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Slave to the Dane  
by  
Judith Falcon

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# SLAVE TO THE DANE

Vikings and Vixens

Book 1

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JUDITH FALCON

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## Prologue

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"DO NOT MOVE. You might have a broken rib."

A sharp stab of pain tore through Eahlwyn's midriff as the words hit her ear and she gave a groan.

Yes. She might well have a broken rib, but that was not all. Her whole body felt sore, bruised and battered. She lifted her hand, prodded at her mouth gingerly and found it swollen. There was a taste of blood in her mouth.

"Yes. You have a cut lip too. And bruises everywhere. A few scratches," the voice said again, sounding closer than before.

There was something about that voice that upset her but she could not think what it was. Her mind was foggy, and she was having difficulty waking up. It was not only that she had never heard it before; it was something else, something she could not place. It belonged to a man, that much was for sure, for it was deep and resonant, but a man she did not know.

She moved again—and winced again.

"Stop. You will do yourself more damage," the man said

more firmly than before. This time, he was right by her. "Don't move, or I will have to tie you up."

The threat cleared her mind in the blink of an eye. No one she knew would ever need or want to tie her up. There was only one person who might. She instantly understood that the man by her side was a Dane. *That* was what had bothered her about his voice! She had never heard anyone speak her language with such an accent before.

A Danish accent.

Panic engulfed her.

"What... you..." She could not formulate the question, could not think straight while her insides were churning in fright. If this was really a Dane, then she was in mortal danger. Her eyes flew open when the mounting fear became impossible to control. She instantly regretted the impulse to look.

Next to the pallet, was the very sight that had filled her nightmares for days.

A blond warrior twice her size armed to the teeth with lethal weapons, his body rippling with muscles and his face splattered in blood.

Her mouth opened but no sound came.

"I cleaned your wounds," he told her, piercing her with his gaze. His eyes were as blue as the ice on the lake on winter mornings. For a moment, she allowed herself to drown in their soothing coolness and felt oddly comforted. Then the full implication of what he was saying hit her. She placed a hand on her chest. Her wounds. To clean them, he would have had to see her naked body.

And if he had, then he knew she was a woman!

Eahlwyn gave out a cry as terror overcame her and she fainted clean away.

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## Chapter 1

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ENGLAND, *Wessex*

*Autumn 1015*

Shouts uttered in an alien, harsh language woke Eahlwyn up, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She looked around and froze in horror when she did not recognise her hut.

It had not been a nightmare after all. She *was* in a lair of Danes, alone amongst dozens of bloodthirsty killers who had seen her for what she truly was. A defenceless woman. Right now, she could hear them prowling around, barking at each other, hacking away at pieces of wood for the fire.

At least she hoped it was wood and not Saxon prisoners they had captured during yesterday's battle...

"What have I gotten myself into?" she whimpered, reawakening the pain in her battered body. She would not be able to take more than a few steps before running straight into one of the Dane warriors—or three.

She could be dead before the day was over, after having been raped until she could not move. There was barely

enough time for her to twist her body to the side before she was sick on the floor.

The door opened just as she was wiping her mouth.

A blond warrior was standing in the door frame, his huge body blocking most of the light. She recognised the man who had threatened to tie her up last night. No, she amended quickly, the dangerous Dane who was keeping her captive. The impression she'd had then was confirmed a hundred-fold. This was a warrior in his prime, forbidding and immensely powerful. She let out a squeak of terror.

"Are you ill?" he asked gruffly, eyeing the mess by the pallet. "Are you in pain?"

Eahlwyn didn't answer. Clutching the thin blanket to her chest, she shifted as far away from him as possible. Had she been in full capacity of her faculties, she would have bolted to the door. It would have been a foolish thing to do, but she would have tried nonetheless, all the while knowing she would never be able to outrun him.

But weak as she was, she had no other choice but to lie still and hope he was too disgusted by her bout of sickness to come any closer.

He moved forward, letting the sun into the hut, and she was able to see him more clearly. Blond hair fell onto strong shoulders, leather clothes clung to a tightly corded body that put her in mind of a tree trunk, blue eyes lit up a face that seemed to have been hewn with an axe.

He was taller, more menacing than anyone she had ever seen. Though he had washed and he was unarmed at the moment, the danger he represented wasn't any less real. Such a man would have no more difficulty in killing her with his bare hands than she would have in breaking a bird's neck. He exuded strength and determination.

Eahlwyn bit her lip. What was she going to do?

"I see," the man said slowly, correctly interpreting the gesture. "You are not ill. You are afraid of me."

There was a hint of annoyance in his tone, as if the realization did not please him. But how could she be anything other than scared? Did he think her a simpleton with no sense of reality? He was a member of a raiding army, he and his friends had decimated everyone around and there was more strength in his little finger than in her whole arm.

Of course, she was afraid of him!

"I-I think I have every right to be afraid of you," she replied, bunching her fists into balls to stop them from trembling.

"No, you don't. I will not hurt you. You are safe with me. You need to believe me."

He spoke in short, to the point sentences, but she guessed his curtness was due to the fact that he was speaking a language that was not his own. Still, his command of the Saxon tongue was more than adequate for her to understand him. It was not how he spoke that bothered her, it was what he was saying. He had decreed that she should believe his promise not to hurt her and she was supposed to simply obey. She swallowed hard. Could she do that? The answer was obvious.

No, she could not.

He was a Dane, an invader, and she was a Saxon, utterly at the mercy of his whims and that of his friends. She could not trust him any more than a chicken could trust a fox.

"You tended my wounds. So, you saw I was not a..." She sucked in a breath and closed her eyes. She was asking for trouble even mentioning this, but she had to ascertain how much he knew. "If you bandaged my chest, you will have seen what I am."

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you rape me?" Perhaps it was folly to insist thus, but she needed to know the danger facing her.

There was a long pause, so long that she wondered if the man had left. Or perhaps he had not understood her question. She opened her eyes and risked a glance at him. His jaw was tense, his whole body taut with barely controlled fury. He looked about to lash out.

A whimper escaped her throat. Oh, why did she have to open her mouth? Ignoring the pain shooting through her midriff, she scrambled to the wall.

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Áslak worked hard at keeping still and not letting his fury burst through.

*"Why did you not rape me?"*

The girl's question had been like a blow to the gut. The implication that assaulting her should have been the first thing he'd done when discovering she was a woman, made his blood boil.

But perhaps he was taking it too much to heart. He forced himself to calm down and accept that the accusation was nothing personal. The girl didn't know him, and he *was* a Dane after all. Of course, she would be scared of him, so scared that she had fainted upon realising who the man in front of her was.

An enemy.

To the Saxons, he was a savage brute, invading their land, a lust-crazed monster, nothing more. They did not know his motivations for being here, any more than he knew about their lives. Up until now, the Saxons had been an indistinct entity in his mind, not people with painful pasts or hopes for a brighter future, just like he was. But now it was different. He was staring at one of them in the face, not a

man coming at him with a raised sword in the heat of battle but a woman scared of what he would do to her in cold blood.

Like rape her.

"I don't rape women, especially women who are half dead," he said deliberately, the mere idea leaving a foul taste in his mouth. "But I understand if you don't believe me."

"Why should... should I believe you?" the girl stammered. Her blue eyes had become huge, in disbelief or in fright, he didn't know. "You are my enemy. You and your friends killed everyone in my village. My brother... The only family I had left..."

Her voice broke on a sob. Áslak took a step back, unable to bear another moment of this. He was not her enemy any more than she was his. He did not intend to rape her or hurt her in any way.

"You will stay here until you get better. This hut is where I sleep for now. You will be safe here. No one but me knows you're a woman, I swear. And I am not your enemy."

Every word was spoken through clenched teeth. If he had been able to shake her into acceptance, he would have. But nothing he would say, much less do, would convince her that he was no monster. She was too petrified to even speak properly, she could barely look at him and the mere thought of being here had made her sick.

What had he expected?

When he had left Denmark a few weeks ago, he had been full of hope. Perhaps he could start anew in a country where no one knew him... But the Saxons did know him. They knew him as a monster.

He cast his thoughts back to the moment he had watched the coast of his native country disappear into the horizon. The vast expanse of sand and rocks would be the last glimpse he ever got of the place he had called home all his

life. He would never go back there. Whatever future was waiting for him, it would be in a new land. The others were here in the hope of looting treasure or of slaking a thirst for violence ever boiling under the surface before returning home in triumph.

Not he.

As soon as Knútr inn ríki was declared king like his father had been, he would leave the army and establish himself in the foreign land.

Or perhaps he would die before, in battle. It did not matter if he did. He had little to live for anyway. Hilda had denied him the only thing that would have given some meaning to his life so his death would not matter to anyone, least of all himself.

Björn had laughed and slapped a hand on his shoulder. "Worried you won't have the chance to fulfil your oath, my friend?"

"No. I'm not worried. If it is meant to happen, it will."

His friend had saved him from a lethal blow during their last raid and Áslak had sworn he would one day repay the favour. This was the only reason he would remain with the raiders upon landing on the coast of Wessex. He intended to stay by Björn's side until he had finally paid his debt of honour.

Then he could decide what to do, but he was not free to move on until he had done so.

"I can't wait to return home laden with riches. And perhaps with a slave or two."

Björn's words had made him shake his head. He did not care for riches or slaves and he had no home to return to.

For him, there would be no going back.

"I came to see your wounds," Áslak told the girl, pushing all unpleasant thoughts aside. That was why he was here, not to listen to her accusations or relive painful memories.

She clutched the blanket more tightly to her chest. The message was clear. She did not want him to touch her, to get anywhere near her.

Áslak remembered his shock when, lifting the shirt off her body, he had found himself staring at two perfect, unmistakably female breasts. The band with which she had bound them had been dislodged during the kicking she had received and hung loosely around her narrow, pliable waist.

So, the foolish young boy who had thought to confront two angry Danes with not so much as a wooden stick to defend himself with was a woman...

Shock had stilled his hand. Once he had discovered her true identity, it had not seemed right to keep undressing her, even if his body had been pulsing with desire. Or rather *because* his body had been pulsing with need. She had been unconscious, oblivious to what he was doing. Even if his mouth had watered at the idea of suckling her tender buds, Áslak had kept his need in check. He did not take advantage of unconscious women. Not only was it wrong, but he much preferred them to take an active part in their lovemaking.

This one was as pretty as a doe, and just as skittish. There would be no approaching her without frightening her half to death. Suckling her would have to wait. For now, he needed to reassure her.

"Yesterday, when I took care of your wounds, I did not take off your..." He gestured at her chausses, knowing she would understand what he meant. He was not sure the information would be enough to reassure her, but he needed to tell her he had tried his best to respect her modesty.

"You took off my shirt even if you did not remove anything else," she said quietly. "You must have, to bandage my wounds. You saw me." She glanced briefly at her chest and blushed. Áslak groaned. With such a tell-tale colour on her cheeks, she looked nothing like the boy she wanted to

impersonate—and very beautiful. Talking about her breasts, imagining sucking on them, had caused his groin to stir, and the flush on her cheeks was not helping. He could feel his erection straining against the tight leather of his hose.

"I had to take your shirt off. You were bleeding. I needed to see what it was," he explained, ignoring the discomfort as best as he could. There had been a cut on her flank, mercifully not deep. She must have cut herself on a stone while she was rolling on the floor, for the men had not used their weapons. He tried to speak matter-of-factly and not dwell on the fact that, yes, he had seen her breasts and could have seen much more. "I cleaned the cut. It will be fine now," he concluded.

The girl nodded faintly, keeping her eyes on him, assessing him. He had the impression that because he was a Dane, she was fighting the impulse to thank him as she would have anyone else. She was grateful to him for saving her life but could not bring herself to acknowledge it because she saw him as her enemy.

No matter, he would wait, and if necessary, he would make her utter the words. Without him, she would be dead, and he wanted her to be fully aware—and thankful—of the fact. He wanted her to stop fearing him. He wanted her, full stop.

And he would get her, one way or the other.

Just like that, his decision was made.

"You will be my slave," he declared, lifting his chin as an odd feeling of power surged through him.

His slave.

The word brought all sorts of provocative thoughts to his mind. His groin stiffened further, confirming that he liked the idea of being this girl's master. He had not intended to take slaves, but it seemed like the obvious thing to do now. Only, he did not seem to mean it in quite the same way as Björn

and the other men did. He was not interested in having someone to toil the fields in his place or sweep his floor.

He didn't need a slave, but he wanted someone to protect. He missed the feeling of completeness looking after someone gave him. This girl needed him, however much she hated the fact, and he liked the idea that he was offering his help when nothing forced him to; he liked knowing that he would make a difference in her life.

The difference between life and death.

Unsurprisingly, though, his announcement did not go down too well with the girl.

"Your slave?" she repeated as if she could not believe she had heard him right.

"Yes. For your protection," Áslak explained. "If I let you go now, you will be captured again or killed. You will stay here with me until we move on. If you are my slave, as well as supposedly a man, you will be safe."

His efforts at appeasement did not work. The girl looked aghast.

"But I cannot be a slave!"

"You can, and you will," he said more forcefully. Couldn't she see that he was her only chance at survival, that he did not mean to humiliate her but protect her? If he had really wanted to treat her like an animal, he would not have tended to her wounds, would he? If he truly meant to hurt her, he could have, in dozens of different ways. But he had not, would not.

There were other things he would like to do to her rather than hurt her.

"You will do what you do in your own house. Gather wood for the fire, cook, clean. Nothing more."

His eyes flicked to her woman parts and he shook his head slightly. The meaning was crystal clear. She would not be required to service him at night. At least... not against her

will. But perhaps she could be made to see that he could offer her more than protection. He could offer her pleasure. She took in another deep breath, causing her breasts to strain against the thin material of her undershirt, the only garment she was wearing at the moment. He clenched his jaw. What he wouldn't give to bite at the defiantly hard nipples he could see poking through it! It was all he had been able to think about since unveiling her body.

"I will not... have to do *that?*" she croaked.

"No. I told you. I don't rape women." Why take by force what you could coax out in a much more satisfying manner? "Now, you must drink and eat."

He took the pitcher from the table and placed it on the floor next to the pallet. The girl did not move a muscle. A stubborn little minx... Good. He liked spirit in people, even more so in women. They made for the best lovers, and of course, there was no glory in taming mice. Much better to harness dragons.

With slow, deliberate gestures, he took a knife from his belt and watched as her eyes widened in fear. She needed to understand that he did not mean to hurt her, but he would not waste his breath explaining that she did not need to fear him; she would be made to realise it on her own. Not taking his gaze from hers, he reached to his pocket and took out a piece of dried meat, enjoying the relief appearing on her face.

Once she had relaxed her stance, he started to cut the meat into small pieces which he held out to her. The girl turned her head to the side, indicating that she would not accept anything coming from him. Áslak gave a smile and ate the meat himself. All in good time. He did not doubt she was hungry and would soon cave in.

"What's your name?" he asked once he had swallowed his mouthful. She didn't answer. "Actually, never mind what it is.

We need to invent one for you because your name is probably a girl's name," he remarked, cutting another, bigger piece of meat for himself. "It is not good for my people to think you are a woman. You will need to... tie your breasts again."

He glanced at the tempting swell beneath the undershirt and groaned. Yes, she definitely needed to cover those maddening curves, not just to hide her real identity, but to protect his sanity.

"My name is Eahlwyn," she surprised him by saying. "I decided to disguise myself as a boy when your army invaded. Your people rape the women they find before they kill them. I did not want to be... you know." She swallowed hard and lowered her eyes.

Something stirred in Áslak at the idea of one of his countrymen forcing himself on her. Over his dead body. That girl belonged to him, and no one else. No one would touch her as long as she was under his protection. The fierceness of his reaction, the possessiveness rippling through him took him by surprise, but it was undeniable; he felt ready to kill to keep her safe.

"I will call you Alfred," he declared, placing the knife back in its sheath with decision. "It is a Saxon name, and it is easy for me to say." She blinked and then nodded slowly. He afforded a smile at her easy surrender. His little adder had lost some of her venom already. "My name is Áslak. I think it will not be difficult for you to say, either. Now, enough nonsense. Eat," he commanded, handing out the last piece of meat.

Eyes planted into hers, he waited, confident she would do what was best for her. After a long moment, she took the meat and brought it to her mouth. When she bared her teeth to bite into it, Áslak let out a low growl, suddenly certain that

a bite from her would give him more pleasure than a kiss from someone else.

"It is good," she mumbled.

"Yes. It is. Trust me. I know what's best for you. In all matters."

As he walked out of the hut, Áslak reflected on the unlikely turn of events.

He now had a slave. It was not what he had planned, but it was the only way he could explain Eahlwyn's presence in the camp and keep her real identity a secret. Claiming her for himself as a woman to warm his bed, would only tempt the others to cause trouble. She was just too beautiful, the lure to take her would be too strong to resist and some fools might well decide that a moment of pleasure in her arms was well worth risking his wrath. A slave boy called Alfred would be a lot safer than an alluring woman called Eahlwyn ever would. Only a handful of his countrymen could be trusted to keep a cool head around a woman, and he had no intention of placing her in danger. Seeing her assaulted under his eye, would tear him apart. Never. He knew he would rip the head off anyone who dared touch her.

He should have guessed that she would be horrified at the idea of being his slave, though. What woman wanted to hear that she was at the mercy of a man twice her size?

Oh well. He would simply have to convince her that she wasn't really going to be his slave in the true sense of the word or be required to slake his lust at night. Although... that was easier said than done. Would he be able to keep his urges in check? There was no denying that the notion she was at his mercy was an intensely arousing one. And she was so beautiful!

He thought back to the moment he had realised the foolhardy youth confronting the two Dane warriors was in fact a woman. His blood had surged at the sight of two firm breasts

begging for a man's attention, his mouth had opened in surprise and desire combined. Of course, now that he had taken the time to look at her more intently, he realised that he should not have missed the clues. For all she wanted to pass off as a man, Eahlwyn was unmistakably feminine. The delicate wrists, the curving hips, the supple waist, everything heralded her true nature.

This was a woman, and an extremely desirable woman at that.

The blonde hair that had been ruthlessly cropped framed a face where two eyes the colour of a clear winter sky seemed to take half the space. Her mouth was a delicious lingonberry red and looked just as tasty. Sweet and tart at the same time, just how he liked it.

How would he convince his wary little Saxon that she had nothing to fear from him? All he knew, was that he could not let her go, alone and unprotected, while Knútr's army was roaming the land. She was already injured and her hot-headedness would only get her into trouble. The way she had launched herself at Harald and Olaf was enough to tell him that if he allowed her to leave, she would be dead before the week was over.

No. She would just have to stick with him until they moved on. He would keep her safe in spite of herself. Knútr inn ríki had elected to use the village, which position was easily defensible, as a resting place for a few days. Some of the warriors were injured and needed time to recuperate. They had been fighting without respite since the moment they had landed.

There was no other way.

'Alfred' would have to be his slave for now, whatever her feelings on the matter were.