

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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TAKEN: A NORTHMAN'S SAGA Brannan Black

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

TAKEN: A NORTHMAN'S SAGA

By Brannan Black

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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TAKEN: A NORTHMAN'S SAGA

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Photo Description

He has long dark hair and a scruffy beard. His high cheekbones and lean face proclaim him a son of northern European lands. Piercing blue eyes stare out at you, full of sadness and menace, a warning to all. The hilt of a sword is just visible under his chin.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

They have burned his village, raped the women, taken the children. This is a fight his people have fought before, but this time it's different. They have taken his lover to torture and use against him. He is the one they want. But they have miscalculated... they took his soul when they hurt his lover. And a man without a soul will stop at nothing to get it back.

No paranormal please.

Sincerely,

Melissa

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: Viking-esque culture, established couple, slave, abduction, barbarians

Content warnings: graphic violence

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TAKEN: A NORTHMAN'S SAGA

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CHAPTER 1

Kolbrandr

Nothing warned us of the devastation we'd find as we rounded the point into the small bay that held our village. Black jagged posts stabbed the sky where our houses once stood. No children ran to greet us. No wives or sisters called a greeting. Dead silence, save for the soft shush of waves on the shore.

"Run her up the beach!" I snarled, my berserker rage a growing heat in my veins. Had any survived? Oden's beard! Renshu? Fear for my lover fed the fire of my rage. *Who did this?* By all the gods above and below, I would make them wish they had never been born!

The Sea Wolf scraped the beach with her keel. Long axe in my hand, I jumped into the shallow water heedless of my men scrambling to catch up. I had one thought, find Ren. Without him I was nothing but the berserker fire burning in my veins. A gift my father called it. I called it a curse until Ren helped me cage the mindless rage within me and taught me how to turn it to my advantage.

The stench of burned wood hung thick in the air. I inhaled deeply, berserker senses on high alert. Gods above! The faint smell of burned flesh reached me. Burned in the houses or funeral pyres? Surely not all of our village could have perished in the blackened bones of our houses? I surged up the beach toward the nearest source of the stench.

"Ware, Kol, they might lie in wait." My twin sister, Kolla's calm tone pulled me back from my blind fury. A deep, calming breath like Ren taught me filled my lungs with fetid air. I coughed but still managed enough control to let go some tension on the out breath.

The silence of the dead lay heavy on our village. The sloshing of boots in water and crunching up the pebbled beach echoed oddly. The low clouds cast the whole of our world in grey and black ash.

The ever-present sea breeze teased around the ruins making eerie hissing noises and the occasional bang of some loose board hitting another. Nothing else stirred. No hounds. No cats. No distant lowing of cattle.

Styrkarr set his hand against the blackened remains of the closest house. "It's cold. Could have been days since this happened or yesterday if they had a cold night."

We spread out, ready for any attack while we searched for signs of life or bodies left to rot where they fell. I headed straight for my longhouse, farthest from the bay and on a slight rise. The charred ribs of the ceiling, what little was left of them, lay crisscrossed over the remains of our home. Nothing could have survived such a fire.

The company gathered, grim and silent. "No signs?" Kolla had to ask. I held onto my sanity by mere threads. Speaking seemed beyond me now. I took several more deep breaths, Ren's voice reaching from my memory to coach me back from the edge.

"No bodies living or dead," Alarr reported. Hope dared to glint in a few eyes. Only the living honored the dead. Vultures and raiders would leave them lie where they'd fallen.

Caw! A rush of wings and the black of a raven deserted its place among the ruins. My head jerked up to follow its path, straight for the tree-covered hills. Which is where any survivors would have gone. *Please, father Oden, let my Renshu be among them!*

Heart in my throat, I stalked toward the woods. My men in a fighting formation at my back. Whoever did this might lie in wait to ambush us. Or we could find our families and loved ones safe in the shelter of the hills. Either way, we had to be ready.

Movement inside the trees caught my attention. I stopped and my company lined up in a shield wall, ready, eager even for a fight. Rikulata, Styrkarr's

wife and head of my hall, stepped out of the shadows. The sigh of our relief sounded loud in the otherwise quiet air.

Bruises covered her face and she held one arm pressed to her side. Her eyes stared at us full of fury, anger melded with sorrow in the lines of her face, the tightness of her stance.

Styrkarr shifted the barest bit next to me but didn't drop his guard. No matter how much he loved his wife, Styrkarr would stand beside me until we knew it was safe. If our enemies were still here, our best chance against them was as one fighting unit.

"Thane Kolbrandr, welcome home." The formal greeting sounded angry and bitter.

I wished I had Ren here, with his gift he could see if someone forced her to speak or if others lay in wait. I had only my gut instinct backed by my heightened senses. I sensed no immediate threat. "Rikulata, what happened here?"

"Ballung!" Turning slightly, she spat on the ground. "That hairless worm stormed our village. Killed any who stood against them, even the old. Took what they wanted and burned the rest. Took our children!" Her voice shook with anger but tears gathered in her eyes. Behind me, my men stirred but held silent. The spice of their anger mingled with their fear, filling my nose. "He said it was a message."

"What message?" I snarled.

"They..." She drew a deep breath, drawing herself up. "They raped our women and left us. So our men would know that following a boy-lover like you would bring a storm of true Northmen down on all they hold dear."

A muttering of righteous fury rose behind me, sweet music to the fire burning in my blood. Renshu, gods above I needed him to help me cool the fire, keep my temper. "Renshu?" Did I dare hope?

Her eyes narrowed. "That hairless worm knew what he is to you. They took him and the children old enough to travel to sell at the slave market at Kayetan's Crossing." She spat on the ground again. "They warned you not to follow or they'd kill them."

Rage roared hot, drowning me in berserker fire. What little control I'd had snapped like a dry twig under my boot. *Kill, I would kill them all and bathe in their blood!*

Kolla's calm voice broke through the haze in my mind. "This is what they want, Kol. For you to give in to the rage and hunt them blindly. You'll need more than your berserker strength to save them."

A maelstrom of hate tore at my very soul. No, I had no soul. They'd taken him. "I need him, Kolla." Even to my ears I sounded barely human. Gods above, I wanted their blood. My knuckles ached, I squeezed the haft of my long axe so hard. I needed Renshu, my heart, my soul.

"And you will have him but only if you don't give into the rage. Fight it, for Renshu. You are stronger than your fire. For Renshu, remember who you are." Her even tone and gentle voice broke through the furious roaring in my head.

How had a slave I'd captured last year come to mean so much to me? To hold my heart and soul in his delicate hands? From the beginning he'd soothed the berserker fire in me while stirring a lust for him I could barely control. At first, I had so little control I'd hurt him more than once.

I drew a deep breath. The memory of the pain I'd caused him cooled my fire faster than water thrown on a hearth. I would never be that monster again! I nodded to Kolla. Between her and Ren, I'd become nearly tame. Nearly.

"I'm going after them. They will pay a blood price for this insult."

"Thane Kolbrandr." Rikulata stepped forward, her swollen lips in a tight grimace. "Afridh headed for her father's. Thane Saxolf and his war hounds will be coming soon."

Styrkarr set a hand on my shoulder. "We should wait then. Gather a force and show that hairless cur once and for all..."

My snarl shut them all up. "Wait if you want. I'm going after what's mine." My control hung by the thinnest line. I didn't dare sit idle.

"Kol, we should wait," Styrkarr cautioned. "Ballung's men are well seasoned and he has other kin he can call on."

Rage threatened to overwhelm me again. My company knew well what that meant and backed off. "Stay if you want. But they have taken what's ours. Ravaged our women and burned our village! How can any of you wait? Does it not burn your veins as it does mine? Have you grown soft over the winter?"

My nostrils flared, taking in the sharp odor of shame. I pushed through my men, headed for the Sea Wolf.

Rikulata grabbed at my cloak. "Promise me you'll make them pay! Stake them down and pull out their guts and leave them to the buzzards."

Ah, how sweet that would be. "You have my word."

Styrkarr motioned me aside. "Kol, think this through. It could be a trap. They know you'll come after them and if they've any brain at all they'll set an ambush."

Reason. I didn't want to hear it at the moment but he was right. He clapped my shoulder, his eyes clearly seeing what darkness lay in my heart. "Let's just be smart, huh? Not get ourselves or our children and Ren killed? Yeah? Think what Renshu would tell you."

Oden's beard! Focus, breathe deep, let the fire flow but not control me. *I control my fire. I am in control.* Just like he taught me. I could do this. I would do this!

Kolla's smaller hand squeezed my other shoulder. "We'll get him back and the children. Then you can let loose on those hairless worms. But first, we need to plan."

My smile felt more like a grimace but I nodded. I turned back to the women. "Tell me everything that happened." A delay but a necessary one. Victory often came not to the better fighters but the better prepared.

Rikulata counted at least sixty men. They had come overland by horse in a rush, only taking time to set fire to the two farms in their way and scatter the farm's horses so they could not reach us with warning. The farm families had fled into the woods, making their way here only to find our village in flames. A few went to other farms, spreading the word. The rest hid in the hills with the surviving villagers.

By horse, they had a more direct route to Kayetan's Crossing, but the children would slow them. If the gods granted us good sailing, we'd beat them. More likely, we'd row a good stretch up the river. It'd be a close thing, but by Oden's beard I would not let those hairless worms get away with this nor let the village children be sold like cattle.

My control hung by a thread so I decided it best to work that energy off by heading overland, tracking Ballung and finding sneaky ways to slow them down. No few of my men looked relieved not to be stuck on a ship with an angry berserker.

Kolfrosta would head for Saxolf's to redirect him. She'd gather what aid she could then ride hard to catch up. The rest of my men would take the ship and make haste to set an ambush for Ballung.

The hunt gave me an outlet for the energy trapped inside me. Though even with the legendary strength of a berserker, I would be hard pressed to make up the two days they had on us.

CHAPTER 2

Renshu

Thundering hooves rose out of the mists of the morning. The twin buckets of water hanging from the pole across my shoulder spilled to the ground as screaming warriors fell upon our village like ravening wolves. In skilled hands, such a stout pole became the weapon my slave status denied me. A familiar fear cramped my stomach but I would defend this simple village that had become my home.

Using my special talent to see the colors of those around me, I had a scant few heartbeats to assess our attackers. I saw little fear and much blood lust. Hopefully their cockiness could be turned to our advantage. We held no hope of defeating these savages, not with Kol and his warriors away, but perhaps we could buy time for the mothers to get their children to the dubious safety of the woods. If it cost me my life, I would do what I could to protect my lover's people, slave collar or not.

A rider bore down on me, stained teeth bared in triumph, dirty blond hair flying wildly from under his helm. Foolish Northmen, they always assumed a small foreign-born man such as myself could scarce be a threat to them. I swept low, taking his horse's legs out from under him. I didn't turn to watch them crash into the side of the well but whirled to meet the next rider bearing down on me. The mist of color swirling around the next one turned an angry red. He would not be fooled my stature.

An old man, once a great warrior but bent with age, rushed to my side. The moment of satisfaction from having a warrior see me as worthy to fight beside died with the shower of his blood. Riders surrounded me now. I took another from his horse even as pain exploded across the back of my head.

I jerked awake, the screams of the injured and dying echoed in my mind. The stench of burned buildings clung to me like a shroud. Or maybe that was just horsehair stuck all over my face. I jerked my hands up to brush it away

only to find my hands were tied to a rope around the horse's neck, my feet secured to the stirrups. I vaguely remembered being tossed on and feeling nauseated before passing out again. Not my idea of fun waking up facedown over a horse's neck. The rise of its neck bumping my face with every stride.

However, the lords of Heaven had looked with favor on this lowly one; I still lived. I looked around. Lords of Heaven! I'd found a whole new low to sink to. Never in my days serving as a Yueji among the most honored nobles of the Emperor of Heaven had I imagined men such as these.

Men! Ha, pigs lived cleaner lives. The stink of unwashed bodies overrode the cleaner smell of horse sweat. Greasy hair hung in ragged braids down their backs. Lords of Heaven, my brethren of the East would faint dead away to see beards crusty with the remains of everything the savages had eaten in the last month. These men embodied every bad thing I'd ever heard about Northmen. So very unlike Kol and his people. Our people. Yes, our people, and I had responsibilities to them despite my status as a slave.

I twisted around, searching for other captives. *Demons of hell curse these savage monsters!* They had the village's children tied two to a horse behind me. I counted nine mounts. Wait, the last one had three younger ones. Nineteen of our precious children stolen by these soul-sick bastards. At least they had paired the younger children with older ones who could help keep them on the swiftly walking horses.

Josurr, pale blond hair wild about his head, was the oldest at twelve years old. In front of him was a blond-haired girl no more than seven or eight whose name I couldn't recall. All of them young enough to manhandle but old enough to be useful and most of them girls. With their light-colored hair and eyes, they would be exotic pets sold to heartless bastards that liked children in their beds. Or worse, to whorehouses where they wouldn't even have a gilded cage to ease their suffering.

It would be a cold day in the lowest level of the underworld before I let that happen. So far, they all looked in decent shape, no more than a few bruises here and there. Josurr sported a large bruise on his cheek. I bet he put up a good fight.

A swell of pride filled my chest; not one of them cried though they had to be scared. Most of the older ones looked sullen and angry. Sefa, with her golden hair and green eyes, met my gaze, offering me a wan smile. I had nothing to offer in return save a small acknowledging turn of my lips.

Feigning semi-consciousness came naturally. I'd learned the hard way to play up my weakness when surrounded by burly bullies. Around us spread a thick, wild looking forest of giant oaks and other leafy trees I didn't know the names of. Some brush pressed into the trail, narrowing it in places so only a single horse could pass at a time. Other areas spread open and we rode in a broad column.

As the day wore on, I didn't have to feign weakness. My head ached and my tender backside protested the long ride. I tried to conserve as much energy as I could. Eventually we would stop and I would need my wits about me if I had any hope of surviving. This I knew from experience.

Ever since I had been betrayed, and taken as a slave West, I had been shuffled or stolen from one ignorant master to another even worse. Until I ended up in these barbarian lands among the wildest of savages, Northmen. How surprising to find my lover, Kol and even more surprising that we could grow to love each other as we had.

The raiders rode hard until dark after attacking our village. Not that I blamed them. They had to know the kind of unholy, inhuman rage that dwelt in my lover. Or perhaps they counted on it. I recognized Ballung from last summer. He wore his lank, filthy, blond hair in a messy nest of thin braids bound together by a dark leather band. From the end of each braid dangled a glass or metal bauble of some kind. I'd yet to meet another who wore their hair like that.

He had challenged Kol last summer and been slapped down hard. This attack had to be revenge, though why he kept me alive instead of disemboweled for Kol to find I did not yet know. I did know that my lover would come for the children and me and when he did, much blood would flow.

The long swift ride did little to ameliorate the ache in my head, so I was grateful when we at last stopped. A foul-smelling savage cut the ropes holding my feet then yanked the rope binding my hands nearly toppling me from the mangy nag they'd tied me on. Before he could yank harder I slid off and into a bow far more suitable to the Imperial court than these wild lands.

Ballung's boot slammed into my shoulder, knocking me back. Men laughed, a few of the younger children cried. Maybe stopping wasn't such a good thing after all.

"Look at me, slave!" Ballung's voice held none of the strength that my master Kol's did.

I should be used to seeking a man's eyes but a lifetime of being hit for daring such familiarity with my betters still made it hard for me. Betters, ha! Filthy ignorant curs even a pig wouldn't claim as kin. These savages could pretend to be my better but nothing could ever elevate them even to the level of servant, much less a well-trained and respected companion to the highest lords of the Emperor's court.

Ballung yanked me up by my braid, turning my head this way and that to examine me in the fading light. "Oden's beard, never have I seen such a pretty little man. That is if you really are a man." He dropped me back to the ground.

"Maybe Kolbrandr's eyes fail him and he can't tell the difference!" some nameless cur snickered, eyes full of malice.

More jeers joined his but I ignored them and returned to my humble bow. Never would I let how I truly felt for Kol show to these dogs. In fact, the fate of the children and I might hinge on them assuming I felt nothing for the man I called lover. Let them believe I would serve whoever had me, because then they might trust me enough to leave me untied. Then I would do what I could to cause them trouble, making it easier for Kol to catch up to us and slaughter these worthless excuses for men.

Ballung snorted, toeing me once more. "I've a buyer willing to pay good silver for this girl-boy. Count yourself lucky slave. I'd just as soon let my men find their sport with you and leave your broken body for that sick man-lover to

find.” He sneered, “You’ll even get to see him again. Right before I kill that hairless worm.”

Excellent, knowing he needed me alive made all the difference in how far I dared go in my efforts. First, I would need to gain their trust, convince them what I good slave I was no matter who held my leash. Moreover, the best way to do that was bowing and scraping for them as if they were Emperors of Heaven instead of filthy, ignorant savages.

Josurr’s angry eyes followed my every move. Somehow I would have to let him in on my plan. A couple of the older children, Josurr included, spat on me whenever I got close enough. Ballung and his stinking mutts found that terribly funny. It did, however, re-enforce the notion I was nothing more than an obedient slave with no feeling for Kol.

Finally, they tied my hands and feet and shoved me down by the children. Now I had time to rest and heal. Tomorrow, I had much work to do. Josurr, also bound hand and foot, wormed his way between me and the other children. Righteous anger swirled around him in a thick miasma of dark colors. His bright blue eyes glared daggers at me while his fair face tried to look as hardened as the most seasoned warrior. Somehow, I had to make him understand I would never betray Kol nor his people while still tricking Ballung.

Gods, but I missed Kol, his strong arms, and gentle heart, warming me through the night. I let memories of our nights together soothe me into sleep. We would be together again, I was certain of it.

My chance came the next day during a break to let the horses rest. They shoved water flasks at Josurr and me to fill in a nearby creek. I had the second one full and turned to climb out of the creek. A careful turn of my foot and I tripped right into the pig guarding us, splashing a good bit of water on him. His buddies laughed, making him even angrier. He struck at me, I twisted to miss most of the blow but made as if he knocked me into another.

The second man shoved me aside, yelling at the first. I caught Josurr’s gaze, raised a brow, and winked. His eyes widened then a slight smile twitched

his lips. The colors swirling around him settled. The slight tip of his head in return let me know he understood and wanted to help.

By this time, Ballung had stomped over and settled things by threatening to disembowel both men if they didn't quit. He glared with narrowed eyes at me so I prostrated myself before him. "Forgive this graceless worm for being so clumsy." Ballung scowled but remained silent. Lucky me, he didn't even kick me before walking away.

That night, they took my boots, as well as those from the two largest boys, untied our hands and feet. "You three, help get the horses untacked, fed and watered. And be quick or there'll be no food for you." Ballung snickered along with his men who shoved us toward the picket lines.

Perfect. I knew a few tricks to play with their tack. A frayed cinch here, a loose buckle there, eventually it'd slow them down. Wouldn't take much to work my tricks. Many of these savages had old equipment to start with.

I watched carefully to see which ones didn't get along. Hmm, how to add to that tension?

They made the older girls fix their pots of stew. A couple of shoving matches between hungry men wanting to be first had to be broken up by Ballung and his second. Their appalling lack of discipline made my job so much easier. Letting me loose among them aided me far more than I helped them setting up camp.

A slide of my foot and one towering giant slammed into another, dumping a full bowl of stew on the ground. In the growing fight, more than one savage felt the need to knock me out of the way, adding to my bruises. I'd endure that and more if it helped slow them enough for Kol to catch up.

The village children fled to the edge of the camp where I joined them. Unfortunately, the fight didn't distract this one guard. He stood between us and the brush, glaring daggers at me as if he knew I'd started it. Lords of Heaven, why couldn't he have been as undisciplined as the rest? At least the older children might have snuck off.

For our dinner, we got to wipe the pots out with stale bread. In the process, I made sure I left a clear footprint in the spilled stew as a message to Kol that I

was alive and well enough to aid him in our recovery. In my heart, I knew he followed. He had to be. I knew with all my being he loved me as much as I loved him.

After making sure all the children got equal shares of the meager food, I settled to sleep. Josurr kept up his part, glaring at me like before. Such a bright child, he did nothing to give my game away. My very dangerous game that, if discovered, could earn me a beating or worse no matter how much I was worth.

CHAPTER 3

Kolbrandr

Two days I tracked them, mostly at a fast jog, slowing or resting only when my berserker strength waned. The meager trail led through thick forests of oak, ash, and beech dotted with meadows and copses of brush. Fields and pastures surrounded a couple of farms owned by my warriors and their kin. They looked to me for protection and I had failed them. Other than a few stray cows, I saw no signs of life as I passed. After I killed Ballung, I'd find the farmers and see what they needed to set their farms to rights.

Ahead, the faint smell of smoke slowed my headlong rush. Ducking behind some brush I cautiously approached the area. Not far off, a tendril of smoke curled up from an abandoned fire. I hovered in the cover of the brush, inhaling deeply and listening. I smelled nothing but old fire and the remains of a camp recently abandoned. A crow dove down to pick among the leavings.

Long axe at the ready, I stepped from my shelter. Nothing moved save the crow intent on what scraps he'd found. Boldly now I looked over the campsite. Here they picketed their horses; there they'd set a latrine. My sensitive nose wrinkled at the stench. Gods above, they could have at least buried it when they moved on!

The crow squawked and flew to a tree, scolding me for disturbing its meal. My lips curved in a smile. Bits of spilt stew littered the ground. In the middle of it, the bare print of a slender, delicate foot. Renshu! Laughter bubbled up. He was alive and well and up to his old tricks. Fools, they had no idea the wicked games that man could get up to! Spilled stew was just the start if he gave them half the trouble he'd given me last summer.

Now I could look fondly on Renshu's efforts to free his previous master but then, Oden's beard, that man made me see red. Like most, I'd discounted his strength based on his exotic, almost pretty face and slender build. But inside, there lay a man of great strength. Warmth swirled deep inside me. I loved the way his sly mind worked. Gods, how I missed him.

With a lighter heart, I took up the chase once more. They couldn't be far ahead now.

The sun rode high overhead when I heard angry voices coming from up the trail. I darted under cover, crept closer. Thank the gods this stretch of forest had plenty of brush for cover. A cursing, red-faced warrior kicked his saddle, much to the amusement of his buddies. A man I recognized as Ballung's second knelt to examine the broken girth. The ragged edges looked worn through but I'd seen that trick before. My Renshu worked to slow them. My heart missed a beat. *Where was he?* I couldn't see him from my hiding spot.

The thunder of hooves shook the ground under me. I flattened softly into the dirt, holding my breath. Two riders with a rider-less horse in tow passed far too close for comfort. Either my dirty cloak hid me or Ballung's men lacked the discipline to keep a sharp eye out at all times. I breathed out a silent sigh of relief.

Ballung rode into view, issuing orders for the unlucky warrior to remain behind and fix his tack. Alone. The only protester ended up sporting a split lip from Ballung's second, after he jerked the fool off his mount.

The company, much quieter now, rode away leaving the two unlucky men. Oh yes, unlucky for them but not for me. As soon as Ballung was too far away to hear their screams, their lives were mine.

"What the hell, little brother. Didn't I tell you not to mouth off to Ballung? You're lucky all you've got is a split lip." The warrior struggling to mend his tack shook his head and sighed. "That man's got a wicked temper."

Thick sarcasm colored the younger man's tone, "You're welcome Gautulf. Anything for my favorite brother." The younger one dabbed at the blood on his lip. God's, did I want to spill more of that.

"Idiot! Now we're both at risk. What if Kolbrandr's company comes through here?" Frustration and disgust colored Gautulf's words. "You are too old to be following me around like a lost pup."

The younger one's jaw tensed, words ground out between clinched teeth. "I owe more loyalty to my older brother than Ballung any day."

The older glared angrily. "You swore loyalty to him and to him you owe allegiance first."

"Maybe, if he wasn't trying to get us all killed by attacking a berserker who just happens to be the son of a king. You think Kolbrandr's the only one that'll come after us for what we did? Taking children like that, it's not right."

Maybe this kid gets to live.

Gautulf threw his cinch down and stood to glare at his younger brother. "Right or wrong, Ballung's the only one who offered us a chance at earning the money we need for the winter. Once you join a company, you do what you're told. Unless you'd rather be digging in the dirt like any common farmer."

"We could have joined Kolbrandr's men. I've heard he's a good leader who cares about his people."

Gautulf jumped up and grabbed his brother by his shirt, growling into his face, "We join a beardless boy-lover and no other company would ever have us! No warrior worth his weight would fight for such a limp-dicked leader." He spat to the side.

My fire flared, angry, hungry for blood. *The older one dies! Painfully.*

The younger warrior scowled but dropped his gaze from his brother's, shoulders slumping in defeat. His brother shoved him hard enough he stumbled away. He turned his back to his brother. And me! I let my fire rise, ready to attack. A moment later, the older one dropped back down, pulling his tack back into his lap. Yes! Time to play.

Berserker fire burning in my veins, I surged up, swinging my long axe in a powerful arc. Gautulf barely had time to throw his saddle up in defense against my inhumanly fast attack. The snap of his arm breaking from the strength of my blow and his scream of pain and fear was music to my soul, filling the empty spot where Renshu should be.

I whirled to block the younger's spear thrust, cracking the shaft. The younger stumbled, terror in his eyes and forming a pungent cloud around him. He jerked back, the broken shaft held in defense as he fumbled for his seax. Sensing the kill, my fire flared, red tinged the edges of my vision. I lunged

forward only to be blindsided by Gautulf. We tumbled and slid in a tangle on the forest floor. That impressed me despite what the cur had called me.

His broken arm cradled against his chest, my enemy rolled away from me. "Run! Ride! Go!" he yelled at his brother even as he staggered to his feet. The youngster whirled away, grabbing his horse. Oden's beard! I couldn't let him get away to warn Ballung.

But I couldn't ignore the older brother, now armed and circling behind me with a throwing axe in his hand. He'd only get one shot. I fainted toward the younger, whirling and following my momentum around. The axe whistled past my head, a sharp sting along my ear. *Close! Damn good throw for a warrior no one would take on. Why would any company pass up a chance at such a warrior?*

The pound of hooves came up behind me; the younger hadn't run but rather sought to ride me down. I dodged just enough for them to miss but grabbed at his leg as he went past. His attempt to kick my face only aided me yanking him off his horse. He landed with a satisfying thud flat on his back.

Finally, opponents to take my frustration out on! Even with my berserker speed, the two of them made me work to best them. Not many warriors could do that, especially not just two.

The younger lay trying to suck air back in his lungs. I leapt for Gautulf, my axe knocking aside the long knife he'd pulled, my fist connecting with his face. Why I pulled my punch at the last second I couldn't say but it saved the man's life, knocking him down and breaking his nose but not shattering his face and killing him. He landed on his broken arm, his scream rending the air. *Yeah, that had to hurt.* My fire purred like a well-fed cat.

I grinned, a vicious snarl more like a wolf's growl than a smile I've been told. The younger brother rolled away. I let him stagger to his feet. No fun killing him while he lay helpless. His wild eyes darted, looking for any weapon to defend himself. My face stretched tighter, teeth bared and fire dancing in my veins. The boy gritted his teeth, his body loose and ready to dodge or strike.

The older brother's screams had died to whimpers. I leaned away, inviting the younger to move. He dove for his brother's axe. I beat him to it, kicking him away with a satisfying crunch of ribs. He howled his pain but rolled to his feet, staggering a bit.

His eyes darted to the axe by my feet. I smiled, toed it. Daring him to come get it. It was in that moment, he realized he would die. Seasoned warriors had broken and run when faced with death at my hands. Defeat filled his eyes yet he remained standing, ready to meet my attack as best he could. A true Northman to the core. Pity the brothers hadn't come to me; they were too good for a beardless whelp like Ballung.

I knew better than to pause in a fight yet I couldn't help savoring my soon-to-be victory. Like a cat with a mouse, I wanted to play with my prey, foolishly giving them time to recover and plan.

His eyes flickered behind me to the left where his brother lay still whining. A new resolve hardened his stance. He dove, this time for the remains of his spear. I leaped to block him but the older brother somehow managed to grab my foot, dumping my arrogant face into the dirt. I coiled and rose, spiting dead leaves and bark. Small twigs caught in my beard.

Together the brothers rushed me. I danced back, using the haft of my axe to thump the younger's broken ribs good. He tumbled, coughing on a scream of pain. I swung the head of my axe at Gautulf, who dodged, throwing himself over his younger brother with nothing to block my next attack.

"Kill me, Kolbrandr, as you will but I beg you, spare my brother. Joining Ballung was my mistake, not his. He's all our young sisters have left. By the gods, I beg you show mercy."

I snarled, "And what mercy did you show my kin? How many did you kill? Rape? You stole our children!" I spat with the fury building inside me.

He met my stare with truth in his. "There were too few men defending to even bother attacking and neither my brother nor I touched the women save to disarm them. We'd given our oath before we knew what Ballung planned so had to follow his orders but neither of us had a stomach for that kind of savagery."

Truth shone in his eyes alongside pain. I smelled no lie hovering around him, only fear. A true warrior's resolve lay in the tense lines of his body.

A strong man shows mercy to those weaker. Just the memory of Ren's words cooled my need for shedding blood. Renshu, my heart, my soul. I needed him, and every moment I toyed with these two he was taken farther away.

"Answer one question. How do the children and my slave fare?" I dreaded the answer but had to know.

He let out the breath he'd been holding, one hand keeping his brother still while he answered. "They are too valuable to allow any of the hairless curs Ballung dug from the lowest pits of hell to harm. Even your precious slave sports no more than a few bruises."

I stepped back, breathing deep, letting out tension and blood lust. Stowing my long axe in its harness across my back, I grabbed both horses, vaulting onto the saddled one. I looked back at the brothers. "If you want to live, don't follow."

Why had I left enemies alive behind me? Was it their too-lean bodies that spoke of few good meals? Or the shabbiness of their clothes that hinted they had no home? The mention of sisters depending on them?

Or maybe I'd spent too much time with my twin, the only shieldmaid I knew with a healing gift. She could be a demon in battle then turn around and offer mercy and aid to the man she'd just struck down.

I sighed. Our father would skin me if he ever found out. Maybe Ballung was right and I was too soft to lead. I should go back and finish them. I didn't. Ren needed saving before that flea bitten cur hurt him. Gods above, what would I do if they hurt him? I hastened my pace along the beaten dirt path.

My berserker fire caused me such trouble most of the time I cursed it. Right now? I thanked all the gods for it. I could see in the dark nearly as well as a cat, smell like the best tracking hound, and fight with the strength of a bear. Even the dim quarter moon provided me enough light to continue the chase long after my quarry had been forced to make camp.

Soon the small trail joined the road headed for Kayetan's Crossing. Shortly after, faint camp sounds—horses shifting about, men talking, arguing and the rattle of gear—warned me to slow down and seek cover.

They'd set up in an open field with the horses on three spread-out pickets. Even the loss of one picket line would hamper them enough, I hoped. No way could I reach all three without being seen. I stifled a shudder at what Ballung might do to my beloved Ren if I was seen. Never mind if they caught me, even a berserker couldn't take on that many men and live.

A very familiar voice drifted on the still night air, music to my heart and soul. Renshu. I couldn't make out what he said but that groveling tone I remembered. When we'd first met, he used it on me in a desperate attempt to save not only his own life but that of his previous master.

What a sight he'd presented in his tattered silk robes, head bowed with his long blue-black braid hanging down in wild disarray. Gods, how I loved to run my fingers through its silken length. My eyes drifted shut in memory. His lean, lithe body under mine. The twist his foreign accent gave to his words. Ah, the sweet smell of his sweat when we shared bed sports.

My manhood grew hard and my berserker fire heated my blood. Nothing I would have liked more than to steal into that camp and take him back then and there. All my muscles tensed, ready to spring. *God's cursed berserker fire! Suicide.* For both of us. I focused on the cool night air filling my lungs. Gods, how I wanted him! *Patience, I had to play this right.* I sat with my head down, struggling for control for several precious moments before I could turn back to surveying my enemy's camp.

Two fires and no tents made up the camp. I spotted at least four guards on duty though they seemed far more interested in what was going on in camp than watching for trouble. No surprise at all that Ballung kept such poor discipline. After his defeat at my hand, I was surprised he could find *any* warriors to follow him much less any good ones.

I crawled back behind a clump of brush and made my way around to the picket closest to cover. A belly crawl wasn't the easiest thing, but if I could loosen even one end of the line, I could then spook the horses from a distance

and it should break. At the very least, the tied together horses would be dashing around in a panicked mass. If even a few escaped, they'd either have to take time to find them or force some to walk or ride double. All of which would slow their progress. Angering Ballung was just a bonus.

Horses snorted and stamped, dancing away as I rose to a crouch from the long grass. I spoke low. "Easy there, just a human. Nothing to worry about. Shhh, quiet now." The horses settled down but not before one of the guards rose from his place by the fire, craning his neck to see into the dark. I hugged the side of the nearest horse, blending my shape with its bulk in the dim light. The guard turned back to his place with a grunt. Good for me that Ballung had such lazy curs working for him.

Oden's beard, they'd staked the line solidly in four places not just the ends! Should I assume all the lines were so well secured or check another? Either way I risked discovery and I'd chosen this line for the best cover. I laid my cheek on the chilled earth, gathering my strength and offering a silent prayer to the gods for their aid this night. I would need it.

Careful of making noise, I tugged with all my strength, popping the first stake out. I hesitated, waiting to see what the horses would do. They continued eating like nothing had happened. Breathing out a sigh of relief, I continued down the line, using the dullest part of my seax to fray the leads and part of the picket line almost to breaking as I passed each horse. Once the stakes were out, the horses would be able to break loose from each other and run freely. Smug satisfaction at the trouble that would cause Ballung filled me.

I'd reached the third stake when a loud clatter followed by shouts of anger rose from the camp. The horses on the far side whinnied and stamped, upset by whatever had happened. The horses around me picked up on the agitation of those across the camp, blowing, shifting nervously, and tugging at their ties. *Gods above, please don't let any of the cut lines break yet!*

Taking advantage of the distraction, I hurriedly yanked the stake out but the rope popped the nearest horse on its the nose. It jumped back, snorting, and setting off those around it. Horses bolted. Ropes snapped setting those horses free but the flapping remains whipped the bunch into a frenzy. Other ropes held so the horses tied together jerked each other around causing even more

panic. The last stake gave under the strain. Shouts rang out from the camp; some headed my way. Time to leave.

I chased after the nearest horse, made a grab for the mane, and jumped, swinging astride in a move straight out of a saga. Unlike a saga, I only managed to stay on for a few strides. The mangy nag bumped into another, stumbled and I flew from the horse's back. I had to let go of its mane or be dragged. I slammed into the earth with a loud whump.

Curled into a ball to protect my head, hooves struck the ground around me. A sharp pain exploded in my thigh where one clipped me. The thunder of their passing retreated into the night.

Firelight backlit the men running my way. Oden's beard! And me with only trampled grass to hide my bulk. I wormed into a slight depression, face flat and sprawled to distort my shape in the shadows. My heart pounded in fear and blood lust driven by my raging berserker fire. Gods how I wanted to spill their blood but the risk to Ren and the children was too great.

Two cursing warriors stopped not ten feet from me. *Great Oden, blind them to my presence.*

CHAPTER 4

Renshu

It took me a few heartbeats to realize the faint red haze I kept seeing around one of the lines of horses had to be Kol. More accurately, the glow of his berserker fire that only ones such as myself could see. He'd need a distraction for whatever he was up to. I surreptitiously scanned the camp. *Hmm, which of these stupid savages could I goad into a fight? Or maybe some other distraction...*

Ah, Josurr and two others lugged the iron cook pots to the edge of camp to scrape them out. Stumbling over a savage got me yelled at, drawing the children's attention. I gave them a raised brow and wink, our secret code to get clumsy. Ballung and his men had started to think we were all lacking brains as well as having the coordination of newborn calves.

A loud clang of tumbling pots spared me from more harassment by the man I'd tripped over. Horses snorted, whinnied, and stamped. The shouts of anger from Ballung and his men as they rushed toward the fractious animals didn't help settle them but stirred them up even more. Elation rose in my breast. Yes, a good distraction for Kol!

I managed to trip over some gear and topple it into the cook fire. Men jumped up screaming, yanking things out of the fire, and stomping out any embers. The horses, already more than restless, started yanking at their tethers, whinnying and blowing. Pure satisfaction at the mess I'd created soared through me.

I rose, stealing a glance toward Kol. That entire string of horses broke loose and took off. And one of the mounts carried the fiery red haze of my lover. Only long practice kept the satisfied smile from my face.

Perhaps I didn't hide my satisfaction as well as I should have or worse, Ballung wasn't quite as stupid as he looked. After shouting at his men to catch the horses and round up the children, Ballung stomped over to me.

“You think I don’t know what you’re doing, slave?” He grabbed me by my throat. “Stupid ass-lover, I remember the trouble you made for that hairless cur you call master.” Ballung leaned close with a smug smirk on his face. I nearly choked on his sour breath. “But I’m too smart for you.”

He shoved me away only to kick my legs from under me, dropping me onto the well-trampled grass. I could have dodged but didn’t dare enrage him further. I did roll to my knees, prostrating myself at the insipid savage’s feet. I’d take the beating if it came to it, wouldn’t be the first time. However, if a bit of groveling spared me? I’d grovel without hesitation.

“Too bad I already took money to deliver you alive and whole. Keep it up and I won’t care. I wonder how well you’d do without a hand or foot?” He jerked my head up by my hair. “Anything else goes wrong and you’ll find out.” He dropped me like a rotted cabbage. “Strip him.”

Burly hands grabbed me up while others roughly yanked my clothes off. Goosebumps bloomed across my skin in the chill night air. Fear coiled in my gut, though I had known the danger. Would they now take turns slaking their lusts on me? *Lords of Heaven, please protect me from their savage thirsts!*

Ballung uncoiled a length of leather strap, flicking it about in an effort to intimidate me. Ha! I’d been beaten with worse by men far better educated in the arts of pain. A beating I could endure, even turn to my advantage since they couldn’t beat me to death.

Two held my arms, stretching me between them. I gasped at the first strike of leather on the tender skin of my back. He and his men laughed. “That’s just a warm up, hairless man-loving cur.”

True to his word, his strokes bit harder with each one though not enough to draw blood. I allowed myself to cry out, struggle, and even beg him to stop. Men such as my captors expected me to be weak. If I showed strength they would only seek to break me. I’d rather they didn’t.

“Louder, slave, sing so your ass-loving master can hear you.” Ballung stepped closer, hot fetid breath swirling around me. “I bet he’s out there right now listening.”

I hadn't missed how the rest of his men held their weapons ready, watching the surrounding night. I hoped Kol had ridden far enough away not to hear them beating on me. *Lords of Heaven, keep my lover safe and sane. Keep him away, for unless his men are here, it would surely be his death.*

I slumped, moaning as if barely conscious. At last they let me drop boneless to the ground. Hard to believe the morons bought it. My first master near the inner sea beat me far worse just for fun. He'd inadvertently taught me how to realistically feign passing out. Beating an unconscious slave held no pleasure for him.

Ballung delivered a last kick. Pain bloomed across my ribs. "Either he doesn't care for you after all or he was smart and didn't follow. Pity, I was looking forward to killing him in front of you." He spat on me before striding away, satisfaction rolling off him.

A rough woolen cloak landed on my tender skin. Hissing in pain, I tucked it under me as padding against the hard, damp ground but couldn't bare its roughness on my tender back. Sprawled on my stomach, I made sure to moan in pain a few times. If I played it up maybe I could get them to delay leaving in the morning.

Sefa crept close with water for me to drink and to bathe my fiery back. Lords, that cool water felt good. It was only then I heard the soft sniffled crying from some of the children. I had forgotten my act would affect more than my captors. A sly wink calmed the frantic whirling of Sefa's colors. When she finished, she returned to the clump of children, soothing them with soft words. It was all I could do unless I wanted Ballung to realize I played him like a well-tuned instrument.

CHAPTER 5

Kolbrandr

Watching them strip and beat Renshu nearly killed me. My fire exploded with pure killing rage. Muscles tensed to spring even as the first lash fell on Ren's silky soft skin. *How dare he touch what's mine? He will suffer tenfold for every bruise or welt he raises on my beloved's skin!* Red washed my world in a fury so intense rational thought stood little chance against it.

A shout behind me doused me in ice water before I'd broken from cover. *What if they killed Ren before I could get to him?* I shuddered, sinking back to the damp, cold ground. Deep even breaths. Listen. Had the caller seen me? His steps moved away, thank the gods. I could only listen to my beloved crying in pain, begging for it to end. Tears wet my cheeks and I bit my lips to keep quiet. With difficulty, I focused on the lessons he'd taught me to control my rage. Deep even breaths, focusing on staying calm, it had never been so hard.

Later, I managed to escape the area without being seen, but my close call and Ren's beating reminded me of the high stakes of this game. I'd done enough to slow them, I hoped. I didn't dare try again for fear they would do worse than beat the man I loved.

Now I needed to find my company and a place we could turn the tables on these hairless weasels. One of their loose horses would be very useful about now but I didn't want to waste time tracking one down. We couldn't be more than a day, maybe two, from Kayetan's Crossing and the slave market there. Time was short.

Even calling on my superior strength, I wasn't sure I could get far enough ahead of them to join my company in time for an ambush. That kick to my leg last night hurt like hell and slowed me. I might heal faster than normal men, but the nag had damn near broken it.

I ate the last of my jerky the following morning. Then stopped late in the day to finish the last of the hard travel-bread baked with nuts and dried fruit. Now I would run on what strength the gods granted me when they gave the

fire to my ancestors. Eventually even that would fail but not today. I couldn't let it. I started out once more.

I had scarce hit my stride when the thump and rattle of horses rose behind me. I dived for cover. Without my superior hearing, they might have caught me before I knew they were there. As it was, just a few moments after I found shelter in a hollow between an old oak's roots, the scouts from Ballung's troop rode past too fast to really scan the area around them. Ballung must be in a real hurry to set such a fast pace.

In the middle of the column, the children rode two or three to a horse. Warriors rode around and between them. Just in front of them, Renshu slumped in his saddle, his horse towed by one of Ballung's men. He looked completely cowed and barely well enough to ride. The way his head drooped might look defeated but I knew better. He would watch carefully for any opportunity to act against his captors. Pretending exhaustion or pain came naturally to him.

A subtle shift and I caught a glimpse of his face. I would swear he looked right at me and winked. Likely he had; his ability to see clouds of colors around people no doubt gave away my position. Relief and love flooded me. He was all right. They hadn't hurt him as badly as it had sounded.

I waited, not daring to follow too close. Back on the road, the sound of more horses had me diving for cover a second time. Ballung had five men riding far enough behind to alert him to any followers. Gods curse the man for getting clever, or more likely, listening to someone smarter than that hairless worm. I waited yet more before following.

Darkness forced them to stop for the night. I skirted the camp, pausing only long enough to watch Renshu moaning and stumbling around in apparent agony. I'd seen that trick before, too. He'd convinced us all he was too weak to run. Ha! He'd nearly gotten away and with his former master in tow. Despite having seen Renshu's act last summer, Ballung seemed to buy it. How stupid or vain must that man be?

Now I just had to find my company and take him back. That hairless worm would pay in blood and pain for all he'd done to my people but especially for

daring to lay a hand on my lover. The cover of darkness aided me as I slunk around their camp.

The day dawned grey and damp. I'd had a few hours rest with only my berserker fire to keep me warm. I longed for the mornings waking warm and content with Ren wrapped in my arms. His hot little body pressed tight to mine. I shook off my melancholy along with the damp. No time to wallow.

I shook out my cloak and set as fast a pace as I felt I could sustain, ignoring the clawing need for food

Kayetán's Crossing squatted between two rivers. Ballung would have to cross the near river some lengths upstream at the ford. I wasn't sure but I thought I would reach it before nightfall. The track crossed some hills and became steep and narrow in places. The gods-cursed rain turned it to slick muck, slowing me to nearly a crawl. Frustration ate at my gut but two falls in short order forced me to slow down.

Midday I stopped under a tree to catch my breath and shake off the rain in my hair. The pounding of hooves echoing up the trail froze my heart. *Oden's beard, not again!* The gods-cursed beardless cur must have risen before dawn and be pushing his horses to exhaustion to move so fast in this foul weather.

I shoved off the tree and took off at a dead run to put distance between us. I had little hope of out-pacing them until the horses started to tire and he was forced to rest them. If the gods favored me, it would be soon. I slipped, nearly toppling but catching myself at the last minute. My fire flared and I kept going into the grey, ugly day.

A raven's caw pulled me up short after I'd run a good distance. There! A second and third close together. For the first time since my enemies had caught up to me again, hope welled inside. My twin sister Kolfrosta hid nearby, hopefully with the rest of my company.

Out of breath, I slipped behind the brush lining the trail. She'd picked a good place for an ambush. The trail here was narrow, and steep enough to give

the horses trouble in the mud. The lack of room to maneuver further favored the men on the ground.

Only the sound of my twin's heartbeat betrayed her arrival behind me. Her lips rested just behind my ear. She whispered, "How close?"

"I can't hear them but they can't be far. They almost caught up to me a while ago," I answered softly.

"You've been running since?" Like she had to ask with my chest still heaving in air.

"Where's the rest of the company?"

"Just up around the bend. Thane Saxolf comes with a dozen men and war-hounds. He couldn't rush his hounds or they wouldn't be any use so I came on ahead. They should arrive within the hour." Kolla handed me some dried fruit and nuts bound with honey, quick energy for the battle to come.

I swallowed a mouthful settling my grumbling stomach. "Let's hope they reach us before Ballung." The sound of hooves in the distance answered that, too many to be Saxolf and his hounds. We were out of time.

"Gods-forsaken curs will be here first. Warn the company. At the rate they've been traveling, they should reach us all too soon."

Kolla chirped like a sparrow. Rustling leaves and then the soft thud of feet heading toward the company startled me. I was either more tired than I thought or whoever that was deserved praise for hiding so well.

She slipped me a leather-wrapped bundle, my chain mail, helm, greaves and gauntlets. I smiled my gratitude and started suiting up. Now that the time had come, I wished Ballung would hurry the hell up! A new surge of energy welled up inside me, chasing away any lingering fatigue.

Ballung's group outnumbered us. The bulk of the company would come at Ballung's group from the front and sides. Kolla had but three warriors well hidden up the hill from the trail. They'd counted on Saxolf's war-hounds to attack from the rear and hopefully get the children and Renshu out unhurt. Now, Kolla and I would have to do it. *Gods above, couldn't life give me a break now and then?*

The clomp of horses and the creak of leather wove in and out of the patter of rain. First sounding closer then farther. I stretched my constricted muscles as quietly as I could.

Down the trail, dark silhouettes formed in the mist. A nod to Kolla and she mimicked a crow once more. One caw to set everyone on alert and warming muscles gone stiff in the cold and damp.

The first pair of riders climbed the rise, heads swiveling while they raked the underbrush looking for trouble. A squirrel set up a chattered warning as the riders passed. We'd been so still, it had ignored us as it gathered food in the damp wood. The riders didn't even pause before urging their mounts around the bend and up the next rise.

The bulk of Ballung's company came up the hill, horses slipping and sliding in the mud. Rage coursed through my veins but I held as still as the forest shadows around me. There, Renshu's black hair hung dank and limp, dripping down the worn cloak he hunched under. What I wouldn't give to be able to warn him what was coming. His head dipped, chin tilted just the barest toward me. Clever man, he sensed us and would be ready.

The last one in the column passed without a backward glance. Kolla started to move but I held her back. Five more riders topped the hill after the main group, Ballung's rear guard.

A shout ahead, and two of the riders spurred their horses up the hill; one horse went down in the slick mud. I let my fire rise, leaping from cover faster than any normal man, ducking under a spear and taking his arm off with my long axe.

An arrow from our hidden archers took out the next one. Kolla had the other one off his horse as I sprinted past. I had to reach Ren before they could hurt him.

Total chaos reigned on the slick hillside, horses falling, men cursing and falling, blood spatters quickly washed away in the drizzle. I heard Styrkarr's bellowed orders over the din as I ducked and wove toward the knot of captives. With Styrkarr directing them, my men were in good seasoned hands.

Ballung's furious caterwaul fueled my fire. "Kill the girl-boy and the children!"

I ducked around mounted warriors using my axe haft to unseat riders and trip horses as I raced past. The familiar red haze colored my vision and rage heated my blood to boiling. Saving Renshu, nothing else mattered. Not even my own life.

CHAPTER 6

Renshu

Seeing my lover's red haze through the trees gave me enough warning to be ready when they attacked. Anticipation with a thread of fear gushed through me. Whatever happened, I would do my best to protect the children.

A minor distraction might help. I shook my head, spraying water at the riders nearest me.

"Gods-cursed hairless whelp!" The one holding my horse's lead reined his horse sharply away, yanking my mount's head. A bit of heel on the opposite side and my nag obliged by jumping toward the jerked lead, slamming into his horse hard enough to make it scramble for footing, nearly unseating him.

The beastly war cries and curses spooked more than just the horses slogging up the primitive morass they called a road. I kicked the astonished face of the man holding my horse's lead. Grabbing my horse's mane and using all the skills I'd learned as a boy, I spun my mount around. Weaponless save for the horse, I was determined to help the children escape.

Ballung's words ordering my death chilled me but it wasn't the first time I'd been faced with imminent disembowelment. I kicked my horse at the savage turning to stab me. Twisting, the spear slid past me. I grabbed the haft, adding my strength to his and jerked the fool off his horse. I made sure to strike him in the face with the butt for good measure.

At a child's cry of warning behind me, I slid half off my horse, twisting to avoid getting skewered from behind. My weight threw that nag off balance and it skidded. The savage's horse slammed mine and I dropped, rolling away from the stumbling horses. I swung up, smacking the spear point against another horse's nose. Blood ran from the cut and the horse reared away, falling on the hapless barbarian.

The children, for reasons I had no time to fathom, joined me on the ground rather than trying to ride away. The largest boys stood with Josurr and Sefa to protect the younger ones. I tossed the spear to Josurr and whipped my cloak

off and into the face of the horse coming to ride me down. It shied and slipped. I whirled and struck out with my cloak again, keeping Ballung's men back by startling their horses.

Eventually, they got smart enough to come at me on the ground. *Lords of Heaven, here we go again.* Only this time I knew they would kill me. I firmed my stance regardless. They rushed me.

CHAPTER 7

Kolbrandr

Red tinged everything I saw. The movements of others seemed slower, when in truth, I was moving faster. Being a berserker had its advantages.

A glancing blow to my leg nearly knocked me down. If it had struck true, he would have taken my leg off. I struck over my shoulder with the butt of my axe haft, shattering my attacker's face.

Much as I needed to reach Ren, it wouldn't help if I was too injured to save him. More careful of those around me, I pressed on, leaving men broken, bleeding or dead in my wake.

"Kolbrandr!" Josurr shouted. I glanced up to see Ren facing off two attackers. With a howl of rage, I rushed ahead, heedless of my own safety. I had to reach Ren before it was too late!

A second glance showed Ren twisting to avoid a spear but slipping in the mud and going down between his attackers.

The wall of warriors stood between us still. I struck one with the heavy head of my axe, sending him flying into his companions.

I jumped the tangled mass of men, reaching those who attacked my beloved. I swung with all my strength and shattered one attacker's head like a gourd. The other jumped back only to have Ren grab his foot, tripping him. Ren stole the man's spear and stabbed him with it.

More of Ballung's men rushed us. It was all we could do to keep them back. Ren handled the spear like a staff, knocking blades and spears aside. Kolla reached us, forming a triangle to protect the children against the press of warriors. Bless the little ones, the larger boys and one girl struck out from between us with spears dropped by the fallen.

A shield wall of enemies formed in front of me. Death whispered in my ear. Blessed by the gods or not, no man could stand long against so many. My only regret would be failing the children and taking beautiful Renshu with me.

A horn blast split the air, followed by the baying of hounds. Saxolf and his war-hounds came crashing up the trail. Each hound fought under the commands of a warrior handler. They flowed around us like a tidal wave. The shield wall in front of me collapsed under the weight of the mighty hounds.

“Ren, get the kids clear!” I shouted and pressed forward with Kolla on my right, Thane Saxolf on my left. With the hounds, what looked like a lost battle swiftly turned to victory.

Freed from the need to protect Ren and the kids, I surveyed the battleground looking for my nemesis. Few of Ballung's warriors still fought, most surrendered or ran. But nowhere did I see Ballung.

“Kolbrandr! Over here!” Alarr waved me over.

Would have felt more satisfying if I'd left my foe broken and bleeding on the ground, but that honor went to Alarr. Bless him; he did save me the honor of the final blow.

My fire roared, demanding Ballung's hot life's blood be sprayed wide. He expected it; I could see it in his eyes. He struggled to stand, left hand clenching what his broken right could not. Ready for an honorable death on the field of battle.

NO! No warrior's death for this beardless cur! A wicked grin tugged at my lips and spread like hate across my face. I had a much better idea. His efforts to stand only got him as far as his knees.

Defiant to the last, he glared. “Go on, or are you too weak to strike the blow, boy-lover?” He sneered and spat at my feet. “You and your beardless butt-lover may have won this day but all know you are without honor. They will finish what I started, wiping your sickness from the earth.” His gaze darted around, seeking support among my men. He found none.

Dusi stepped forward and spat on Ballung. “A man who steals children to sell to Midlanders knows nothing of honor!”

Ballung pushed himself upright with his sword, taking weight off his bleeding thigh. “How can you follow this boy-lover? A wild berserker controlled by a foreign slave? Are you all blind?” He turned hate-filled eyes to me, disgust radiating through the pain on his face. “Tell me, does your

precious girl-boy whisper orders when he's fucking you? What's it like to have a slave up your ass, boy-lover?"

I laughed. "Any who think my slave controls me doesn't know me at all."

"We all know you fled your father's hall because you can't control yourself, berserker." Disgust, pain, and fear wavered through his words, stealing much of their impact, "Amazing how suddenly you've managed it after that girl-boy slave attached himself to you. Must be some potent magic he uses."

Kolla snickered, "Berserkers are immune to magic. Not to mention only women can wield it. And as any of the company will testify, Renshu may be small compared to us, but he is all man."

Ballung crowed in triumph, "Ho ho! So the shieldmaid is maid no more and by a slave's cock!" He glared around at my men, settling his challenging gaze on Thane Saxolf. "How sick and twisted is a man who shares a bed and slave with his sister?"

Saxolf cocked a brow, uncertainty on his face. My warriors settled it by laughing raucously.

Alarr chuckled, "We've all seen the slave naked, more than once without bedding him. After all, he traveled with us all last summer and unlike you, we like being clean, even if just a dunk in the river. Oden's beard, you've seen him yourself before you turned traitor and tried to kill him. Only running saved you the death you so richly deserved." He spat on Ballung. "Hairless coward!"

That took all the fight out of my enemy. Even the men sworn to him damned him with their looks. It seemed few really knew how Ballung and I had become enemies. He took a breath, eyes cold and full of death, and struggled to raise his sword up as if to strike.

I smiled, a predatory look with my fire high in my eyes. "Oh, I'm not going to kill you, beardless cur." With the haft of my long axe, I knocked his sword from his hand; toppling him back into the mud. Kolla grabbed it away.

Towering over him, I sneered my hate. "Never would I offer you that honor. No, you deserve the fate you would have sent our children to, slavery.

Kolla, patch him up. That goes for any survivors. I doubt they're worth what we lost but at least we can get something from their hairless hides."

With the heat of my fire still burning me up inside, I turned to find Renshu. "Renshu?"

"Took the kids around the bend."

I pointed to a couple of my men. "You two with me." I needed Renshu, needed to see, to touch, to really know he was alive.

CHAPTER 8

Renshu

I'd guided the children under the trees and behind a thicket of thorny growth. The trees cut the drizzle while the thorn bushes offered some small protection. I snorted to myself, thorns versus men in hardened leather and chain mail? Who was I kidding?

The sounds of battle dimmed to the cries and moans of the injured. But who had won? We didn't have to wait long to find out. I saw the faint red berserker haze before Kol came around the corner into view, bloodied, but with the confidence of a victor. My heart leaped at the sight of him.

"Renshu!" He froze, fear staining the clear red around him. His eyes widened, searching the empty road and brush lining it.

I stood. "Here, great and victorious warrior Thane Kolbrandr." In the brush, a bow of my head in respect would have to serve, though I'd have rather offered him the honor due him with a full court bow. "Come, children." They needed no other encouragement to break from cover.

I picked my way out past the thorns to stand, wet, cold, and elated, in the mud facing my master, my lover. The total shift in his aura from fear and anger to lust sent waves of want skittering up and down my spine.

The light rain barely dampened the joyful squeals of the littlest girl leaping into her father's arms. He and his companion herded the exuberant children up the road. The sounds of reunion blended into the moans of the battlefield.

"Forgive my forwardness, but should such young innocents be exposed to that." I waved my hand up the trail.

Kol shrugged, gaze locked on me with a heat that made it hard to breathe. "They're Northlanders, best if they get used to it young. Besides, they've a right to see the beardless curs who took them dead or defeated."

Further protests fled my scrambled brain as Kol stalked toward me. Pleasant shivers vibrated all over my skin. We crashed together, hands stroking, seeking any injuries, and assuring each other that we still lived.

Kol growled, pulling away enough to drag me toward the trees. "Need you."

"Take me, master."

He snarled in my ear, "Not master, not here."

I darted forward to steal a kiss. Knowing he saw me as his equal, at least when we were alone, added the glow of love to the heat of our lust.

A lascivious smile curved his cold-reddened lips. He tugged me under the spreading boughs of an old oak that shielded us from the light drizzle. He shoved my back against the rough trunk. Pain radiated out from the welts on my back. I sucked in a breath, biting back a cry of pain. To Kol, I would show no weakness.

"Oden's beard! How could I forget you were beaten? Here, let me see." He pulled me around despite my protests.

"I'm fine, Kol. Just a little whipping, didn't even break the skin."

Ignoring me as usual, he tugged my tunic up, turning me toward the dim light leaking through the clouds. "Gods, how I wanted to kill him right then and there. I swear it was as if I felt each blow." Pain filled his voice. "Your cries tore holes through my soul."

I pulled free, turning to cup his face. "Forgive me, if I'd known you had to listen I would have been quieter. It was mostly a show for Ballung's benefit."

Kol snorted, "I figured but it still drove me nearly mad. Only forcing myself to remember how you pulled the same stunt with me made it bearable." He chuckled. "I almost felt sorry for the curs knowing how you played them."

I smiled broadly, "Like a well-tuned harp."

"You may not wield a sword or axe but you are still one of the most dangerous men I know." His eyes turned soft, his strong fingers cupped my face and stroked my cheek. I felt all the love I carried for him returned in kind.

A strange light shifted through his aura, a tinge of regret perhaps, or worry. “I remember when I first saw you. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to kill you or fuck you.” He pulled me close. “Thanks the gods I didn’t kill you.”

I laughed softly against his chest. “I expected to die and when you dragged me behind that building, I figured you’d fuck me half to death and *then* kill me.” I smiled, brushing a hand along his handsome face. “Instead you gave me the first pleasure anyone had offered me in more years than I care to count.”

Kol tenderly brushed a thumb across my lower lip. “If that was pleasure, I hate to think what you consider pain.”

“May have been a bit... intense but still, I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” I focused all my need for this man in my gaze, locking my gaze onto his startling ice-blue eyes. My manhood ached with wanting his touch. “I’d love to do it again.”

He shuffled closer, hand fisting in my tunic. “Yeah?”

I smiled and pressed my hard length against him. “Oh, yeah, even in the rain and with you smelling like death.”

Our lips met in a scorching kiss. His hardened shaft ground into my belly. I slipped my leg between his to rub my own hard length on his muscled thigh. Pure ecstasy raced from my groin to all parts of my body. The cold, the pain in my back, even the fear and tension of the last few days, it all fled before the onslaught of Kol’s desire for me.

His strong hands, toughened with years of swinging a sword or long axe, gently stroked my body. Seeking ways under my sodden clothes and searching my skin for spots of pleasure or wounds in need of his gentle care.

All that tenderness was well and good, but I wanted more. I needed him to claim me once more. Remind me of his strength and need for me. I fought with the laces on his trousers. The length of his chain mail got thoroughly in my way. Snarling in frustration, I bent my head to see better the things that kept us apart.

He chuckled into my hair. “Eager for something, little one?”

I snarled up at him, "Are you not?" I gave his hard length a firm stroke. "Feels to me like you are."

His sexy growl vibrated along taut nerves to flush my manhood with an urgent need for relief. Cupping me with his big hands had me moaning and mindless. Swiftly, he spun me around, pressing me toward the mighty tree's trunk.

I dropped my woolen trousers and leaned forward, eager to feel him in me. The jangle of armor and creak of leather behind me added to the heat lighting me up inside.

Strong fingers spread my cheeks for the cool oil Kol always carried in a small water pouch on his belt. His after-battle lusts were legendary and I enjoyed every moment of them. His fingers breached me, I sighed out a moan of pleasure. His strong fingers stroked me inside with sure knowledge of my needs.

The heat of his body warmed my back. The broad head of his manhood replaced the fingers teasing me. So gentle at first but I could feel his need quivering in his grip. I pushed back, taking him in me in a single thrust. "Ahhhh, yesss, Kol!" Lords, it felt so good!

His control broke. Gripping me tight he gave me what we both wanted. Hot, hard and fast. I lost myself in the thrill of him against me, in me, owning me in ways no other could. His hot breath panted over my shoulder, sending tickling fingers along my heated skin.

"Gggaaa, yesss." My incoherent babble cued Kol to reach around and grasp my heated length. Each thrust of his mighty hips pushed me through his tight fist. Higher, hotter, the need spiraled out of control.

"Kol!" My body convulsed in pleasures too intense to describe. My hot spend splattered the oak's rough trunk.

"Ren!" His thrusts stuttered, then he buried himself deep, pulsing out his seed, claiming me completely.

He nuzzled into my neck, his breathing as labored as mine. We stayed there, catching our breaths, letting our hearts settle into a gentle rhythm. Cold

rain dripped on my head to run down my back. I shivered and Kol withdrew his warmth leaving me shivering hard.

“Ren, beloved, did I hurt you?”

I turned, leaning just my undamaged shoulders against the tree trunk. “Never, my savage warrior.” I ran a single finger down his cheek. “Never could you hurt me.” My heart swelled with the love I held for this most improbable man, a barbarian burdened with a savage power whose heart and soul were most gentle and kind. I would love him to the end of my days. The shine in his eyes and clear tones of his colors proved he felt the same for me.

He smiled, a beacon of light in the lessening gloom of the day. “Come, Renshu, we’ve a lot yet to do today before we can travel home.”

Home, yes. Wherever Kolbrandr lay his head was now my home.

THE END

Author Bio

Dark Dreams, Forbidden Fantasies. What if...

Brannan writes books balancing gritty realism with a sprinkling of humor and leavened with love. Her critically acclaimed books include post-apocalyptic, fantasy, and paranormal genres. Gender is no barrier to love so you'll find m/f, m/m, and m/m/f couples sharing the adventures and romances of a lifetime. She loves to put average people in tough and unusual spots to see what makes them tick. OK, some are not so average and are from different realities but they are still as real to her as anyone.

Brannan can often be found writing out on her patio, while traveling with her hubby, or squirreled away in her studio. She lives on a small ranch in Colorado and enjoys traveling, making stained glass windows, and staring out the window overlooking her ranch wondering "what if?"

Come lose yourself in Brannan's worlds where passion and gritty action coexist.

Contact & Media Info

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