord.”

“I need to shed my armour. Meet me in our bed.” His eyes glided over her figure, “without clothes.”

She blushed again but could not suppress the smile that graced her face. “Aye.” She turned and hurried out of the room.

Bera sighed, shook her head with a bemused smile before she turned and walked away with Kadlin behind her. She didn’t have to hear what was said between her daughter and her husband to know the words exchanged, especially when Runa rushed from the hall with a blush that must’ve went clear to her toes.

Bothvar turned and called Gils to get him out of his armour. Impatience laced his words. The young man followed him to the ante chamber.

Runa had barely gotten her clothes off when Bothvar came in the room with his grey eyes dark with lust. He had pushed her against the wall near the bed without a word and covered her mouth with his. She still had her dray on, but totally forgot about it when he hiked it up over her hips. He somehow managed to free himself and plunge into her while supporting

her bottom with his large hands. Runa wrapped her legs around his hips as he slid within her and her arms around his neck. Her head was arched back as she gasped with every thrust. His lips trailed hot kisses over her neck before capturing her mouth in a hungry kiss again muffling her increasing gasps. He groaned at the taste her and the euphoric feeling of plunging deep within her moist warmth. He felt her shudder and moan her release. He thrust twice more and followed suit kissing her deeply.

It was a long silent stretch of heavy breathing before someone spoke, it was Bothvar, "Woman, you manage to instil such lust in me, I lose all control." He chuckled, "We did not even make the bed." He lifted his head to see that she was still braced on his hips with her back against the wall.

She giggled, "I did not mind Bothvar."

"So I guessed." Causing her to laugh again, "But..." He backed away from the wall, still gripping her bottom, "You should be given some measure of decency." He carried her to the bed and laid her down, separating from her so he could fully undress before he tended to the rest of her clothing.

"I forget your strength Bothvar," Her eyes slid over his sinewy body with bright approval, "When you are absent from me."

He covered her body with his, "Then let me remind you." He said huskily as his mouth captured hers again.

Bothvar had fallen asleep on his stomach and Runa lay on top of him. She loved how her small frame fit within his. Her head rested on his shoulder as the rest of her stretched down the

length of him with her feet barely coming to mid-calf on him. She couldn't get enough of the feel of him and wished to feel his warmth along the length of her so she pulled herself on top of him when he fell asleep. He slept quickly after they had joined a second time and then she knew that he must've pushed his army for home.

Bothvar opened his eyes to banging on his door and Grunewald's voice. "Aye." He answered. He could feel Runa stretched on top of him, she didn't even stir with the loud noise. His hand reached back and caressed her side, "Runa...Runa.."

She moaned, stretched and rolled off of him, "I hear you..." she said with a smile in her voice.

"The celebration of our return is starting and you know my men do not eat without their King." He rolled on his side and pulled her close to kiss her. He then lifted his head and stared at her seriously, "Nothing can tell you how hard these past moons have been without you and my sons."

"Aye. I too have suffered at your absence." Her hand slid along his jaw slowly as if she was memorizing his features, "I am pleased that I was able to give you another son Bothvar."

He grinned, "Aye, but I had better speak to Thora before I get you with child again. We have proven to be very good at making babes. I think I should let your body rest."

Her eyes widened and she immediately shook her head, "No, My Lord, I would have a dozen of your children if it pleases you. I enjoy being a mother."

"You please me. You do not need to keep bearing me warriors to prove this. I do not know how many more children you may have by opening your belly. Thora does." He chuckled, "I am sure it is not a dozen. So you may have to settle for one or two more."

"How about a girl then?"

He laughed, "Runa we do not control the gender."

"No? I thought with the medicines that Thora has..."

He grinned, "No love, that was all me. I seem destined to plant sons in you."

She blushed, "I still have a lot to learn about the Gierrer."

"it'll be my pleasure to teach you." He patted her bare round bottom, letting his hand linger on the perfect warm shape as he spoke with profound reluctance, "Now we get up." He turned, hopped out of bed and pulled on a fresh tunic and skins. "I will send your maids in. My wife may be tardy for the celebrations, but I may not." He gave her with a sly grin. He left her alone for only a moment before Ingun and Kadlin appeared.

When Runa emerged some time later, the feast had already started being served. She noticed that Bothvar had Thrain on his lap. He was happily picking at whatever was placed in front of him and shoving it in his mouth. He watched his father with great scrutiny and mimicked everything he did. Bothvar was busy talking to Grunewald and when he reached for his wine, Thrain went to grab the flask after he had set it down.

“Bothvar...Don’t!” Runa scolded just in time.

Bothvar laughed and pulled the flask away from Thrain, “Now son, you are too young for such pleasures.” At the sight Thrain’s bottom lip sticking out in a pout Bothvar and Grunewald both howled with laughter.

Runa took her seat next to Bothvar trying to keep the amusement she felt over the situation out of her eyes as she continued scolding Bothvar. “You should pay closer attention Bothvar.”

“Aye love.” He grinned while Thrain was staring at him in fascination over his father’s boisterous laugh, then he burst into giggles causing Bothvar and Runa to laugh.

“There is no end to you, my son.” Bothvar stared down at him still chuckling.

“He already is attached to you my lord,” Runa added, “He has not even thought to come to me.”

Bothvar leaned over and kissed her, “That is because his mother kept my memory alive while I was gone.” He lifted his head and stared at her gratefully.

Runa’s expression suddenly saddened, “This reminds me...when are you to leave again?”

“Leave?” He raised his brows.

She nodded.

Bothvar grinned, "You worry about nothing Runa. I have no intention of leaving you soon."

"What about the Mohr's?"

Bothvar's expression became serious, but his words were soft, "This is talk that can wait love. There is no reason for you to fret over something that has not even been discussed as yet." He leaned down and kissed her forehead, "I have suffered enough being away from my family. I do not need to hear talk of when I will leave next."

She nodded, "Aye. My lord. I regret that I have said anything."

Thrain crawled across the seat to her lap while Bothvar stared down at her, "It is a valid question, but now I wish to enjoy my beautiful woman and my children without the discussion of politics." He caressed her jaw gently with his thumb causing her to turn her face up to him and smile. He bent down and brushed his lips across hers.

"I understand." She whispered against his mouth causing him to smile.

Thrain stood up on her lap and pulled on her necklace to look at the shiny metal etching then turn and point at Bothvar to say "Pa-pa....Pa-pa."

Bothvar laughed and pulled his son back into his embrace, "You are a smart warrior Thrain." He prided, "and already you grow since I have been home."

Thrain gave his father a huge grin, “Pa-pa!” He bellowed causing numerous people around them to cheer and laugh.

The night wore on and when the Gierrer women began to gather in the center of the hall, cheers went up all around. Runa and Asta got up and joined them as they showed how their lessons paid off. It wasn't long after the dance ended that the hall was emptied. The Warriors collected their women even before they finished dancing unable to curtail their lust anymore.

When Runa returned to Bothvar's side she saw that Thrain had fallen asleep on his shoulder.

“He looks good on you my Lord.” She smiled.

“Aye.” He grinned proudly as he got up carefully not to disturb his son's sleep. He took Runa's hand also as they left the hall.

When they entered their chamber Kadlin was waiting to assist Runa. He told her to go with her and he would see to the children. She gave him a generous smile and did as he bade. He went into the room that he had turned into his children's sleeping quarters as Runa had requested. Ingun was awake and sitting in a chair with Magnus who, she explained, had just fallen asleep. He laid Thrain down on his bed and stopped to stare down at Magnus proudly before leaving the room bidding Ingun a goodnight. He shut the door behind him. He couldn't recall a time that he had been so happy.

The next morning after they had eaten. Bothvar had taken a seat in front of the hearth and watched Runa play with their children. Thrain toddled around in circles and stopped

every now gripping Bothvar's knee to stare up at him to yell "Pa-pa!" causing him to laugh. Thrain would then burst into a fit of giggles and resume his circling. Runa sat on a cushion with her legs crossed under her gown while Magnus cooed on her lap.

"My lord." Ralf had appeared at that moment and bowed.

Bothvar indicated for him to approach.

Ralf walked up to him, bent over and whispered in his ear.

Runa glanced up to see Bothvar's expression become serious. His eyes centered on her. He nodded and spoke back to Ralf who turned and left.

Bothvar leaned forward in his chair, "Runa, you must take the children and leave the hall."

She was startled, "What is it?"

He shook his head and waved at Kadlin and Ingun who were already picking up Thrain and Magnus off of her lap.

"Bothvar?"

"Not now Runa. Do as I ask. I need you gone from the hall." He stood and helped her up.

She stared at him for a full minute not missing his concern, "As you wish." She bowed to him and turned and left with her warriors at her heels.

Bothvar waited until she was gone before he turned and walked to his warriors that gathered by the entrance across the hall. Grunewald was with them.

“How many does the Mohr prince bring with him?”

“The scouts seem to think around five hundred.” Grunewald walked with his brother out into the courtyard.

“Only?”

“Aye. Yet he brings a few dozen to the walls. The rest are hold up about a day’s ride east.”

“So he wishes to talk.”

“He has probably heard the news of the alliance.”

Bothvar nodded and then turned to Ralf, who was at his heels, “Allow them entrance.”

“Aye my lord.” Ralf turned and trotted to the gates of the courtyard.

Bothvar turned back to Grunewald, “I suspect he worries over the strength of the Esbiorn and Gierrer.” He grinned, “They should.”

“Aye.” Grunewald agreed. “Yet they have a vast army and only bring a mere five hundred. Maybe it is peace talk.”

“I doubt it.” Bothvar said almost to himself. The Mohr’s were a selfish race, they were not to be trusted.

Chapter Sixteen

In a matter of moments yellow and green banners filled the courtyard. A man barely in his twentieth season dismounted and approached Bothvar. He bowed respectfully before speaking.

“I am Prince Kadim and I come in peace in hopes to discuss a truce with your people.”

Bothvar snorted.

Kadim raised his head and looked at the fierce warriors that stood behind the King. He did not doubt their strength or their fierceness for it was legendary. However he was true to his word. After his father had received news of the Esbiorn King's death and the alliance with the Gierrer he had requested that his son make peace also. They knew that their kingdom would fall under such an alliance and their father did not take kindly to the Ziln's demands. However, standing in front of the large warriors did not do much for his own confidence. The king himself could probably kill him with one blow from those large fists. “I come on behalf of my father to discuss and alliance.”

“So you say.” Bothvar stated, “However, Kadim as you can see I am in no need of such. The power of the alliance with the Esbiorn's has made my Kingdom strong.”

“Aye.” Kadim agreed, “But we have much to offer also and would as much like to share it with the Esbiorn King also. We offer the rich pleasure of our spices, cloth and metals for access to your open water for trade with far lands. I know in the past we have tried to take such from you, but my father insists on his life

that we will honour your truce from now on.”

“And what good is his word?” Bothvar saw rage enter the young prince’s expression, but he managed to keep his voice calm.

“You have but to ask of what will satisfy your trust. I have sisters that....”

“I already have a woman, the likes of which you cannot compete.” Bothvar cut him off.

“Only one?”

“Aye, that is all a Gierrer needs.” He said narrowing his pale gaze on him.

“I apologize my lord I did not mean to offend you. Our customs are obviously different in many ways. It is common for a Mohr to take more than one woman.”

“Clearly you do not know our women.” Bothvar stated causing his men to laugh.

Kadim had to suppress a smile. He had seen some of the females as he rode through the village. They were beautiful. Unfortunately his people did not have that in common. His race was quite plain.

Bothvar sighed, “Kadim you have my audience tonight, but you and your men will leave your weapons here with my men. You have my word that no harm will come to them if they do as I bid.”

Kadim bowed again, "Thank you my lord." He straightened, turned and barked several orders to his men, who dismounted and began handing their weapons to Bothvar's.

When they dined that evening, Runa remained in Bothvar's chambers with the children. He had seen to her safety. Unfortunately Grunewald had been too occupied to see to the same. Asta entered the hall and all fell quiet. Kadim instantly stood while Grunewald and Bothvar followed his gaze.

"By the Gods." Kadim stated in awe.

Bothvar cursed and Grunewald shot to his feet and drew his sword pointing it at Kadim's chest. The sound of Grunewald's sword being unsheathed brought Kadim's eyes to him. Grunewald did not mistake the desire that registered there, "remove your eyes from my woman, or I'll slice them out of your head." His voice was a deadly calm.

"Asta!" Bellowed Bothvar, "Remove yourself!"

Things had unfolded so quickly that she did not have time to register what had just happened. There were many men in the hall that she did not recognize, but she knew from the look of them that they were not Esbiorn or Gierrer. Then she heard Grunewald threatening one of them and Bothvar bellowing at her. She froze.

"Damn! Ralf get her out of here!" Bothvar shouted and Ralf was out of his chair before he finished the sentence and took Asta by the arm leading her gently but quickly from the hall.

“Grunewald.” Bothvar put his hand on his brother’s shoulder and spoke with his usual command, “Lower your sword.”

“Now I understand why your women do not join us my lord.” Kadim stated while still staring at Grunewald. His eyes flickered a challenge and Grunewald obviously did not miss it.

“You wish to fight me for her do you not Kadim? I will best you.” Grunewald did as his brother asked and sheathed his sword. “It would be an unfair fight.” He said confidently.

“Is there such a custom?” Hope had entered his expression but he still locked gazes with Grunewald.

“No.” Bothvar interjected, “There is not. Our women choose us. We do not choose them.”

“Pity.” He said as he sat down, “A beauty such as that would be well worth fighting for.”

Grunewald snarled.

Bothvar sat back down and Grunewald followed suit but his scowl remained. Bothvar leaned toward him, “Just so you understand our customs Kadim. Our women choose their males and they choose who they go to bed with. We do not force them. Even our slaves have that right to chose. If you wish the company of a Gierrer woman she must accept you. I do not have a problem if you bed one of our women, but our mates are not to be touched.”

Kadim stared at him for a moment, “I understand.” His

eyes flicked to Grunewald, "Are there other women like yours."

"Aye, my brother's." he growled out.

Kadim returned his gaze to Bothvar, "Only two?"

"They are Esbiorn." He offered.

Kadim leaned back in his chair thinking about this before returning his gaze to Bothvar, "I have seen many Gierrer women when I rode through the village. They are also beautiful, " He nodded toward the hall that Asta was taken down, "But the likes of her, I have never seen." He turned back to Grunewald, "I regret to have offended you Grunewald. I admit I was taken back over her beauty. It will not happen again. I will inform my men of your customs so there will be no offense taken here while we are guests in your land."

Grunewald nodded at Kadim's apology but still kept his expression sour. He did not like any man ogling his woman no matter who he was.

Kadim stood and held his arm out for Bothvar to clasp, "I thank you for your audience, but the hour is late. I will return to my camp tonight and return tomorrow. I ask that you invite your women to the festivities tomorrow night so I may enjoy their company," His eyes turned to Grunewald who's expression turned menacing again, "I promise on my life that I will behave as will my men. I feel it is important to understand each other's customs if there is to be peace between us. Again Grunewald I regret to have offended you." He turned and left calling for his men.

“Bastard.” Grunewald seethed as his eyes followed him out of the hall.

Bothvar smiled, “Grunewald, you cannot blame the man. He was taken by surprise.”

“Still. It was a clever way to get us to bring our women out to parade before his eyes.”

“Aye, but we will do as he asks. We cannot keep hiding them.” He turned to leave, “Not only that, women have a way of getting things out of men, that men cannot.”

Grunewald actually laughed, “True brother.”

The next night, proved to be no different. The visitors were obvious in their lust for the Gierrer and the Esbiorn women when they entered the hall. Bothvar had yet to appear with Runa and Grunewald knew it was done purposely. He removed a dagger from his belt and stuck it in the table between kadim and himself, “*Just a reminder of who Asta belongs to.*” Grunewald stated in the Mohr’s language. Kadim gave him a challenging smile.

“Your warning does not go unheeded Grunewald, son of Urthraine.”

Asta jumped at the sudden motion of the dagger embedding in the wooden table, “What is that for?” She did not understand the language they spoke, but knew it wasn’t Gierrer, because she had been learning it and none of the words were familiar.

He turned to her, "It is a Mohr custom." He said with a straight face.

Kadim laughed at Grunewald's explanation causing him to glare at him once again.

A hush suddenly fell over the hall when Bothvar entered with Runa on his arm.

Kadim swore under his breath at the sight before him. He thought Grunewald's woman was unequalled, but this woman was a goddess. He stood and bowed as did the rest of his men. However, he made sure that he kept his desires well hidden. It would not be a good thing to lust after the King's mate. Although he stopped his brother from running him through, he was certain the King would not hesitate if he looked his woman over as he wanted to. He was thankful for the moment that his head was bowed so he could regain his composure. She was a striking image of desire. Her voluptuous body was unequalled in his realm. She wore Gierrer colors and it was such a startling contrast to her golden hair and deep blue eyes. He lifted his head as she bowed her greeting as Bothvar sat her down before taking the seat next to him.

Bothvar introduced the prince to Runa while carefully studying his expression. He hid his desires well, thought Bothvar, but not well enough. He smiled as he slid his hand to Runa's thigh possessively. Unlike Grunewald he had more time to adjust his jealous nature toward those who desired Runa.

"What is that?" Runa nodded to the dagger sticking out of the table.

“It is a Mohr custom.” Asta answered.

Bothvar stared at the dagger between Kadim and Grunewald and shook his head. He knew damn well it wasn’t a custom but a warning to the Mohr prince.

“You are Esbiorn are you not, my lady?”

Runa was surprised the Mohr spoke to her, she looked at Bothvar before answering. He nodded his approval, “Aye.”

“Are all Esbiorn females as beautiful as you?”

Runa blushed unable to answer.

“No. They are not.” Bothvar offered smiling his approval.

Kadim directed his attention to Bothvar, “You are indeed lucky then, my lord.”

“Aye.” He agreed squeezing Runa’s thigh.

“Do you have a woman?” Runa asked.

Kadim stared at her and his eyes glinted over the attention she gave him, “Several.”
She blushed again, “Oh?”

“Mohr’s can take more than one.” He explained.

“Do you have children then?” she said changing the subject, she could not share Bothvar.

"Three." He smiled, "All daughters."

"You are so young..."

"As are you..." He cut her off, "Do you and your lord have children."

"Two sons." Bothvar offered, "They will be strong warriors some day."

Kadim's expression showed intense approval. He did not miss the pride in Bothvar's words, "Your woman is so small my lord, yet she bears you sons. You are truly gifted with her." He eyed her, "You would certainly be a great prize in my land."

"She is in ours." Bothvar stated.

Runa found herself actually liking the Mohr Prince the more he talked. He seemed quite genuine in his comments and very honest with them. Although she hadn't blushed so much since she first met Bothvar, she enjoyed listening to his stories of his customs. She could tell from Grunewald's scowl that he didn't care much for him but Bothvar did not seem to show the same disapproval. The night carried on and many of the men had retired for the night, including Grunewald and Asta. Bothvar sat with the prince near the hearth in the large chairs and Runa had found herself sitting on the arm of the chair that Bothvar occupied. His arm was around her waist as she leaned into him. Several of the Prince's men remained behind as Brim and Ralf who took up the seats at the wooden table behind them to keep a watchful eye on their King and Runa. The two men talked of the history between their cultures and Runa was fascinated to learn of the Mohr's ways. She even found herself asking a few

questions much to the approval of the prince who answered eagerly. Before long it was the early hours of the morning and Runa had somehow managed to drift off on Bothvar's shoulder. He turned and pulled her onto his lap without a thought to the man sitting next to him.

Kadim watched the display, "You love her very much."

Bothvar nodded as he tucked her head into his shoulder. One arm was around her back and the other over her thighs.

"It is a rare thing to see. We revere our women as do you, but the bond you share with her is unknown to us. I envy such."

Bothvar smiled, "It is bred in us Kadim. It is not something that shows up at random."

"I can see that. We would just possess such a beautiful woman and not share such a bond. Although I must admit, I would trade all of what I have for the likes of her."

Bothvar was not offended at the man's statement. He was flattered. Yes Runa was rare, but she was his and his alone. She had born him sons and loved him like no other.

Kadim stood then and stretched, "I thank you for your hospitality my lord. I will take my leave and speak to my father of your requests. Do not get up." He grinned when Bothvar made to stand. "I will see myself out. I will send a messenger in several moons so that we may finalize our agreements."

Bothvar held out his arm and the Mohr prince clasped it in agreement before he left.

Bothvar stood and took Runa with him. He carried her sleeping form to his chamber with his warriors on his heels.

When he laid her on their bed she opened her eyes, "I fell asleep."

He grinned, "Aye, you did, but not before you charmed the Mohr Prince."

She blushed, "Bothvar, you should not say such things."

He brushed his lips over hers, "Are you too tired to love me woman?"

She let a slow sensual smile spread across her face, "I am never too tired to love you." She slid her arms around his neck and pulled him down to kiss him.

He undressed her slowly savouring every inch of her flesh. He knew her desires well by now and made sure she begged him for release. He slid into her with controlled ease until she was wild with need. She tightened her thighs on his hips and pleaded with him to take her over the edge. He grinned and captured her mouth while he plunged hard into her, giving her the release she begged for. He roared his climax and collapsed on her. Before he smothered her he rolled to his side taking her with him.

"Give me another child Bothvar." She whispered into his chest.

He smiled, "You wish for another?"

She nodded.

He chuckled, “Then love, I will give you another.” He pushed her onto her back and kissed her again.

EPILOGUE

In the years to come Bothvar was not only a legend among his people but among the three united kingdoms. The Zilns had not challenged the Gierrer after the alliance. He fathered three more sons and finally to Runa’s delight, a daughter. All of his sons grew to carry on his legend as unsurpassable warriors.

Erland became a father of two daughters and then a son. Lenore had finally joined him when peace settled in Esbiorn. The Gierrer and the Esbiorns remained a strong bond for many generations.



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