



Defiant in the Viking's Bed (Victorious Vikings Book 3)

By Joanna Fulford

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Captured by his enemy and chained like a dog, Leif Egilsson has one thought in his mind: revenge. He'll no longer be beguiled by the treacherous beauty of Lady Astrid, and her innocence, which he so craved, will finally be his.

On his escape, this fierce, proud Viking is bent on making her pay the price of her betrayal—in his bed! Only, Astrid has the heart of a warrior, and she will not be tamed as easily as he believes....

Victorious Vikings

No man could defeat them. Three women would defy them!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Joanna Fulford's two great passions as a child were horses and writing. Riding developed her love of and respect for the countryside – though it was sometimes seen at much closer quarters than anticipated – and writing allowed exploration of the inner landscape. But teaching was Joanna's calling for many years, and she only left education to pursue writing full-time when it became a growing compulsion!

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Leif Egilsson pulled his dagger free and silently lowered the body of the dead guard. Across the wide clearing in front of him he could see a large camp fire around which a dozen men lounged at their ease, laughing and talking among themselves. Their war gear was piled a few yards off. Behind them was pitched an imposing tent, no doubt sheltering the prince and his closest henchmen. Hard by was a smaller shelter with two guards posted at the entrance. Leif noted their presence with satisfaction.

'That's where Hakke will be holding her, my lord,' he murmured.

Halfdan Svarti nodded. 'We'll go in fast and hit them before they know what's happened. In the meantime, you and your men find Lady Ragnhild and keep her safe.'

'Depend on it.'

The two men retraced their steps into the trees a little way to where fifty armed warriors waited. Halfdan surveyed them keenly.

'Take no prisoners. This time we end it once and for all.'

They heard him in wolfish anticipation.

Leif met his brother's gaze. 'Ready?'

Finn smiled. 'Does Thor hurl thunderbolts?'

'He does today.'

'I'm glad to hear it, Cousin,' said Erik. 'Life has grown dull of late.'

Beside them a grizzled campaigner stroked the haft of an axe. 'You speak true. There hasn't been so much as a skirmish for weeks. Skull Cleaver is thirsty.'

'She shall drink her fill, Thorvald,' said Leif.

The older man laughed softly. It drew answering grins from those who stood nearby. There followed the muted chink of mail and the sinister whisper of blades unsheathed. Leif smiled, tightening his grip on Foe Bane's hilt, and then briefly touched the amulet that he wore around his neck.

'Let's do it.'

They moved forwards to the edge of the thicket. Halfdan raised his sword aloft and then, with a deafening roar, the whole force broke from cover and hurtled upon the enemy.

Astrid sat bolt upright, her startled gaze meeting Ragnhild's. 'What was that?'

'I'm not sure. It sounded like...'

The rest was lost, swept aside by a deafening war cry and then confused alarm: shouting, running feet and then the unmistakable clash of steel. Astrid leapt to her feet and ran to the entrance of the tent, pushing aside the hangings to peer out. Her eyes widened.

'Merciful gods! Where on earth did *they* come from?'

Ragnhild hastened to join her and then she too stared in dismay at the throng of fighting warriors. 'Whose men are those? Can you tell?'

'No, but they're definitely enemies of Prince Hakke, which means.'

'They might prove friends to us?'

'Let's hope so, my lady.'

Astrid prayed that her words were true and that they might not find themselves even worse off than before. It was hard to see how, but then, nothing was certain. This might mean deliverance or doom. Hakke would not yield up his prisoners easily. Indeed, he might rather slay them than lose them. She swallowed hard. They had no weapons with which to defend themselves; even their belt knives had been confiscated when they were captured. Possibly the prince had not wished to leave temptation in their way. He was right: Ragnhild would have used it on herself before agreeing to his demands and Astrid didn't blame her. Nor would she have chosen to linger among the present company after her mistress's demise. Some things *were* worse than death.

Leif parried the blow aimed at his head and laid on with a will, driving his opponent back several paces. The defender fought desperately, recovered again and came on, his expression a feral snarl. A wicked thrust was deftly deflected. The blades slid and locked. Leif brought a knee up hard, heard a grunt of pain and saw the man stagger. A second later Foe Bane sank deep in his opponent's gut. Leif tugged the sword free and darted a swift look around. His gaze fell on a familiar figure some twenty yards off; a warrior whose helm bore the crest of a hunting hawk. He was yelling furious orders at his troops. As the latter piled into the fray the warrior looked round and as his gaze locked with Leif's, anger became malevolence.

'You!'

'As you say, Hakke.'

'This will not be forgotten. Not this, nor the battle at Eid.'

'I hope not.'

'All will be paid for, Leif Egilsson.'

Before they could say more one of Halfdan's men stepped into Hakke's path, compelling his attention. Other fighting pairs jostled in. The prince spied his opponent and backed off, lost to view behind the melee. Leif hesitated, sorely tempted to go after him. However, his promise to the king could not be ignored and reluctantly he turned away. The others would have to deal with it. He had a more pressing mission.

The sounds of conflict drew nearer and then the view from the tent was entirely blocked by fighting men. There followed a cry of mortal agony and blood sprayed across hempen fabric. Both women gasped, leaping out of the way as the guard's lifeless body fell through the opening. Then the hangings were torn aside and a tall figure blocked out the light; a figure clad in chainmail and whose fist wielded a blood-stained sword. He was flanked by several other mailed warriors. The two women paled and retreated, brought to bay at the rear of the tent.

As the intruder advanced Astrid stifled a scream, her heart pounding like Thor's hammer. Her attention flicked from the naked dripping blade to the darkening gore streaked across the chainmail byrnies and thence to the steel helmet that partly concealed his face. He halted a few feet away and for the space of a few heartbeats his gaze swept both women, cool and assessing. Then he lowered the sword.

'Don't be afraid. No harm shall come to you.'

The sensation of relief was so strong it made her feel light-headed. With an effort she mastered it and faced him.

'Who are you?' she demanded. 'What do you want with us?'

'I want nothing, lady, other than to ensure your safety. The rest my lord will explain himself.'

'And who is your lord?' 'King Halfdan.'

Both women regarded him in astonishment. Ragnhild's hand tightened on Astrid's arm. 'Halfdan?' 'Aye, my lady.' 'Oh, the gods be thanked.'

Astrid too let out the breath she had been holding, hardly able to take in such a swift reversal of their former ill fortune. Turning to Ragnhild, she saw the same expression mirrored in the other woman's face.

'The king is here?' Ragnhild continued.

'Nothing could have kept him away, my lady. Your safety and well-being are most dear to his heart.'

'As his are to mine.' She paused. 'To whom do I owe thanks for bringing such happy news?'

'Leif Egilsson, at your service.'

'I shall remember that name.'

'My lady does me honour.'

Just then they heard more voices outside, one much louder than the rest, demanding to know Ragnhild's

whereabouts. Moments later the newcomer strode into the tent, a big man, dark of hair and beard, whose face might have been hewn from rock. He paused and as his gaze came to rest on Ragnhild its expression softened. That look was enough. Ragnhild ran to him and was swept into a close embrace.

'I thought I'd never see you again, my lord.' 'No man shall ever take you from me.' He glanced down at her. 'Did the brute hurt you?' 'No, I am well.' 'I thank Odin for it.'

Astrid looked on smiling, her heart full, happy for Ragnhild and for an outcome so different from the one they had earlier expected.

Presently the reunited couple left the tent, no doubt wanting a little space alone for private speech. Halfdan's men grinned and watched them go; then took themselves off in other directions.

'A happy turn of events,' said Astrid. Then she turned to Leif. 'But for your timely intervention it might not have been. I too am grateful.'

He paused to make use of the door hangings and wipe his sword clean; then sheathed it. 'No thanks are necessary. It was a matter of unfinished business.'

'I see.'

'Now it is done.'

'Perhaps there will be peace at last.' He unfastened the chin strap and removed his helmet. 'Perhaps.'

Astrid caught her breath, wondering for a moment if Baldur the Beautiful had not just assumed human form. A mane of pale gold hair framed a face remarkable for its strong chiselled lines and planes. His eyes were somewhere between blue and grey, like the sea just after a storm, but much harder to read. Realising she was staring, she dragged her mind back to the conversation.

'If it comes about I shall know whom to thank.'

He smiled faintly. 'You have the advantage of me, lady.'

'I am Astrid, companion to Ragnhild.'

The blue-grey gaze surveyed her from head to toe and back again. 'A pretty name and most aptly bestowed.'

His expression was both hard to interpret and mildly disconcerting. Had he paid her a genuine compliment or had she detected a faintly mocking undertone? Perhaps it was a little of both. Whatever the truth of it she was keenly aware that everyone else had left the tent; that now she had his undivided attention. While male attention was nothing new, it always made her feel uneasy and resurrected unwelcome memories, so she tried to avoid it. This man didn't make her afraid as Hakke and his mercenaries had done but there was something about him that disturbed her all the same, and on an entirely different and unfamiliar level. She decided to parry.

'It is I who am fortunate in having so kind a mistress.'

'Your mistress is about to become a queen or I miss my guess.'

She smiled. 'I think your guess is accurate, though perhaps not hard to arrive at.'

'True.'

'I believe theirs will be a most happy marriage.' 'That will make them both lucky and exceptional.' 'Why should it be exceptional?' she replied. 'Plenty of marriages are happy.'

'It may be so but it is entirely outside my experience.' 'Then how can you judge?'

'I was referring to the latter part of your statement, not the former.'

'Oh.'

The conversation lapsed into an awkward silence made more difficult by the weight of that steady blue-grey gaze. A slow flush of warmth crept upwards from her neck and throat. It was time to bring matters to a conclusion.

'Speaking of my mistress; I should rejoin her.' She paused. 'Will you take me to her?'

'As you wish.'

He drew the hangings aside and stood back to let her pass. She brushed past him and stepped outside. There she checked abruptly, wide-eyed as she took in the number of the slain. The earth was dark with their blood; its thick metallic reek hung on the still air. Mingled with it were other smells, equally rank. She swallowed hard, trying not to breathe too deeply.

'Battle isn't pretty, is it?' he said.

'Hardly.'

'And yet you do not scream or swoon.'

'Is that what you were expecting?'

'Had you done so, I wouldn't have been surprised. Now I am.'

She wondered what he would have done if she had swooned. The possibilities were vaguely disconcerting, like his smile now. Quickly she looked away. 'The reality of battle is worse than I imagined.'

'One grows used to it.'

'I think I could never grow used to it.'

'A woman shouldn't have to.'

Astrid had no intention of arguing the point. Instead she looked around, seeking Ragnhild, and located her some little way off, in conversation with Halfdan and some of his men.

Her companion followed her gaze. 'Shall we join them?' 'Certainly.'

He placed a hand under her elbow to steer her around the worst of the carnage. The touch transferred unsettling warmth through the sleeve of her gown. She glanced up quickly and saw him smile. The previous awkwardness might never have happened. Aware of him to her fingertips, she looked away and tried to fix her attention on where they were going. They joined the others a few moments later.

The king's expression was sombre. Astrid felt a twinge of apprehension and directed a quizzical look at Ragnhild. Her friend lost no time in explaining.

'Hakke isn't here, Astrid.'

'No, curse him,' said Halfdan. 'When he realised he was heavily outnumbered he slipped away in the confusion.'

We went after him but some of his men had horses waiting nearby; a second string. I should have foreseen that.'

'Easy to be wise after the event,' replied Leif.

'Since we'd left our own mounts back in the wood the fugitives had a head start. The man's more slippery than a greasy weasel.'

'But far more treacherous, my lord. We need to put him under ground.'

'I have men out looking for him now.'

'He'll be heading for his ship. The coast is only a few miles off.'

'My thought exactly.'

'With your leave I'll take my own force and join the pursuit.'

Halfdan nodded. 'Do it; and may the All-Father bring you better luck.'

Leif bowed to Ragnhild and Astrid and then bade them a brief courteous farewell. With that he turned and strode away. As she watched his retreating figure, Astrid experienced an unwonted sensation of regret, knowing she wouldn't forget him. He, on the other hand, being bound upon his quest, would already have dismissed her from his mind. Not that it mattered. They were unlikely to meet again. Drawing her mantle closer, she followed Halfdan and Ragnhild towards the waiting horses.

Leif and his companions reached the coast in time to see the ship heading towards the open sea. Anger mingled with frustration, emotions he was not alone in feeling, to judge from the flinty expressions around him.

'Hakke will return to his lair and lick his wounds awhile,' said Finn, 'but he'll be back.'

'And in force, no doubt,' added Erik.

'Well, there's nothing we can do about it now,' replied Thorvald.

The others were silent, each man inwardly acknowledging the truth of that statement. They had ridden hard, sparing neither themselves nor their mounts, only for this. Leif restrained the urge to curse, knowing it would serve no purpose.

Eventually Finn glanced his way. 'It'll be dark soon. What do you want to do?'

'We'll make camp here tonight.'

'I was hoping you'd say that. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut.'

'Looks like Hakke's crewmen were before us,' said Erik, eyeing the charred remains of a fire on the strand beyond. 'He really had every eventuality covered, didn't he?'

Thorvald followed his gaze. 'They were certainly waiting awhile. They've even left us some wood.'

'Thoughtful to the last,' replied Finn.

'No, they probably pissed on it before they left.'

In spite of himself Leif grinned. 'Most like. Even if they didn't it won't be enough to keep a fire alight for more than half an hour.' He turned to the others. 'Aun, Harek, Bjarni, Ingolf and Trygg—start looking for some more wood. The rest will take care of the horses.'

As the men moved to obey he went down to inspect the abandoned campsite. Contrary to suspicion the remaining firewood was dry. However, when he tested an ember in the makeshift hearth it was barely warm. They were going to have to start again. Brushing a smear of soot from his fingers, he straightened and went off in search of kindling.

Users Review

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