

THE DEFIANT HEART

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Table of Contents

THE DEFIANT HEART

Dedication

Author's Appreciation

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Author Biography

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Coming Soon

Coming in Late 2013

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Dedication

For my children, Kimberly, Scott, and Christopher. You've always been and continue to be the precious lights of my life. And for our grandsons, Sean, Beau, Connor, Aidyn, Nicholas and James, and for Ligia, our daughter-in-law, and Brian, our son-in-law, you add sparkle and shine to my life all the more.

Author's Appreciation

A very special thanks to Jim Shellem for his nautical expertise and advice, not only in editing the pertinent scenes, but as the "architect" of the sea battle.

Additional thanks to Linda Douglas for her help in Lyting's and Deira's scene at Gelandri.

Also, warm and very special thanks to my parents, Jim and Betty Barbour for the "care and feeding of the muse" while laboring in the face of her deadline and she needed a place of peace and quiet to tuck herself away. You're the best.

Note on pronunciation: Once again, I have used Icelandic (Íslensk) which preserves the language of the ninth-century Norsemen. The character "ð" is pronounced like the th-sound in "the"; "þ" is pronounced like the th-sound in "thin"; and "æ" is pronounced "i" as in "like."



PART 1

A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine.

“From the fury of the Norsemen deliver us, O Lord!”

Prologue

The North Sea, 915 A.D.

The mighty fleet of *drakken* swept north, carving the fogbound sea. Swift and silent they coursed, triumphant high-prowed dragonships, their hulls heavy with plunder—serpents in the mists.

Onward they plowed through trackless ocean and sunless haze, bearing their precious cargo—ivory, gold, and womanly flesh—far from the Isle of Eire, far to where gelid shores and hoarfrost lairs brinked the earth.

A horn brayed long and deep, sending chills to crawl over Ailinn as the lead vessel signaled its companions through the curtain of gray. The others quickly took up the call and repeated the blast from stern to stern till the waters vibrated with the sound of trumpeting beasts.

Ailinn drew the mist-sodden blanket about young Lia and hugged her close. “Shush, love. Rest now,” she soothed.

Lia shuddered beneath Ailinn’s arms, but her cries quieted to a broken snuffle.

Heavyhearted, Ailinn laid her cheek against her stepcousin’s small, dark head and closed her eyes. She breathed the dank sea air and listened to the muffled sobs of the women about her. Listened to the rhythmic drub of a wooden rod as a Norseman smote his buckler over and over, pacing the oarsmen’s strokes.

“May God remember us in our hour of need,” Ailinn prayed softly over Lia. “May God protect —”

Ailinn swallowed her words against the knot of anger that rose in her breast. For a countless time this day she shuttered her heart against the pain, against the horrors that burned in her soul.

Where was the Almighty in those desperate moments before dawn? Why did God hold back his hand when the blood-thirsting devils descended upon Clonmel? Why?

She squeezed her lashes against a fresh flow of tears. Still, they trickled paths over her cheeks. Instinctively Ailinn rocked Lia in her arms, a gentle, comforting motion.

Cold. She was so cold. And so very tired. ‘Twas a chill and a weariness that only one who had passed through the darkness of death and the shadows of Hell could know. If there remained one shred of gratitude she could lift heavenward, ‘twas that Fianna, her mother, and Lorcan, her stepfather, did not live to see Munster ripped wide by Danish blades. Would that God had seen her to her own grave with them and spared her this agony.

Ailinn thrust aside her self-pity. Her heart ached for her stepcousins. Lia and Deira had witnessed their parents lying in a pool of blood, their father with his head crushed and their mother savaged. Rhiannon had shrieked wildly for her father, the overking. He was a dauntless, hard-bitten warrior. Still, there was no sight of him when they were dragged from the compound with the other women.

Sweet Jesu, the sight of it!—everything hacked to pieces. In their contempt the Norsemen hewed down every object and beast that misfortuned to occupy the walled yard. All about lay the wreckage of implements, furniture, and crockery. Huts were torched and pens smashed down. Blooded hounds cluttered the yard. Everywhere there was death. Ailinn saw those she’d known

from her youth lying vacant-eyed, their lives poured out on Eire's sweet earth. Many more were beyond recognition.

The preparations for the bridal feast, so joyfully made the day before, lay in ruin. Sprays of hawthorn, decorating the doors and walls of buildings, shriveled with heat as flames devoured the structures and those who had fallen within.

Longships—dozens upon dozens—awaited, blackening the River Suir. Ailinn was boarded with the others and shackled to the thick mast. As the ships slid away, she watched the billowing smoke climb the skies over Clonmel.

Ailinn shivered as she tasted the salt of her tears. A breeze stirred and teased a strand of auburn hair across her face. Dragging it down, she squinted her eyes open to seek Deira and Rhiannon. Instead, her gaze met with the hard, flinty stare of the man called Hakon.

She stiffened with revulsion and loathing. God willing, she would kill the cur with her own hands given the chance. 'Twas he who had slain their maid, Bergette, and violated Deira and Rhiannon before her very eyes.

Ailinn averted her face and stared gloomily into the mist. Fresh currents of guilt surged through her. 'Twas, in part, her own actions that provoked the Norseman to lay hold of her stepcousins and defile them so savagely. Even now as she glanced to them, Rhiannon clawed her with eyes sharp as talons, then gave Ailinn her back as she slipped a comforting arm about Deira.

Pain lanced through Ailinn and stung her heart. She grieved for them both and for all the women who suffered the dark lusts of the Northmen. None had escaped, not even young Lia. None, save herself alone.

She glanced to the ship's graying chieftain, a massive, grizzled warrior—Skallagrim, she'd heard the others name him. 'Twas he who claimed possession of her despite Hakon's heated protests. Whatever his intent, Skallagrim neither pleased himself upon her nor allowed his men sport of her.

Ailinn felt the weight of Hakon's steady, piercing gaze. A chill curled along her spine. She feared he yet purposed to have her.

In that first, horrifying moment, when the Norsemen burst through the chamber door, her eyes had beheld Hakon's crimsoned blade flashing. Flashing its terrible downward stroke as he severed Bergette's life. Ailinn screamed at the butchery, drawing Hakon's attention upon herself. In a heartbeat he leapt for her, yet she fought him with a frenzied strength as pure, unholy terror erupted through her. The fine bride's veil and crown of hyacinth ripped from her hair beneath his hands as she wrenched free and fled for the door. In the next breath she slammed into the hardened chest of a huge, brutish Northman who reeked of smoke, sweat, and death.

Ailinn's blood ran cold as Skallagrim held her in his iron grip and ran a gauging eye over her. Hakon argued hotly with her captor while their comrades began to push into the small room and lay hold of the young women there. Though Ailinn understood naught of their twisted tongue, Hakon plainly deemed her his prize and demanded her back.

But Skallagrim refused to release her, using his authority to end the matter. 'Twas then in the heat of his anger that Hakon seized Deira and ravaged her. He next laid hold to Rhiannon. The heathens abused the other maidens as well, swiftly, brutally, shouting their coarse pleasure. Several flaunted the stained gowns of the virgins they sullied, pleased with the spoils of conquest.

At that, Skallagrim studied Ailinn a long, considering moment. He marked the bridal array that adorned her—the unblemished gown, the remnants of bruised blossoms that yet clung in her hair. A light came into his flat eyes and his craggy, bearded face spread with a grin as though he

had found some great treasure. With Ailinn secure in his grip, he hauled her from the building and down to the River Suir.

Lia tensed against Ailinn, netting her back to the moment. She looked up to see Hakon unfold to his full height. He stepped forward with sure footage on the forging deck.

Ailinn's heart thudded against her ribs as his gaze prowled over them. She tightened her grip on Lia, but he only rumbled a sound deep in his throat, then moved past to the rear of the ship, where he replaced the man at the steering board.

Ailinn vented her breath. Gently she fingered back a tangle of hair from Lia's pale cheek.

"As pas de peur, ma chère cousine. Reposes-toi," Ailinn calmed, unmindful she had slipped into Frankish.

She, Lia, and Deira had learned the tongue at their nurse's knee and exercised it most often to share a confidence or voice their griefs. Now the familiar words rushed forth, consoling in somewise—old friends, intimate and dear.

Lia quieted once more as Ailinn soothed her fingers through the girl's sable tresses. What would come of them, she brooded—Lia, Deira, Rhiannon, the maidens of Clonmel, herself? Were the remainder of their days foredoomed to enslavement and submission among the heathens? And Skallagrim—what plans did he hold for her? Surely, he spared her apurpose. Though she loathed to concede it, for the moment her safety lay with the rugged chieftain. But her kinswomen and friends she was powerless to aid.

Dispirited, Ailinn began to sing softly, lulling Lia with an old strain that was tinged with a sadness peculiar to Gaelic melodies. Her crystalline voice carried along the ship's length and drifted out over the deep waters. The men fell silent. Even the oar-pacer muted his strokes.

Tears ached in Ailinn's throat, but her voice never faltered. Once anew, she thanked Heaven above that her mother and stepfather had not lived to suffer this day or witness her fate. She embraced their memory and held them dear. For the briefest of moments she recalled her mother as she lay dying, her husband's and daughter's hands clasped within her own thin strength.

"Hold fast, my dearest Ailinn," Fianna heartened. "Sometimes the darkness holds the light."

Ailinn staved the memories before their keen edge pared too close. Lifting her gaze, she beheld her new masters. They wore the blood of her people.

Raw, mordant anger churned Ailinn's soul. What small light remained in her life after Fianna's and Lorcan's deaths today went out altogether. In the darkness that engulfed her world, she knew only a scalding hatred for all Norsemen. Her body they might use and break, but in her heart she vowed ever to remain defiant.

As the ships sliced the waters for distant shores, Ailinn ended her song. "I am sorry, Mother. Night has fallen and I cannot see beyond. There is no one to aid me or bring forth the hope of dawn."

Hedeby, Danmark

A bright smile slashed Lyting's sun-coppered features as he leapt from the prow of the *Sea Falcon* to the wharf's solid planking. 'Twas good to be in Hedeby once more.

As he secured the ship to one of the stout bollards, he scanned the bustling quayside with its colorful mix of humanity.

Já, 'twas good, he avowed warmly, his pulse quickening to the pace that thrummed along the dock and on through the town. This voyage would be his last for many a year to come—a final excursion before his return to Normandy. Then would he set forth for Corbie and begin studies under the Benedictines, bound by Holy Rule.

Mayhap, in time, he would yet return to these shores.

With a staunch yank he finished lashing the lines and glanced back to the sleek ship. Lyting's grin widened. His sister-in-law, Brienne, and her friend, Aleth, gaped from their perch. The scene before them, he imagined, was wholly unlike any they'd ever witnessed in their native Francia.

Hedeby. Gateway of Danmark. Mistress of trade and crossroad of the North. The town nestled in a ring of heavy defense works on the Schlei fjord which cut deep across the narrow foot of the Jutland peninsula. Traffic intersected her boundaries east from the Baltic and west from the North Sea. Along the military road, Hærvejen, goods flowed north and south.

Lyting looked on with amusement as Brienne nudged Aleth, pointing out a man who ambled along the pier in wide, baggy pants gathered below his knees. Aleth, in turn, gasped at the necklace one woman wore, an extravagant piece crowded with large rock crystals, set in silver mountings.

The planks shuddered beneath Lyting as his brother, Rurik, jumped to the wharf beside him. An instant later Aleth's husband, Ketil, appeared above them shouldering a narrow wooden ramp.

Lyting tossed a spiritous glance from one to the other as he helped brace down the thick board. "Best secure the keys to your coffers. Your wives look ready to spend last year's gain."

Ketil guffawed in his flaming red beard, his broken features crinkling. "And what better enjoyment than for a man to squander a bit of coin on his lady? 'Twill be most happily rewarded in the end." He winked, then leaned forward to cast Lyting a purposeful nod. "Mind, 'twould do you well to find a warm and lovesome maid and bind yourself there. Far better than the cold stone walls you seek," he said, dispensing his all-too-frequent advice.

Rurik chuckled deep and rich as Ketil withdrew. "Marriage agrees with our friend. Who would have thought that such a wisp of a girl as Aleth could tame that bear?"

Lyting shared the laugh, his smile lingering as his golden brother mounted the plank to rejoin his wife in the ship. Rurik dropped a kiss to Brienne's lips, then a second to the small, dark head asleep at her breast. Aleth moved to Rurik's side just then, bearing a second child, identical to the first, and gave the mite over to his father.

A warm pride swelled through Lyting as he looked on the Baron and Baronne de Valsemé as

they stood with their young heirs and gazed townward. Norse and Frank, they tarried, content in each other's presence. *Nei*, Norman, Lyting amended, melded by heart and blood.

Danish by birth, Lyting and his brothers had grown to manhood in Jutland's north on the inlets and broads of the Limfjord. Their father, Gruel Atli, warred for a decade in Francia alongside their famed uncle, Rollo, and the Norsemen of the Seine.

Nearly four years past, the Frankish king, Charles, came to terms with Rollo, granting him both fiefdom and title and creating for him a coveted place within the ranks of Frankish aristocracy as Duke of Normandy. For their part, Rollo and his men agreed to defend Charles's realm and take the waters of Holy Baptism.

In his stead, Rollo awarded Atli for his loyalty with the barony of Valsemé, the former holding of Richard Beaumanoir, Brienne's father. Atli did not enjoy the fruits of his warring for long. Scarcely did Lyting arrive from Limfjord and Rurik return from his travels in the East than their father died. With his last words Atli conferred the barony and his untouched bride—Brienne—to Rurik's keeping.

Yet, 'twas a position swift challenged. Jealousies and treacheries ran deep within the barony. The blood of the brothers spilled upon the blade—so much, near lost.

Near lost. Lyting touched the faint scar that lined his cheek, his gaze drifting to Brienne.

"By the Mass!" Ketil's oath ruptured his thoughts. "Did you bring your full worth?" He grunted as he hoisted a small, iron-clad chest from the cargo hold onto the deck's planking. "'Tis a rock, Lyting."

Lyting shook free the old specters and crossed over the ramp. "There will be little need for coin or goods where I am destined," he tossed easily, smiling. "And I have brought my wealth apurpose."

"Destined indeed," Ketil rumbled, poised to argue the point. But when Lyting forbore him a glance, Ketil harnessed his tongue.

His lips twitched beneath the curling blaze that shrubbed his face. "Say you, 'apurpose' '?" Ketil notched a brow at Lyting, then bent to retrieve a second trunk from storage. "Mayhap you shall yet restore my confidence and lavish the treasure on some fair damsel."

"Have heart, Ketil," Rurik called back as he aided Brienne down the ramp. "'Tis burdensome enough that Brother Bernard watches henlike over Lyting, sparing his virtue all earthly temptation. But you are ever eager to thrust every unpledged maid onto his path."

Barely suppressed laughter rippled through the baron's crew and men-at-arms who labored to make fast the *Sea Falcon*, preparing to haul her ashore.

"And well he should have heeded my advice on the day I wed Aleth," Ketil persisted. "There is no want of maidens in Normandy who would welcome him to their arms *and* beds. 'Twould be of little surprise should Hedeby's daughters prove as ardent."

Lyting shook his head good-naturedly and began to interrupt Ketil's discourse, but his friend gave him no pause.

"That snow-bright hair of yours tempts the women as honey does flies." Ketil gestured to the exceptional white mane that spilled past Lyting's shoulders. "I held hope 'twas to that end that you avoided my lady's shears of late. Forsooth, you look as fierce as any of our battle-hungry kindred gone *i viking*. Women admire men of courage and steel," he asserted with a stout nod of his head. "Especially the lustrous maids of Danmark."

"Oh, Ketil." Aleth wagged her head, a soft smile etching her features. "Grant Lyting a measure of peace and do come along."

Aleth turned to Rurik as he remounted the plank and accepted his outstretched hand. Leaning

upon his strength, she allowed him to assist her ashore.

Eager to follow his diminutive wife, Ketil caught up several bundles from the hold and motioned for Lyting to aid him with the solid chest that stood between them. Together, they took up the weight and crossed the deck.

“Do not be disheartened, my friend,” Lyting cheered as they descended. With a shrug of hard-muscled shoulder, he repositioned the small coffer of riches so that it rode more securely against the curve of his neck. “This is for no silken-thighed temptress but for one of true metal and a voice that fair rings to the heavens. ‘Tis the Bell of Saint Anskar I seek.”

“Bell? What need have you of a bell?” Ketil’s brows hoisted apart.

“Have you heard naught of blessed Saint Anskar?” Lyting beamed him a glance as they gained the wharf. “He established a church at Hedeby this century past and furnished it with a fine bell. When Anskar died, so did his mission. ‘Tis said the church yet stands, boasting its bell. ‘Tis my intent to make fair purchase of the piece for Valsemé’s own church. Again, there is little use for coin when I enter the cloistered walls of Corbie.”

“Corbie. Bell. Bah! ‘Tis no bell you need, but a flesh-and-blood woman. A flesh-and-blood woman who will help you *ring* your blessed bell of Saint Anskar!”

Ahead of them, Rurik and Brienne broke into gales of laughter. Their twins looked on them in wonder, then, caught up in the merriment, joined with peals of unrestrained delight.

The small party of Normans threaded their way through the crowds and carts that choked the waterfront. Arabs in long, fluid robes strolled the docks, some stopping to haggle slave prices with Rus traders who offered sturdy young Slavs. Frisians, garbed in striped tunics and possessing long wilting mustaches, bartered fine Rhenish glassware from straw-packed barrels.

Lyting and Ketil exchanged glances to see how prominently the merchants of Sverige figured among the Danes this season. Hedeby changed masters with regularity these days, Lyting acknowledged soberly, a bedeviled state spawned years past when the Swedish king, Olaf, seized control of the market-town. Thenceforth, Hedeby had passed back and forth, between Swede and Dane, in an endless power struggle to control the bounty that trafficked her borders.

For all that, Hedeby prospered and life proceeded largely undisturbed. Though it might rub his Dane’s pride, ‘twas the Swedes who had fortified her with defense works. And likewise, through them, that the most exotic of goods flowed—luxuries from Byzantium, the Bulgar Khaganates, and the Caliphates of Baghdad.

Ketil gave a snort, drawing Lyting’s attention to one Swede who dangled a bauble before a shapely Danish maid. She trilled a small laugh as he folded the trinket into her palm. But at the same moment her gaze fell on Lyting and her lips fell open. The Swede twisted round to follow the maid’s interest. Icily he flicked an impatient glare over Lyting, then turned back, shifting his stance to block the maid’s view.

Lyting caught the flash of white teeth cutting a swathe through Ketil’s beard.

“*Nei*, friend. Not a word,” he warned but was hard put to temper the grin from his own face.

From above, a horn sounded, long and deep, drawing Lyting’s gaze to the earthen rampart that rose over Hedeby and to the watchtowers atop it. Again, the horn resonated, rich and full-bodied, signaling ships arrived from the sea.

The oddest of presentiments rippled along Lyting’s spine as he turned to view the palisaded harbor.

“Let us hope they be not more Sverige-men,” Ketil gruffed.

Lyting watched as the first warship slipped through the sea gate, lying low to the waterline, its serpent’s prow gleaming.

Keen of sight, he marked the boisterous celebration onboard. The sea warriors axed open casks, ladling up horns full of ale and hailing those ashore before they swilled the contents. As the oars dipped the waters, the men took turns stepping out upon the shafts and dancing over them along the length of the ship. Their comrades cheered them on, then roared with laughter when they lost their balance and splashed into the Schlei.

Those who accomplished the deed rewarded themselves with more drink and gladdened themselves further, pillaging lips and fondling breasts of the female captives chained at the mast.

“*Nei*, friend. Not Sverige-men.” Lyting steeled at the sight. “They’re our own kinsmen, fresh from a raid.”



Shackled together by ankle cuffs and chains, their wrists tethered, the maids of Eire shuffled along the timbered street in a single column.

Ailinn strained to glimpse Deira and Lia where they walked ahead, separated by a dozen or more women. She could not see them. Rhiannon, unhappily, trod directly behind, her tongue no less sharp for her trials.

“Why should these Norsemen favor you above the rest?” she hissed past Ailinn’s shoulder. “Every wretched day since our taking have I struggled on that, choked on that. And though I am ill to think on it further, ‘tis plain. Their greed for gold outweighs the lusts of their loins.”

“Hush, Rhiannon.” Ailinn cautioned in a tight half-whisper. “They keep watch of us. Hold your tongue lest you would see us flogged.”

“Flogged? Not *you*,” Rhiannon bit out. “Not you who they spare of their appetites and suffer no hardship. You, who they cloak warm in wool while the rest of us near freeze upon the open sea. Have you not guessed it?” Rhiannon baited. “They think you to be me—daughter of Mór, princess of the Eóganachts and Domnal’s bride. They see a hearty ransom in that.”

Ailinn clenched her teeth, incredulous at Rhiannon’s assumption.

“How should they know aught of us? These are black-shielded Danes who fell upon Eire like wolves out of the North, not the men of Norge who infest our fair isle. Did you imagine them to have stopped and questioned their Norse kindred before entering the Suir to determine who was who among the Irish? The Norwegians are their foe as much as any. I have heard it in your father’s hall.”

“‘Tis as I say, I tell you,” Rhiannon countered. “They chose to attack the compound of a *ruri ri* thinking to find great wealth there.” She jabbed the back of Ailinn’s arm. “They did not know we two exchanged places that morn. They found us in my chamber, did they not? And there you were, wearing *my* wedding mantle, *my* gown, a garland in your hair.”

“Enough, Rhiannon!” Ailinn’s temples throbbed as she attempted to block the dark memories from her mind’s eye. “Even should you have the right of it, who would give ransom now? Who among our menfolk survived the slaughter that soaked the dawn? How can any of us know?”

“Mór lives!” Rhiannon declared fiercely. “And these Norse devils will not treat you so finely once they learn the truth. *Ní hea*.” A gloat coated her voice beneath the words. “Not when they find that their prize captive lacks one drop of Eóganacht blood, royal or otherwise. That she springs only from the Corcu Loígda—the conquered Érainn—footstool of the Eóganachts for centuries past.”

Ailinn’s anger screamed through her veins. “I am sure you will hasten to apprise them and better your condition as swift as you can accomplish it.”

A contented, deep-throated sound reached her from behind, though Rhiannon abstained from comment. Ailinn envisioned the cat who savored its cream. And the one about to swallow its

prey.

As they left the quayside to enter the town's forest of reed-thatched dwellings, Rhiannon's silence continued to stab at her back, sharp as any two-edged blade.



Lyting hefted the iron caldron into place, suspending it on hook and chain over the room's central stone-lined hearth. He glanced across the *skali*, the *hus*'s fine main hall, and grinned. Brienne and Aleth yet lingered at the door, ogling the vibrant spectacle of Hedeby's streets.

Rurik emerged from a back storeroom just then, dusting the dirt from his hands. He glanced to where little Richard and Kylan trotted merrily along the *langpallar*, the raised side-floors that lined the *skali*'s walls. A smile warmed his features as he joined Lyting.

"'Tis a fine lodgment. The lads seem happy enough, and the ladies will be comfortable here for the span of our stay."

Lyting chuckled. "If they don't burst with wanting to explore the merchant's booths and craftsmen's quarters."

Rurik's gaze traveled to the women, and he shared the jest. With a gleam to his eyes he stepped toward the sleeping-platforms. The twins giggled with delight when he held out his arms for them. One after the other they launched themselves at their father's chest. Catching them up, Rurik held them high in the crook of his arms and jostled them gamesomely, like two little wheat sacks.

"What say you men?" He winked conspiratorially at Lyting as he addressed his sons. "We are finished here for a time—our trunks stored and everything put to rights. Shall we check on the *Sea Falcon* and see if Ketil and the others have secured her ashore? 'Twould not surprise me if the crew should need your help to set their camp and raise their tents."

Brienne and Aleth came away from the portal as Rurik addressed Lyting, though he spoke for them to hear.

"The *hus* must still be provisioned, if only for tonight. Mayhap you would be of a mind to escort the ladies about the town. I would do so myself, but with warships in port, I prefer to see to the *Sea Falcon* personally."

Lyting nodded. "Best we double the watch tonight. I'll tent with the men and see it done." Lyting graced Brienne and Aleth with a generous smile. "Meanwhile, perchance, my ladies would accompany me, and we shall discover what pleasantries Hedeby offers this season."

Amid high spirits and joyous articulations, the women hurried to gather their cloaks from the wall pegs.

"Be mindful to return with some food for the kettle and oil for our lamps," Rurik teased lightly, then dropped his voice as he skimmed a look to Lyting.

"If there is aught the ladies especially favor, secure it with coin when they are not aware and bid the merchant hold it. Ketil and I will settle with him later."

Lyting's eyes sparkled as they departed the *hus*. He turned back and set the key to the lock. "'Twould seem I shall spend this journey laboring to empty both our coffers."

"Ah, but mayhap you shall find your bell," Brienne offered brightly.

Lyting straightened to find three widening grins. By their expressions, they clearly held Ketil's advisements in mind. He began to lift a finger and forestall the all-too-predictable comment when little Richard began to bounce in his father's arm.

"I help you ring it," he chirped.

"I ring it," Kylan joined gleefully.

Lyting squeezed the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger and shook his head in

mock dismay. His shoulders vibrated with silent laughter. The Lord's Cross, he discovered ever anew, must be borne in many ways.



Lyting's bootfall sounded bluntly on the wooden walkway as he guided the ladies along the fresh-water rivulet that flowed through the heart of Hedeby.

Houses lined the street cramped one upon another—yards neatly fenced, rooftops nearly touching, attendant sheds and workshops to the back. Rapturous aromas of fresh-baked bread, hearty stews, and grilled fish wafted from open doors to swamp their senses.

For a brief time they wandered. Lyting pointed out curiosities and directed them to tented stalls where visiting merchants spread exotic wares—rare spices and rich brocades, ropes of seal hide and walrus ivory. Brienne took special interest in a belt fashioned with metal plaques from Persia, thinking to gift Rurik. Aleth looked at gaming pieces for Ketil.

Where the lane abutted the main north-south thoroughfare, they turned left and crossed the rivulet. Diverting once more, they entered the craftsmen's quarters. Brienne and Aleth examined the potter's bowls, watched the jeweler cut and polish his amber, then lingered over the weaver's array of *hlað*—colorfully patterned ribbons.

Lyting watched with enjoyment as the women chattered back and forth, excited as two fresh-cheeked maids attending their first fair. While they made their choices, he moved to the horn-carver's display, hoping to find something fitting for each of them. Something small, thoughtfully chosen. Something by which they might remember their journey here. Remember him. In years to come. Long after he departed Valsemé.

Lyting lifted a handsome, fine-toothed comb and wondered why so cheerful a task should drag at the heart of his soul.

"Red deer." A voice disrupted his thoughts. "The combs are carved from the antlers of red deer."

Lyting found a whiskery little man sitting off to the side, whittling an indiscernible object.

"Each is fitted with its own case. There are also needles, spindles, knife handles, and spoons to satisfy any maid. And should you be in need of a fine wool cloak for your heart's lady, I have several in trade."

Lyting threw up a hand to halt the man before he attempted to sell him the stool and table as well.

"Two comb sets will do." He reached for the pouch at his hip, glancing over to the weaver's shed at the same moment. The women were gone.

Lyting's heart jolted from his chest as he broke into a run and spanned the distance between the comb-maker's and weaver's stands.

"The Frankish noblewomen, where are they?" he demanded sharply, jarring to a halt, every muscle battle-tense.

The weaver clutched a roll of linen to his chest and fell back a pace at the storm on Lyting's face. With a quick, trembly gesture he pointed toward the end of the row of workshops where it opened to the streetside.

Lyting caught sight of Brienne's flowing veil and mantle and hastened to reach them. Stuffing his heart back into his chest, he came to a stop beside them, but before he could utter a word, his heart jammed against his ribs once more as he beheld the women's stricken faces.

He followed their gaze to where a group of sea raiders led their shackled prizes along the wood-paved lane. Females all, the captives scuffed slowly over the planks, dragging the chains that bound their ankles and bit into their flesh. Some sobbed softly while others moved their lips

in prayer.

“Oh, Lyting, Lyting.” Brienne gripped his arm, her voice aching with compassion.

Lyting knew that both Rurik and Ketil had taken pains to forewarn their wives that Hedeby was a major slave market. Still, to witness the wretched plight of these women was more than either could bear.

Brienne’s grip tightened, bringing his eyes to meet hers—great violet orbs, filled with her heart.

“Oh, Lyting. Cannot we help just *one*?”

A faint memory whispered, cautioning that the last time Brienne so pleaded for his aid, and in similar tone, it very near cost him his life. But even as he heeded that dim warning, his gaze fell upon an auburn-haired beauty, her face the gift of angels, her form exquisitely modeled and temptingly displayed in her clinging gown. She held herself proudly, defiant, a fierce courage upon her brow.

Unbidden, his feet carried him forward.



“These dogs will rue the day they laid hand to a daughter of Mór.” Rhiannon chafed Ailinn’s ear as they moved along the walk. “I shall gain my freedom, heed my words. And once ransomed, I shall exact my vengeance. ‘Twill then be Norsemen who empty their lifeblood upon stout Celtic blades.”

Ailinn’s patience neared its end. Rhiannon embroidered retribution with every step she took, envisioning and savoring a conquest that could never exist beyond the scope of her own imaginings. Did Rhiannon’s venom so blind her? Naught would ever be the same, even should she return to Eire’s green shores.

Bone weary and nerves rubbed raw, Ailinn resolved to set the matter to her stepcousin straight forth. Bluntness was all Rhiannon truly understood. ‘Twas unhealthy to nurture disillusion, if not starkly dangerous. They must acknowledge the reality of their plight if they ever hoped to survive it.

“These Danes should have taken more care,” Rhiannon continued. “Domnal will one day rule from the Rock of Cashel and command the armies of Munster. He shall avenge me, his bride, and prove himself the Northmen’s bane.”

Ailinn could tolerate no more. “Rhiannon, take the sunbeam from your eye. You have been sullied at the hands of the Northmen. Domnal will no longer want you.”

Rhiannon fell deathly silent. But a breath of a moment later, pain knifed across Ailinn’s ankle as she felt her fetters hard yanked from behind, her step short-chained.

Ailinn spilled forward, barely breaking the fall with tethered hands as the ground rushed up to meet her. Palms, elbows, and thighs stung as she landed facedown with a distinct “woof,” the air forced out of her. She shook her head, raising upright slightly, and found herself staring at two booted feet.

Ailinn began to push away, but a warm hand closed about her upper arm while a second encompassed her opposite hand in sure, solid strength. Tiny tremors chased through her, one trailing quickly upon another, as she felt herself drawn upward.

The boots passed from view, and her eyes encountered iron-forged legs encased in snug fitting breeches—long legs, appearing momentarily without end.

But as she rose farther, they disappeared beneath a fine cloth tunic—this, sword-belted over abdomen and hip. Her gaze traveled higher, skimming the trim line of body past the cinctured waist to a steely expanse of chest and shoulder.

Ailinn's breath grew shallow. Her hand burned within her captor's hold. Tilting up her chin, she swept her gaze over the tanned column of neck, square cut of jaw, then upward the final distance to behold crystal blue eyes and hair . . . hair as bright as day.

Ailinn wavered, her bone gone to liquid, and sought to regain her footing. The man's hand slipped at once from her arm to the small of her back to steady her. In so doing he pressed her closer and held her a scarce whisper apart.

She dared look on him again, tracing the clean lines of his face, so strikingly handsome. The man possessed a leonine quality, dangerously male and not to be underestimated. Yet it was his eyes, more beautiful than most, that held her captive. They penetrated the depths of her, as if to strip her bare to the core and lay open her heart.

A blur of movement caught the edge of her vision, alerting Ailinn to Hakon's approach. Beyond his shoulder she spied Skallagrim watching, close-faced.

Without word the man released her. He ran a long gaze over her, then grazed her eyes with an intense, unreadable look. Drawing forth his coin pouch, he turned to Hakon.

Ailinn's pulse raced. The man intended to purchase her! In an instant, the dreamlike haze that enveloped her dissipated and reality clattered hard down upon her once more. She darted her gaze about her, collecting the images to heart—knots of townspeople lining the lane, coarsely assessing them; her kinswomen herded like animals, manacled and abused; and their captors, the murderous pagans who had ravaged Munster and enslaved them.

Like a storm on the horizon her fury gathered, swift and terrible. She brought her eyes to the man who purposed to buy her and saw him for the first time for what he truly was—a heathenous Dane, fierce and untamed. His incredible snowfall of hair spilled to mid-chest with barbarous effect. Upon his cheek he bore a scar, token of a violent past.

Ailinn castigated herself for every heated tremor he stirred to life within her. He was no different from the rest. And here he stood, brazenly offering coin for her. To what purpose, if not to fill his bed with her and abuse her there?

As the man turned to face her, a tempest of emotion erupted within Ailinn. The horrors and outrages of the past week surged forth and overwhelmed her. She met his eyes with icy contempt. Then, in the full gale of her fury, she spat on him.



Lyting fell back a pace, stunned by the maid's vehemence. She sliced him with a look of unveiled loathing, as though he alone were responsible for the misfortune of her people.

Slowly he wiped the moisture from his cheek, locking his eyes with hers—large, brown eyes, dark about the rims but golden within their centers, warmed with honey. Rich auburn hair tumbled in disarray about a heart-shaped face, the features delicate, refined, the skin flawless as cream beneath the smudges.

Lord in His mercy, but she was a magnificent creature. All the more ravishing in the high grip of her anger. Lyting braced himself against the fire that swept through his veins. Her spirit was unbroken, and that suddenly pleased him.

"What price do you set on this woman?" Lyting angled a glance to the sea raider who stood right of him.

" 'Twould appear she does not wish *you* for her master." The man's mouth dragged upward, the words more barb than jest. Lyting sharpened his focus on the seaman, caring naught for his tone.

The man burned with brash confidence, legs spread apart and arms crossed chest level. He bore no great height but looked hard as stone. His hair shone dully of tarnished gold, and a

month's worth of growth covered his jaw.

"I would have her nonetheless," Lyting weighted his words evenly.

The man gauged him with darkening eyes for one brief but deliberate moment. He then broke away his gaze and took an unhurried step toward the maid. He cupped her chin, but she wrenched from his touch, recoiling. He merely chuckled and brushed his fingertips along her neck.

A burr climbed Lyting's back. The man reminded him all too well of another. Another whose name was no longer spoken in the barony. Their physical aspects were markedly different, yet the two were of a kind. Predators.

"This one is not for purchase," the man breathed, a hard glitter to his eyes. "But there are others to choose from."

"None other will do," Lyting clipped.

The sea raider narrowed his gaze, wolflike. "Then you need be content without her. She is not mine to sell, and her owner holds plans for her." Something obscure flickered in his eyes. "Be assured, she shall be well used."



Ailinn started when Hakon crouched to unlock her ankle chains. Rising again, he grasped her by the arm and hauled her from the line. As he led her away, she cast back a frantic, searching glance for her stepcousins. Instead, she met the dazzling intensity of the white Dane's gaze.

Skallagrim joined Hakon just then, and she found herself pulled farther along the network of streets. As they entered a side lane, she braved one last look back. Instantly she spied the towering Dane as he left the walk to join two women.

Ailinn's ire flared. The man possessed a female for each arm, yet his base cravings drove him to acquire another?

The image of the tall Dane and the women continued to nip at her, vex her. Their elegant dress suggested they be wives of status. Certainly not slaves. The Norse were polygamous devils, she had once been told. They enjoyed as many wives as they could maintain and kept even more female slaves beneath their roofs. Yet, 'twas appalling that the man should openly seek her purchase within his wives' view.

A sudden realization lurched through Ailinn. The women's garments were wholly unlike those of other townswomen she had seen. Rather, the gowns of these women were much like her old nursemaid's, Bergette's, only far richer. Upon their heads they wore the distinctive flowing veil of the Franks—the *couvre chef*.

Ailinn pondered this, mystified, when she was brought to a sudden halt. Looking up, she found herself before a small house, stave-built with vertical planking. The carcass of an entire ox occupied a platform, raised up on posts above the portal, sacrificial offering to the exactions of the Nordic gods.

Ailinn gaped up at the poor beast, aghast at the practice. Before her, the door drew open.

As Ailinn lowered her gaze, the breath sealed in her throat. A brutish-looking woman, thick and raw-boned, filled the entrance, scowling down at her.

The bell of Saint Anskar. Lyting slipped the pouch from his belt and weighed it in his hand as he gazed on the hallowed piece.

After returning Brienne and Aleth to their lodgings, he'd set out about town, restless, knotted up, with a sharp need to stretch himself.

Enwrapped in thought, the cheer sapped from his day, he ranged the full breadth and reach of Hedeby. With a sharp jolt he stayed himself as he quested yet another doorway, another yard, for a glimpse of auburn hair.

The beauty eclipsed his every conscious step—scorn-filled eyes, emblazoning her memory to heart.

Wresting himself from that vision, he set himself to a more purposeful task—locating Anskar's church. His inquiries led him here, eastward, to the harbor end of town.

Beneath the shadow of the earthenworks stood the modest structure that once served the saintly archbishop. A sorry thing that it should serve the populace of Hedeby nowadays as a fish *hus*. He only hoped the owner would be agreeable to parting with its bell and wondered ruefully if 'twas currently employed to signal the arrival of the day's fresh catch.

Lyting hefted the pouch once more in his palm and started forward. An outburst of laughter from the direction of the docks brought him around. Six of the drakken-warriors made their way toward him along the walk.

In their midst strode a bull of a man whom Lyting recognized from earlier that day when he sought to purchase the maid. Broad of feature and build, he bore himself with a decided, self-assured gait. His teeth gapped beneath a passing smile, and braids plaited the iron-gray hair at temple and jaw.

"Ho!" a voice called out from the troop.

Lyting cut a glance over them. Again the voice bellowed in greeting. This time a man stepped apart and waved an arm wide, his features lost beneath a dense growth of beard, its dusky brown shade at odds with his coppery ravel of hair.

Lyting looked about himself to see if someone stood near who might be the object of the man's enthusiasm. But in the next instance the man abandoned his comrades and hastened directly toward him, a wide grin brightening his face.

"Lyting!" The raider grasped his arm in friendship and clapped a hand robustly to his shoulder. "I thought you to be in Francia wielding sword and might for your uncle, the duke."

Lyting swept a gaze over the disturbingly familiar features, then likewise broke into a broad grin.

"Stefnir? I did not recognize you beneath that thatch."

"Been *i viking* the month long." Stefnir rasped the beard with his knuckles. "You will recall how lean the spoils are in the service of our king and how spare the women." He winked a smile. "I set off to fill my coffers and enjoy some wenching this spring."

Remembering his comrades, Stefnir turned and motioned them on.

The grayed warrior buckled his gaze on Lyting as he advanced and the distance narrowed between them. Lyting met the silent measure of those eyes. Muscles lightly reined, he held his

stance, absorbing the tremor of boards beneath his feet as they shivered with the men's heavy, booted passage. Without utterance the raiders continued on.

"Your leader?" Lyting nodded after the older man, careful to conceal his interest.

"Skallagrim? He commands the *drakkar Wind Raven*. I joined under his sail. These few . . ."

Stefnir gestured to the dragonships anchored within the palisade. "These are but a small portion of a great fleet that voyaged under Harald Split-Brow. We fell upon the Saxons and Irish while they still licked their wounds from the late autumn raid."

Stefnir clamped open hands to the sides of his belted waist in obvious satisfaction. "The main body of *drakken* returns north with Harald. Skallagrim and some of the others had more pressing needs and diverted to Hedeby. But what of you? How fares your father and his new domain?"

A tiny muscle twinged the corner of Lyting's eye. "He died shortly after my arrival three years past."

A shaft of surprise widened Stefnir's eyes, then passed. "Gruel Atli was a fierce and courageous warrior. Though his absence will be sore felt, 'tis comfort and glory that his sword now sings in the halls of Valhalla."

Lyting reserved comment as to where, in truth, his father's spirit might dwell, and whether 'twas Valkyries or Angels who saw him there. He deemed it best to not decry the old gods too hastily with an espousal of the cross and risk affronting Stefnir. If his old friend indeed served beneath Skallagrim's command, there was information to be gleaned of the raid on the Celtic Isle and of the beautiful captive who so haunted him.

"My elder brother, Rurik, now holds fief and title and rules as Baron de Valsemé," he revealed simply.

A smile crept over Stefnir's lips and trailed up to his eyes. "I imagine that set ill with Hastein."

"*Já*. That it did." Lyting shut his mind to his half-brother and all the black, fetid memories. "But his obsessions no longer afflict us."

Dispelling the shadows with a sound mental shake, Lyting delivered a friendly clout to Stefnir's arm.

"What say you we find ourselves some skins of wine and joints of meat? I would hear of your adventures across the sea

"And I, the maids of Francia." Stefnir's face split wide with a grin

A brief time later Lyting and Stefnir sat before a vendor's stall over beakers of ale and steaming bowls of venison stew.

"Last year's raid brought the Irish to their knees," Stefnir said around a jawful of meat. "This year Harald wished to break their spine."

Lyting held intent on each word, restraining the questions he would ask while Stefnir quaffed down the contents of his cup and sleeved the wetness from his mouth.

"At first sight of the dragon-prow, these Irish hide their treasures away. Harald came away with few spoils last autumn, though he scented a hoard beneath his feet. They are a clever lot, the Irish, but Harald is shrewder. He took as captives some of their soldiers—Munstermen—and kept them alive long enough to learn the location of their *souterrains*—ancient underground caves."

Lyting girt his patience as Stefnir attended to the last of his stew and called for more ale. But a moment later Stefnir rewarded his forbearance.

"We swept down upon them like a sky full of hawks—swift, without warning, before the first rift of dawn. Harald marked the monastery and surrounding grounds for himself. The chiefs

closest to him blanketed the area as well, claiming all the choice sites. This maddened Skallagrim, that they should seize the church coffers solely for themselves, for those are the far richest to plunder in any Christian land.

“But Skallagrim is an artful fox. He was among those who loosened the Munstermen’s tongues and recalled that one spoke of ‘overkings’ who dwelt upon the Suir. We sailed inland for a time, leading a fair division of the fleet which was likewise displeased by Harald’s wiles. Soon enough we came upon a compound, boasting many buildings, ablaze with torchlight and decorated for feasting. Before the first chink of light punctured the night, we fell on them, undeclared.”

Stefnir stayed his tale while the vendor’s round wife refilled his beaker. She then topped off Lyting’s, which, like his bowl, stood scarcely touched. A frown puckered her brow as she withdrew and padded back to the stall, Stefnir’s eyes following the sway of her hips.

“And how fared the raid?” Impatience scrubbed through Lyting, keen to have a full recounting, yet knowing when he did, he would ill like the taste of it.

“‘Twas not the sort of victory I sought.” Stefnir stirred from his distraction. “Not one a warrior boasts of, or a skald deigns worthy to set to verse. ‘Tis no honor to slay men befogged in their cups.” He took a swill of ale, then cocked a brow at Lyting and smiled afresh.

“‘Twould seem the Irish enjoy their drink as much as we. ‘Twas a wedding feast we interrupted, though, in truth, the event had yet to take place. We discovered the bride and her handmaids yet in her bower. Odin did smile on me that I should be among the first to sample that fair, virginal gathering.”

Lyting came forward on the stool, gripping his cup so hard he risked to break it. But Stefnir continued without notice, tossing a hand to the air.

“Whatever be their customs, their men began their celebrations aforehand, making light of our work. I’ll give you this.” He held Lyting’s gaze. “The ‘overking’—whoever he was—purposed to impress his guests with his importance and power, and displayed a great portion of his wealth in the hall. That, too, eased our task.”

“But what of the bride?” Lyting brought his cup down solidly on the table, sloshing its contents. “What of the maidens trapped in the bridal chamber?”

Stefnir stilled his beaker midair, casting Lyting a curious, heedful look.

“Did one possess dark red hair, the color of an autumn wood afire in its crown? A maiden of rare beauty,” Lyting pressed.

“*Já*,” Stefnir acknowledged slowly, pensively, then pulled on a long draught of ale.

“I sought to purchase such a maid this day, from one of the raiders who drove their fettered captives through streets. He appeared to know your chieftain, Skallagrim.”

Stefnir spewed his mouthful of ale, missing Lyting and the table, but sprayed a cat that dozed nearby. He then sat choking a full minute, pounding his chest while the feline shook itself indignantly and swished away, tail flicking high in the air.

“*You?*” Stefnir uttered in astonishment. Slapping his thigh, he threw back his head and bellowed with laughter. “‘Twas *you* who sought to purchase Skallagrim’s prize slave, while the rest of us were near deprived of our vitals for merely looking upon her overlong?”

He wiped the tears from his eyes. “I heard the tale that someone, not of the fleet, sought to possess her. You are fortunate to still carry something of use between your legs. Curse that I should be restricted aboard the *Wind Raven* with watch at the time and missed the sport. Tell me in truth. Did you lock horns with Hakon over the doe?”

“Hakon.” Lyting tested the name and found it to resonate unpleasantly with that of his dead

half-brother. Ill portent or coincidence? he wondered, then tucked the thought to memory. “What is his tie to Skallagrim? And what of the maid?”

Stefnir rose, a smile stretching his beard. “My friend, you have set your desires upon the bride, herself. And should you be intent on that quest, you will need to defy both a dragon and a demon. But, come. Let us walk a time, and I will tell you what I know.”

After pitching a small coin to the vendor’s wife, they proceeded along the rivulet, westward through town.

“Skallagrim and Hakon quarreled bitterly over the girl. Hakon gained the chamber before the rest and, if believed, seized her first. When I entered, Skallagrim had her in his grasp. From their argument I gather she slipped from Hakon’s hold only to be snared by Skallagrim. In the end Hakon yielded. Skallagrim not only commands the crew of the *Wind Raven*, he is Hakon’s uncle.”

Lyting lifted a brow at this. “Hakon said Skallagrim intends to use the maid to some end.”

“Ah, the pity of it, too.” Stefnir sighed. “We capture a nymph of such marvelous beauty that she stirs a man’s most lust-filled dreams but to gaze on her. Yet, we are forbidden to sample that sweet nectar. Would you believe, Skallagrim preserves her virtue to gift her to another, not even a Norseman?”

Lyting halted in his footsteps. “Skallagrim does not pleasure himself upon her?” he said in amazement. “She remains unravished? A virgin?”

“Skallagrim assumes so. He could not verify that detail with his crew so eager to aid him. Her attendants proved virgins, and the preparations within the compound were so elaborate ‘twas probably to be her first joining.”

Lyting rubbed a hand across his jaw, envisioning the Irish maid—the delicate contours of her face; the slim, straight nose; the full, enticing mouth. He blinked away the image and picked up his pace once more.

“ ‘Tis singularly odd that Skallagrim did not have her himself. Is the man a eunuch?”

Stefnir laughed. “*Nei*. But mayhap no better fortune. Rumors abound that he was unmanned a few years back. Some say a fever near took him and left him impotent. Others claim he put aside a lover who thereupon revealed herself to be a witch and put him under a curse. When his member stirs, ‘tis said it becomes a great gnarled root, twisting this way and that so he cannot engage in the act or ‘tis too painful.”

Stefnir shrugged. “Wherever lies the truth, there is one thing for certain. Skallagrim does not take his women openly on raids as do the others. At times he keeps a woman in his tent. Let us hope he enjoys some success. ‘Tis a wretched thing to befall a man.”

Lyting nodded absently, his thoughts running far ahead. “What need has Skallagrim of a virgin if he cannot make use of her himself?”

“Silk. He means to use her to gain concessions in Byzantium’s silk trade.”

For a second time Lyting stopped abruptly midstep and rounded on his old comrade.

“Upon Odin’s beard, ‘tis truth,” Stefnir swore. “I sat about the fires with Skallagrim one night while he was in one of his more agreeable moods and drink had eased his tongue. He claimed she is more valuable to him than gold. But only if he can deliver her to the East undefiled.”

Stefnir gestured that they divert along a side lane. Lyting easily matched pace, though his mind was set to spinning.

“Like myself,” Stefnir continued, “Skallagrim voyaged on this raid for quick plunder—to enrich himself as he might before setting sail for Miklagård, the ‘Great City’ of Byzantium—

Constantinople. As he tells it, he hunts Arctic furs in the winter months and trades in Byzantium during the summer. His sister, Thora, maintains a *hus* here in Hedeby. 'Tis his anchorage, so to speak." Stefnir directed Lyting right on a northward walk.

"It might surprise you, but Skallagrim is a man of farsightedness. For years he has courted Byzantium's officials and labored to see the silk trade opened to Western markets. The Byzantines impose many restrictions and tariffs and allow precious little of the stuff to pass out of their walled city. Evidently, Skallagrim neared an arrangement last summer. He woos a high court official, a thoroughly—and advantageously—corrupt man who holds sway with the minister of trade."

Stefnir glanced to Lyting and lifted a meaningful brow. "This official possesses a reputation for generosity to those he befriends. And those who gift him well. Among other diversions, the man collects beautiful concubines from all over the Empire and beyond. But he accepts only virgins, not wanting to acquire them disease-ridden and possibly pregnant. 'Tis my belief he harbors some personal fetish to be the first to broach those fair portals himself." Stefnir snorted.

Lyting envisaged the beauty trapped within the Byzantine's exotic web as he employed his methods to break and subdue her. Bile rose in Lyting's throat.

"Anyway—" Stefnir continued—"when Skallagrim ensnared the Irish beauty, arrayed in her bridal raiment, he saw her usefulness and felt he had gained better spoils than even Harald Split-Brow in the end. He intends to sail with her at week's end for Byzantium."

Lyting's thoughts churned with his rising emotions as Stefnir came to a halt. Looking up, Lyting realized they stood before the slave *hus*.

"Mere talk of this woman doth whet my appetite," Stefnir declared. "What say you we entertain ourselves with a few Irish wenches?"

Lyting suddenly felt as though he observed his old friend from a great distance. He recognized that, had Skallagrim openly shared his captive, she would find no rest to her days for the ceaseless demands of men like Stefnir.

"*Nei.*" He concealed his disgust. "There are matters I need attend to for now."

"Mayhap we can enjoy a bladder of wine before I leave to rejoin the king's fleet," Stefnir called cheerfully as he started for the portal. "You have yet to tell me of the maids of Francia."

Pausing, he put one hand to the door's framework and glanced back. "One caution, friend. Should you harbor thoughts to gain the maid, watch Hakon. I believe he means to have her, regardless of his uncle's plans."

Lyting nodded gravely, then took his leave. As earlier, he walked for a time, his thoughts chasing round and round as he wrestled with what he deemed a most unreasonable urge to protect the maid. He reminded himself that she belonged to Skallagrim. Reminded himself that he purposed to set his path for Corbie upon his return to Normandy.

He remained unappeased, a storm of unrest gathering in his soul.

Was it God's design or Devil's temptation that his path should cross with this woman's? Soul and flesh, ever the struggle. Deep within, he sensed 'twould be an age before he regained his heart's peace.

Climbing to the top of the earthenworks, he surprised the watchman. After an exchange of greetings, he remained and faced seaward, tracing the ribbon of the Schlei to where it disappeared into the distance.

Thoughtfully he scanned the masts of the *drakken* moored in the harbor.

Turning slowly around, Lyting drifted his gaze over the crowded rooftops of Hedeby. Somewhere beneath their thatched crowns dwelled the maid of his enchantment.



Ailinn thrashed within the grip of the two Norsewomen as they strove to force her onto her back upon one of the room's two raised side-floors.

'Twas only a matter of moments before they would fell her to their purposes, Ailinn knew. There was no escape. Only brief victory, vanished in a blink-of-eye. The sow she'd first encountered before the portal now grabbed at her ankles, intent on snatching her from her feet. But they would not have her so easily. They would taste her mettle and know the fires that forge the Irish.

Ailinn twisted and kicked free of the sow, her feet slapping down atop the platform. The other two women stepped up, onto the planking, dragging her with them.

A dark blade of fear rode Ailinn as she strained against them. Did they aim to harm her? Prepare her for some grim Nordic ritual? Sacrifice her to the gods? Her thoughts strayed to the poor ox outside the door.

Summoning her strength, Ailinn threw her weight to one side, propelling herself and her unwanted companions off balance. As one, they crashed into the loom that stood braced at the end of the flooring. The piece tottered, one of its uprights dropping off the edge of the settle, then keeled sideways and clattered to the floor.

Ailinn grimaced as the Norsewomen wrenched her arms, one seizing a fistful of her hair and jerking her head backward.

The sow stumped forward, drawing back her hand, wide and open-palmed. Ailinn braced herself for the blow. Just as the hand began to fall, Skallagrim roared from his chair.

Thora. The sow had a name. Ailinn gasped for breath. Like Hakon, the woman yielded to the chieftain's will.

Slowly Skallagrim rose to his feet, pegging Ailinn with his eyes. He started forward with purposeful steps.

The women eased their hold a fraction, then slammed Ailinn flat against the wall where the loom had been and held her there. Ailinn stifled her cry as pain fractured the back of her head and splintered down her spine.

Skallagrim's shadow fell across her. For a moment he stood, breathing down upon her. For all her worth, Ailinn could not still the tremors in her legs.

A wave of terror crested through her as Skallagrim unsheathed the knife at his waist. Firelight glinted along its honed edge as he brought the steel within view. Turning the blade, he pressed its cold shaft against her throat,

Ailinn swallowed beneath the thirsting metal as his meaty fist moved to the top of her gown. With a swift, stout yank he ripped the fabric from her breasts. Ailinn squeezed her eyes shut, the tear of cloth filling her ears as he stripped away its full length.

Cool air rushed over her bared flesh. She sought to distance herself, mind and soul, from her vile plight, but Skallagrim jolted her back. Dropping the shorn gown in a heap at her feet, he seized upon the remnants yet trapped at her back. They joined the rest in a puddle as he pulled her from the wall and lowered the blade to rest between her breasts.

Fear stalked through Ailinn. She forced her eyes to meet his, craving to slice him through with her contempt, yet knowing she did no more than amuse him for she could not win past her panic.

Skallagrim regarded her stolidly, his eyes unstirred in their depths. Closing his hand over hers, he isolated one finger and applied precise and calculated pressure to the joint.

Pain shot through Ailinn's hand and traveled along her arm. Her knees doubled beneath her,

and she dropped to the flooring.

Instantly the women pushed her onto her back and held her by neck, arms, and shoulders. The sow, Thora, forced her legs apart and held them as Skallagrim knelt before her. Ailinn stiffened as hands touched her. She steeled herself for the coming pain, then sickened before the promise of a torturous death. She was a weak-kneed creature after all, she decided, closing her eyes. May Saint Pádraig and the Heavenly Host conduct her swiftly to her reward.

No pain followed. Only the grunt of the sow. Ailinn peered through her lashes. The woman nodded her affirmation at something while Skallagrim likewise indicated his approval. At that they released her legs, and she found herself hauled upright and set to her feet.

Ailinn stood before Skallagrim, her cheeks burning hot. She sought to cover herself with her hands, neither shred of cloth nor scrap of modesty left to her. He roamed an eye over her, smiling within his beard. Once more he growled his approval, then moved apart. Taking a small caldron from over the fires, he added its contents to an oaken tub that stood toward the opposite end of the room.

Incredulous, Ailinn allowed herself to be led forward without further struggle and watched as Thora sprinkled petals and herbs over the inviting waters. They meant to bathe her!

Rapidly she pieced together bits and fragments of the past days. Skallagrim did not appear intent on ravishing her himself and withheld her from his men. Nor would he allow the woman, Thora, to strike her. But why? She was but a slave now. Was there some reason he did not wish her marred?

And what of their crude examination of her? Her cheeks flamed anew. Did they inspect the proof of her maidenhood? Praise God that she was yet chaste. What would have befallen her had the evidence no longer been intact? What would befall her now that it was?

One of the blond giants prodded her from behind and gestured that she step into the tub. Ailinn complied, knowing herself to be in dire need of a thorough scrubbing.

The next moment she reconsidered, wincing at the heat of the water. Immediately the women surrounded her. Scooping up handfuls of soft soap from bowls, they lathered her from head to toe, none too gently, then doused her with bucketfuls of clean water and repeated the process.

Ailinn spluttered beneath the second downpour. Parting the sopping hair from her face, she discovered Hakon leaning against the open door. Before she could cross her hands over her breasts, an expanse of cloth snapped open in front of her, blocking the view. Ailinn looked up to find Skallagrim outstretching a great square of linen. He did not trust Hakon, either, she decided as she rose on shaky legs and stepped into the folds.

Skallagrim left her to the women's ministrations as he proceeded to the portal and set Hakon to some task outside the building. While Skallagrim yet turned from them, the two Norse "guardswomen" dried Ailinn roughly, whispering and tittering among themselves as they yanked her hair and pinched her flesh.

Skallagrim caught the last of this and drove them from the house at full bellow. He then harangued Thora at length, pointing to Ailinn, then to the door, and at times, the rafters and floor. Ailinn understood none of it yet dared not move. She stood clutching the linen about her till Skallagrim ceased his rantings and, at last, motioned that she wait upon the settle.

Thora notched her chin, her ire fermenting as she crossed to the back of the room. Withdrawing a shapeless tunic from a chest that stood there, she returned and thrust it in Ailinn's face.

Fish eyes, Ailinn thought as she slipped the garment over her head beneath Thora's cold and glassy stare. But when the cloth's harsh texture sent a rash up her throat and provoked her to

scratching, Skallagrim ordered her remove it and set to searching through his own sea chest.

Ailinn's heart strained as he brought forth objects that once graced Mór's hall. Finding a garment, he withdrew it and bore it to her, a soft-green gown—her steppaunt's, Murieann's. A fresh shaft of pain pierced Ailinn's heart and continued on to her soul.

Tears welled as she drew on the gown. Murieann was slight in build like her youngest daughter, Lia, though Deira stood taller. *Was*. Ailinn shivered as she tugged down the fabric and fretted anew for her stepcousins. The hems fell far short of ankle and wrist.

Skallagrim returned to the sea chest and brought forth an elegant cordage, a braided piece of varied colors and fine needlework, meant to cincture a dress. This, too, she recognized as Murieann's. As he started toward her, Thora caught at his sleeve, desiring the girdle for herself. But Skallagrim shrugged her off with a growl and bore the piece to Ailinn. When he turned around, Thora stood over his sea chest, unfolding the bridal mantle.

Ailinn clutched the girdle to her breast as Skallagrim howled at Thora and tromped back across the room. But Thora found her voice and matched him for volume. Like a badger with its catch, she clung to the elegant cloak and would not let it go.

On they bickered while, soundlessly, Hakon entered the house and took up a place on the settle opposite Ailinn. Half-reclining, he listened amusedly to the squabble while he drifted his gaze over Ailinn. She trembled beneath his hungry perusal as he grazed the curves beneath her gown and lingered over her bare legs.

Ailinn diverted her attention back to the warring couple and to the bridal mantle. Rhiannon's mantle.

What if Rhiannon had been right? The thought nettled. What if the Norsemen believed her to be a valuable hostage of royal lineage? And what would become of her when they discovered that she was only a poor relation of a vanquished tribe—Ailinn of the Érainn?

Still, 'twas like fitting together shards of broken pottery. 'Twas hard to match the edges. Pieces were lacking and she could scarce make sense of those she held. If the heathens thought to gain ransom, why then their concern that she be a virgin? An unravished bride would be worth more than one spoiled, true. Yet, her instincts told her more lay behind Skallagrim's interest in her virtue.

Ailinn massaged her forehead. She understood little of men's dealings, their barterings for power and wealth . . . and hostages. Rhiannon understood. 'Twas why she first cast her net for Domnal of the Raithlind Eóganachts, certain that he would be next to rule from the Rock of Cashel. 'Twas why they exchanged places that fateful morn . . .

Her thoughts spiraled back to that grim morning, only 'twas not grim at its outset, but rather a day of high cheer and merriment—Rhiannon's wedding day.

Ailinn, Deira, and Lia, and all the other maids who attended the bride awoke before dawn, restless in their sleep, having captured fair little of it.

They rose, giddy for the day to come when Mór would make the traditional "bridal ride" with Rhiannon, and Domnal would appear with the Raithlind and abduct her. Afterward, all would return to the compound to fulfill the ceremonies and feast away the remainder of the day and night.

Lia had laughed so gaily, Ailinn recalled, and proposed they slip out of the compound to roll in the morning dew for good luck. Good luck, Ailinn thought bitterly. Before they could even dress fully, they heard the clash in the courtyard.

"Bran!" Rhiannon screamed. "The Dalcassian! He has come to seize me. He vowed as much."

Rhiannon wrung her hands, eyes darting from wall to wall as though she looked for a weapon to seize upon. Then a thought sparked to life in her eyes.

"Help me, Cousin," Rhiannon pleaded, gripping Ailinn. "Bran must not find me. His manhood was sore offended when I chose Domnal over him and rejected his offer of marriage. But he does not seek me this day to soothe his bruised pride alone. 'Tis insult he issues—and challenge—to Raithlind and Caisil and all Eóganachts alike."

Ailinn tried to pull from Rhiannon's hold, heedful of her blurring of falsehoods and truths, and wary of her reference to herself as *cousin*—a relationship Rhiannon loathed to acknowledge unless she have desperate need of Ailinn for some self-serving end.

"Bran knows that, in time to come, Domnal will claim the throne of Cashel," Rhiannon continued, undeterred. "Long have the kings of Munster sprung from our line, and Domnal is favored to succeed. The Dalcassian views him as Domnal's foremost rival, for he covets the crown himself."

The din mounted in the hall.

Ailinn winced as Rhiannon's nails stabbed into her.

"Bran must not succeed. 'Tis *me* he wants, to strike at Domnal. *Please*, Ailinn," Rhiannon's voice rose with urgency. "Take my gown, my mantle. He does not know my face. Let him think you are me, and go with him. When he discovers his error, 'twill be too late. I shall get word to Domnal at once, I promise. He camps nearby awaiting the bridal ride."

Steel rang on steel without.

Alarm filled Rhiannon's eyes. "Quickly, Ailinn. 'Twill be strife for all Munster and a warring of tribes should Bran succeed and spoil Domnal's bride."

Ailinn snatched free of Rhiannon's grip, her temper flaring. "Yet you would see him spoil me? 'Twas your own sharp tongue that brings Bran down on us now, not challenge to Domnal, and well you know it. Far more than male pride and injured manhood drives Bran. Rather, 'tis the grave insults you hurled at his people when he offered for your hand. Still, you would preserve yourself at my ruin that you might sit in queenly splendor at Cashel."

"What?" Rhiannon shrieked. "Would you have seen me accept Bran to my marriage bed? Taint the blood of the Caisil with that of a baseborn Dalcassian forevermore?"

"Baseborn, Rhiannon? Bran is a Dalcassian prince."

"There is but one kind of Dalcassian," Rhiannon sneered. "Swine, not fit to tend me in my chambers."

Ailinn took a swift step forward, causing Rhiannon to fall back a pace.

"And 'twas the very fullness of those sentiments that so inflamed Bran and now brings him beating down upon our door. Do not deny it. I was present when you vented your spleen to the Dalcassian envoy and rejected their prince's proposal. Did you think Bran would countenance such insult and swallow it meekly? Now we all suffer the blight of your words. I bear no wish to hazard defilement because of them."

"But you need to help me." Rhiannon clutched at Ailinn.

"I shall take your place, Rhiannon," Deira offered quietly and came forth to stand before them.

Rhiannon whirled around, eyes flashing. Though three years younger, Deira nearly matched her for height. "Mayhap so!" Her voice filled with renewed hope.

"*Ní hea*, Deira," Ailinn protested, her stomach clenching at the thought.

"'Tis all right, Ailinn," Deira comforted. "Domnal will come for me. But Rhiannon is right. The Dalcassian must not seize her, or so much more bloodshed will follow. 'Tis best for all that I

go with Bran. He'll not harm me once he realizes his mistake."

Ailinn held no such confidence. As ever, Deira placed others before herself. But this time, overtrustful and uncomprehending of the full of the situation, she put herself at risk. That, Ailinn could not abide, though Rhiannon appeared eager for her to do so.

Ailinn looked on while Rhiannon set out her jewels and spread her wedding gown. White. It struck Ailinn as singularly odd that, where most brides chose bright-colored gowns, Rhiannon should insist upon white as though to attest to her purity. Ailinn held her own opinions on that matter. Mayhap, what Rhiannon truly feared was what Bran would discover of her. Or how he might use that knowledge.

Bran. What had she heard of him? A brave and fierce warrior? Prudent and fair? She had seen him once, a solid-built man with fiery curls covering head and chin, favorable enough to look upon. Should she go with him, feigning to be the bride, 'twas likely he'd be angry when he discovered the ruse. But should he decide to keep her . . .

Ailinn watched Rhiannon unfold the shimmering bridal mantle, a heavy brocade of white woven with emerald green and shot through with threads of gold.

Mayhap, 'twould not be so terrible a thing, she pondered. In the next moon's turning she would be eighteen. At times Ailinn wondered if her uncle ever intended to find her a husband. But though she loved her stepfamily, and Deira and Lia as sisters, she held no true place among the Eóganachts.

'Twould be with considerable chance, to go with Bran, she deemed. Perchance, he would take her to wife to right his offense—if there be one. Or perchance, he would keep her as his concubine or mistress. 'Twas allowable under Brehon law, though not a station she desired. Yet, if he spoiled her, she reasoned, 'twas probable he would keep her at his side in some wise to amend his wrong. She might still find more acceptance among the Dalcassians under Bran's banner than ever she had among the Eóganachts.

As Ailinn looked to see Deira take the gown from Rhiannon, she realized that naught truly mattered save her stepcousin. She could not allow Deira to risk herself.

"I will take your place, Rhiannon." Ailinn swept the snowy dress from Deira's hands with gritty determination.

Shouts heightened on the other side of the door. Blades clashed and scraped.

Hurriedly Ailinn slipped into the gown. A flurry of hands attended her, the maids white-faced for all they heard. The rich mantle weighed heavily upon her shoulders as the attendants secured it in place with gleaming silver brooches.

Rhiannon directed that Ailinn's auburn tresses be drawn back and hidden beneath the cloud of veil, lest Bran know her own to be raven. Lia quickly fashioned a crown of wild hyacinth from sprigs waiting in the crocks and set it upon Ailinn's head.

"*Non. Non. Ma chere*, Ailinn," Bergette implored, breaking her silence. "'Tis evil, I feel in my bones. You must not go with him."

Ailinn looked on her Frankish nursemaid, surprised she had forgotten her till now. Before she could reply, a man screamed out in pain, and she heard his bulk clump against the other side of the door.

Fear rippled through her. This was more than simple abduction. Bran would not strike Mór's compound and slay the wedding guests to wreak vengeance for Rhiannon's insults.

A great blow fell upon the door, so hard the boards shuddered. Several more blows followed, accompanied by the cracking and splintering of wood. Bergette rushed forth to place herself between Ailinn and the portal, her arms outstretched in a protective gesture.

Ailinn braced herself, her nails biting into her palms. She prepared to confront the flame-haired Dalcassian, but when the door burst open, 'twas not Bran who entered in. . . .

Ailinn withdrew from her reverie, her gaze traveling to Hakon. He watched her, fires banked in his eyes.

Fresh pricklings of fear coursed through her. She averted her eyes to find Skallagrim folding the bridal mantle back into the sea chest. Just as Ailinn became aware of the room's uncommon silence, Thora's bulk moved before her and blocked her view.

Face dark with anger, Thora yanked the fine cordage of Murieann's girdle from Ailinn's grasp. She lumbered back across the room with the prize, then on a sudden, inspired thought, retrieved a leather strap from the side floor and flung it at Ailinn's feet.

Ailinn recovered the strip, realizing Thora intended she should belt her gown with the piece, then recognized the strap to be the tether that had bound her wrists.

Mayhap, 'twas a more fitting girdle, she reasoned with a twinge of despair. She was a slave now. A slave with an uncertain future. But, then, what future was ever certain?

The hours dragged slowly as the day aged to evening. Skallagrim saw that Thora set Ailinn no task too strenuous or that might cause her injury. Thora took unkindly to his interference but, in the end, busied Ailinn with simple chores—setting the loom to rights, twisting thread, tending the hearth fires, and replenishing the men's cups.

Ailinn felt Hakon's burning gaze trace her every movement. She grew uncomfortable beneath his interests and breathed relief when at last he departed.

Meanwhile, Skallagrim sat in his carved chair without remark as he shaped a portion of bone into a gaming piece. 'Twas not until he rose that Ailinn spied the battle-ax resting against the chair's side.

Skallagrim moved to the end of the room, where a frame bed sat upon the elevated flooring. When he beckoned she join him, Ailinn's heart rose to her throat.

Warily she crossed the hall. But as she reached the platform, Skallagrim tossed several fur robes to the floor, then bid her step up onto the planking. Slipping an iron ring about her ankle, he chained her to the foot of his bed.

Long afterward, Ailinn lay awake in the dark while Thora snored softly upon her pallet and Skallagrim rattled out long, deep breaths. Embers glowed red within the hearth, partially illuminating the room.

Ailinn fixed her gaze upon the gable end of the hall, to the triangular opening just beneath the slope of the roof. There she could view a sprinkling of stars.

In all Creation, did God know she was here? Did He heed her prayers or abandon her among the pagans?

Her thoughts went to Thora. The Norsewoman would subject her to every hardship, if allowed, deeming her no more than a common slave to be exploited and abused at will.

Hakon, too, would clearly use—and abuse—her, but in more vile ways. He was a black-hearted heathen, and only Skallagrim stood between him and his desires.

Yet, 'twas the chieftain's own designs that preyed most heavily upon her mind. What bitter fate did he cast for her? What faceless destiny waited on the morrow?

Inexplicably her thoughts turned to the white-haired Dane, as ever they had this day. She did not regret her insult to him, she told herself, for he was a godless Norseman like the rest. Yet, she could not help but wonder whether her life would have been better had he succeeded in purchasing her and she lay this night beneath his roof.

An accompanying thought startled Ailinn, and she turned into the furs and closed her eyes

against the vivid image it formed. Warm currents rushed through her. Still, the vision lingered, bringing heat to her cheeks.

If the man sought to acquire her, then surely he intended that she lay beneath more than his roof.



Lyting drew deeper into the shadows as voices erupted nearby, two noisy revelers fracturing the late-night silence with their song.

Swathed in a great, gray cloak, Lyting tugged the hood downward. Even on a moonless night his bright mane marked him. Tonight the moon hung like a fat crescent in the sky, and he held no wish to be discovered.

He remained in the darkness of the narrow side lane as the merry-makers passed into view—two Danish seamen with a maid between them. Angry shouts discharged from a neighboring *hus*, and someone hurled a bucket from the door of another.

Lyting stepped to the edge of the passage as the trio continued on, then returned his interest across the wooded lane to the *hus* of Thora Kolsdóttir.

It had been a fairly simple matter to locate the *hus*. He had arrived in time to observe Hakon enter the dwelling and to overhear the voices raised within. Presumably, 'twas Skallagrim and Thora who matched volume for volume, though he could discern little of their argument.

He had waited, palm resting on sword hilt, unsure why he had come or what action he might take if a need arose. Soon the *hus* quieted. Still, he waited.

Once, the door opened and a dour-looking woman stepped forth to pitch a bucketful of water into the yard. 'Twas then that he glimpsed the maid's slender figure as she moved near the portal—garbed in green now, her rich auburn hair spilling past her hips. Heat flashed through him, jolting him by its intensity and taking him by surprise.

Lyting girt himself, even now, against the directness of that response, so immediate, instinctive, elemental—all spurred by the mere sight of the Irish beauty.

Mayhap he should have sought to free another, a small voice pricked from a remote corner of his mind. This one lay beyond his grasp. Yet, had he emptied his coffers and found sufficient coin to deliver every captive borne from Ireland, he knew deep in his soul that he still would be here tonight.

In time Hakon emerged from the *hus* and departed in the direction of the docks. Lyting eased his vigil, resolving to stay a time longer, until he must leave to take up his watch of the *Sea Falcon*. There, at the harbor, he would have a clear view of the *Wind Raven* as well.

Sleep he could not seek before dawn's breaking. But he held certain that when he finally gained his rest, his dreams—like the thoughts that had weighed on him these many long hours—would be inescapably entangled with masses of auburn hair.

Ailinn trailed Thora along the street, clutching a bundle of soiled linens to her hip. Ankle cuffs and chains hampered her steps.

Thora scowled back at Ailinn's lagging pace with mounting impatience. Grasping a handful of hair at the side of Ailinn's head, she forced her on at a quickened pace.

Ailinn boiled as Thora released her a short distance later, her scalp yet screaming its protest. She blinked away the moisture that had sprung to her eyes. The Norsewoman wielded her authority with obvious enjoyment. But Ailinn refused to add one crumb to her pleasure. Whatever Thora wrought upon her, she vowed she would not cry out, nor plead, nor allow one tear to fall. Masking all emotion from her face, she fixed her gaze past Thora's broad back and struggled on beneath her burdens.

Increasingly Ailinn grew aware of the marked interest her passage stirred. Men turned from their tasks to appraise her from beneath arched brows and partially lowered lids, their gazes bold, assessing, edged with a certain hunger. By contrast, the women glared, sharp-eyed and tight-lipped.

Ill caring for the attention she drew, Ailinn shifted her gaze to the weathered boards beneath her feet and proceeded along the course in Thora's shadow.

In short time they reached the harbor. Thora led Ailinn along the wharf to its farthest end. Here, the planking ceased and the shore stretched a fair distance to the palisaded seawall.

Numerous tents occupied a large, open tract of land that lay between the edge of water and the border of town. Ships, likewise, populated the expanse, having been grounded ashore. The largest vessels remained moored at pilings mid-harbor or tied at the piers. Ailinn sighted Skallagrim's dragonship, its monster head grinning. Her stomach twisted into a hard, icy knot.

Gruffly Thora directed that she kneel with her bundle upon a little projection that jutted off the quay. Handing Ailinn a paddle board and small, wooden tub filled with soap, Thora motioned that she commence with the washing. Thora then stepped several paces away to join a clutch of townswomen gathered there. Proudly she lifted aside the bright panel of cloth that covered the front of her chemise and displayed Murieann's girdle.

Ailinn simmered as she thrust a tunic into the water and swished it about. She derived a small measure of perverse satisfaction seeing that the cord barely met about Thora's thick waist. It had hung at length on Murieann's slender form.

Ailinn turned back to her task, chiding herself for such an unchristian and mean-spirited thought. Yet, 'twas not the thought itself that disturbed her so much as her pleasuring in it. In truth, she felt no charity toward the Norsewoman, nor any of her kind. Only a rocky barrenness of heart.

Overhead, gulls cried out against the clear-blue vault of sky as they stretched their wings to the warmth of the sun. Along the wharf seamen mended nets and loaded waiting craft while merchants bartered their goods.

Ailinn scrubbed a stubborn spot, then doused the linen once more and sat back on her heels. Brushing away a wisp of hair from her eyes, she squinted against the brightness of the day and envied the birds their freedom.

Joyous squeals of children erupted nearby, drawing Ailinn's eye. She caught a vivid patch of color as it swept up into the air—a small boy in naught but a red tunic, being hoisted high above a man's head. The sprite's wagging legs and squirming bulk obstructed her view of the man. The child laughed gleefully and tossed back his dark headful of curls as his captor apparently nuzzled his stomach.

The man began to lower the child and Ailinn next found herself gazing fully upon the white-haired Dane. In a heartbeat his crystal blue eyes met with hers, but not before she realized that he stood in the shallows before her stripped bare to his loincloth.

Ailinn gasped, letting go the linen from her fingers. Quickly she tore away her gaze and snatched the garment back up from the water. She felt shivery and breathless and jolted to her very core.

Ailinn scrubbed at the tunic vigorously, heat flaming her cheeks. The vision of sculpted muscles, broad shoulders, and hard, sinewed legs continued to burn in her mind's eye.

Several minutes passed before she found the courage to look toward him again. To her relief, he was absorbed in play with the child—children—she corrected as she discovered a second little boy, clad in blue, identical to the first.

The Dane caught the babe up beneath the arms. Stepping deeper into the water, he swung the child round in a wide circle, lifting and dipping the boy in one continuous, wavelike motion.

Ailinn watched, momentarily transfixed by the warm, familial scene playing out before her. It stunned her to see this caring side of a Norseman. At the same time she found herself wholly affected by the sheer magnificence of the man.

He moved with power and grace—beautiful, potent, thrilling to behold. The word *leonine* again sprang to mind, as it had yesterday, when her eyes first encountered him. The long lines of his body appeared supple, resilient, yet well defined. Their underlying strength had been forged, she imagined, through years of discipline and rigorous training.

Ailinn gazed on the rich play of muscle through his chest and arms, then drifted her eyes to his handsome features. She noted the ease of his smile and the unmistakable affection contained in his eyes as he looked on the babe and lifted him heavenward.

Ailinn returned her attention to the garment in her hands and began to beat it with the small paddle. *His?* she wondered of the children, noting they bore him little resemblance, what with their ebony locks and what appeared to be thumb-size impressions in their little chins. He had none, though she thought to have glimpsed dimples in his cheeks.

She whisked a glance to the Dane and back again. Aye, dimples. Creases, really. Deep ones. In each cheek.

Ailinn reversed the cloth and pounded it soundly.

And his eyes . . . she summoned them to mind. His eyes were as blue as the lakes of Killarney, though lighter—brilliant and clear. The children's were indiscernible at this distance, obviously not the same sparkling shade.

Ailinn rubbed soap into a stain, then stayed her busy hands, startled that anything about the Dane should be of concern to her. She turned the cloth over and took up the paddle again.

Of course the man would have children, she reasoned with herself. Likely he had sired more than these two.

Ailinn stole a sideways glance of his splendid frame. Many more. Indeed, what woman would turn him from her bed?

She plunged the garment into the water and sloshed it around. Withdrawing it, she wrung it hard, then slapped it down on the growing pile of sodden cloths.

As Ailinn reached for another linen, she felt the heat of his eyes upon her. Imagination, she chided herself and dismissed the unsettling feeling. Still, the sensation remained.

Slowly she lifted her gaze and immediately lost herself in a crystal blue sea. Ailinn took a long, difficult swallow, her mouth and throat suddenly gone dry. Several moments passed, an eternity, before she could pull away from his intense regard.

She lowered her eyes—a mistake—for they came to rest upon his flat, tapering waist. Then the narrow strip of cloth fastened low about his hips. Then his long, hard, marvelously sculpted legs.

Ailinn's heart began to thud high in her chest and sound in her ears.

The vibrations of the wharf-planking alerted her to Thora's approach. A moment later the Norsewoman barked out some displeasure and gave a jarring shove to her back. Ailinn nearly pitched from the landing, inadvertently toppling a small mound of Thora's chemises into the water.

Pain seared her scalp as Thora dragged her upright by the hair. Ailinn saw the Dane start forward, thunder in his face. But at the same time she glimpsed Thora's hand in her edge of vision, drawing back to strike.

"Skallagrim!" Ailinn hurled the name as though it were a weapon.

Thora stayed her hand midair and growled beneath her breath. Releasing Ailinn, she stepped back, lips thinned and nostrils flared. She then jabbed a finger toward the fallen clothes, carping in shrill tones until Ailinn retrieved them from the water.

Satisfied, Thora straightened, smoothed the panels of cloth that overlay the front and back of her gown, then, after casting a glance to the white-haired Dane, returned to her friends.



Anger exploded through Lyting. He started forward as the bearish-looking woman descended upon the maid. Thora Kolsdóttir. He recognized her from yestereve and gained an instant dislike for the woman. In the next moment he halted as the maid called out something and Thora's arm went rigid. The woman looked ready to chew iron rivets, but she released her hold on the girl.

Lyting rubbed his hand along his jaw. What could the maid have spoken? He watched her pluck the fallen garments from the river. A smile touched his lips and then died as he discovered Thora's eyes upon him. Incredibly, she tried to draw his interest as she strutted toward the cluster of women, giving a slight pitch to her great hips. In truth, the movement produced more joggle than sway. Meanwhile, her companions whispered and tittered among themselves as their eyes strayed over him.

Lyting felt nauseated. Then his anger boiled afresh. How long had these women been observing him? Had they seen how his gaze fairly consumed the maid? How their eyes had met and wed for that one brief moment? Jealous shrews. Was *that* the cause of this scene? Did they punish the maid on his account?

His choler rose another degree as the women continued to devour him with covetous eyes. If 'twas a closer look they desired, then they would have it, along with a blistering piece of his mind.

He began to take a forward step, but the children chose that very moment to wrap themselves about his legs.

"Look, Uncle. Ketil." Richard waved toward the wharf.

"Ketil," chimed Kylan.

Lyting reined his impulses, remembering the lads. He hauled his eyes from the women and sliced a glance along the pier. There, he spied Ketil examining a length of line. Nearby stood

Skallagrim—watching, solemn-faced.

Lyting stilled as he and the chieftain regarded each other across the distance. Skallagrim raised his bearded chin, then shifted his gaze to the maid and then to his sister, Thora.

“Up, Uncle.” Kylan pulled at Lyting’s thigh and hip in an attempt to scramble upward. Richard likewise began to scale his uncle’s other leg.

Stifling the fire that yet burned within, Lyting looked down on the round little heads and allowed his smile to return. He tousled their ebony locks, then lifted them, one to each hip.

Again, the boys called out and waved at Ketil until they captured his attention. Ketil’s teeth gleamed through his blaze of beard, and he lifted his hand in acknowledgment.

Lyting nodded a greeting to Ketil as well, his arms occupied with the two lively pups. Still distracted, he deflected his gaze back toward the maiden.

‘Twould seem that Skallagrim watched over his prize captive as closely as he, himself, did. Likely, the chieftain was not the sort of man who would welcome interference with that which he held as his own—slave *or* sister.

Lyting stabbed a look at the women, yet debating whether or not to confront them with his displeasure. A muscle flexed along his jaw. Teeth clamped tight, he vented a breath. For the moment he would resist the temptation—as long as they left the maid undisturbed.

He glanced once more to the auburn-haired beauty, resolving to remain here for the time, near at hand, and enjoy sporting with young Richard and Kylan.

As his humor flowed slowly back, Lyting sank down into the coolness of the water, drawing the boys with him. Their gasps quickly dissolved to laughter as he squiggled his fingers over their soft bellies and flashed them an openhearted smile.



Ketil watched with gladsome approval at the cheery little scene. ‘Twas good to see Lyting relaxing with the mites. He loved children and should have a hall filled with his own. But with his mind set on shutting himself within the sterile walls of Corbie, Rurik and Brienne’s children would be the only ones Lyting would ever enjoy.

A shame, Ketil sighed as he examined the line of seal-hide for imperfections and tested its strength. The Good Lord saved Lyting from the brink of death, well and true. But that did not necessarily mean that He spared him apurpose for Corbie. Lyting thought in that vein, however, and it seemed naught could dissuade him.

Ketil chuckled at Richard’s antics and waved again. He caught the twinkle in Lyting’s eye as he scooped up the boy and dangled him upside down.

“You sailed with that man?” a roughened voice sounded off to his left.

Ketil turned and took measure of the weathered sea-warrior who stood several arm’s lengths away. He possessed as brambly a mane of hair and beard as himself and stood nearly as tall.

“*Já,*” Ketil answered with a shadow of caution. “We arrived yestermorn from Normandy.”

The man seemed to consider this for a moment, then his eye ranged to Lyting. “Your friend tried to buy a slave of mine.” He nodded toward a maid who labored over her wash at the end of the wharf. A maid of exceptional beauty.

Ketil lifted a brow in utter surprise. He had heard of the incident from Aleth and Brienne. But they made no mention that the maid Lyting sought to free was one so fair.

Ketil tugged at his beard, a smile spreading beneath the fiery thicket. ‘Twas a good sign. Mayhap, his badgerings and advisements would bear fruit after all.

Ketil smoothed his mustache and shrugged casually. “I imagine that one draws many an eye.”

“*Já*, that she does. But your friend seemed more intent than most.” The man looked again to Lyting and considered him with a hard stare. “Normandy, eh? Has your pale-haired friend a name?”

Ketil bent an eye over the sea-warrior, gauging how he should respond. “Lyting Atlison, blood-nephew to Duke Rollo himself and brother to the Baron de Valsemé. We sail under the baron’s banner. And you?”

The man rolled an eye to Ketil. “Skallagrim, master of the *Wind Raven*. I sail under my own banner.” Unexpectedly one side of his mouth drew into the semblance of a smile, then faded. His attention returned to Lyting.

“Best advise Atlison to take a long, cold swim. His desire for my slave is obvious, but the maid is not for purchase. He’ll have to find another to bed.”

“Him?” Ketil fairly choked, though the thought of Lyting “in lust” was wondrously heartening.

Again, a faint knell of caution sounded somewhere in Ketil’s brain, and he felt a compelling need to put Skallagrim’s concerns to rest. He hoped Lyting would understand the necessity to depict matters as he must to their Odin-worshipping kinsman.

“*Nei*, there be naught to glean in his interest,” Ketil avowed. “Those Franks have turned him into a knee-bending Christian. He seeks a monkish life on our return to Normandy. ‘Twas not for himself but for the baronne that he sought to acquire the maid. She is a softhearted woman, a Frank.”

Skallagrim looked to Ketil skeptically. “Odd that she would choose a slave of such beauty to tempt her husband.”

Ketil huffed into his beard. Obviously Skallagrim had not seen the Lady Brienne nor heard the saga of hers and Rurik’s joining. Their tale of love was the sort skalds remembered in verse and celebrated in the halls.

“*Nei*. I did not mean that the baronne selected the maid. She left the matter of purchase to Lyting. He is after all, a full-blooded son of Danmark. Understandably, he chose the most beautiful.”

To Ketil’s surprise, Skallagrim cracked a smile.

“I imagine the baron would have been appreciative of that, had he succeeded!”

Ketil remained silent as the chieftain cast a suspect eye to Lyting.

“He seeks to be a monk, you say? I have heard that the Christians’ beliefs can unman a warrior. But he does not look unmanned from here.”

“Lyting honors the vows he seeks to embrace, even now,” Ketil maintained staunchly but truthfully. “He suffers as any man who denies his body. He finds his relief as you suggest, by taking frequent swims in cold lakes.”

The tension seemed to seep out of Skallagrim’s shoulders and limbs. His smile reappeared, then mellowed as he shook his head. “ ‘Tis unfathomable, this priest-class’ devotion to celibacy that the Christians so revere.”

Ketil found no response as his thoughts went to Aleth. To his mind, the fairest and most enjoyable achievement of Divine creation was Woman, and *she* God fashioned expressly for Man.

“At least your friend will enjoy the riches of the church without the need to first plunder them!” Skallagrim grinned.

Ketil gave a brief nod and matched his smile as though to agree. He hoped Lyting would move with care about Skallagrim and the beautiful slavegirl. A misstep could prove fateful.



Ailinn rose to her feet, slipping a last glance to the Dane as she took up the dense weight of wet linens. Their eyes brushed for the barest of moments before she turned and followed Thora back along the wharf.

The vision of the bright-haired warrior continued to play in her mind as she and Thora retraced their earlier steps, turning down one lane, then another. Suddenly they came upon a gathering—mostly Arabs and Northmen—crowded about something of interest. In their midst Ailinn spied the maids of Clonmel, displayed before all as common slaves, proffered for a bit of coin. 'Twas then that her gaze fell on Lia.

"Ni hea!" Ailinn lurched forward, her shackles trammeling her step. Their eyes found each other's just as Thora cuffed Ailinn alongside the back of her head, where marks would be hidden beneath the hair.

Ailinn bent beneath the blow, clutching the sodden laundry to her side. She tasted the sharp, bitter hatred that filled her soul. Hatred for all that was Norse.

Slowly she straightened and cleaved Thora with such a look of vehemence and utter loathing that the Norsewoman drew back a pace.

Ailinn's eyes then sought Lia's once more. Their gazes met and held across an ocean of pain in one last farewell.

As she forced her steps on to follow Thora, Ailinn's heart splinter into a thousand pieces.

Woodenly she trailed Thora's steps back to the house. As she approached the portal, she observed Hakon within the fenced side yard, his back facing her.

Unclad to the waist, he peered into a small disk of polished metal, nailed to a sapling, and scraped away the growth that covered his jaw. Though Hakon appeared unconcerned with the women's arrival, Ailinn saw that he watched her in his mirror as she moved toward the door and entered the dwelling.

Thora had no sooner set her to a task than Hakon appeared on the threshold and stepped inside. He paused by the barrel of ale that sat near the entry and took a hollowed gourd from the wall. Ladling up a portion of the golden liquid, he drank it slowly, his eyes passing over her where she knelt by the hearth. Draining the last of the beverage, he returned the dipper to its peg, wiped his mouth, and departed without a word.

Unease settled in Ailinn's bone. She strove to force Hakon from her mind as she coaxed the embers to life. Thora lingered by the door a moment longer, gazing after Hakon's back. Her eyes then drew to Ailinn.

Thora moved to a weathered trunk that sat along the wall. Opening it, she withdrew a stout chain, several arms' lengths in measure, and a heavy lock. Her expression lightened as she started toward Ailinn.

With a grunt, Thora half-bent, half-squatted to remove the linkage that bound Ailinn's ankles. She then reshackled Ailinn's left leg with the second, much longer piece of chain. Rising, Thora proceeded to wrap the end about the carved, timbered post opposite the hearth and secure it with the lock.

Ailinn remained motionless as Thora sought her mantle and advanced toward the door. On a parting thought, Thora turned back, grabbed up an abandoned distaff bearing a fluffy knob of wool, and returned to Ailinn long enough to thrust it into her hands. She then snatched up a shallow basket—one Ailinn recognized from yestereve as having held the supper's fish—and quit the house. Thora's voice sounded outside as she presumably informed Hakon of her departure.

The moment drew out. Stillness descended upon the house. Silence.

Ailinn sank beside the hearth, alert, observant, her ears strained for the slightest sound. She fingered the wool, then absently began to twist the fibers to begin a thread as she glanced about the empty hall. Abruptly Ailinn stilled her hands and dropped her gaze. Thora had provided her no spindle. The Norsewoman never intended that she should work the wool.

Just then the room darkened as though the sun had escaped behind the clouds and had been momentarily blotted out. Fine hairs raised along the back of Ailinn's neck. Her gaze drew to the door to behold Hakon framed within its portal.

Ailinn ceased to breathe. Hakon's eyes smoldered deep in their sockets, two burning coals. She prayed he had come for naught but the ale and would quickly slake his thirst and be gone. Her hopes withered as Hakon stepped inside and passed the barrel, sparing it no interest.

He came to a halt. Tunic in hand, he wiped the sweat from his bare chest, then threw it to the side-floor. Eyes never leaving her, he continued forward.

Ailinn rose on watery legs as Hakon uttered something in his Norse tongue and closed the distance.

"I do not understand." Her grip tightened around the distaff, and she edged backward.

Again Hakon spoke, these words different, though as incomprehensible as the first.

"*N' on digná tu.* I do not understand. Leave me be!"

The ankle cuff bit into her flesh as the chain jarred to its end and held fast. Still, she strove to draw back, straining against the bonds, her leg and the linkage stretched tight.

Hakon bridged the narrow space in an easy stride and clamped iron fingers about her arms. Terror sheared through Ailinn as he hauled her against his rock-hard chest. Frantically she thrashed and pitched within his hold but gained no advantage. A slim hope glimmered—a single word. Yet, as the name of her grizzled protector rose in her throat and reached her lips, it was crushed beneath Hakon's bruising mouth.

Ailinn cried against the assault, her pleas stifled beneath his ravaging kiss. Desperate, she angled the distaff and stabbed for his side.

Hakon snarled and wrenched back as the stick caught him low across the waist. Knocking the piece from her hands, he thrust Ailinn to the floor, then dropped to cover her. But she rolled from under him and clambered to gain the side-floor. Hakon aided her efforts as he grasped her about the waist and tossed her up onto fur throws.

Pain tore at Ailinn's leg as the chain jolted against its limits once more. In the skip of a heartbeat Hakon flung himself atop her. Pinning her arms, he pressed her into the pelts. She felt the hard length of his ravenous passion as he ground his hips against her.

Yanking at the folds of her skirt, he bared her leg and swept his roughened hand upward over thigh and hip to capture her buttock. Forcing her against him, Hakon seized her lips in a brutal kiss.

Ailinn writhed beneath him, each breath hard won, the air pressed from her lungs. Just when she feared she might suffocate, he shifted. Grasping the fullness of her breast, he coarsely caressed her. Ardor blazed in his eyes. Impatient, Hakon fisted the gown's neckline and tore it free.

Crippling fear overtook Ailinn as the fabric ripped. The sound of it filled her ears, then changed and swelled in volume to an earsplitting roar. Just as cool air touched her breast, Hakon's weight abruptly left her. He catapulted backward by an unseen force, and Ailinn next found herself staring up through open space at the rafters.

Twisting, she caught sight of Skallagrim as he hurled Hakon across the room. Like a great,

raging bear he set upon Hakon. Dragging him to his feet, he slogged him in stomach and jaw, then backhanded him across the face.

Hakon hurtled backward against the side-floor, yelling out as his ribs struck against the edge of board. Mouth and nose bleeding, a cut above his eye, he stirred to gain some advantage.

But Skallagrim's fury stormed unabated. Grabbing an ax down from the wall, he clutched the shaft at each end then started once more for Hakon. As Hakon recovered his footing, Skallagrim caught him straight on with the ax handle. Ramming it across Hakon's throat, he shoved him up against one of the hall's stout posts, nearly lifting him from his feet.



"Cease, Uncle!" Hakon rasped beneath the wood. "Would you kill me for a mere kiss of your slave? I did but seek a taste of her lips and pleasure my hand with her breasts."

"You lie," Skallagrim snarled in his face.

"*Nei*," Hakon spat with disdain. "I would not spoil your prized gift to the Byzantine. I have not forgotten her usefulness to you."

Skallagrim eyed him with a hard, incisive gaze. "See that you remember," he bit out. "'Twill be a long journey, Hakon. Take what slavewomen you will to satisfy your lusts for the duration. But be assured, touch this one and I shall personally cut your throat, nephew or not."

At that, Skallagrim released Hakon. Angrily Hakon snatched up his tunic from the side-floor and stalked from the hall.



Ailinn gripped the wreckage of fabric to her breast. Eyes wide and nerves racked raw, she trembled violently as her grim-faced master approached.

The chieftain looked down on her, marked her ruined dress, the fear in her eyes, and then examined her for bruises. Freeing the chain from the post, he led Ailinn to the back of the hall, where he secured her, as the night before, to the foot of his bed.

As Ailinn huddled upon the pallet, Skallagrim positioned his great chair to face the door, then took up his seat. Placing his ax across his lap, he kept watch, prepared for anyone who would give challenge or dare to thwart his plans.

The twins trotted happily along the lane ahead of their uncle, their little mouths puckered around a piece of honeycomb.

As they approached the *hus*, Lyting lengthened his stride to catch up with them, then pushed open the door before sticky little hands could touch it.

Aleth greeted them with a smile and shake of her head as the three entered, licking their fingers and lips.

"Lyting, how you do spoil the children!" She laughed, catching up a damp cloth and coming forward.

Her smile widened as, one after the other, Richard and Kylan offered up their portions of the waxy comb for her to taste.

"*Merci. Mais non, mes petits.* Though, mayhap we best tidy you up before you give your *maman* and *papa* a big hug." Aleth swept a glance to Lyting. "You as well." She raised on tiptoe to wipe a trace of honey from his chin.

Lyting chuckled at her motherly attentions and shifted the small crock of golden nectar from beneath his arm.

"For you, my lady. A small token. How would men such as we fare without your tender ministrations?" He winked at the boys.

"You could use a little fussing over," she chided, tugging at one of the long, pale locks that reached low on Lyting's chest. "When you are of a mind to part with some of this bountiful mane, come to me. I shall see that you have a fine cut."

"Soon, Aleth." He flashed her a smile, the creases deepening in his cheeks. "I confess, I do not look forward to the tonsure and have been enjoying the full wealth and measure of my hair these months past. But 'tis yours for the shearing when the time comes."

Lyting gave over the jar to Aleth, then glanced toward the door at the rear of the *skali*.

"They are in the yard," Aleth offered as she set the crockery on the side floor. Kneeling to the boys' height, she began wiping Kylan's face. "Be along with you, now." She shooed him blithely. "I'll bring the boys in a moment."

"*Pakk*, Aleth."

As Lyting emerged from the building, he beheld Brienne, all grace and loveliness, sitting beneath an ancient silver lime tree. She looked off to the right, her elegant profile silhouetted against the dark luxury of her hair, which flowed freely, as Rurik preferred.

The lime spread out all about her, above and behind, shimmering with pale green foliage. Translucent and heart-shaped, the leaves were richly silvered underneath with fine hairs so that each new breath of air stirred them to glitter and wink with sunlight, the effect spellbinding.

Had it not been for the faint line that traced Brienne's forehead, Lyting would have thought her to be merely preoccupied, lost in pleasant thoughts. But now he saw that her gaze was fixed on Rurik where he stood stone still, gazing out over the fence, a parchment in his hand.

Brienne began to lift a hand toward Rurik and her lips parted softly as though she would speak. But then she hesitated, apparently deciding otherwise, and let her hand fall once more to her lap. As though Rurik sensed her thoughts, he looked toward her and met her eyes. Lyting felt

the fine strand of tension spun out between them.

Uncertain of the scene, Lyting cleared his throat. The two turned as one, Brienne smiling with a genuine warmth and gladness to see him, Rurik coming away from the corner of the yard to greet him.

Feeling the moment to be yet awkward, Lyting glanced again to the spectacular tree and attempted to lighten the mood.

“My lady has chosen her time well,” he teased gently. “For all its glory, one is not able to long enjoy the shelter of the lime. Soon ‘twill begin to drop a sticky dew from its leaves and continue until summer’s end—a vexsome trial for even its most devoted admirer.”

“Mayhap ‘twould be worth enduring.” Brienne lifted her gaze and scanned the luminous canopy overhead.

Just then Rurik came to stand beside her, propping his foot upon the bench where she sat. Brienne placed her hand on his knee, her violet eyes coupling with his.

“My dear husband holds that the lime is much like a beautiful woman, difficult to possess and not without her trials. Each ordeal, he says, is a testing of a man’s true mettle—his steadfastness and determination. A testing of his very heart and soul.”

Lyting swept his gaze to the tree, all expression deserting his face. Golden-brown eyes and deep auburn hair shimmered before his mind’s eye as one with the leaves. He blinked away the vision and suddenly became aware that his heart had picked up its beat and his blood pulsed through his veins.

The boisterous invasion of children broke the spell. Giggling and squealing, the twins scurried across the yard and into the arms of their parents. Lyting stepped apart and rubbed a hand across his eyes. When he glanced back, he met Brienne’s silent, questioning gaze, her head tilted to one side.

Kylan quickly reclaimed his mother’s attention, placing small hands to her cheeks and turning her face to his. Rurik, meanwhile, had plucked up young Richard and perched him on a hip. Irrepressible, the babe tugged to be higher and would not be satisfied until he could wrap his arms about his father’s neck.

Rurik chuckled. Giving over the parchment to Lyting, he disengaged his young heir and resettled him against his chest. At once Richard began to pat at his father’s chin.

Lyting’s gaze dropped to the cockled vellum as it curled in on itself. It bore precise, heavily inked characters. He recognized them to be Greek.

His brow rose a fraction. A message from the East? Byzantium? It had been years since Rurik served there as one the emperor’s elite Varangian Guard.

He skimmed the parchment once again. What nature of missive did the scroll contain? he wondered. Surely it held importance to have been transmitted from so great a distance and after so many years of silence. Its content obviously troubled his brother.

Lyting cut a glance to Rurik and found him watching. With a brief nod Rurik indicated he should examine the document more closely, then turned to walk about the yard with Brienne and the children.

Unscrolling the piece, Lyting studied the rows of neat, compact lettering. At first glance the script appeared as thwarting as the Roman system of writing. He had begun instruction in both forms—Greek and Latin—under the tutelage of Brother Bernard in preparation for Corbie.

His grasp for the Greek, though rudimentary, far exceeded his capacity for the latter. But then Greek was already familiar to him. He’d studied it years past when he readied to join Rurik and the Varangians in the East. To that end his brother had dispatched a Byzantine scholar to

Limfjord to instruct him personally in the language and strict codes of court etiquette. But he never reached the golden city, for Norwegian Harald struck Danmark and ravaged Jutland's western coast. Abandoning the prospect of a bright future with the Guard, he took up sword and shield to defend his homeland. Sailing with the Danish fleet, he engaged the Norwegians on the North Sea . . .

Laboriously Lyting's gaze moved across the script as he sounded out each letter, each word, groping for the meaning. Someone had died, a Varangian—Askel the Red. The name rang familiar, but Lyting could not connect it with any accounting that he might have heard. Other names followed, these also Norse. The parchment was dated five months prior at Dyrrachium, signed by one Stephanites Cerularius. Again, the name held no significance.

"Some ale, Lyting?" Aleth proffered a cup at his elbow.

Lyting pulled his gaze from the text and accepted her offering. "*Pakk*, Aleth." As he drew on the liquid, he caught sight of Kylan yawning hugely in his mother's arms.

"You have exhausted these little ones, Lyting," Brienne called out. "They shall need their naps early."

Aleth crossed to disencumber Rurik of little Richard, who was rubbing his eyes. As the women advanced toward the *hus* with the children, Lyting saw Brienne's gaze stray to the parchment. She hugged her son to herself, though her smile remained fastened in place.

"*Merci* for amusing the boys, Lyting." Her words gave no hint that anything disturbed her. "Mayhap I shall be able to enjoy a little rest myself."

Lyting regarded Brienne as she disappeared into the darkness of the *hus*. Withdrawing his gaze, he rolled the letter closed and tapped it thoughtfully against his palm. With unhurried pace he approached Rurik and extended the scroll.

"We sailed for Hedeby earlier than first you intensioned. 'Twas for this, was it not?"

Rurik nodded, his eyes somber as he accepted back the parchment.

Lyting dredged distant memories and long-forgotten conversations from the backwaters of his mind.

"Askel the Red—did he not serve under your command in Constantinople?"

"*Já*. Askel was one of my finest officers. He, Koll, Leidolf, Thengil, and Vegeir were as my right hand when we quelled the palace uprising and preserved Leo's crown. It earned us the title of the 'Dragons Around the Throne.' "

Lyting recognized the last three names from the scroll,

"I recall the tale, though the details be somewhat clouded now. You foiled a plot to assassinate the emperor, Leo Sophos, and his infant son. 'Twas a rather elaborate conspiracy, was it not? Knotted with complexities, double-dealings, deceits. A 'tangle of vipers,' you called it, 'nesting in every corner.' "

"*Já*. Distinctively 'Byzantine'." A grim smile etched Rurik's lips. "I never told you the full of it, *broðir*. But mayhap 'tis well that I do so now, for I know not where this will lead." He looked to the scroll, venting a breath, then met Lyting's gaze.

"I joined the palace guard shortly after Leo's third wife had died, and he had taken Zoë Carbonopsina as his mistress. The Church's Eastern 'Greek' branch is more rigid in matters of marriage than Rome. Even in the event a spouse dies, second marriages are frowned upon and third marriages strictly prohibited. Leo, himself, had reinforced the Church's position years earlier, issuing a special law of his own. But then his first wife died childless, as did his second. When he took a third wife, 'twas an open breach with the Church. But soon she, too, died, leaving Leo without male issue."

Rurik pushed a hand through his golden hair and stepped toward the lime tree.

“A fourth marriage was beyond question. I can tell you that Leo’s brother, Alexander, was well pleased that the line of succession should pass to him. But then Zoë conceived. Leo saw to it that she spent her confinement in the palace’s ‘purple chamber,’ where all the empresses officially birthed their children. Zoë presented Leo with a son, and from that time he devoted himself to seeing his heir legitimized.

“After much controversy, the Patriarch agreed to baptize the child in the Hagia Sophia and to christen him Constantine Porphyrogentius, ‘born in the purple.’ But ‘twas a condition that Leo set aside Zoë. Instead, three days after the ceremony, Leo married Zoë and elevated her to the status of Augusta.”

Rurik began to pace. “A storm of angry protest arose, fueling the many factions and quarrels that beset Leo from the past. He was even barred from entering the church on Christmas Day and again, twelve days later, on the Feast of the Epiphany. Yet, Leo was intractable. Resolute. He turned to Rome, circumventing the Patriarch’s authority, and appealed directly to the Pope—much to the Pontiff’s delight. Leo received his dispensation. His marriage was validated. With that accomplished, he forced the Patriarch, Nicholas Mysticus, from his chair and replaced him with another.

“You can imagine the response that wrought.” Rurik threw a hand to the air. “The political parties—the Greens and the Blues—the exiled Patriarch, a score of others, each with its own squabble, all clawing for power and profit.” He stopped his pacing. “And then there was the emperor’s brother, Alexander, an indolent, self-pleasuring creature who had much to lose.”

Rurik expelled a long breath, lifting his face heavenward and bracing his hands on his hips. “Mayhap ‘twas best, *broðir*, that you did not come to Constantinople as we planned. Sharks swam about the throne. Death waited in the shadow of the crown.”

Rurik fell to a reflective silence.

Lyting bided the moment, digesting all his brother spoke.

“And what of the plot to remove Leo?” he prompted several minutes later.

“ ‘Twas nearly the emperor’s undoing.” Rurik paced to the fence, then turned.

“Shall we say, I ‘intercepted’ secret directives that involved a conspiracy to murder the Imperial family—exclusive of Alexander, that is. The assassins plotted to provoke the Blues and Greens to riot in the Hippodrome while the emperor was in attendance. Riots in the Hippodrome are also distinctively ‘Byzantine.’ “

Rurik’s mouth set in a firm line, his features darkening with memory.

“The riots were intended to conceal their treachery. The emperor’s assassins would already be positioned in close proximity to his person—presumably trusted, high-ranking members of court to enjoy such privilege of access. We knew not their names. Meanwhile, within the Sacred Imperial Palace, the child and empress were to be slain.

“With this knowledge in hand, I chose five of my most capable officers, and together we laid schemes of our own to snare the conspirators. The emperor proved cooperative, though he insisted he keep his appearance in the Hippodrome and force his opponents’ hands openly. Zoë feared for him but refused to leave the imperial grounds for safety, preferring to die in the purple if necessary. The child, we managed to spirit from the palace in Helena’s care and kept them both under heavy guard elsewhere in the city.”

Lyting’s eyes snapped to Rurik’s. *Helena*. The noble lady who once held his brother’s heart in Byzantium. The cause of Rurik’s years of wandering. He had not known that she aided him in preserving Leo’s throne and family.

Rurik shifted his stance. “The designated day came. Our Varangians were carefully posted about the palace grounds and throughout the Hippodrome. Another complement guarded the empress in her private residence, the Pantheon. I, myself, and my officers escorted Leo to the imperial box, the *kathisma*, which overlooked the arena from an upper balcony in the Hippodrome. Dignitaries and courtiers awaited us in the royal box. They were our chief concern.

“The mood of the crowd was sullen that day. Early in the games, an upheaval erupted below, then spread through the spectators like a rapid fire feeding on dry kindling. During the tumult, the conspirators made their move.”

“‘Twas your own blade,” Lyting recalled aloud, “that smote the assassins’ steel and saved the imperial neck. You shielded the emperor with your body, did you not?”

“*Já*. I to the fore, while Askel guarded both our backs. I felled two of them, Vegeir a third. The trio proved to be patricians of high office, one a member of the Senate. We quickly removed the emperor to safety, but it took hours to quell the broil below. The Blues and Greens had taken over the arena. Scores were arrested and interrogated.”

Rurik turned and braced his hands on the fence, slightly crushing the parchment.

“Though the conspiracy lay shattered and most involved seized, ‘twas plain that we had not apprehended the architect of the scheme. Personally, ‘twas my belief that he served Alexander, but every trail we followed evaporated before we could discover its end. He simply faded chameleonlike into the sea of officials and retainers that surrounded the throne.

“Of course, he might not have survived the revolt. Many died in the affray. When I left Constantinople, ‘twas with the frustration that, dead or alive, he had eluded my grasp. And, if he had survived, ‘twas likely he yet abetted the emperor’s degenerate brother.”

Lyting watched the muscle flex along Rurik’s jaw as he obviously grappled with that frustration once more. Rurik, he knew, would never have left the city had it not been for Helena’s death. Shortly after Rurik routed the conspirators, the emperor lavished honors and riches on him and his officers. Leo had intended to elevate Rurik to one of the privileged ranks so that he might reward him further with Helena’s hand in marriage. But Helena fell suddenly ill and died within days. After her funeral Rurik left Byzantium and took up the life of trading—a hollow man, until he came to Normandy. . . .

“Since my leave-taking,” Rurik broke into Lyting’s thoughts, “I have maintained loose ties with the Guard and kept an ear open for news from the East. The year I came to Valsemé, Leo died—a natural death. Alexander usurped the throne with little delay and exiled Zoë to a nunnery. My men kept careful watch to see if anyone aided him, but Alexander was so intoxicated with his own power ‘twould seem he heeded no man’s counsel. Scarcely a year passed when he, too, died. Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus, whom Alexander had recalled, took control as head of the Council of Regency for young Constantine.

“His rule proved as brief as Alexander’s, for this year past, another palace revolution occurred, led by Zoë and her generals. Zoë expelled the Patriarch and assumed power in the name of her son. She rules today, bedeviled with many of the old contentions along with new ones she inherited from Alexander and the Patriarch, namely a war with the Bulgarians. Adrianople has already fallen, and now they move on Dyrrachium. Many of our Varangians have joined the Byzantines in the field to repulse the Bulgarians including Askel.” Rurik paused and reached for the wide silver armband that encircled his left forearm.

“Before departing Constantinople, Askel felt an urgency to send me this.”

He drew off the piece and held it forth to Lyting.

Taking the band, Lyting examined it. As he turned it over, his gaze fell to the runes engraved

on the underside. These he read with relative ease:

*The spider yet spins in the palace of the Caesars.
Leidolf, Thengil, Vegeir dead.*

His gaze went immediately to Rurik, then to the parchment. He drew a brow downward as he puzzled the armband and the letter. Something felt amiss. Darkly amiss.

“Does the letter reveal what befell Askel in Dyrrachium? In truth, I could unravel little of it. Who is this Stephanites Cerularius? ‘Tis odd that he should write you of Askel, and that he names the others as well.”

Rurik opened out the parchment. “He claims to be a friend of Askel’s. Evidently he commands a *skutatoï*, an infantry unit, mainly of spearmen. He admired Askel’s skill with spears and they struck a friendship. According to Stephanites, Askel confided the information contained in this letter and directed that, should he die, Stephanites was to see it set down and dispatched it to me through the merchants of Hedeby.”

Lyting rubbed his hand along his jaw, an obscure thought nettling at the back of his brain. “And what of Askel’s missive?”

“He apprised Stephanites that Thengil and Vegeir died of a sudden and suspicious sickness, ‘not unlike Helena.’ Leidolf was found murdered in the men’s baths. ‘Twas Askel’s belief that the one we ever sought—the one behind the plot against Leo and his family—had resurfaced and was carefully removing the ‘Dragons’ from ‘around the throne.’ There is no telling who this man now serves. Ten-year-old Constantine is the last in the line of the Macedonians. Askel feared that Zoë and her son are again in grave danger.”

Lyting’s brows drew together. “Yet, if that is so, why did he leave Constantinople for Dyrrachium? Though there are many Varangians serving in the palace guard, that left only Koll from the original six to try to expose the man.”

“I have no solid answer.” Rurik shook his head. “It makes little sense unless Askel was on the scent of something.”

“Or someone.”

“Exactly. Stephanites says ‘twas not a Bulgarian’s blade that felled Askel. He disappeared from nightwatch. His body was found the next morning in the desert.”

“Then Askel *was* tracking someone.”

“Or mayhap followed out of the city.”

“Still, there is something I do not understand.” Lyting’s thoughts congealed at last as that which plagued him came to the fore of his mind. “Askel took pains to send you an encrypted message from Constantinople—in runes, secreted on the back of an arm bracelet—as though he knew not whom to trust. Why, then, once in the field, would he detail the entire story—not to a Varangian bound by a code of brotherhood—but to a Byzantine soldier? From what you have told me, you six tasted full well of Byzantine duplicity.”

“I have been struggling with that as well,” Rurik agreed. “When I remind myself that ‘twas Stephanites, not Askel, who authored the letter, it begins to come clear.”

Rurik held Lyting’s gaze, the blue of his eyes draining to a flinty gray.

“ ‘Tis my belief the letter is a lure, designed to draw me back to Byzantium, with Helena as the prime bait. It intimates that, like the rest, she, too, was murdered. He who wrote those lines knew full well that I could not bide to leave them rest.”

Lyting marked the complexity of emotion that passed through Rurik’s face. “Then you think Stephanites is Askel’s murderer?”

“I know nothing with surety. Much lies in darkness.” Rurik brooded for a moment. “One

thing is certain, however. Neither Askel nor Stephanites knew that I had abandoned my life of trading and now rule a barony in Francia with a wife and sons. Both sought to reach me through Hedeby, knowing it to be a major crossroad and market center of the North. That proved wise on their parts for the pieces found me easily enough. They came into the keeping of Issac the Jew, an old acquaintance, but he is too feeble to journey south anymore. He sent word with the ships bound for Normandy, and safeguarded the items here.”

Lyting nodded, recalling the messenger, one of Issac’s kindred. “Have you determined what course you will take?” Lyting handed him back the arm bracelet.

“*Nei*. I need think on this longer. Even if Stephanites proves false, I doubt he is more than an underling for the viper behind all this. I’ll examine the band and scroll further and ask about. Most of our Norse merchants traveling the Eastern routes are Sverige-men, as are the Varangians. Mayhap I can glean something of value from them. There appears to be an abundance of Sverige-men here in Hedeby this season.”

“I think Ketil would agree.” A smile touched Lyting’s lips, then dimmed. “Do you think to journey to the Great City yourself? To Miklagárd?”

Rurik pressed his eyes closed a moment, then drew a long breath as he straightened and regarded Lyting.

“If one thing distinguishes a Varangian, ‘tis his fierce loyalty to the ‘throne of the Caesars.’ Tis a loyalty he carries in his veins till the day his blood flows no more. And yet, for myself, there are new loyalties of equal import. They bind me by oath to duke and king alike, to Normandy and Francia. And there are my people of Valsemé, and, not the least, my family which I am loathe to leave. Still, Zoë and Constantine need be warned, and I would make contact with Koll. The possibility of Helena murdered tears at me, I confess. But as to whether I will undertake this journey, I have no answer.”

Rurik tucked the parchment inside his tunic and slipped the band onto his arm. “Sorry to burden you, *broðir*, but I thought you need know should anything befall—”

He broke off the grim thought, then affected a smile. “I think I shall envy you your peaceful days at Corbie in some ways.”

Brienne came forth from the *hus* just then and started toward him. The blue returned to his eyes, and he broke into an open smile.

“And in other ways I shall not.” Rurik’s gaze shone down on Brienne as she stepped into his arms.

Lyting watched as Rurik secured Brienne against his side and dropped a kiss to her lips. Rurik continued to hold her as though he did so against the moment he might have to part from her.

Lyting dropped away his gaze, a tide of conflicting emotions sweeping through him. He glanced to the shimmering tree, then back again and caught the last of what Brienne spoke.

“The children are sleeping soundly. Ketil returned and has taken Aleth out. It seems he is anxious to spend more coin on her, but he would not say what has taken his eye this time.” She laughed.

“I, too, shall take my leave.” Lyting chafed to be moving, the familiar restlessness returned tenfold. “Unless there is some task you need me to attend, *broðir*, there are some purchases I would also make.”

“Ah, Anskar’s bell,” Brienne said mindfully. “‘Twill be a fine addition to Valsemé’s church.”

Lyting’s brows lifted with surprise. He had forgotten the bell since his encounter with

Stefnir. In truth, 'twas combs he would seek and a very long walk.

"*Já*, the bell," he repeated, wholly distracted. "I'll leave by the side yard so I don't risk waking the babes."



Brienne's gaze followed Lyting as he departed. Pensive, she leaned into Rurik's chest and watched Lyting's bright head and broad shoulders disappear down the lane.

"When first I saw Lyting," she reminisced, "he was shrouded in a monk's garb. It did not seem to befit him then, nor does the thought of him wearing it now."

"Are you of the same mind as Ketil, *ástin mín*?" Rurik bent to the sensitive spot behind her ear.

"Mayhap." She tingled at the warmth of his mouth and touch of his tongue. "You are the one least surprised by Lyting's decision to take the cowl."

"I simply hold my peace." Rurik began a slow, downward path, pressing kisses along her neck.

Brienne wavered as shivers of fire showered her throat and shoulder. Reluctantly she resisted the sensations spiraling through her. Leaning back in the circle of Rurik's arms, she gave him an expectant eye.

Rurik drew her against himself once more, undeterred, and brushed his lips against her midnight hair.

"You would have to have known Lyting in his youth and what it was like for him to grow up as youngest to a half brother like . . ." He stopped short of voicing Hastein's name aloud.

"How so, love?" Brienne pressed, quivering as the tip of his tongue traced the shell of her ear. "How could *that one* have possibly affected Lyting's call to the monastic life?"

Rurik pulled back with a sigh, realizing Brienne would own no ease till she had a fuller explanation. He sent up a small, hope-filled prayer that the twins would nap long and deep, and that the others would find much to occupy themselves for the coming hours. He would yet savor this time alone with his ravishing wife. With temporary resignation he covered her hands with his own.

"Our half brother bedeviled Lyting from infancy, just as he did every other living creature. Have you noticed how ever vigilant Lyting is? How keenly alert? Like the forest animals he so loves, 'tis near impossible to steal up on him. Even when he appears asleep, 'tis only a light, surface sort of slumber he keeps. Always with a sword at hand. 'Tis born of the hazards he endured in his youth. The constant threat of our half brother's shadow."

Sadness filled Brienne as she envisaged the ordeal of Lyting's childhood. She knew firsthand of Hastein's twistedness, having witnessed the full magnitude of his barbarity unleashed upon her brother-in-law.

"It must have been horribly difficult for him. But how did that bear on his resolve to enter Corbie?"

Rurik turned over her hands in his as memories of his own youth glanced through him. He leveled his gaze over the top of her head.

"My brothers were a study in contrast. The one, malicious and spiteful, who derived pleasure in tormenting the most innocent of creatures. The other, profoundly humane and caring, who, despite danger to himself, came ever behind, righting the wrongs, easing the suffering. Even as a small lad, Lyting took it upon himself to rectify our half brother's cruelties. Like you with your herbs, love, he was a healer of sorts, tending the injuries of animals he found callously brutalized and left to die—putting them from their misery only when faced with no other choice. That

deeply affected him. He deplored the senselessness of it all.

“As he grew in height and strength, he aided those children younger, pitting himself against our half brother with varying results. Not all the scars he bears were gained that night he defended you, *ástin mín*, though most were inflicted by the same one’s blade.”

Seeing the pain that creased Brienne’s features, Rurik drew her against him and stroked her hair.

“Now Lyting wishes to right the ills of Normandy wrought by our kindred. Never was he part to their plunderings in Francia. He arrived shortly after the king concluded his treaty with Rollo. Lyting was swift to embrace Christ’s cross from the first. Far quicker than I,” he added with a smile.

Brienne tipped her face upward and searched Rurik’s face. “Then you think Lyting *should* enter Corbie?”

“I simply trust his judgment.”

Brienne’s lips parted to speak, but he placed a finger there. “*Ástin mín*, Lyting must follow his own heart’s calling.”

Brienne gave a smile and small nod of agreement.

“Now, love”—Rurik’s eyes glowed softly—“shall we discuss my brother the day long or avail ourselves of the fine new mattress of eiderdown that awaits us within?”

He trailed kisses over her temple, cheek, and jaw and teased her lips apart. “I would favor a set of daughters to match our sons,” he whispered against her mouth, then drew her into a deep, intoxicating kiss.

Brienne melted into Rurik, her passion climbing to meet his. Vaguely she felt her feet leave the earth and herself lifted high, deliciously weightless in the power of his arms. Without breaking their kiss, Rurik carried her toward the *hus*.

Crossing through the portal, Brienne caught a last glimpse of the silver lime, sparkling and winking on a breeze. As it passed from sight, she wondered hazily where the “heart’s calling” would lead her noble brother-in-law.



A fire burned in Lyting’s soul. He traveled the streets of Hedeby—north to south, east to west five times over and five times more. Pace unabating, he drove himself on, a boil of argument.

Mounting the steep ladder to the crown of defense works, he circled the town once, twice, thrice. At last he halted and braced his hands against the low timbered wall.

Below spread that small portion of the world that was Danmark, stretching forth to the grayed rim of the horizon. Lyting focused on the distance. He skimmed the muted line where sky met earth, then allowed his thoughts to slip past and continue on with mind’s sight across the heath.

Southward rose the great Danevirke severing Danmark from Frisia and the East Frankish kingdom. Farther to the south and somewhat west lay Francia, his adopted homeland. There he committed himself by sword and by oath, the sum of his days for three years passing contained in a single word—Valsemé. Another name waited there to encompass his future—that of Corbie.

Lyting moved along the battlement to gaze westward. Across a short portage the rivers Rheide, Treene, and Ejder flowed into one another and connected to the North Sea—once his battlefield. Beyond that vast body, lay the land of the Saxons and the isle of the Celts. From those fertile shores came the maid of fire and beauty to haunt him with her golden-brown eyes.

On he strode atop the great earthen mound, past the towers and woodworks. He paused to

gaze northward, reaching across time and distance with heart's memory to the magnificent blue waterways of the Limfjord and the place of his birth. There was he formed and nurtured. There did he grow to manhood.

At what age had he realized that Limfjord did not hold his future? When had he first perceived that his destiny lay apart from her? And yet, Lyting mused, when he sought to journey east, he found himself west. And when he thought to return to the family's holdings in north Jutland, his father bid him south to Normandy. He had not returned since.

At length Lyting came to stand and look eastward. He tarried a while, arrested by the light fracturing the surface of the Schlei as it coursed slowly toward the Baltic. Across that near-tideless sea lay the passage to Byzantium.

Lyting closed his hands to fists. Where did his destiny abide now? Where in God's holy truth did the Almighty intend that he serve?

Guilt rode him. He chastised himself for not having offered at once to sail in his brother's stead for Constantinople. Purposely he held back. Underlying his impulse to aid Rurik was his increasing obsession with the maid of Eire. 'Twas the thought of her that spurred him to voice his willingness to undertake the journey. In truth, the words nearly tripped from his tongue. But if last night's dreams be counted, his motives were not so high-minded. His first act of the day was spent, not on bent knee in prayer, but in the icy river, quenching the passions kindled in sleep, quelling their obvious effect.

Saints breath! What madness possessed him? The girl belonged to Skallagrim. *Skallagrim*, he emphasized sternly. And the chieftain commanded a *drakkar* of warriors eager to safeguard her from all, including himself.

Did he imagine to join the convoy and keep guard of her on the journey east? To what end? To see the maid safely into the arms of the Byzantine? Or, mayhap, escape with her into the mountains, forests, or grasslands—all crawling with fierce barbarians?

And what of Rurik's missive to the empress Zoë and young Constantine? 'Twould still need to be delivered. Still necessary to reach Miklagård and hazard the reprisal of his choleric kinsmen.

Lyting tossed back his mane of hair and set his face to the heavens.

Mayhap 'twas all a testing. Brother Bernard warned that the path of the religious be an onerous one, beset with many trials, most especially those of the flesh.

From the first, he resolved he would embrace the devout life only if confident he could honor the requisite vows. He would not live a lie. To that end, he self-imposed his own trials and took up the practice—*nei*, the cross—of celibacy.

"God's mercy," Lyting muttered suddenly aloud, frustration shunting through him. He thought he had mastered his earthly desires. Yet, since arriving in Hedeby, he had spent most of his hours concerned with the girl, either standing watch in alleys or taking long swims. He felt weary, embattled—spirit and flesh warring within.

Lyting closed his eyes, drew a breath, and steadied his thoughts.

Rurik gave no indication that he would ask him to delay his entry into Corbie and voyage east. Certainly, he was the logical choice due to their ties of kinship and his training in the language and court formalities. Still, others were capable of the task. They need only make contact with Koll—if he be yet alive—or the Varangians. Rurik could supply names and directives. There also remained the possibility that his brother would choose to return to the imperial city himself.

Depleted by his hours of roaming and arguing in endless circles with himself, Lyting headed

toward the ladder and began to descend. Stefnir came to mind.

If Skallagrim joined the raiders solely for quick plunder, as Stefnir had said, then it stood to reason that few, if any, of the *Wind Raven's* crew would sail with the chieftain for Byzantium—only the merchantmen among them, and not all those would be destined for Miklagárd.

Hakon would for a certainty.

Lyting halted as his foot met with solid ground. If Stefnir's words be true, Hakon purposed to defy his uncle and possess the maid for himself.

Lyting steeled himself, his warrior's blood stirring in the well of his soul.

Corbie had stood for centuries and would remain for many more, he reasoned. Certainly, 'twould be there the day he sought her door.

But time ran short for the child emperor and his mother. And for the beautiful maid of Eire.



Lyting swept through the portal of the *hus* and into the *skali*, a swirl of cloak and energy.

Ketil and Aleth looked up from where they sat on the side floor, playing a game of draughts. Brienne paused in bathing the children, and Rurik turned where he stood before the hearth. On a small, scarred bench next to him the parchment from Dyrrachium lay open.

Lyting crossed the hall, his bearing charged with power and purpose. Picking up the document, he raised his eyes and met Rurik's gaze directly.

"On the day you became baron, *broðir*, I plighted you my sword oath. Faithfully have I served you, and faithfully do I serve you still. I seek no release from my vow, nor shall I till the day I commit myself to Corbie."

He drew a breath and straightened his stance, resolute in his course.

"By your leave, I shall sail in your stead. I shall deliver your message to Byzantium."

Lyting closed his hand to a fist and struck it over his heart. "By *bouche et des mains*," he reaffirmed his sworn vow, "I am your man."

Ailinn sat quietly upon the fur pelts at the foot of Skallagrim's bed and watched the chieftain as he conversed with one of his men at the portal of the house.

She remembered the man with his coppery hair and brownish beard. Remembered him from the Norsemen's harrowing invasion of the bridal chamber so many weeks ago.

When the man turned and departed, Thora scuffled from her stool by the loom and prodded Skallagrim with questions. At the chieftain's response, she drew her substantial dimensions to full height, paused for the space of a heartbeat, then stirred the hall to motion.

Ailinn fought the urge to shrink back as Thora made an undeviating line toward her, Skallagrim's key in hand, and unshackled her from the bed. At once Thora set her to work, filling extra lamps with oil and wicks and dispersing them about the room.

Trunks were next opened, three in all. Out came brightly embroidered pillows and additional furs to furnish the raised side-floors, then glasswares, carved platters, and drinking horns with silver rims.

Hakon arrived amid the whirl of activity. He remained just outside the door at first and exchanged words with Skallagrim. Moments later he stepped inside.

Ailinn bristled. 'Twas the first time Hakon showed himself at the house since his earlier attack on her. She saw that the cut above his eye had scabbed over, its dark crust in contrast to the angry red flesh swelling beneath.

As Hakon's eyes drew to hers, Ailinn diverted her gaze. She held her attention rigidly to her present task—draining crimson berries from their tub of water and transferring them to a large wooden bowl.

Hakon advanced deeper into the hall, moving unavoidably close in the confines of the room. It was all Ailinn could do to brace herself against the sudden assault of emotions—anger, hatred, bitterness, and fear pounding through her. Just as Hakon reached her, Thora motioned him over and directed him to mount a wide strip of tapestry across the end wall. Ailinn silently vented her relief.

Meanwhile, Thora proceeded to replace the panels of cloth that overlay her gown with fresh ones. Likewise, she exchanged the large oval brooches at her shoulders for a more elaborate pair and suspended strings of glass and amber beads between them, bringing a scowl from Skallagrim. But Ailinn observed that the chieftain had changed his tunic as well and now wore a finely wrought neck ring of polished silver about his throat.

Hakon made no such efforts and took up a place on the settle near the open fire pit to drink a cup of ale. Ailinn thought he looked to sit beneath a dark cloud, so grim was his cast.

At Thora's hurried bidding, Ailinn filled bowls with clotted cream and placed them on a tray with the berries. Thora rushed to arrange platters of food, her tongue and temper sharpening. When Ailinn failed to understand her latest dictate, it brought an angry shout. But Thora restrained her hand as it pulled upward, obviously mindful of Skallagrim and the rewards of his displeasure.

Ailinn kept her gaze from the discolorations along Thora's neck and arms, and dared not draw attention to herself—to the bodice of her gown where Thora's forced handiwork rejoined

the jagged tear, or to Murieann's coveted girdle which now lay upon her own hips by Skallagrim's command.

Hostility flashed like heat lightning in the depths of the Norsewoman's eyes as Ailinn continued to stand unmoving. Thora took Ailinn by the arm and propelled her to the far end of the hearth. There, she drove her to her knees and left her cooking oatcakes on the stone slab that spanned the hearth's width.

Ailinn exhaled, thankful for the respite. As she turned the little cakes, she wondered for the first time what had prompted the hasty preparations. But before she could ponder it, Hakon shifted his position into the fringe of her vision. Ailinn tensed. Calmly he drew on his cup, reclining on the very spot where, earlier, he sought to violate her.

A knock sounded upon the door, solid and sure.

Ailinn lifted her gaze as Skallagrim moved toward the portal. Thora ceased her bustlings to quickly brush back her hair. Hakon rose slowly to full height. He fixed his stance, feet spread shoulder-width apart, his weight in his heels. Anticipation layered the air. Ailinn found that she, too, held her breath as Skallagrim drew wide the door.

Her eyes rounded. Upon the threshold stood a magnificent-looking man, golden of hair, impressive in stature, and richly dressed. A man of station and consequence. She whispered a glance over his features. Features that were strongly familiar. . . .

Without pause he stepped apart from the door, exposing a second man to view and allowing him forth.

Ailinn's heart leapt wildly as the Dane with starbright hair filled the portal. His entrance brightened the very room itself, sending the shadows to scurry into every crack and corner that the hall possessed.

Ailinn's mouth went dry as his eyes skimmed to hers—a nearly imperceptible motion that he accomplished in the course of his turn to address Skallagrim. The look might have been viewed as a glance to Hakon or Thora, yet his eyes touched hers for one stolen instant, setting her heart and hope on wing.

Had he come for her? Her thoughts skittered and her pulse livened. Mayhap God in His Heaven had not forgotten her after all.

Reason cautioned that the man could have come on any number of matters. Cautioned that, even if he did seek her purchase, he was no more than a murderous heathen like those who had seized her—a barbaric Norseman with a sword's sting upon his cheek—no doubt harsh and cold-blooded.

But her heart ceased to listen as she envisioned the Dane as she'd seen him earlier that day at the river. His affectionate enjoyment of the children and his caring way with them disputed a more violent image.

Ailinn looked to the two men once more. Brothers. They must be brothers, for they favored each other with a powerful resemblance. Both were similar in age, height, and build—warriors, the two of them— one silver, one gold.

Ailinn stayed her thoughts as the men moved toward the hearth with Skallagrim. Conscious of their towering nearness, she gave her attention to the browned cakes and began removing them to a platter.

Above her the introductions and courtesies continued. Thora consumed the men with hungry eyes. She pushed forward of Hakon, smiling and gabbling, eager for Skallagrim to present her. A jarringly girlish laugh escaped her when he did.

Hakon remained lodged in his stance as the chieftain gestured toward him with an open hand

and spoke his name in introduction. A pause followed. The golden man acknowledged Hakon with what seemed a spare but formal greeting. The silver warrior made no response.

Ailinn raised her eyes and found the Dane's gaze hardened over Hakon's swollen features. He flicked a glance to Thora, keen to her bruises, then bent his gaze to her, where she knelt at the hearthstone.

Ailinn heated as his eyes traveled over her breast, tracing the entire length of uneven stitches that reached from the neck of her gown nearly to her waist. His gaze turned glacial. In a breath his eyes skimmed over her, questing for marks upon her flesh. Finding none, he shot a look back to Hakon, arrow-swift. The two faced each other without word—Hakon bearing challenge in his posture; the white Dane contemptuous, hard-eyed, piercing Hakon to the marrow with his frigid gaze.

Thora moved off, then returned a moment later with a large cream-colored jar with red markings. She initiated a light chatter as she prepared to present the wine. At the same time she motioned for Ailinn to rise from her place and aid with the drinking horns.

The tension in the air dissipated somewhat. Thora continued to smile and direct a genial flow of words toward her visitors. Yet, when Ailinn met her eyes, she found flames kindled in their depths. 'Twas as though Thora blamed her for drawing the silver warrior's disfavor down upon herself and Hakon.

Taking up two of the ornamented horns, Ailinn waited as Thora filled them with a rich garnet wine. Visibly pleased with the offering, Thora relieved her of one of the vessels and turned to the golden man.

Of the two men he looked to be the older and the one who held title—a lordly figure among Norsemen. The lavish gold brooch at his shoulder and gem-studded buckle at his waist spoke of great wealth.

Were they brothers of royal blood, mayhap?

Her brows flinched downward, for the man's image did not fit this place somehow. She snatched another glimpse. His attire was a mixture of exquisite Nordic jewelry and clothes that were . . . Frankish?

Ailinn blinked. His raiment was much as Bergette once described, both in words and in pictures scratched out upon the earthen floor in her stepuncle's hall. Ailinn pondered this as her eyes slipped over the cross-garters that bound his legs, then drew to the cut of his cloak. The fabric of his tunic could easily be the famed Frisian cloth of the East Franks. Deep blue in color, like that of a midnight sky, the tunic carried a border of gleaming falcons about its hem.

With a sudden flash, Ailinn recalled the two women who had accompanied the white Dane on the previous day when first she encountered him and he sought her purchase. She strove to retrieve the details from memory, but Thora disrupted her thoughts as she grasped the second horn and took it from her hands.

Ailinn's gaze followed the Norsewoman, trailing to the bright-haired Dane while Thora offered him the wine. His garments were Norse in style, unembellished with simple body-skimming lines. Again, the fabric was superior in weave, the same weave as the brother's.

Ailinn's gaze slipped higher, colliding at once with the Dane's brilliant blue eyes, so intense and penetrating. She gasped at the contact and dropped her gaze to the floor.

Heat swept a path over her throat and cheeks. Her heart began to hammer and her hands shake as she took up the remaining vessels and held them for Thora to fill. To Ailinn's dismay, the wine spilled over the rims.

Thora bit out a string of chastisements on a low, tethered breath. Stern-faced, she wiped the

dripping horns, then gave them over to Skallagrim and Hakon. Rounding on Ailinn, she motioned her away.

Ailinn strove to clear her thoughts. She continued to cling to a small reed of hope as she took up the tray of berries and cream at Thora's command. Had the Dane come for her? Should she dare pray that he did?

She scoured her mind for what Bergette once told her of the Norse conquests in Francia. She sorely wished now that she'd given the tales closer attention. Foremost, she recalled Bergette's fuming protest of the Northmen's treaty with the Frankish king. They now ruled in *Francia*—*Normanni*, her nursemaid called them—their domain no less than a duchy, their rough-hewn leader no less than a duke.

Bergette had scoffed that barbarians should be granted fief and title. Unlike Eire, where Northmen erected new settlements on Irish soil and installed their own kings, in Francia the Norse were part of the Frankish nobility itself. Despite her nursemaid's sharp opinion, Ailinn thought some wisdom lay in that. Better to yoke Norse prowess to preserve the rightful throne than allow new kingships to take root and war against the old.

Were these men Normanni then? her thoughts circled back.

Thora nudged Ailinn to take up the platter of hearth cakes and follow her. This she did, bringing along with it the tray with the berries. Her heart quickened and her senses sharpened. How she longed to flee this place and escape the hands of Thora, Hakon, and the unfathomable chieftain, Skallagrim. Surely, her fate with the silver warrior could be no worse than the one she already faced. Indeed, she believed it would be much improved.

Keenly alert, Ailinn waited with Thora while the men settled themselves. Skallagrim offered his great carved seat to the golden lord, then assumed a smaller chair for himself. The white Dane and Hakon took up places on the raised side-floors, directly opposite each other.

Thora proffered her offering of meats and breads. Disappointingly, it passed untouched, though Hakon motioned for more wine. While the Norsewoman stepped apart to retrieve the jar, Ailinn presented her tray to the golden man.

He spoke with the chieftain, his voice deep and rich. She glanced over him, observant to every detail and whatever she might glean. Unexpectedly he lifted his eyes and met hers. Steel blue. They held recognition in their depths. 'Twas as though he knew of her and now compared her to those reports.

Ailinn withdrew her gaze, marking the cleft he bore in his chin. The dark-haired children sprang to mind. They owned like indentations upon their little chins, and their indistinguishable eye color could easily have been the same as his. One of the Frankish women, Ailinn remembered, possessed ebony tresses—the one that was so exceedingly fair.

Ailinn's heart skipped several beats as she turned to serve Skallagrim. Perhaps the woman was this man's wife, not the other's. An effusion of fresh energy washed through her. She sought to scan the golden lord's hand for a ring, but Thora prompted her to serve the others.

Ailinn's breath grew shallow as she moved before the silver warrior and offered him her tray. His eyes reached up to hers and enwrapped her in that clear blue sea. A rush of excitement surged through her, for his gaze held a depth of unspoken words. Certainly he had come for her.

He continued to drink of her with his eyes as he spooned cream and berries onto an oatcake. Pinching up the sides, he took the treat and tasted it. She watched the line of his jaw and his beautifully carved lips as he ate. Again, she met his gaze. His expression revealed naught, though his eyes shined softly upon her.

Thora moved before the white Dane just then and bumped Ailinn aside with one large hip.

With a brusque nod of the head, she signaled for Ailinn to remove herself and serve Hakon.

Ailinn gripped the platter and tray tighter. Turning to Hakon, she avoided his eyes but felt his hard stare all the same. He swiped a single cake from the platter and tore it with his back teeth, then downed more wine. Hostility wreathed about him, envenoming the air.

Ailinn began to draw away, but Hakon trapped her wrist. The pressure of his fingers brought her eyes to his as he relieved her platter of another cake. Ailinn fought her revulsion, abhorring his touch. She thought to hear the silver warrior move, but Skallagrim's voice broke over the hall. Hakon released her as the chieftain ordered away the women and their trays.



Skallagrim gulped another mouthful of wine, wiped his mouth with his hand, and eyed the lord of Valsemé.

"My man, Stefnir Hranason, tells me you seek passage to Byzantium, Baron."

"*Satt*. True." Rurik nodded. "Though 'tis my *broðir* who will actually undertake the journey and sail in my stead."

"The monk?" the chieftain blurted, coming forward in his chair.

Lyting's brow skidded upward. He exchanged a swift, sharp glance with Rurik.

"He *is* to join the Christian priest-class, is he not?" A veiled look came into Skallagrim's eyes. "I have it on your friend's word—the great red-haired bear who serves you."

Lyting masked his surprise and rose to his feet. Facing the hoary chieftain, he pulled open the neck of his tunic and exposed a silver cross, gleaming against his chest.

Rurik played the moment, lacing his fingers together as though the chieftain tested his patience. "'Tis a private matter—a mission of grave importance that requires my brother to delay his entrance into the holy brotherhood. Lyting travels as my personal emissary to the very highest levels of the Imperial court."

Skallagrim elevated a brow, then settled back and sipped his horn, obviously wary, distrustful. "How grave? And how high?"

"None graver. None higher." Rurik held him with an unwavering gaze. "And potentially profitable to those who keep his company."

Skallagrim pared Lyting with a critical gaze. His glance slipped past to where his Irish prize stood behind the hearth, then to Hakon, who glared at the younger Atlison's back—when he wasn't sliding glances to the maid.

Skallagrim's jaw hardened at that, his teeth fusing to rock. He looked again to the girl, then fixed his eyes on the baron's brother. Suspicion perched in his eyes. He did not need another cock in the pen. Despite the silver that Atlison's passage would bring, he would not risk spoiling the girl. Hakon would be enough to manage.

"With respect, Baron, I, myself, am a man of considerable means and significant connections. To my thinking, 'tis your brother who stands to profit by *my* company and the transport I can provide. Of course, others can supply that as easily as I."

Skallagrim gave a shrug then leaned forward. "We sail in convoy to Kiev and on to Constantinople. Truth to tell, what with goods and slaves, I am already pressed for space. The *Wind Raven*, of course, is a warship, too large and fragile for the journey. She must be stored in Gotland. I shall take a lighter, clinker-built vessel from there and change that again in Kiev for a small but sturdy Slav boat that can withstand the rapids of the Dnieper. You can appreciate my limitations, Baron." Skallagrim opened his palm to the air. "I could, perhaps, take your brother as far as Gotland."

Lyting watched as Rurik allowed a mingling of impatience and displeasure to cross his face.

They had anticipated the chieftain's resistance and concurred that their best approach lay in appealing to the man's pride and greed. Lyting maintained his silent stance as Rurik's hand moved to this throat and drew on a thong that lay hidden beneath his tunic. He produced a small leather pouch. Slipping the strap over his head, Rurik did no more than hold the bag in sight, baiting Skallagrim.

"I know well of trade routes and ships—firsthand," Rurik emphasized tersely. "I also know how many men and goods each type of ship can hold," he dismissed Skallagrim's excuses. "What I seek is a seasoned voyager, one experienced with the particular perils that are inherent in traveling the Dnieper. My message *must* reach Miklagård and not fall fallow in the hands of nomadic tribesmen or lost to the bottom of the Dnieper."

Rurik gazed at him levelly. "Stefnir vows you are such a man for the task. To be plainspoken, I give credence to his word only because Lyting does. Stefnir is known to my brother from the years they fought in the king's service upon the seas, preserving Danmark."

Skallagrim's eyes sheered to Lyting, surprise firing them. Rurik pressed on. "I can compensate you with more than mere coin. Through my brother, you can gain access to the one above all who can grant the allowances you seek in the silk trade."

Before the chieftain could question how he came by such knowledge of him, Rurik spread open the bag's puckered mouth and plucked an enameled gold case from its confines. Skallagrim's eyes bulged as Rurik opened the box. Inside nestled a lustrous piece of cloth—silk of Imperial purple.

"'Tis death to the man who secrets silk from Miklagård!" Skallagrim exclaimed in an astonished breath. "But death most vile to any who would thief dye-goods of the emperor's purple. How did—?"

"I neither secreted nor thieved the silk," Rurik declared resolutely.

Extracting a single golden *solidii* from the royal wrappings, he held it up, exposing the coin's crisp image—a miniature portrait of the Imperial personage.

"'Twas the gift of Emperor Leo Sophos himself."

Skallagrim thumped back in his chair, clearly astonished. A sudden comprehension rippled through his eyes. He wet his lips. "There be tales that persist of a Varangian named Rurik—one of ours, a Dane, not a Swede—who won fame and riches by his daring and later traveled the Volga—"

"The same," Rurik acknowledged, cutting the chieftain short. Before Skallagrim could make further comment, Rurik dangled before him the prize pearl of temptation.

"If you would know, I send my brother to hold audience with the dowager empress, herself."

"Zoë?" Skallagrim near choked with awe.



Ailinn grew restive, unable to comprehend anything of what transpired among the men. She continued to pray desperately that the white Dane had come for her.

Skallagrim had appeared guarded, even quarrelsome, at first. She could not see what the tall Dane revealed to him, for his back confronted her like a wall. But the chieftain's entire countenance and manner altered when the lord brought forth an ornamented box which yielded a golden coin and scrap of purple cloth. Mayhap these men were royals after all.

Her thoughts snapped back as Skallagrim called for more wine. Thora hastened to serve them while the chieftain and the golden lord continued to speak, their words falling in agreeable tones. Meanwhile, the silver warrior resumed his place on the side-floor and readjusted his tunic. Hakon's ill temper continued to smolder visibly, darkening his cast.

Thora fawned over her guests, her excitement saturating the air. Ailinn's heart began to pound solidly once again as Thora motioned for her to bring the trays of cakes and berries.

Had the men struck a bargain, then? Forged some agreement and settled their affairs? Would she be free of this detestable place in the coming moments, trading one future for another?

Ailinn's hands trembled as she stepped before the silver warrior and looked openly into his eyes. She must know. Surely she could read something there. But as their gazes touched, Thora jostled her with a hip, forcing her aside and causing Ailinn to lose her hold on one tray.

It flipped upward, sending a shower of berries into the warrior's lap and a splattering of cream across Thora's nose, mouth, and chest. The bowls and tray clattered noisily to the floor, followed by an enraged screech from Thora. Impulsively the Norsewoman drew back and directed a blow at Ailinn.

Lightning swift, the silver warrior bolted to his feet, blocking Thora's attack with one hand while sweeping Ailinn behind him with the other. Hakon, likewise, bounded to his feet and drew on his sword. But before the steel left its scabbard, the white Dane's blade flashed before him.



Rurik drove from his chair and reached for his hilt, but Skallagrim stayed him.

The chieftain remained seated. Tenting his fingers, he contemplated the scene. His gaze shifted between Lyting and Hakon, then he smiled with satisfaction deep in his beard. Mayhap Atlison *was* the answer to his needs after all. The baron's brother would bring silver to his coffer, audience with the Byzantine empress, and the perfect counterbalance to his most immediate problem—Hakon.

"Lord Rurik, I believe my ship can carry another after all." He squinted an eye over Lyting for one final estimation. "He returns to confine himself to a monastery, you say?"

"The holy brothers prepare his place even now at Corbie."

"Christians," Skallagrim grunted, though obviously content with the answer as he drained the ale from his horn.



The bright-haired Dane and Hakon remained fixed in their stances, steel gleaming in their hands, challenge burning in their eyes. Ailinn clung to her protector, her breasts pressing into his back. She trembled against him as firelight danced along the blades. For one blood-chilling moment she relived her first encounter with Hakon when he burst into the bridal chamber and reaped death at her feet.

She squeezed her lashes shut against the memory, sinking her fingers deeper into the Dane's garments. Desperately she prayed that he would take her from this place and now.

Skallagrim's voice rolled across the room. She heard Thora move off, then the scraping of Hakon's sword as he returned it with measured slowness to its scabbard.

The Dane continued to secure her against himself, his left arm and hand curved back, his long fingers pressed against the curve of her spine. He waited until Hakon had fully resheathed his blade before he restored his own.

Ailinn felt his weight shift and his arm relax. He began to turn and their bodies parted. Cool air rushed between them. Yet, when the Dane's eyes sought hers, Ailinn felt a liquid warmth spread through her, heating her to her toes.

Skallagrim's voice rumbled loudly, dispelling the sensation. Ailinn glanced to the chieftain. Her heart pitched when he motioned for her to withdraw to the pallet at the back of the hall. Anxious, she looked to the white Dane, seeking some sign—any sign—that she should stay by

his side.

His gaze held hers, his expression intense, unreadable. Then his lashes dipped and brushed his cheeks. She thought to hear frustration in the breath he released. He raised his clear blue eyes and with a scant nod of his head indicated that she should obey Skallagrim's order.

Ailinn's spirits plunged. Reluctantly she stepped apart, longing for all the world to remain in the stronghold of his shadow, dreading he might leave her here.

She calmed herself as she traversed the room. Mayhap there yet remained matters the men must discuss, arrangements to complete. Thrice had the white Dane appeared in her life—the first and second times by chance, true, but the third with purpose. She felt an unwavering certainty that his visitation this night would affect the course of all of her tomorrows.

Ailinn assumed her place at the foot of Skallagrim's bed and waited, attentive to the men's every gesture and utterance. She held fast to her fragile hopes as the golden lord and Skallagrim rose from their chairs and locked forearms, sealing their bargain. The chieftain turned and clasped the silver warrior's arm as well.

Hope burgeoned as Skallagrim accepted several plump pouches, presumably filled with coin. But could a slave bring such wealth? she wondered, disbelieving any could. The doubt nettled, and her heart tripped a little. Still, she eased toward the edge of the raised side-floor, prepared to spring to her feet and leave at the first sign.

The men conversed a moment longer and drank a final toast from the ornamented horns—all except Hakon, who brooded nearby. Ailinn twisted the fur robe beneath her fingers, then rose to her knees and gripped hold of the bed's carved end post when the three moved toward the door.

Had they forgotten her? Her nails stabbed the wood. She fixed her gaze on the brothers where they stood waiting while Skallagrim drew open the door. The grievous truth crushed down upon her as the men began to depart. The silver warrior had not come for her.

Ailinn's heart plummeted, despair overtaking her. She watched, disconsolate, as the golden lord passed through the door and the white Dane stepped to the portal.

He hesitated upon the threshold and looked back. Their gazes met and held across the room. He then turned and was gone, taking with him his shining presence and her last ray of hope. Ailinn thought her heart would crack.

She sank onto the furs, fighting back her welling tears, tasting sharply of her aloneness. The pull at her ankle cuff and the clank of chains roused her from her gloom. She found Skallagrim shackling her to his bed. A chill passed through her. She was truly forsaken—cursed and condemned—to the hands of this brutish man and his murderous kin.

Later, Ailinn lay awake upon the furs while Thora snored on her pallet and Skallagrim tossed in his sleep. Hakon no longer occupied the hall.

Through the opening beneath the eaves, she silently viewed the stars—silvery points of light illuminating a world plunged to darkness.

Ailinn's thoughts drifted to the white Dane. How could she have been so wrong? Yet, he protected her. But then he left her.

A single tear cascaded over her cheek, followed by another and another. Truly, God *had* abandoned her. There would be no escape from Thora, or Hakon, or the inscrutable Skallagrim.

She could not think on the days that yet lay before her—however many, however few. She no longer possessed her own life. She was the chieftain's slave. By all that she could garner, he had already set the seal upon her fate.

Bereft of hope, Ailinn looked to the stars in the heavens and braced herself for the coming dawn.



Lyting lingered a time with Rurik, a short distance from Thora's *hus*.

It had taken a supreme force of will to compel his feet to move and leave the maid within. Such pain cleaved her eyes, imploring that he not abandon her there. Her look lanced straight through his heart and lodged in his soul.

Despite Skallagrim and Hakon, he vowed to win her free and shelter her beneath his protection. When he sailed from Byzantium, 'twould be with the maid of Eire.

"Do you come now, *broðir*?" Rurik asked for a second time.

Lyting dragged his attention from the direction of the *hus* and found Rurik regarding him with an inquisitive gaze. "*Nei*, I keep watch tonight."

"I thought Audun and Magnus—" Rurik halted midsentence, comprehension breaking in his eyes.

He pressed his lips to a thoughtful line. Reaching inside his tunic, he took hold of the leather pouch and drew it forth, then slipped the strap over his head. Rurik gave over the bag with its valued contents to Lyting.

"It gladdens me to know that matters are in such capable hands." Esteem reflected in his eyes. "*Gott kvöld, broðir*. Good night. I will see you on the morrow."

Rurik smiled and departed, heading back along the walk toward the lodgings where his family awaited.

Lyting placed the thong and pouch around his neck, then stepped to the familiar passageway. On impulse he looked up to the starry heavens and thought of the autumn-fire maid. Then, enfolding himself in his great mantle and covering his bright hair, he melted into the shadows and took up his vigil.



In the chill of early morning, while the skies yet slumbered overhead, Ailinn hastened to keep pace with Skallagrim along the dark and timbered streets.

She knew this moment would come. Dreaded it. And now its yoke was upon her.

For three days passing she and Thora had prepared provisions for a journey—barrels of salt fish, hard-baked bread, tubs of cheese and berries. They worked long, filling skins with water and casks with ale. Skallagrim brought forth furs, seal hides, and walrus ivory from storage. He sorted, counted, and bundled. Together, he and Hakon removed the goods and foodstuffs from the hall. The time of waiting was at an end.

Ailinn braced herself as the future rushed into the present, and Skallagrim led her to her fate.

The day yawned awake and the skies paled as Ailinn and the chieftain emerged from the last cluster of houses and reached the harbor. Crossing the wharf, they continued on.

A crisp breeze played over Ailinn as she looked up. Her gaze drew to the end of the pier, then turned cold. Directly ahead waited the great serpent ship that had borne her here. The monster-headed prow gleamed with the morning's light, its grin frozen in time by the wood-carver's art.

Ailinn's stomach wrenched to think she must board the ship once more. Where now? she wondered. To what desolate, unconsecrated corner of the world would it deliver her?

She kept close to Skallagrim as they wended their way amid the activity on the dock. Men moved in a continuous flow, to and from the ship, unloading barrels and crates.

Aboard, a clutch of crewmen raised the mast, then slotted and secured it in place. Several dispersed to attach the rigging. Ailinn's steps faltered, for there, fitting a mast line to the bow,

stood the Dane with star-bright hair.

Ailinn forgot to breathe, surprise overtaking her and something akin to joy.

She watched as he wiped his brow and moved to affix two more lines to the side of the ship. He looked different. More handsome, if possible, less barbarous. His mane of hair had been trimmed to shoulder length.

Heat climbed her cheeks as he raised his eyes to hers. She blamed it on the warming rays of the sun but could not explain the explosion of fire within.

Skallagrim prodded her forward, across a narrow, ridged plank and onto the vessel. Conducting her toward the bow, he chained her to the empty shield rack that ran along the outside rail and left her there.

Ailinn waited. Time and again, her attention strayed to the white Dane. She guarded her interest, fearing the chieftain's unpredictable response. Yet impulse warred with wisdom, and try though she did, she could not wholly keep her eyes from the silver warrior.

With the spar set and sail lashed in place, the men lowered the piece, bracing it above the decking on three upright supports, spaced down the center of the ship. With that complete, the chieftain relocated Ailinn to the mast, where he chained her as he had on the previous voyage.

Ailinn shifted to find a comfortable position, the boards hard beneath her, the irons weighing heavily upon her leg. She glanced out over the water, then to the gulls reeling and screaming above. Finally she returned her gaze townward and drew it along the shoreline and dock.

Ailinn stilled as she beheld a group of slavewomen there, being herded toward the ship.

She rose, buttressing herself against the mast as she recognized some among them to be maids of Eire, seized in the raid on Clonmel. She bit her lip and studied each one. At the site of Hakon to the rear of the group, her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a cry. With him he brought Deira and Rhiannon.

An eternity passed before her stepcousins finally boarded, but at last they came within arm's length, and crying out, the three clung to one another with fierce joy. Hakon growled to quiet the women as he shackled them together at the mast.

Ailinn wiped her tears, then gave Rhiannon's arm another squeeze and took Deira's face between her palms.

"Merciful God, I thought never to see you again." She swept a searching glance over the other captives and returned her gaze. "Do you know what has become of Lia?"

Pain weighed Deira's brow, and the light died in her eyes. Ailinn knew with surety, Lia had been sold. An aching sadness clutched at her heart.

"Was it Arabs who made her purchase?"

"*Ní hea*. 'Twas a great Norse devil," Rhiannon stated with contempt for their kind. "By now he has taken her far from this place."

Ailinn swallowed the lump that rose in her throat and said a brief prayer for gentle Lia.

While the sun still climbed the early morning skies, Skallagrim ordered for the mooring lines to be cast off and the oars set to the water.

The ship glided from the dock—an imposing sight with its high, sweeping lines and the bright-colored shields, now hung along the sides from prow to stern.

As the vessel slid across the harbor, Ailinn looked to the white Dane where he plied his strength to a long, oaken oar. Of a sudden he directed his attention past the crew and ship and back to the quayside. A brilliant smile broke over his face—a startling slash of white across sun-deepened features. Ailinn's heart leaped in its place.

Giving herself a firm mental shake, she followed his gaze to the wharf. There, a man and

woman waved in farewell. Ailinn looked again. 'Twas the golden lord and the Frankish lady. They stood intimately close, their sides pressed together, each holding a dark-haired babe.

The lord trailed off his wave and lowered his hand to the lady's hip. The gesture left no doubt in Ailinn's mind. 'Twas the golden lord who was wed to the lady of Francia, not his brother.

But what of the second Frankish woman? She scanned the wharf and piers but did not see her. Ailinn puzzled that. Surely if she was the white Dane's wife, she would wish to see him away. Ailinn's brow fluttered upward. Mayhap the other lady was not bound to him, either.

She surveyed the wharf a final time, then caught herself. Why should it matter? she admonished herself. He was a Norseman. For whatever reason God ordained that their lives should continue to cross, and regardless that he seemed preferable to any of his kind, she must never forget the blood that flowed in his veins.

As the dragonship slipped through the palisaded gates, Skallagrim ordered that the great, square sail be hoisted and unfurled to the wind. Ailinn tasted the exhilaration that swept through the men, her own mounting as they coursed the wide waterway. She gave herself to the moment—the steady swell and dip of the ship; the stiff, moist breeze buffeting her cheeks and tossing her hair in a fiery dance; the creak of wood and snap of sail; the faint saltiness to the air. Above, sea-swallows followed in their wake, and along the river, beech trees leafed to a pale green, gracing their passage.

Time slipped past unmarked until hours later they gained upon the mouth of the river. A tremor passed through Ailinn as she viewed the vast sea that lay ahead. Beyond its watery domain awaited her unnamed fate.

She took a swallow against the dread that weighted her soul. Ignoring her earlier thoughts, she looked to the silver warrior. He met her gaze at once as though sensing her need. She found strength there and solace. The distance between them diminished, crystal blue eyes encompassing the golden-brown depths of her own.

As their gazes coupled and held fast, the *Wind Raven* passed out of the River Schlei and into the deep-blue waters of the Baltic.

End of Sample

Author Biography



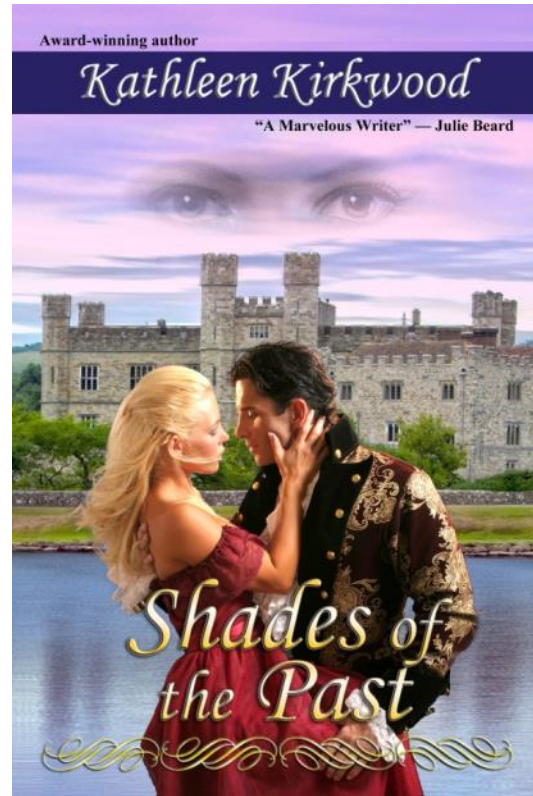
Kathleen Kirkwood is the pseudonym for award-winning, best-selling author Anita Gordon. Having an abiding love for history, she enjoys setting her stories in distant times and places long past. To date they include Medieval adventures and Late Victorian paranormal romances. After forty years of travels and raising children in various locations, Kirkwood and her husband have returned to the Southwest where they first met. Currently, she is dusting off and revising her backlist for release in digital and print format. She is also working on a new novel, a haunting tale set on the Chesapeake Bay and the shores of historic Southern Maryland. Look for ***Pirates' Moon*** in late 2013. Visit her at:

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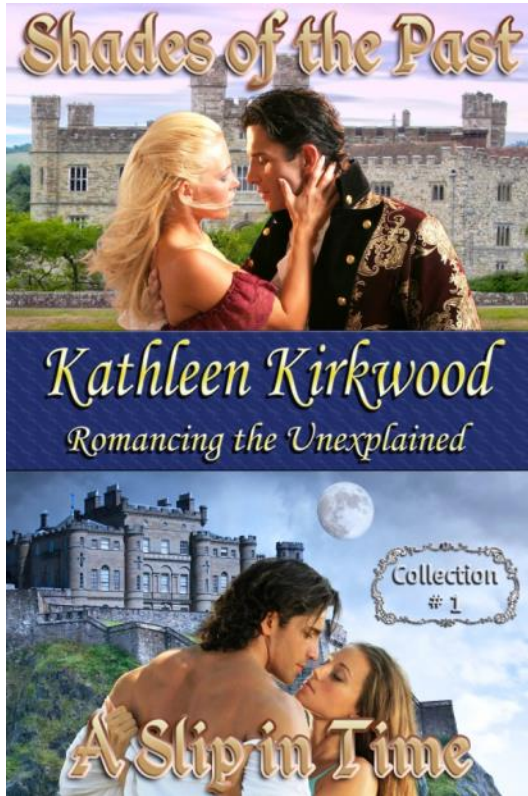


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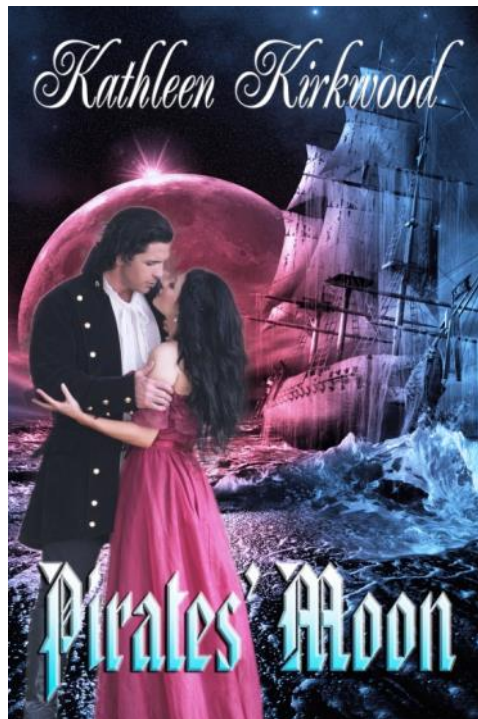
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