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Wolf In Shining Armor

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WOLF IN SHINING ARMOR

Charlene Teglia

Prologue *The Border Lands, 1146*

Rorik loved the woods. In the night the trees rose black and jagged, forming broken outlines against the starlit sky as they curved overhead in an ancient living canopy above the path he strode. They rustled and murmured with the sounds of hundreds of creatures going about their nocturnal business.

Eerie, to some. To him, it was the sound and sight of home. The Fell Wood outside of Wolf's Keep, rumored to harbor demon wolves who took human form, served to keep poachers as well as the overly curious far away, and so he found good hunting. This night, aided by the light of the full moon, he followed a line of snares he'd set and baited the day before, checking for game.

His cousin, Simon of Northumberland, accompanied him as always. Somewhat unhappily, Rorik knew. Simon did not quite share either his love of adventure or his appreciation for the Fell Wood at night. As light in heart as he was light of hair, the dark woods held no fascination for him.

Rorik paused to smile at his companion. "Up ahead, I hear something," he said softly. He'd snared a deer, possibly, from the sounds he heard. Something large. Then he frowned as he listened more closely. That wild thrashing did not sound like a deer. He signaled Simon to be quiet and follow closely. At a soft run, he approached the snare and nocked an arrow at the ready.

Then he slowly lowered his bow and replaced the arrow at the sight that met his eyes.

"What are you doing?" Simon hissed, looking agonized. "It is a wolf. A demon wolf, come for our souls. Kill it, quickly." Rorik waved impatiently at Simon, gesturing for quiet. There were no demons in his woods. This was but a she-wolf caught in a snare meant for other game. A small one, not fully grown. Moonlight touched the black fur, highlighting it with silver and glistening off the glowing eyes. Blood tinged the snow at the beast's feet and tipped the muzzle.

Memory flashed in Rorik's mind, tales of wolf traps found sprung, holding only a forepaw, as the creature fought so fiercely for freedom that it would pay any price. As this wolf would do.

He didn't see danger. Rorik saw only the wolf and felt the injustice, the unbearable horror of its captivity, the panic at running fleet across the snow one moment, inexplicably held prisoner the next.

Rorik slipped slowly up to the snare, holding the wolf's eyes as he did. "Easy," he whispered. "Hush, now." Making his motions careful and steady, he eased one hand to the snare then quickly sprung her loose and stepped back.

Not swiftly enough to evade slashing teeth that tore his chest before the young shewolf fled into the night.

Simon ran to his aid and staunched the blood with shaking hands. "Rorik? Rorik, do you hear me? Speak," he pleaded.

Rorik stirred and smiled at his companion. "Did you see her, Simon? She was beautiful."

"See what? The wolf?" Simon asked. "I could scarcely miss that."

"No. The girl." Then Rorik fell back, unconscious.

Chapter One

Fourteen years later...

"Do you think to find it changed much?" Simon inquired, guiding his gray warhorse beside Rorik's black destrier. The two knights showed the signs of having survived many battles in myriad ways. The armor and equipment showed the lines and dents of hard use, in spite of flawless upkeep, as did the two faces. They were deeply changed, if Wolf's Keep was not, Simon acknowledged.

Rorik didn't answer. Perhaps he had changed most of all, Simon thought. Battle had hardened him. The youthful companion who had risked his life to free a wild wolf had seen too much killing. His moods had grown as dark as his hair and did not seem to be lightening as they neared home.

Known as the Fell Wolf for the bite he'd earned, the rumors that Rorik became a demon wolf had come in useful on many occasions. Absurd, but useful. In the tourneys many an opponent quailed before the black and gray banner, fear and superstition striking more blows than a lance.

As soldiers of fortune, the two had done well. Well enough to permit them to return to Rorik's home, now his by coin as well as birthright, with the full coffers and riches supplied by grateful lords whose lands and holdings they had defended. The earnings would permit them to hold and defend their own land now.

Simon frowned, thinking of that injustice. That Rorik should have to buy back his ancestral home still rankled. But his father's untimely death had allowed an unscrupulous neighboring lord to claim Wolf's Keep, and Rorik had been unable to prevent it, having only fifteen years at the time.

That they were both away, fostered and in training for knighthood at the time, had also forced Rorik to bide his time in reclaiming his home. In his patient way, he'd

earned his spurs and set out to make his fortune, first in the tourneys then as a seasoned soldier for hire, always confident that he would return.

The Fell Wolf was returning now, some ten years later, and Simon nearly pitied Alain Devere. He'd lost the prize he thought to take, and the man could not rest easy of a night, knowing the lord's son was coming home to claim what was his.

Including his betrothed, the lady Elissa Montreade. The shy and lovely girl he recalled had also fostered in Wolf's Keep as Rorik's future bride, the marriage arranged by the old baron shortly after the birth of a daughter to dear friends. She, and no doubt her dowry, had been taken along with the fieldom by Devere.

He frowned at that thought. They had been in no position to help her sooner, but he did not like to think of the child who had been his youthful shadow under the care of such a man.

Simon eyed his friend once more, thinking Rorik did not look in the least like an eager bridegroom, nor a returning hero.

He looked battle-weary and in sore need of a diversion.

"So, Rorik, your hearth and home await, with the lovely lady Elissa soon to grace them both. Will you frighten her with that face of yours?"

Rorik roused himself from his dark thoughts and spared a glance for Simon the chatterer. In truth, it did not feel like a homecoming. Without his parents living, he did not expect to find much of a home waiting. Devere had doubtless let the place fall to ruin under his stewardship. With no lord in residence the able servants had fled, fearing tales of human wolves. Any retainers remaining did so out of blind loyalty or old age.

He did not expect to find much waiting for him. As for his betrothed...there, he could find something to think on that pleased him. Marriage was a practical business. He did not love Elissa, nor did he expect to. However, enough nights in rough camps made the idea of home and a wife to see to his comfort seem more than adequate compensation for doing his duty.

A wife to make a home from a pile of cold stone. Children to fill his hall with laughter. To raise children and crops, that was a pleasant future. He'd seen enough of death and spilled enough blood.

By nightfall, Rorik had revised his opinion.

Wolf's Keep he expected to find in poor condition. What he failed to anticipate was Elissa, whom he recalled as little more than a babe herself, heavy with child, ravished and abandoned by Devere and stripped of her dowry and her pride both. She wept while she delivered news of Alain Devere's impending marriage to a neighboring heiress.

Simon was struck silent with fury by the news, although Rorik noted the concern in his manner as he helped Elissa find a chair and stood by her. So. Was that how matters stood? he wondered. Simon had always had a soft spot for the girl. Rorik had no objection to relinquishing his claim on her in favor of Simon. But Devere, that was another matter.

The baron had robbed him of home, and now Rorik was denied his wedding night as well, while Devere anticipated his? Could the man be allowed to go his way and forget Elissa, robbed of her innocence and her wealth, left to survive however she could? Not that either he or Simon would allow her to suffer. But Devere could not have known that when he cast her off.

No. This outrage could not go unchallenged. It would serve the man well if his bride were stolen in return, Rorik thought.

By moonrise thought had grown to plan, and plan to action.

* * * * *

Rorik slipped through the window and slowly searched the chamber for his quarry with the patient, thorough eye of an experienced hunter and the guarded care of a veteran soldier. He spotted her easily in the bed once he lifted the draperies. Moonlight touched her face with silver, and revealed the curve of an ivory cheek against a soft fall of midnight hair. The lady lay on her side, curled up like a sleeping child, her head pillowed on her hands. Her night rail lay twisted about her, and exposed a length of leg to the cool caress of the moon.

Rorik's breath caught as he gazed at her. He'd expected a woman, not a child. The consort of his enemy.

He hadn't expected her to look like an innocent in the arms of Morpheus.

Rorik hardened his heart and firmed his resolve. He'd have what he came for. He'd wreak his vengeance on Alain by stealing the man's bride, a fitting retribution. He'd have what was coming to him.

And he had a wedding night coming. Alain had robbed him of his. He would return the favor. Here, now, so there could be no question that he'd claimed the woman before taking her away. He wanted a wife. If he was denied the one he'd been promised, he would have this one. Ailiss, her name was. It suited her, he thought.

He did acknowledge that the woman he'd come to steal might not be pleased with his plan. Simon was forever telling him that his fearsome reputation and hard ways would not win a lady's love, but if she had been willing to marry Alain Devere, she could hardly consider him a worse husband. She might even view him as an improvement.

Rorik stripped and then set about securing his prize, his movements swift and sure in the darkened chamber. A length of silk served to gag the wench. Another covered her eyes, and still another bound her wrists together. The other end Rorik tied to the bedpost and smiled at the convenience. By now his quarry was awake, although barely a minute had passed since he first set foot inside the bedchamber.

She struggled and managed a few good kicks before he caught her feet and ruthlessly tied them wide apart. Her strength both surprised and pleased him. He drew his small ornamental knife, used mainly for eating, but which now served to slit her

garment from top to bottom. She froze at the cold touch of metal. Then Rorik stripped away the cloth, his eyes devouring the naked flesh revealed to his gaze.

She was a vision of erotic beauty, naked and spread for his pleasure, and Rorik burned to claim her. He would take those perfect breasts, that small waist, the graceful curve of her hips. He would take the softly furred mound between her thighs that lay exposed and unprotected, his to plunder. He would spend his seed in her body. He felt hunger rising, like none he'd ever known. A dark hunger, a need to dominate and demand submission.

Beneath the animal haze of his hunger, Rorik realized she was afraid. He could feel her fear like a living thing in the night as he lowered himself over her, trapping her with his weight. He could feel it as surely as he felt her soft breasts against his skin, and it didn't please him. Her breath came too fast, her heart pounded too fiercely and Rorik frowned, recognizing the signs of panic. He intended to seduce her into cooperating, not brutalize her.

She lay frozen beneath him until she felt the hard shaft of his cock against her thigh, seeking out and probing at the entrance to her body, and then her fear found expression in violent struggle. Rorik was hard-pressed to hold her down with his weight. As small as she was, she nearly succeeded in throwing him off.

Then he realized something else.

She wasn't fighting him. She had no fear of him. Her skin burned against his and the rich scent of her arousal filled the air. He knew if he tasted the pink flesh between her thighs, he would find her cream flowing for him. But she was fighting the silken bonds as if they were the living embodiment of every dark horror she knew or imagined. She fought so wildly that he feared she'd injure herself.

He wanted her bound. More than that, he wanted her submissive. But he couldn't allow her to hurt herself.

Rorik hesitated then removed the cloth that cut off her vision. Her wide eyes met his. Feral, golden eyes that sent a jolt of recognition through him. Dimly, he remembered seeing this before. Golden eyes in wild panic. Blood running from trapped appendages. Black hair that blended into the night.

A she-wolf, caught in a trap, another night, long ago. The wolf had torn at herself in a frenzy to be free. She would have injured herself if he hadn't stopped her. To spare her that, he'd risked coming forward to free her. He hadn't been able to explain the impulse that drove him, but he couldn't see the creature suffer for the desperate need to be free.

He'd taken pity on the wolf and gained a vicious wound for his trouble. When he recovered, he found he'd gained something more. A dark legacy that slept inside him and awoke when needed, lending strength and instinct and heightened senses that had helped Rorik survive countless battles.

Every full moon it rose to ascendancy. The moon would be full in one more night. Already the wolf within prowled and pushed, awake and wanting to break free.

The hunger for this woman belonged to the wolf, Rorik realized. Not his human self. Was it the near-full moon or the woman who had woken his wolf? Her scent drew him like no other. Instinct demanded that he claim her.

He had known other women, but none had ever made the beast within him rise and demand to mate. It burned in him like a fever, and Rorik realized the touch of her skin against his had triggered this animal need to mate and to be acknowledged as the dominant one.

He stared down at her and she stared back at him, a trapped wild creature touched by moonlight. What was she?

Even as the question formed, he knew the answer. The woman and the wolf who'd torn his flesh that long ago night were one.

Chapter Two

As Rorik absorbed the truth, questions rose. How had she come to be here? Did Alain know what she was? Or had she kept her nature hidden from him while she bided her time and waited for the full moon to free her?

One thing he knew. She would tear open her wrists fighting for freedom and never feel the pain in her state, driven by an inner wildness that couldn't bear captivity. She would injure herself badly if he didn't stop her.

Rorik reached for the silken knot, but her struggles had tightened it beyond loosening. He drew the knife again and her struggles intensified. It took all his strength to hold her, but if he failed to keep her still, she'd cut herself on the blade instead of allowing him to cut the cloth. Rorik held her ruthlessly still and cut her hands free. Then he forced her arms apart and down, shackled by his hands.

She went still now that her hands were only trapped by his, but the rapid rise and fall of her breasts told him that his captive was far from calm. Would she submit to him now? Or scream for help if he removed the gag?

He could feel the hardened pebbles of her nipples against his chest. The scent of her heat intoxicated him. He wanted to bury his tongue in her quim and taste her juices. And then he wanted to drive his cock inside her hot, slick flesh and fuck her, spurting his seed into the depths of her body.

Hush," Rorik murmured, holding her more easily now that she'd ceased her ferocious struggles. He held her gaze with his, willing her to be calm. "Hush, now."

It was like looking into the eyes of the she-wolf, Rorik thought in wonder. Animal wariness and animal cunning, combined with something primal and untamed shone in her uncanny golden eyes. Looking into her eyes, resolve hardened in the depths of his soul. This creature would never belong to Devere, or any other man. Never. She was his. He had come to claim her, and now she would know her mate.

A low growl escaped him and he felt her shiver as the sound danced over her skin. He lowered his head and let his teeth close on the soft skin at her throat. The wolf inside demanded that she acknowledge him as alpha. She made a low sound and went limp under him. Her head tipped back, exposing all of her vulnerable throat to him. His growl became one of triumph.

Her body shifted under his, hips arching up against him as if seeking contact with the broad head of his cock. Rorik released her throat and covered her torso with soft nips, kisses and licks, claiming her breasts, her nipples, moving lower to nuzzle the curve of her belly. He rose on his knees and looked down at her, naked and spread for him, the gleam of her juices visible on her quim in the moonlight.

He took her with his mouth first. He sought out the sensitive nub that hid in the slick folds of her flesh and sucked at it. She gasped and arched her back, offering herself more fully to him. Rorik feasted on her quim, licking, sucking, devouring. He drove his tongue into her while she moaned and fisted her hands in his hair in a silent demand.

His little wolf wanted satisfaction. Rorik gave it to her, working first one finger, then two into her tight passage while he pleasured her with his mouth. The scent of her, the taste and feel of her slick flesh made his cock throb. She rocked her hips into him to meet the pressure of his invading fingers, opening for him, and then she came for him while he lapped up her cream. When he felt her inner muscles relax their grip on his fingers, he withdrew them.

Rorik rose above her and settled his cock between her thighs. The broad head of his shaft pushed against the slick flesh of her quim, softened and made ready for his entry. He pressed forward and felt her sex opening for him, stretching to accommodate him.

Holding her eyes as firmly as he held her slight body, Rorik drove himself into her, rending the slight barrier he expected. He knew that first thrust may have hurt her, but

she didn't flinch or make a sound. He could have removed the cloth from her mouth without any fear that she'd raise an alarm. She was as soundless as the night.

Rorik kept still, knowing her silence didn't mean his swift taking of her virginity didn't pain her. He gave her body time to adjust to his invasion, to soften and relax. She was fully aroused, her quim swollen and slick for him. Now he waited for her to indicate that she was ready for his next thrust. The tight clasp of her sex gripping his cock made him want to drive into her again and again. The wolf inside him told Rorik that she burned with the same fever to mate.

"I am sorry if I hurt you, little one," he said softly.

She didn't move, blink or in any way signify that she heard, or that his words had any meaning to her. Nevertheless, Rorik knew she heard. Then she moved underneath him, her hips shifting to take him deeper, a clear invitation for him to continue.

Control snapped. The need to mate made him swift and urgent as he took her, claiming her irrevocably. He tried to be gentle. He tried to have a care for her slight size and untried body, but need burned too fiercely. She was his and the beast inside him would not go slowly. With every deep thrust he felt a force growing between them, felt a strange power building.

Rorik claimed his mate with driving fury. When he felt the inner muscles of her quim gripping his cock as she found her pleasure again, he let go and filled her tight channel with his seed in a violent spending that made him shudder and left him feeling as if the little she-wolf had ripped his soul from his body and taken it for herself.

Not that she looked like she wanted it. She looked shocked and confused, as if she couldn't imagine why she'd woken to find a strange man in her bed, or why she'd let him fuck her.

Ailiss lay under the alpha who had come to her, trembling with the aftershocks of pleasure and the still surging force of the mating bond. So the tales were true. When

mates touched for the first time the wolves within recognized each other and the two must join their flesh and become one.

Not as in a human marriage. Something older and deeper, a bond that once formed could never be broken. It was said the bonds were formed in another life and time and must reform when the wolves were reunited with their mates. That their mates were predestined, chosen for all time during a previous and forgotten birth.

They lost the memory of that past life but they kept the ability to recognize their mates. That was the legacy of the human wolves.

Some of her kin never found their mates. They might be born separated by great distances. Ailiss had thought never to be reunited with her mate. She had been declared the property of a human male and given to him, the marriage to be formalized on the morrow. Her family had been unable to prevent the wedding without revealing their secret. How had her mate come to find her now?

She had felt him, sensed him, before she opened her eyes and saw him. And then he had blindfolded, gagged and bound her.

Underneath the euphoria of mating lay fury that he had overpowered her. But then, he was alpha. Instinct would demand he dominate, that she must submit to him. Her own instinct had demanded she submit, her body's recognition of him a separate thing from her mind or will.

Even now, with her feet still tied apart and her mouth gagged, her body burned for his to claim her again. She wanted his cock inside her, driving into her with deep, long strokes. She wanted him to possess her body and satisfy the animal hunger that had risen to meet his.

She, the one who so dearly guarded her freedom, who fought against any restraint, had lay back with her legs open with his bonds around her and spilled her juices while he lapped them up. And then, when he spilled himself inside her, she had creamed for him a second time, still bound.

Ailiss felt her slick juices flowing from her quim at the very thought.

A part of her delighted in this submission to her mate, her alpha. He hadn't harmed her, had freed her wrists when he understood her panic. Then he had overridden panic with pleasure, awakening the wolf within her, triggering the mating fever that swept over her.

It rode her still. She moved restlessly against the bonds. They prevented her from locking her legs around his waist, or from rolling to rise on her knees and offer her rear to him. His cock was still planted deep inside her quim and it wasn't enough. He hadn't taken enough of her.

Her mate withdrew from her and she wanted to shriek her fury at the loss. Her sex ached to be filled with his cock again and again. He finished untying her. He freed her legs, then her mouth and gathered her into his arms to hold her close to his heart.

"Little wolf," he whispered against her hair, "Now it is done. You belong to me. And I keep what is mine." Triumph filled his voice. His hand followed the invitation of her parted thighs and cupped her quim, stroking the folds of her sex, dipping his fingers in the cream that flowed for him.

"So wet," he growled.

He thrust his fingers into her and Ailiss made a low sound of pleasure. Yes. That was better. She needed him to penetrate her. She moved her hips against his hand, arching her back, rocking into him, riding his fingers as they plunged into her quim.

Ailiss loved the fullness of his fingers thrusting into her, her sex opening and stretching for him. He rubbed at the tight bud of her clit with his thumb and she wanted to shriek her pleasure. And she wanted more.

She heard his soft laugh at her response. His thumb ground against her sensitive nub again and again while he worked her quim with his fingers. Ailiss felt her inner muscles begin to quiver, then clamp down on the fingers thrust deep inside her while she came again.

Rorik cradled his mate in his arms, his fingers still buried in her core. *Mine*. The wolf within all but howled its satisfaction.

Wolf In Shining Armor

Whatever the cost, he was taking his captive bride home, and he would fight the devil himself to keep her. She belonged to him. The fierce knowledge made him nearly euphoric in his possession. He would take her even if it meant war, and since she'd been promised to Devere, it undoubtedly would, Rorik wryly acknowledged to himself.

It was a good thing Wolf's Keep had sturdy defenses and ready, able men, welltrained and experienced in war. His men might even enjoy a bit of a siege to keep their spirits up and their hands in. Certainly they'd protested his decision to slip into Devere's holding on the eve of his wedding alone. They were spoiling for a fight and had no wish to be left out. He'd surely gain them one for this night's work.

She stirred against him and Rorik lay still as she touched him, first tentatively, then openly exploring him with curious hands. She touched the scars on his chest, then looked up at him and spoke for the first time. "You are Rorik, the knight they call the Fell Wolf, are you not? It was you I wounded. I never meant to hurt you, or force the change upon you. I was afraid and I struck out."

Her voice was pitched low with a husky timbre to it that pleased Rorik. The sound of her voice, the silk of her bare skin against his, the slick heat of her sex when it clasped his cock all pleased him.

He covered her hands with one of his. "I know. You were young. So was I, or I would have been more cautious."

"You are not angry?"

"Should I be angry that you gave me the strength and cunning to survive tournaments and wars?" Rorik asked her. "Or the instinct to recognize my mate?"

"You might not have been grateful. And you bound me." Her voice sounded both angry and hurt over his method of capturing her.

"I thought you might try to escape before I could persuade you to surrender your body to me. I had no wish to spend the night hours chasing you about the chamber and dragging you out from beneath the bed when we could use our time in more enjoyable ways."

"Then you knew what I was when you came?" she asked. She rose up on one elbow to see his face in the moonlight.

"No." He moved his fingers inside her and watched her reaction reflected in her eyes. They darkened and her lips parted slightly. "I knew that you were promised to Devere and he had taken the woman promised to me. It seemed fair that I take you in exchange."

"So you came here to hurt me. Or to get even with him." Her eyes shuttered and her face went still, all expression slipping away.

Rorik thrust a third finger into her with a low growl, asserting his possession of her. "I came for my due. You are mine, and if you prefer your promised husband to me you do not know him well. He would kill you. Elissa he could use and discard, she is too gentle to be any challenge to him and her family has no power to threaten a baron. But he is not a stupid man. He would know that you posed a danger and he would have arranged an accident if he didn't simply murder you outright."

"He does not suspect my nature." Her eyes flew open again and Rorik saw rebellion in her eyes.

"He does not believe in demon wolves, but I assure you he would know if you defied him, and that you had the will to cut his throat while he slept if he displeased you. He would never be able to control you. He would do his best to break you and failing that, he would decide you could not be allowed to live."

"You would not be afraid to sleep beside me at night?"

She was challenging him. Rorik laughed softly.

"I will tame you, Ailiss. And I will give you no reason to cut short my days on this earth." He moved his head to capture her lower lip with his teeth. He nipped at the sensitive flesh then released it. "I will give you so much pleasure you will not wish to deprive yourself of the source."

"I have no wish to die," she answered, sounding disgruntled.

"What do you mean? Do you believe I would harm you?"

She stared at him. "I mean that to cause your death would mean my own. We are mated. My life force is now bound to yours. I cannot be separated from you without growing weak, even dying if we are kept apart. I am stuck with you, caught forever in this trap, and you wanted me only because I was your enemy's prize."

Her face was expressionless, but her voice was bitter.

"Ailiss." Rorik slid his hand free of her and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close. Instinct told him that the touch of his flesh against hers, as much of it as possible, would give her comfort.

A sound in the hall roused him to action. His mate was in danger if they lingered here.

Moving swiftly, Rorik rose and grabbed a garment from the chest in the chamber and dressed his silent prize in it, then wrapped her in his voluminous black cloak for warmth, frowning as he did so at the sudden loss of heat in her pale flesh.

She was too cold, as if the heat of their mating had burned out and left her chilled and shocked. He supposed she hadn't expected to be bound and gagged then ravished and abducted by an inhuman stranger on the eve of her wedding.

All things considered, he thought she was taking it rather well. Still, it alarmed him. He wrapped her as warmly as he could before taking up the rope he'd used to scale her wall, and climbed out the window, holding her cradled against his broad chest.

"Steady," he said softly, seeing fear flare in her eyes again. "Be still. I'll not drop you." At his words, her golden gaze dipped to the ground below, barely visible in the moonlight, and her already pale face blanched at the height.

"Hold tight to me," Rorik commanded. His mate obeyed, closing her eyes and burying her face in his shoulder without speaking.

It pleased him. She was wild, his little wolf, but she felt the bond between them and she knew him as surely as he knew her. Rorik pressed a light kiss on her forehead in

reward. Then he lowered them slowly and carefully to the ground, playing out the rope and taking them over the distance in a series of measured drops.

The moonlit night was further evidence of Alain Devere's incompetence. He should never have been able to breach the wall this night, should never have come close to stealing this treasure in his arms.

"Alain failed to guard you well," Rorik growled against her hair. "You may be certain I will not prove so careless. No man or wolf will take you from me."

She didn't answer. Rorik didn't expect her to. He left the rope as an announcement, in case the bloodstained sheets didn't serve well enough to notify all within the castle that the lord's bride had been claimed by another.

Melting into the night, he carried her to the place where Simon waited with the horses.

"You have her, then." Simon eyed Ailiss. "She looks pale. Have you been terrifying her with tales about her new home?"

"She doesn't frighten easily."

"Good choice for you to marry, then. I thought Elissa would expire from relief when the dread Fell Wolf released her from her duty."

"Elissa ought to fear that you'll talk her to death," Rorik growled then mounted his horse in one easy movement, not at all burdened by Ailiss' added weight.

The steeds moved off at their rider's silent urging, making their careful way through the woods. Rorik had chosen the beasts for sure-footedness and endurance, as well as speed.

They would need all three this night.

Chapter Three

They rode at a steady pace until the enemy holding lay several miles behind them. Then Rorik signaled Simon to ride ahead. He urged his own stallion to speed and adjusted the spoils of his victory in his arms, holding her securely. His arms braced her on both sides and the hard wall of his chest made a solid resting place for his prize. He wouldn't let her fall.

He concentrated on their flight and tried not to think of the unsatisfied ache in his loins, stirred by her nearness. He wanted her again. He wanted to take her in fierce, sexual domination again and again, until he knew she carried his child.

Ailiss belonged to him now. He would keep her and defend her against all comers. She would bear his children. She was his mate. Animal need rose, reminding him that the same hunger burned in her. The need for touch, for closeness. Rorik knew she needed more contact with him to grow warm again.

She had pulled away from him when she realized why he'd come to her, and there had been no time to make her understand that human plans were irrelevant. Their wolves had chosen. She belonged to him. That meant everything. Devere meant nothing, other than the obstacle he presented to their legal marriage. An obstacle that would be dealt with swiftly and surely.

Rorik stroked and caressed her beneath the cape as they rode. She trembled and shuddered with need at his touch and Rorik laughed softly, teasing her breasts as they swelled in his hands, rubbing the tight buds of her nipples with his palms.

"You belong to me," he informed her boldly. He lifted her to allow one hand to raise her gown, part her thighs and cup the slick, soft flesh of her quim. "See how your cream flows for me?"

Ailiss refused to look, mute with rebellion, and Rorik laughed again. She was stubborn but she pleased him, and he knew very well he pleased her.

She pretended to ignore him while he fondled her breasts and hiked her skirt up higher to more freely admire her bared sex, swollen and pink from serving his cock, glistening with the cream his fingers coaxed from her.

He could feel heat returning to her skin as he touched her, but to warm her from the core she needed more. They had time enough, Rorik decided. He stopped the horse and lifted Ailiss to the ground.

She started to run, a clear challenge of his abilities. He caught her easily, dropping her to the ground with her skirt nearly over her head. The beast within wanted to draw it out, not let it end so soon. To chase and capture her, proving his worth as her mate.

On another night they would play that game. But not tonight. Tonight he wanted to keep her close, to not lose contact with her, as if on some instinctive level he feared the loss of his touch might injure her.

A swift hand freed his throbbing shaft and then he buried his cock in her again without preamble. She was ready for him, her sex opening to welcome his invasion.

"You see, my lady? You cannot escape me. I have claimed you." Rorik smiled at his prize and her golden eyes burned in anger. He wasn't daunted. She was his, and he'd win her surrender.

The need to physically possess her and make her his rode him and he drove his cock into her quim endlessly. She shared his need, whether she wished to or not, and he felt certain the cold shock she suffered meant she needed this. She needed the touch of his skin against hers, the heat of him inside her.

Her velvety flesh enclosed and sheathed his hardness, and Rorik closed his eyes at the almost unbearable pleasure taking her gave him. His hands closed over her breasts then tore aside the fabric that covered them to bare them to his loving assault.

Lips and hands paid homage to her soft breasts as he sank his cock into her quim again and again. He closed his eyes and roared as he spilled his seed deep inside her, while she moaned and writhed under him, the inner muscles of her sex milking his cock as she came with him.

Spent, he opened his eyes and met hers again in steady regard. "You are mine," he stated evenly. "Mine."

Ailiss glared back at him.

Rorik merely laughed and hugged her as if she'd uttered the sweetest of lover's endearments. He kissed her, grinding her lips against her teeth in a show of domination.

He'd never felt anything like this before, this need to totally possess a woman and overpower her. He wanted her sweet surrender. But never her defeat. He would never make Ailiss the loser in any contest. She was his mate, and her strength of will was a match for his. The wolf inside him understood that and it pleased both animal and man.

She was hot to the touch now, as if her body's vital reserves had been replenished by mating once more. Relief swept through him. "Your chill is gone," he said. "Do you feel strong enough to ride on?"

"Is that why you stopped?" She sounded surprised.

"You were so chilled when I dressed you. You said separation could weaken you, and I think so soon even the barrier of clothing made too much separation." Rorik frowned at her in the moonlight. "Are you stronger now?"

"Yes." Ailiss gave him a guarded look. "You risked this delay because you feared for me?"

"I did." He moved inside her, a gentle thrust, emphasizing their connection. "We stopped too soon earlier, I think. Mating is not meant to be interrupted."

"No," she agreed. "But we had no choice. I heard the sounds as well. We would have been discovered if we had lingered there."

"We cannot linger here, either." He raised a hand to her face and stroked it, cupping the curve of her cheek. "I regret the need for haste, Ailiss. I will make it up to

you. I will show you how I cherish your body. How I cherish you. You are my mate, and you will be my wife."

"Your stolen wife." But she didn't sound angry now.

"You would rather I tried to win you with courtly protestations of love? By reciting poems to your beauty, or standing beneath your window to sing to you? You would despise a man who did those things." Rorik withdrew from her and stood, straightening his clothing as he spoke. "I am a man of war. Of action. I am more suited to a weapon than a lute. And I suit you, little wolf."

He offered her his hand and drew her to her feet then straightened her dress. He wrapped his cloak tightly around her once more to keep her from taking another chill. "We can delay no longer," he said urgently. "Devere will follow. Come."

It was obvious in spite of her complaints that his mate preferred him to Devere. In her haste to avoid pursuit, Ailiss tried to mount his stallion by herself and Rorik winced, envisioning her delicate body suffering a savage kick from the trained warhorse. To his amazement, however, Goliath stood fast and endured her.

Perhaps Goliath knew she was like him from her scent. Animals had responded to him differently since his change. It stood to reason they would react to Ailiss in the same way.

Relieved that she was unharmed, Rorik seated her on the horse's back before he mounted behind her and set Goliath once more on a course to safety. He settled her between the cradle of his thighs and held her close. "Sleep now," he commanded. "I will keep you safe."

She curled her body into his. Her breathing deepened. After a while, he knew she slept.

That action was most telling. She would not sleep in his arms if she didn't trust him, no matter how tired she was. He smiled down at his sleeping mate, pleased beyond words. She was his, well and truly.

Rorik pressed a tender kiss on her forehead and she sighed softly. "Rest well, little one," he whispered.

She'd claimed him as surely as he'd claimed her, Rorik thought. She'd left her mark on him, so long ago. Perhaps the wolf within her had known then what was meant to be. He stroked the length of her midnight hair, wanting to offer her comfort as she slept. She saw mating as a trap with no escape now, but he could not believe she wouldn't come to see it in a different light as time went on.

Tomorrow night the full moon would rise. They would shed their human skins and then perhaps the wolves could sort matters out.

The thought of the two of them together in animal form made Rorik impatient for the passage of time to free them. He had been a lone wolf all these years. What would it be like to run and hunt beside his mate? He was eager to experience it, to share the wild freedom of the night with Ailiss.

* * * * *

Ailiss spent the day that was to have been her wedding day sulking about Wolf's Keep. Rorik had made it clear that she was to be his lady, accorded all respect the position entailed, and then gone off to consult with his men on matters of defense. He expected Devere to attack. Ailiss did not.

Open assault was not the baron's way. He had been granted her hand in marriage by a combination of bribery, threats and trickery. An open declaration of war, coming to meet his enemy in force, those were honest actions. While Rorik prepared for siege, she tried to guess what method of trickery he would use.

The puzzle also served to keep her mind occupied far from the touchy topic of her current status. The fact that the marriage she had never wanted had been prevented brought her only relief. But now she had a more permanent arrangement to deal with. A mate. A mate who had not looked for nor wanted her.

The human side of her wanted to curl up and weep. The animal side was fast losing patience with her. Wolves were practical creatures. Hers saw that her mate was strong, fierce, able to defend her and any young they had. Further, a human marriage posed a grave risk. She could have been discovered. Rorik had saved her from that possibility. For that alone, she ought to be grateful to him.

He had also taken care to rouse her heat fully before mating with her, making the experience pleasurable. He had untied her when he understood her reaction to restraint. He had stopped mid-flight to take her again, giving her his strength, his heat, his essence when he knew she needed it.

She had been united with her mate, saved from a disastrous marriage to a human, and treated well. So why wasn't she happy?

Pride, Ailiss realized. It was a blow to her pride when she understood that Rorik hadn't sought her out, that in his eyes any woman would have done. He wanted a wife, he was taking one, and it simply happened to be her.

Her wolf side found this ridiculous. Had he known there were others like him? Had he ever believed he could find a mate, that such a thing existed? He knew nothing of their kind, and that was her own fault. She had wounded him and fled in fear, telling no one what she had done, leaving him to either die or adapt to the change and make his own way.

In fact, discovering who and what she was had to have come as a shock to him. He had expected a human woman. He seemed more than pleased to have found her instead.

Ailiss wandered the grounds while she thought. Rorik had made it clear she was free to do as she pleased and roam where she willed within the limits of safety he'd defined. She wasn't fool enough to rebel against caution. She stayed within the boundaries he'd dictated, but because she was distracted and divided internally, she failed to heed her inner wolf's warning until it was too late.

The snap of a twig underfoot made her look up, and then a blanket fell around her, blocking her sight and offending her nose with the musty scent that clung to the material. While she was trapped in the rough folds of fabric, she was grabbed up and carried. Ailiss fought her unseen assailant, caught him off balance as she threw her weight off to one side, and nearly managed to escape. Then her abductor clouted her on the temple and she felt her body go limp as the world went dark.

Chapter Four

When Ailiss came to herself, she was still in darkness. Then she realized night had fallen. Hours must have passed since she was taken. Where was she? She lay on the musty blanket that had been used to capture her. She recognized it by both its scent and the scratchy feel of the fabric. Without moving, not wanting to give away any sign that she was awake in case her captor watched, Ailiss extended her senses to learn all she could from sight, sound and scent.

She identified the Fell Woods easily and felt relief. She hadn't been taken far. That was good. If she'd been taken too far from Rorik, that alone might have assured her death already. He would be near. A fear she hadn't even known she possessed eased and Ailiss relaxed slightly. Her mate would not allow her to be taken from him. He would come for her. Perhaps he was already in pursuit.

He wasn't near enough to sense, however. She heard owls, other night creatures, the rustling of leaves and twigs, but caught only the scent of one male she knew, in addition to the scent of her unseen abductor. Alain Devere. The baron was close. He hadn't been the one to capture her, but she could reason out perfectly well what had happened. He had paid some man to find her alone, take her, and bring her to him. Undoubtedly Devere planned to ambush Rorik when he came for her.

She was meant to serve as the bait in the baron's trap, while he waited with his accomplice. Devere wouldn't risk a fair fight with a knight of Rorik's experience.

That triggered another thought. Was she trapped? Ailiss moved her hands and feet imperceptibly, testing. She found ropes at her wrists and ankles. That was a difficulty. She fought down panic and forced herself to take slow, even breaths. Then she felt the moon rising and wanted to smile. There would be no difficulty at all in a few minutes more. Her paws were smaller than human hands and feet. Her dress, however, would be a hindrance. Getting free of the folds of fabric she wore posed a greater complication than the ropes. Fortunately, her captor was available to serve as lady's maid.

She let out a low moan as if in pain and stirred, drawing the baron's attention.

"So. You're awake." He came to stand over her, leaving his accomplice to watch for Rorik. "Such a tragic tale this will make. Poor Ailiss, kidnapped on the eve of your wedding then killed by your lover before I could free you. I admit I had intended to arrange your tragic end after our marriage, but this opportunity is too good to pass up. I wonder, should I kill your lover first, or make him watch while I rape you?"

"No! Don't touch me!" Ailiss whimpered.

Devere gave her a cruel smile and drew his ornamental dagger. "Let us see what lies beneath that gown."

So predictable, Ailiss thought. She had taken care never to be alone with the man, but his nature had been clear to her. If their wedding had taken place, it would have been a race to see which of them could kill the other first. Since he had never seen her as anything but a meek, biddable female, Ailiss felt confident that she had the advantage. She would have trembled to play her part better but feared the knife would slip if she did, so she settled for making weeping noises while keeping still.

The gown fell away, leaving her naked.

The light of the full moon touched her skin and Ailiss felt the transformation begin.

A sudden noise from behind him made the baron turn his head in the direction of the sound. When he turned back, he saw only the rope, still knotted, lying on the otherwise empty blanket with the ruined and abandoned gown.

Ailiss blended into the woods and waited for Rorik to come into view. He was close, almost close enough to see. And then he was there, a great wolf running full out in the darkness. She moved, just enough for him to see her. She didn't have to tell him there were two men ahead, he could hear and smell them as well as she could.

One for each of us, she thought, and dropped her jaw in a canine grin.

The men were armed with bows as well as swords. It wouldn't be too easy. But they wouldn't expect to find themselves fighting wolves instead of a man, wolves who knew weapons and could think.

She heard a shout and knew they'd been spotted. The man who had captured her nocked an arrow into his bow. He was looking towards Rorik and she realized he hadn't seen her, hidden in the deeper shadows. She ran forward, choosing her angle for attack. He saw her when she burst into view a split second before he could loose his arrow. Ailiss leapt for his throat and made certain it was the last thing he would ever see.

She wheeled and looked for Rorik, saw him circling Devere, who had his sword out. Toying with the man. Drawing out his fun. She let out a soft *humph* and crouched to watch, ready to leap to her mate's defense if he needed her.

Rorik danced about Devere, worrying him, staying easily out of reach of the sword, leaping in to wound and draw blood and then back out of striking range. At first Ailiss thought he was simply bleeding the man to toy with him, then she saw the pattern. Devere was being disabled, one major muscle group at a time, as Rorik chose his targets. He left the hamstrings and Ailiss knew when the man could no longer hold or swing a weapon, Rorik intended him to run.

Ah. A chase. She approved. It came all too soon, the sword falling from Devere's now-useless hand, and then Rorik snapped at his legs. The man turned and fled. Rorik let him get a head start and Ailiss waited for him to begin the hunt before falling in behind him. They ran in silence, following not just the scent but the crashing sounds of Devere's panicked flight.

Rorik let him run until his steps slowed nearly to stumbling. Then he leapt, brought the man down, and stood over his chest.

"It cannot be," Devere gasped out. "Stories. Legends."

Ailiss came forward and stood beside her mate, letting the man see her eyes and fur and make of it what he would. His eyes widened in disbelieving comprehension.

Then Rorik finished him off.

He turned to her and Ailiss knew what he wanted next. Another hunt, this one not lethal. There were matters to be resolved between them still, and a contest of skill, cunning and endurance was a step in that direction.

Ailiss sprang into the woods, beginning a game of chase with the sure knowledge that Rorik would catch her. But she intended to make him work for it.

Chapter Five

They slipped back into Wolf's Keep near dawn and Rorik led the way to his chamber. It felt strange to become human again, the shift in balance seeming unnatural at first. Ailiss entered the room with slow steps, adjusting. Rorik closed the door and stood beside her, watching her.

They had run for hours in the woods. He had caught her in the end, but it hadn't been easy and she had very nearly succeeded in evading him until the moon set. Their game had left them both exhilarated rather than exhausted, and it could have only one conclusion.

"Did he hurt you?" Rorik asked.

Ailiss blinked, the question so unexpected it took her a moment to understand his meaning. "No. The man who kidnapped me gave me a good headache, but the worst thing they did was force me to endure having my head wrapped in a smelly blanket."

Rorik's mouth twitched in humor. With a heightened sense of smell, a foul odor was indeed difficult to endure, but hardly injurious.

"Then are you up to another challenge?" he asked.

"What did you have in mind?" Ailiss asked, feeling her pulse quicken and her quim swell and grow slick with anticipation. She knew very well what sort of challenge he wanted.

Instead of answering, he sprang towards her. Ailiss dodged to the side, evading him. He feinted one direction and Ailiss attacked instead of defending, going low, her shoulder aimed into the side of his thigh while her arms locked behind his knees. She nearly succeeded in bringing him down, but he recovered his balance and reached down to pinch her nipple.

She squealed in surprise and let go of him in a reflexive move to protect herself. He laughed and bent down, scooped her up, and tossed her onto the bed. She slid off the other side and faced him with the bed between them, grinning.

Ailiss knew how their play would end, but this was a side of Rorik she hadn't expected. If he had a desire to play rough in the bedchamber, she could only assume he'd never had the opportunity to indulge it before. He'd have to be too careful of a human partner. It was too easy for the wolf's strength to turn pleasure into pain. With her, he wouldn't have to check himself.

Rorik feinted one direction. She moved opposite to counter, and he leaped over the bed, his arms closing around her. Ailiss laughed as he swung her around and threw her onto the bed again, this time following her down and trapping her beneath his weight.

She twisted and broke free, rolled over him and leaped away. He dove for her and brought her down to the floor with a crash. She went still as if surrendering and tapped him to indicate she wanted him to move off her.

"Did you think I would fall for that?" he asked her. He nuzzled her neck and then raked her with his teeth. She shuddered underneath him as heat flooded her body. His weight pinned her to the floor, the scent of him covered her, and she felt his hard cock against her bare buttocks.

"No, but I thought it worth trying." Ailiss arched up against him in silent invitation.

"Ah, so now you want me, after leading me on a chase all night long." Rorik levered himself up into a sitting position and scooped her into his lap, still facedown. "Time to teach you a lesson."

He delivered a stinging slap to her bare buttocks and Ailiss jolted in surprise. It brought a rush of blood to her quim and made her muscles clench. She squirmed to press her sex against him. Rorik secured her across his thighs so that she couldn't gain pressure where she wanted it and Ailiss made a low sound of frustration. He laughed and spanked her again. She wiggled and fought to get loose while he slid a hand beneath her and stroked the sensitive nub between her thighs.

The combination of his hand stimulating her quim from below while his other hand slapped her bare buttocks from above had her squirming and then bucking in his lap as she sought to gain her release. Just as she felt the waves of pleasure begin, he stopped. Ailiss let out a small scream and twisted in his arms.

She bit and clawed at him hard enough to draw blood as he wrestled her down onto her back and settled his cock between her thighs. He made no move to enter her, and she writhed under him in frustration.

"You made me wait for it for hours," he growled. "Your turn to wait now."

Ailiss locked her legs around his waist, lifted her hips, and forced the head of him into her slick folds.

He pinched her nipple in retaliation and she gasped as the added stimulation, on the fine border between pleasure and pain, sent another rush of heat through her. "Rorik. Now."

He drove into her with one hard, fast, thrust. She was already climaxing as he entered her. He pinched her nipple hard once more and she felt the waves of pleasure rippling through her again and again as he took her with furious force. When he spilled himself inside her, he threw his head back and roared his release.

Afterward they lay spent and gasping for breath, still entwined.

It had been a night of revelations. Her mate had fought for her, fought beside her, and then fought with her in a sensual contest that proved he considered her his equal. He had not checked himself in their chase. It had taken all her speed and skill to evade him. And in wrestling with her, he hadn't given her any advantage. He had paid her the ultimate compliment, trusting her to be his match as well as his mate.

Rorik had shown her what she needed to see, that no other woman would ever do for him. Only with her could he be fully himself. Both selves, as she could be fully herself with him, in both of her forms.

She was well and truly caught in his sensual trap and never wanted to be free of him. Ailiss nuzzled his throat and slipped into sleep, sure of him and of their future.

* * * * *

One month later...

Rorik found his mate taking her ease in the deep shade of the woods. She leaned against a tree, her knees drawn up to her chest, bare feet visible from beneath the hem of her gown.

He spotted her shoes in a nearby heap and smiled. Shoes were a source of incessant complaints from his mate. They pinched. They annoyed. They kept her from feeling the ground beneath her feet. She went barefoot at every opportunity.

Ailiss looked up when she heard him coming towards her.

"There are wolves in these woods," Rorik informed her, still smiling.

"Really?" Her eyes widened.

"Truly. Dangerous wolves. If one spotted you, he might want to eat you up."

Ailiss put a hand to her chest in mock fright. "Ohhh. Not that. What should I do?"

"You could try to run, but it might make the wolf hungrier." Rorik looked down at her. "I suggest you surrender to the inevitable. Lift your skirt and spread your legs."

She let her knees fall open but didn't raise her skirt. "First tell me what you have there."

"This?" He gestured at the very visible bulge of his erection. "I think it speaks for itself."

"No, in your hand." She waved in the direction of it.

"Ah. This." Rorik offered it to her, then sprawled beside her on the ground and slid his hand beneath her skirt. "This documents all the details of our marriage. Your family seems quite pleased with the arrangement."

"Hmm." She handed it back to him and gave him a measuring look. "You are a brave knight. You know, the last man who was to have married me died. Quite mysteriously. Here in these very woods."

"No mystery there at all," Rorik grunted. "A wolf tore the man's throat out. Exactly what the fool deserved for wandering about in the woods at night."

"He tried to steal me from you." Ailiss sounded indignant all over again, and Rorik wondered if she wished he'd killed Devere more slowly.

"To be fair, I stole you from him first." Rorik stroked his hand along the soft skin of her inner thigh and then lightly traced the folds of her sex, bare to him beneath the cover of her skirt.

"I wanted to be stolen by you." Ailiss raised her skirt so they could both watch. Her quim was already growing swollen and slick for him. He thrust a finger into her and she sighed in pleasure. "You captured me twice. You deserved to keep me."

"I let you go the first time." Rorik thrust a second finger into her, preparing her for his cock. "I will never let you go again."

"What will you do with me?" She smiled at him, her lips curved in humor, her cheeks flushed with desire and Rorik felt his heart turn over. He would never tire of the sight of her, the sound of her voice, the scent of her skin. In her human form or the shape of a wolf, she enchanted him. She matched his strength, his will, his pride. And his love.

"Claim you."

He lowered his mouth to her and tasted the cream that flowed for him. He suckled the swollen nub that hid in the folds of her sex until she moaned. His fingers thrust in and out of her quim while he licked and sucked at her. The rich scent of her arousal made his cock throb in anticipation. When he felt her nearing orgasm, he stopped and withdrew his fingers.

She made a low sound of protest.

Rorik nudged her hip. "On your belly."

Ailiss rolled over, her movements slow and sinuous. She tugged the fabric of her skirt down to protect her skin from the ground, but raised it up in back, baring her rear to him. He knelt behind her and moved her legs apart, then raised her up onto her knees so that he could see the pink, swollen folds of her quim, exposed and vulnerable.

Rorik traced the graceful line of her spine with his hands then cupped the curves of her naked bottom. The full shape of it tempted him and he gave it an experimental squeeze. He felt her respond and knew he could explore more of this territory. He toyed with her buttocks and traced a finger between the round globes, down to the tight rosy opening he could just reach with her thighs slightly apart. He stroked it lightly and felt her shiver in response.

So. That pleased her. Rorik slid his hand lower, cupped her naked quim, and coated his fingers with her natural lubrication. Then he slowly, gently worked the tip of one finger into her anus. She let out soft sigh of pleasure mingled with surprise. He stroked in and out of the tight opening while she arched her back a little more to give him better access.

Rorik leaned over her so he could nip sharply with his teeth at the curve of her neck where it joined her shoulder. He reached down with one hand to free his cock then guided it to the slick opening of her sex.

"I am going to fuck you," he said, pleasuring her ass while he prepared to fill her quim with his cock and his come. "Right here, beneath this tree, in these woods. I'll take you on your hands and knees."

"Yes." She thrust her hips back, forcing the head of his cock to enter her. Rorik pressed forward, entering her inch by inch, until his shaft was buried inside her as far as it could go with his hand barring full entry. The hot, tight clasp of her body gave him such satisfaction, such a sense of completion.

"Mine," he growled. He felt her tight muscles gripping his cock, smelled her arousal, felt her surrendering to his joint possession of her quim and the tighter opening that gripped his finger. The position would make it awkward to continue the dual penetration so Rorik left his exploration of her tempting rear for another time and gripped her hips with his hands instead.

Then he took her hard and fast. When he began to spurt his seed deep into her body's core, she buried her face against her arm to muffle her cries of pleasure while she milked his cock.

Spent, Rorik lowered his torso over hers and rested his head on her back, his cock still buried deep inside her. It was risky to linger like this, he knew. They could be discovered. But he stayed there a moment longer, unwilling to withdraw from her.

"Do you still consider this a trap?" he asked her.

Ailiss seemed content with him. He knew she enjoyed their bed games and whenever he wanted to play rough she gave as good as she got. Her response was as wild and untamed as her wolf's nature and she was as quick to laugh with him as she was to attack him in play. Yet some part of him worried that she might still resist or resent their bond.

She arched her back and pushed her hips against his, grinding him deeper into her quim. "I consider this a miracle. Tonight the moon will be full again and we'll both be free."

"I'll chase you again," Rorik promised.

"I'll let you catch me," Ailiss teased.

He nipped at her neck and growled. "I'll always catch you."

She let out a soft sigh. "I depend upon it."

Rorik wrapped his arms around her and rolled with her onto their sides, slipping out of her in the process. "This is where it began, you know. You marked me here."

"I did." She sounded pleased with herself.

"I saw you when it happened." He stroked her hips and belly as he spoke.

"Of course you saw me. I was the little black wolf springing out of the trap and ripping your chest open," Ailiss said.

"That, too. But for a moment, I saw something else. A golden-eyed woman with black hair flowing down to her waist. It's why I didn't move back or strike you to defend myself. You leapt at me as a wolf but I saw the woman."

Ailiss wiggled out of his hold so she could roll to face him. "You did?"

"I did. Simon saw only the wolf, but I think from that night on I knew I'd find you again."

She raked her nails down the front of his shirt, hard enough to hurt. "Which is why you intended to honor your arranged marriage first, and then decided to steal a wife for revenge when that plan fell through."

"What would you say if I told you I believe the wolf within knew what I would find when I stole into that room to capture you?" Rorik asked her.

She laid her open hand over the flesh that she'd scarred years before, hidden beneath his shirt, and spoke slowly. "I would say I believe it."

"You knew, too. The animal side of you knew when you bit me."

"Yes." She looked up at him. "I didn't understand. Not with my human side. I thought you'd done me a kindness and in return I'd done a terrible thing. Most humans lack the ability to change. To them our bite is death, not new life. Then I heard the stories of a dark knight said to have the soul of a wolf and I knew you'd lived."

"I did." He smiled at her and tugged her closer so he could kiss her with lazy thoroughness. "I have no wish for any other life, or any other mate. You are mine, and that is as it should be. All is well."

"I am yours," Ailiss agreed. She kissed him back, and then neither of them said anything more for hours.

About the Author

Charlene Teglia writes erotic romance with humor and speculative fiction elements. She can't imagine any better life than making up stories about hunky Alpha heroes who meet their match and live happily ever after, whether it happens right next door, in outer space, or the outer limits of imagination. When she's not writing, she can be found hiking around the Olympic Peninsula with her family or opening and closing doors for cats.

Charlene welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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