

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHAEL-SCOTT EARLE



VIKING
Rune SMITH **2**

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If you need to see a higher resolution version of this map, you can find it on my [website](#), my [Patreon](#), or my [Facebook fan group](#).



Chapter 1

All around me, the deranged cackling of the jakyls echoed through the cold night air.

The Red Forest was cloaked in a heavy, moonless black at this hour, so I couldn't catch even a glint of orange light in the jakyls' bulging blue eyes. All I had to go off of was the frenzied yipping that rebounded off the ashen trunks of the trees, but it didn't make much of a difference if I could see the packs closing in or not.

What mattered was that I kept silent and made sure my mount didn't flee too soon.

It had been two weeks since I conquered Illska in the name of Dalir, and in that time, I'd joined in the jakyl hunt almost every evening. Over the last few days, the autumn storms finally seemed to be waning, so for the first time since I took over Illska, not even a drizzle of frigid rain doused my hunting party. The forest was so still tonight that I could hear the telltale snagging of thick, shaggy fur against stout black thorns. My night vision could even pick up a few ragged shadows trotting a perimeter around us.

This meant the slithering of pronged tongues across teeth would start soon.

I wasn't sure how many packs of jakyls surrounded my squadron right now, but we waited on our drekkadyr with spears in hand. I knew the deranged beasts would press in to rile up our mounts any minute now because the jakyls always started their hunt the same way, and it was a tactic I'd started to get used to.

Still, the wait never got any less unnerving to me.

Each night, the spooky little yips of the grinning beasts came creeping through the woods from the south, and it started out as a sparse and ghostly chorus. The way they all added their own calls at random made it hard to tell where exactly the pack was centralized, but then a goosing cackle would inevitably break out directly behind us when we least expected it.

The high-pitched chattering of the pack grew louder after that, and it wasn't long before nothing but yipping, demented laughter filled the darkness in all directions.

There was no doubt the jakyls enjoyed driving their prey insane with fear before the kill.

The final attack was always hectic, like they'd run out of restraint, but their initial stalking was so carefully orchestrated that it made me wonder if there was some method to their madness. They had a knack for spurring pure, shivering terror in my veins no matter how many times I heard the manic pack closing in, but Illskan warriors learned how to work with the jakyls' tactics.

At sunset each day, my new clansmen rode out from the stronghold and traveled deep into our southern territory, and once the band of seventy hunters branched out into smaller squadrons, we were sitting ducks in the pitch black. My first time out, I couldn't believe this was the best approach to handling the predators, but as I learned more about this more southern region, the logic became clearer.

In Illska, I had four posts outside my stronghold, all occupied day and night by guards and slaves. Plus, an entire children's village sat two miles south of my ramparts. The jakyls prowled the southern lands of my territory year round, and the only way to ensure they didn't prey on my clansmen and slaves was to lure them to a better meal every damn night.

It turned out the drekkadyr were too enticing of a meal for the jakyls to ignore. According to the warriors of Illska, drekkadyr were almost hunted to extinction by the jakyls before their clan began taming the four-horned beasts and keeping them in herds. Now that we had a nest of the beasts, all it took was one mass hunt every evening to maintain the balance in this part of the Red Forest, and I could definitely appreciate the efforts.

Each night, the hunters of Illska played cat and mouse with the deranged beasts, and they offered up our own herd of drekkadyr on a silver platter to get things started. Of course, this particular herd carried ruthless and armed warriors on their backs, and no matter

how many times we slaughtered pack after pack like this, the jakyls never learned their lesson. They were too greedy and single-minded to do anything but descend on our herd the second they caught a whiff of the drekkadyr.

So whenever I wasn't occupied with my other chieftain duties, I rode out with my new clansmen.

Even though no chieftain of Illska had ever done so before.

I could have avoided the frenzied stalking scene like my predecessors had, but there was good enough reason to go against the grain in this case. For starters, it was incredibly gratifying to spear the fuck out of the apex predators who threatened my new land. Jakyls were three times the size of a hyena, bred non-stop like rabbits, and birthed litters as large as twelve cubs every month. They were the primary reason Illska was so low on game across the entire territory, and without proper management, they'd overthrow even the Farthegns in this region within months.

Maintaining this careful balance in the wilderness spoke directly to my Alaskan soul on many levels. I'd honestly started looking forward to the trips out with the hunting party. The process of luring in and taking down jakyls was almost as hair-raising as a nóttmal hunt, but less intimidating overall, and working with a band of seventy warriors to achieve one goal was gratifying in its own way.

There was also the issue of Farthegn loyalties though, and this was fifty percent of the reason I joined the hunts to begin with.

I couldn't be sure seventy Illskans riding out unsupervised wouldn't rally the more than one hundred clansmen I had guarding the posts outside my stronghold.

Not yet, anyways.

Tension against me was slowly ebbing in Illska, but not enough to give me total peace of mind, so for now, more than a third of the evening hunting party was always comprised of my most skilled Dalirian huntresses.

These were women warriors who Eir herself trained with bows and spears, and they could almost hold a candle to my winged wife's

precision with either weapon. They were also fiercely loyal to both of us, and they took Eir's oath to die for me as seriously as my beautiful wife did. Half of them insisted on joining the hunting party for my protection alone, but they clearly enjoyed the hunt itself as well.

The sound of my warriors' devilish chuckles always mingled with the delirium of the jakyls whenever the attack began, and seven of these women hunters surrounded me at all times on their mounts no matter how messy things got. The idea of them taking a rogue spear to the back for me never sat well with my conscience, but I could appreciate the precaution. It was dark as hell out here, and if there was one thing I'd learned about the Red Forest, it was that anything could show up to kill me at any given moment.

Maybe it'd be a rebel Farthegn out to claim my title, but maybe not. Only a handful of beasties here preferred to make a loud entrance, and the rest stalked around on silent paws just waiting to maul the fuck out of anything that crossed their paths.

And these days, I wasn't just another hunter in the woods. I was the chieftain of not one, but two Farthegn clans. With over three hundred warriors under my command, and more than a hundred slaves in my care, a lot relied on me staying alive.

Because of this, I allowed my seven wildish guards to take their positions around me as they pleased, and the rest of Dalir's hunters were arranged amongst the Illskan squadrons.

The yips and cackles were growing louder than the anxious braying of our drekkadyr now, and I could hear my huntresses already shifting their weight on their mounts and readying their spears. The women preferred to use the atlatls of Dalir so they'd guarantee a kill with each strike, but I'd been doing so much spear hunting lately that I was effective enough to not need my own design.

My fist clenched on the shaft of my spear as I waited for the jakyls' restraint to finally snap, and the drekkadyr's hooves stamped hard against the soil as their panic mounted. My squadron and I kept the herd tightly reined in, but just as a heckling shadow darted past, the drekkadyr to my right reared up.

Then my hunters broke into motion, and the jakyls descended on us all.

My first spear impaled a grinning beast directly in its neck, and the ragged shoulders slammed hard into my mount while it squealed in pain. I grinned as I heard its heavy body drop to the ground, but five more jakyls were already gnashing their teeth for a taste of my drekkadyr.

I pulled another spear from the bucket on my back while my guards' mounts bucked wildly at my sides, and we speared our attackers with one arm and clung to our reins with the other. Everything was submerged in shadows, but my eyes were well adjusted to the dark by now. I managed to keep my drekkadyr mostly under control as he tossed his head against my efforts to hold him steady, and one after another, the jakyls pounced from the blackness.

The constant onslaught had my heart rate jacked as piercing squeals and thrumming hooves echoed all around me.

Then the tension of the herd finally broke, and the drekkadyr bolted for their lives. Herds of hunters thundered through the trees as the squadrons sprawled out. I felt the bodies of dead jakyls giving way under me as I let my mount dart seamlessly through the sea of predators, and my wildish guards forced their beasts to follow my own. Every cackling shadow got a giant hoof or a spear to the head, and the women warriors chuckled with pride at every death squeal that rent the chilly air.

I'd probably killed upwards of a dozen jakyls by now, but I couldn't summon the enthusiasm of my guards about it. I actually preferred taking on hulking Farthegns compared to deranged beasts with hundreds of teeth crammed into their jaws. But the best way to keep my nerves in check for a hunt as frantic as this was to block out most of my own instincts. I'd actually learned to let my drekkadyr behave like the prey animal it was instead, and my focus remained locked on keeping him alive one night after another.

This approach usually worked out fine for us all.

But each night was a new opportunity for something terrible to happen.

The yelp of a hunter being thrown from his mount was my first warning something had gone wrong. Then the blood-curdling shriek that followed sent ice through my veins.

The raggedy shadows below me shifted en masse, and as the cackling reached psychotic heights, the shouts of the Fartheagns rose up as all hell broke loose.

There was one thing that could turn the tides of a jakyl hunt: the taste of human flesh. All it took was one jakyl getting a bite out of a Fartheagn.

Now, none of these grinning bastards mattered to me so much as the few who were mauling our fallen hunter. If they got away, my clansmen would be at the top of the menu from here on out, and drekkadyr would never be enough to lure them away from my posts again.

“Turn back!” I bellowed to the hunters closest to me. “Don’t lose track of the feeders!”

Too many jakyls were tearing into the dead hunter, though. Their yips became feverish and delirious as they ripped the man to shreds. The sound of their sadistic glee spurred all the rest into action too, and cackling shadows barreled straight past our mounts now that better fare was available.

The jakyls knocked the drekkadyr’s hooves out from under them in their rush to get a taste, and two more hunters were thrown in the commotion. I almost met the same mauling fate as my mount crashed into a tree in its panic, and another three jakyls nearly toppled us into the thorns.

“Son of a bitch!” I growled, but I managed to keep my seat on the drekkadyr’s back.

Then another hunter was thrown into the jaws of the pack, and I knew this hunt was only moments from turning into a Fartheagn slaughter.

“Dalir, finish this fast!” I hollered above the shrieks.

The Dalirian women heeded my order at once, and every weapon they had on them joined in our efforts as their killing instincts took over. If there was one thing I could trust my home clan with, it was delivering fast and unrelenting attacks without hesitation.

And I was right there with them.

I threw three tomahawks in quick succession, and then I tore a jagged sword from my sheath. The jakyls were swarming around and attacking each other in their efforts to devour the bodies themselves, and I kicked my mount onward and barreled straight into the nearest mass of shadows.

Then I lashed out at every bloody beast I could reach.

My drekkadyr snarled and bucked as the jakyls’ ravenous fangs tore into its shoulders and hindquarters on their way to me, but I knew I didn’t have another choice. There were still dozens of the bastards out here, and in a matter of minutes, every one of them would be after us all if they caught even one taste of our hunters.

But there was too much Farthegn blood on the ground now. Too many jakyls were fiending for a bite.

Each crazed jakyl in the swarm was slaughtered on sight as Dalir’s warriors tore through the pack as ruthlessly as the beasts themselves. Illska did their best to stay on their panicked mounts while they hurled spears into the mass whenever they found an opening. The number of bodies piling up on the forest floor only made it more difficult to keep our drekkadyr in hand, and the stench of blood was heavy in the cold night air as the wild energy of the jakyls spiked.

The Dalirians didn’t stop hacking into the shaggy bodies for anything, and even when their mounts were bucking wildly, and their own legs were clamped in the jaws of a jakyl, my women warriors fought back with a vengeance. They impaled the spikes of their tomahawks in the jakyls’ bulging eyes to wrench their faces open, and the more grinning beasts who came at them, the faster their jagged blades swiped through the mass of ragged fur.

We were almost winning now. Illska's hunters took to picking off the fleeing jakyls with their battle axes whenever they broke away from the slaughter, but then I saw a group slip under their radar.

"Five just got away!" I bellowed to a nearby Illskan.

The bearded man was about my size but at least ten years my senior. His entire left arm was already covered in blood while he clutched a spear and his reins in it, but he also held a hefty battle axe in his good arm. He let out a grating command as he wrenched the reins, and his drekkadyr reared up beside mine. Then the two of us galloped after the rogue jakyls who'd just finished shredding one of our hunters into pieces.

The greedy fuckers pounced straight for the next hunters who were distracted slaughtering a swarm of beasts, and two of the jakyls almost dragged some of my huntresses to the ground.

But my women were faster than them. Both beasts got their throats slit open mid-leap by jagged swords. Then another took a seven-inch tomahawk spike to the skull, and the bearded Illskan beside me managed to catch up to the fourth jakyl and shatter its spine with his battle axe. His spear missed the next beast on account of how injured his left arm was, and my own spear nicked its hindquarters. This was enough to slow it up before it could snatch a nearby hunter, and the battle axe dropped once more to finish him off in passing.

My mount was heavily injured at this point, and I could feel the blood of its gaping wounds seeping into my pant legs, but I urged it onward. I couldn't lose sight of the last two jakyls ahead. Even though the beasts were snarling with hunger, they seemed to be fleeing the slaughter taking place among the pack.

The bearded Illskan beside me was just as determined as I was to finish them off. We couldn't let even one of these crazed jakyls get loose in our woods.

"They're splitting up!" I warned the man, and a second later, a jakyl vanished into the shadows to our right. "Shit!"

Then I veered off to catch him while the Illskan galloped onward after the last fleeing jakyl, but the snarling and yipping of my prey abruptly stopped.

I reined in my panting mount and listened to the darkness around me.

The distant death squeals of the pack were less numerous, and it sounded like my warriors were close to ending the tumult in the north. But none of my guards had seen me take off during the chaos, and I was on my own in the blackened woods while I looked for any sign of the jakyl I'd chased here.

My heart thrummed heavy in my ears as a cold breeze sifted through my sweaty hair. A full minute must have ticked by without even the slightest rustle of a thorny bramble. No spooky yips started up, either, and I narrowed my eyes while I scanned the shadows more carefully.

Something was off.

The jakyls didn't bother stalking silently. They had a set habit of surrounding and tormenting their prey. I knew I'd followed directly along the path the fleeing jakyl had taken, but I couldn't account for why it had abruptly gone silent.

My wounded mount swayed under me as it let out an exhausted nicker, and for a moment, I thought for sure the scent of its blood would get to the jakyl soon enough. This species was too greedy to pass up a meal like this, but the rogue jakyl never pounced.

Seconds seemed to crawl past, and around the time I started to wonder if I was actually alone out here, something else occurred to me.

The last two jakyls weren't the same as the ones I'd gotten used to hunting. They'd already tasted the blood of the Farthegns tonight. They didn't give a shit about drekkadyr anymore, so they wouldn't lurk around waiting to get mine.

But the Illskan hunter I came out here with was covered in his own blood when we split up.

If this jakyl could differentiate between the stench of wounded drekkadyr or wounded Farthegn, he'd damn sure choose the latter, which meant my clansmen now had two jakyls after him, and he wouldn't expect one to be trailing him from this direction.

"Fuck," I growled under my breath as I sheathed my jagged sword. Then I dug my heels hard into the sides of my drekkadyr. "Come on, damn it! Move!"

The drekkadyr let out a bray of protest, but it obeyed my command and charged ahead into the night. I had no idea where the man had gone, or how far he might have ridden, and I strained my ears to catch any sign of him. The heavy breathing of my mount and the pounding of its hooves didn't help my efforts, but I kept him galloping as fast as he could manage.

We were well out of range of the slaughter taking place in the north now. The Red Forest seemed to be wholly deserted out here aside from myself, but I refused to slow down or turn back. These jakyls were so fiendish they'd entirely switched up their natural tactics for another taste of Farthegn flesh, and I couldn't have them stalking silently through my territory from here on out.

I didn't even want to imagine what would happen long-term if either of these last two jakyls got away.

Then I heard one harsh and manic yip of a jakyl not forty feet ahead. A second later, the bearded Illskan let out a furious grunt of effort, and a squeal of death rent the air.

I knew what would come next before I even had time to call out to the man, and I had my spear raised with my lips parted when he suddenly howled in pain.

The last jakyl had caught him unaware from behind without making a sound.

My drekkadyr was only twenty feet away from the hunter when I saw his hulking form crash from his mount with a shaggy beast clamped to his back. But the jakyl only tore into his prey a couple times. Then he turned away with his bloody maws parted, and his

bulging blue eyes locked on mine like he'd been waiting for me to arrive.

My mount reared up so fast that I was thrown clear into the air, and I saw the shadow of the jakyl lurch after me just before I slammed hard into the ground. My head spun on impact, but I rolled, planted the shaft of my spear into the ground at my side, and popped back up to my knees.

Then the jakyl let out a quick, deranged yip of glee, and the grinning bastard pounced.

The spearhead pierced his sternum before his teeth could reach me. The jakyl yelped and writhed to free itself, but its weight only forced the tip in deeper. I kept an iron grip on the spear shaft no matter how much the beast thrashed around, and as its blood trickled over my hands, a piercing death squeal peeled from the jakyl's throat.

"Serves you right," I whispered to the jakyl as the last bit of its life left its body.

Then the forest went silent.



Chapter 2

A row of stout torches illuminated the entrance of Illska's stronghold, and in the firelight, it looked like the entire hunting party had been ambushed.

I'd lost my mount after the jakyl jumped me, so I had the bearded Illskan man draped over the back of his own drekkadyr while I rode astride it. I was mostly drenched in the blood of the last beast who skewered itself on my spear, but the rest of the hunters were covered in gaping wounds where the jakyls had bit them.

Our herd of drekkadyr were twice as torn up as their riders, so the moment my guards saw the state of us all, they hustled to get the gates lifted. Then a stream of armed warriors poured out from the village as we rode in, and they stationed themselves around the clearing outside in case any hostiles were still in the area.

Igrid was at the head of the group with her Khopesh sword drawn. Her thick brown dreadlocks bobbed in a knot on top of her head as she ran over to my mount, and the pierced woman barked orders to the Farthegns in their language the whole way. She looked equally concerned and ready to beat a fucker to death when she roughly caught my leg in an iron grip. Then she dragged me from my mount and shoved me around full circle to check my wounds.

"What has happened, my chief?" Igrid demanded. "Was it Hylmrek? Did you butcher them sufficiently for this violence? Have the Illskans betrayed--"

"Everything's fine," I chuckled and stumbled from her rough handling. "There was no attack. Well, not from any clan, at least. The jakyls got out of hand is all. We lost about eight hunters to them."

Igrid narrowed her brown eyes, and the shards of bone sticking out of her nostrils twitched as she leaned in closer to me.

"Did the Illskans cause this violence on purpose?" the pierced woman asked. "It could have been an effort to risk your life without drawing suspicion, my chief."

“I doubt it,” I snorted. “The hunters we lost were all from Illska, and the rest joined Dalir’s efforts in slaughtering the whole pack once things went south. There weren’t any issues between the two at all.”

“Very well,” Igrid mumbled, and she reluctantly sheathed her sickle-sword.

I smirked as Igrid left to rein the warriors back in and get them all inside the stronghold, and while I led my mount farther from the gated entrance, I eyed the rest of the hunters.

Everyone was dismounting in the clearing at the mouth of the village, and they limped their way around their drekkadyr to take stock of the damage. The majority of my hunters had bloody gashes in their flesh where the jakyls leapt to try and get them. Their buckskin pants were tattered while the toes of their leather boots were torn straight through, but I could tell my clansmen would all pull through alright. It took a lot more than a few jagged bite wounds to cut a Farthegn down, and it looked like they were more concerned about tending to their mounts.

About sixty of our seventy horned beasts made it back from the hunt despite the carnage, but whole swaths of deep brown fur hung loose from their shoulders, and their rumps bore countless gouge marks from the jakyls’ six-inch talons.

We probably killed off about three packs’ worth of jakyls out there tonight, but I still didn’t like the idea of having the smell of drekkadyr blood all over the stronghold. Usually, the stench of dead jakyls was enough to hold the rest off for a day after a hunt was finished, but an easy meal like this one might be enough to override their natural instincts.

After tonight, I knew for sure this was a possibility with a species like theirs.

For this exact reason, I made sure to leave every slaughtered jakyl out in the forest this time. I hoped this would buy us at least one night of peace to address the issue of our bloody herd.

“Are you well, my chief?” a woman warrior asked from behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder while I untethered the reins from

the drekkadyr I rode in on.

Four of my female guards from Dalir were standing there waiting, and they each remained stoic and upright despite the juicy gashes taken out of their thighs and calves.

“I’m good,” I assured them all. “Just a few bruises and a couple bite marks. Nothing too serious, but how are you all holding up?”

“We have failed you, my chief,” a black-haired warrior blurted out. “You were left to travel unaccompanied in these woods, and--”

“You haven’t failed me in the slightest,” I cut in, and I sent the bloody women an amused grin. “You did me proud out there tonight. I want you all to head to the feasting hall and get your fill. We’ll ride north in a couple hours and have Amaeda look after those wounds.”

“We are not hungry, my chief,” another guard insisted, and her scowl lines deepened beneath the black marks striping her face. “We will remain at your side until you retire to the feasting hall yourself.”

I cocked an eyebrow at the line of unwavering, wildish women, but I didn’t offer any rebuttals. I knew better than to argue with Dalirian females by now, especially where my protection was concerned.

Or when they were injured.

Most of the women I’d known back on Earth tended to get a little weepy when they were in excruciating pain, but Farthegns seemed to feed off the loss of their own blood. It only hardened their resolve.

“Well, I’ll be heading to join in the evening meal soon enough,” I muttered as I finished untethering my mount.

The four women offered curt nods and took their positions around me, and I handed the bridle to the black-haired warrior as Igrid returned with her report.

“The night guard has been sent to the east to do a quick run along Hylmrek’s border, and word has been sent to the patrol outside the slave villages about the jakyl attack.” The bone-laden warrior

jutted her thumb toward the bearded man strewn across my mount. “Is this one dead?”

“Not yet,” I sighed. “He fought well, but the jakyls outsmarted us both. He’s got a chunk taken out of his shoulder, and his head’s been mauled a bit on one side. I’ll get him to the healer first thing. All the injured drekkadyr can stay within the stronghold until I have time to run them north. I don’t want their scent drawing any jakyls up here, so they’ll heal up in Dalir for the next week or so.”

“Yes, my chief,” Igrid promptly agreed. “What of your kill for the evening? The women are... eager to work.”

I furrowed my brow as the pierced warrior tilted her head toward the village lanes. When I followed her line of sight, I found a posse of about thirty Illskan women watching me.

All of them had skinning knives already in hand, and it looked like the deep black lines that striped their cheeks from eyes to chin had been carefully redrawn recently. The shaggy golden hides around their hips were fresh as well, and I couldn’t help noticing a lot of them had tidied up their long braids and knots with fresh bone hair pieces.

They’d also loosened the top few hooks on their cuirasses to make sure their ample cleavage was not so subtly exposed.

Again.

I offered the group of busty, badass women a nod of acknowledgment, but then I turned my back to hide my smirk.

“You can dismiss the women,” I muttered to Igrid. “We left the dead out in the forest tonight. The hides were too battered to salvage anyways.”

Igrid sent me a pointed look. “My chief, it annoys me to say this, but you cannot only favor the women of Dalir. These Illskan women are inferior to us, of course, but they have proven themselves loyal to you with no persuasion needed. You should honor them and bring them something to skin for you.”

“I never said they were inferior,” I clarified as I lowered my voice.

“Well, they are,” Igrid countered.

My four wildish guards nodded with smug agreement, and I chuckled as I shook my head and motioned for a few men to come over and give me a hand. Four of the more seasoned warriors of Illska were quick to comply, and they offered me weathered grins and a couple claps to the shoulder as they joined me. Then we all worked to get my unconscious ward off the drekkadyr’s back, and I could hear Igrid ordering the Illskan women away as loudly as possible the whole time.

Irritated grumbling followed shortly after. By the time I got the huge Farthegn hauled to the ground and hoisted between me and four other men, the women had only moved about two feet back.

“Excuse us,” I grunted while we waded through the throng of busty warriors.

“Do you require anything of us, my chief?” an Illskan woman inquired, and she pressed her breasts against my arm as I shuffled past. “Any assistance? Perhaps we can clean your weapons for you?”

“Have your wounds still not been tended to?” another demanded. “Surely the women of Dalir know better than to let you go without the proper attention.”

“If not...” a woman added, “we have plenty of supplies available here for you, my chief. Leave your ward with the men and let us take you to our healer. We can remove these bloody old hides of Dalir and find you something fresh from our own tanner.”

“The chief is in no need of your assistance,” one of my guards growled.

A few huffy grunts rippled through the crowd as the Illskan women were shoved aside so I could make it through.

“Yeah, uhhh, I’m fine,” I said. “Really. My wounds are fine, and I just want to get this man taken care of. Why don’t you all head to

the feast? I'll be over there shortly."

"Do you wish for us to fetch you anything in particular tonight, my chief?" an Illskan woman pressed. "Mead? A fresh barrel of ale? Perhaps the honeyed bread we prepared for you earlier this week? We have saved plenty, and if you recall, you admire our breads quite a lot, my chief."

"His ale has already been fetched," Igrid snapped, and she sent the Illskan women a hard glare as she raised her voice. "Heed your chieftain's orders at once! Or I'll be telling his wife how shamefully disobedient you've turned out to be."

That worked.

One mention of my winged wife parted the sea of women ahead of me, and the burly Illskans helping me with my ward chuckled beneath their beards. I just exchanged a wry smirk with the gray-haired warrior who had hold of the fallen man's other leg, and he risked giving me a wink.

Then we proceeded through the dirt lanes of the stronghold, and Igrid kept a cocky bounce in her step while she led the way to the healer's hut.

"You've gotta stop using my wife as a threat against these women," I muttered under my breath. "You know Eir's proud that they're enthusiastic about their loyalty to me."

"She might be proud to some degree, but Eir has also acknowledged that Dalir is superior to Illska," Igrid informed me. "This praise includes the quality of our women. Thyrri can confirm her stance on this matter. So can Anakol and Bragi. They've all heard her say it."

"Yeah, I know," I mumbled. "They keep bringing it up every day."

"Then you know it's necessary for a clear ranking system to remain in place," Igrid continued. "Your wife is obviously of the highest quality, and she is a woman of Dalir. So I will proudly use her against every inferior woman in this stronghold if I must."

My female guards chuckled in agreement as they trailed behind me and the other men, but I decided to let the subject drop.

The fact was, no two clans of the Red Forest had ever shared a chieftain before. I figured the adjustment period might drag out for a while longer, and it honestly could have been a lot worse. I'd expected this takeover to be difficult in countless ways, but since this wasn't necessarily the case, I figured catty women were better than getting a dagger plunged in my back.

Within a day of killing the former chieftain of Illska, I found myself in possession of a whole slew of new women warriors, and to my surprise, none of them met my gaze with hostility. Not a single one.

It was quite the opposite.

Every woman in Illska paid no mind to my accent or the large mark they'd seen blazing on my chest the night I took their clan for my own.

Apparently, conquering a clan as large as theirs with an army one-third their size commanded a lot of respect from these Illskan women, but this willful loyalty wasn't the only thing I could appreciate about them.

They were all just as committed to their training as my clansmen in Dalir. Their battle tactics were severely different, but their determination and resilience were equally matched. They were also sexy as hell, both feminine-sleek and warrior-ripped, and according to the men I was walking with right now, none of them spent as much time with their cuirasses unclasped before I'd shown up in Illska.

On top of all this, the Illskan women who were married seemed to be doing me a lot of favors in their spare time, because none of their husbands were among the warriors giving me trouble. Still, these axe-wielding women, married or not, were admittedly more desperate for my attention than the Dalirian women were, and the rivalry between the two was obvious from day one.

My Dalirian women already knew without question that I cared for all of them, and they'd learned to trust I had their best interests at the forefront of my mind. This was probably why they were slightly possessive about me, and I understood the inclination. I was the first chieftain they'd had in ages who wasn't a total fucking creep, but I also knew them all by name at this point, and I'd taken every one of them to hunt with me on multiple occasions.

We were a close-knit group who'd accomplished so much in so short a time, and that counted for a hell of a lot.

On the other hand, the women in Illska never hunted. Only the men of their clan managed this kind of work, and they seemed to think I hadn't noticed half of them because of this. Which was probably accurate. The number of women in this clan was just too numerous, and my schedule was packed all day between running two clans and guarding two territories at once.

All I could do right now was try and put up a neutral front when the rival women clashed, but whether they were from Dalir or Illska, I appreciated all of them. My collection of badass, Farthegn women numbered well over a hundred across both my territories, and they were fierce as hell, loyal as fuck, and looked fantastic in their tight leather armor and rugged braids. This chieftain had very few complaints to make on their account.

But I did secretly agree with my beautiful wife. On the whole, Dalir was the superior clan in my book.

For starters, my northern clansmen had been loyal to me for longer, and when I said "kill," they fucking massacred, no questions asked. Even after the battle in Illska was won, they kept on training and pulling their weight non-stop. They'd also proven more grateful for my efforts, more fundamentally skilled with their weapons, and they didn't have a nasty habit of burning my slaves alive when I wasn't around.

Again, in Illska, it wasn't the busty women or their husbands I needed to worry about. But the slew of jacked-up, beefy, axe-wielding men who were in their prime with no one to fuck were a royal pain in my ass.

When these guys had a problem with something, they didn't hold back about making it known. And for the last two weeks, I was the one they had a problem with.

After I freed the imprisoned slaves from the Illskan dungeons and set them up in longhouses to heal, these beefy assholes started burning them up one by one when my back was turned. Then I transferred the slaves from the stronghold to Dalir instead, and someone started snatching more slaves from my villages in the south to burn up next. How they managed to coordinate this, and who was in charge of the whole bullshit operation, I had no idea.

That's why I put Igrid in place as the head guard in Illska.

She watched these bastards like a hawk, with no less than eight of Brokkr's blades on her at all times. She didn't hesitate to beat the biggest Farthegns into submission, either, or throw them in the dungeons if they gave her any trouble. Igrid was the one person the men in Illska feared almost as much as my wife, but even she wasn't sure how slaves kept turning up burned alive.

So I still had some managerial issues to sort out.

In the meantime, most of the residents strolling around the stronghold these days could be trusted. Some of the men had been let out of the dungeons recently just for behaving, and they hadn't strictly proven their loyalty yet, but I figured keeping them out in the open would make it easier to catch what they were up to with my damn slaves. It also gave me an opportunity to change their tunes with good food, good ale, and healing remedies more effective than any sorcerers, elves, or beast-people had ever managed here before.

Luckily, these three things had already proven effective in winning over the more seasoned warriors of Illska. It seemed my most weathered clansmen knew what was good for them.

The oldest men with the most impressive beards were as accepting of my title as the women were. They didn't give a shit what part of the north I came from, and they didn't ask about my mark. They also didn't ask about my black-winged, Hylmrek born, soul-raising wife, and this impressed me the most. While every other

member of Illska shrank in fear whenever Eir was mentioned, the oldest men just smirked with a hint of pride. Then they'd bow their heads in respect to Eir whenever she came around.

I'd realized early on that these seasoned warriors of Illska were my most valuable assets in the south. And after seeing them training at their fields to the west of the stronghold, I decided they could probably even out-scalp Stranholf if they had to.

These older burly guys didn't just wield their giant battle axes. They annihilated with them, and they laughed like crazed maniacs while they did so.

It was fucking scary.

"Watch his head," I warned as we worked to fit our hulking ward through the door of the healing hut.

"You sure he's still livin'?" Fritjof grunted.

"He was thirty minutes ago," I replied, and the gruff warrior snorted at the sentiment.

Fritjof was the same Farthegn who'd obeyed my orders the very night Dalir conquered this clan, and it was the promise of ale and the presence of Eir that ensured his loyalty from then on. He was basically the lead old badass of the old badasses in Illska, and he reminded me a lot of a biker with his wild gray mane and beard to match. He wore his rugged armor and shaggy jakyl hide at all times, no matter the occasion, and once I'd returned his weapon to him, I never saw him without the stupid-heavy battle axe secured to his broad back.

"One... two... three..." I wheezed, and the five of us hoisted the six-foot warrior onto a raised healing bed.

"Fat bastard," Fritjof growled.

I smirked and eyed the lumps of pure muscle beneath our ward's leather armor, but the sight of his half-torn face sobered me pretty quickly.

The jakyl who'd pounced on his back tonight got two good bites out of him before it came after me. Now, his collarbone was

snapped in two while the sinews of his shoulder muscles lay exposed and partially shredded. The flesh of his face had been torn off from one eyebrow down to the corner of his mouth, and all the way back beyond his ear was raw, exposed, fibrous tissue.

“My chief, I was not expecting you!” the healer panted, and an anxious, middle-aged woman with mousy brown hair and wan features scuttled up to my side. Then she stared in horror at the blood all over my nóttmal hide and armor. “Are you wounded, my chief? What has happened? Shall I prepare some--”

“I’m not wounded,” I interrupted. “But this man clearly is.”

The healer spared half a glance to the mauled warrior beside me. “Yes, I can see that, but you do not look well, my chief. Are you certain you need no remedies?”

“I’m fine,” I said, and I tried to be patient with the fretful woman while she wrung her hands. “Amaeda will take care of me, but I have to insist you get to work looking after this warrior. That’s an order. He’s a strong man and a brave one, and if he dies on this table, it won’t be the jakyl who’s to blame for it. It’ll be you. I’ve brought him to you alive. See to it he stays that way.”

“Y-Yes, my chief.” The healer bobbed her mousy brown head. “I will not disappoint you. I have all I need here to see the work is done well. Your Amaeda’s remedies have proven most effective.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said with a reassuring grin. “Several other clansmen were injured during the jakyl hunt tonight. I’d expect them to show up here just as soon as they finish eating their evening meal.”

“I will prepare the poultices immediately,” the wan woman announced.

“Thank you.” I turned away to find Fritjof and the other bearded men watching the healer with wary looks in their eyes.

The band of warriors didn’t voice their opinions just yet. Instead, they led the way back into the lane behind Igrid, and my four guards were waiting diligently in the torchlight when I shut the door

of the healer's hut behind me. Then I joined the silent group, and I gauged the weathered lines on Fritjof's furrowed brow.

"She'll keep him alive," I assured the man.

"Your own healer may be a miracle worker," Fritjof muttered, "but that slave in there is a useless skin bag. Never known her to fix a damn thing beyond a sword wound, and even I could do as much."

"Well, if it looks like she can't deliver, I'll take him north to Dalir," I decided.

"Ye' sure that'll improve his chances?" the gruff warrior chuckled. "I'd wager he'll end up skinned in his Dalirian healing bed before that old elf ever gets to see him. Your lot seem like the skinning type."

"Butchering is more likely," Igrid said with a remorseless grin.

"He'll be safe," I sighed. "Dalir knows the protocol, and no one's gonna cause trouble around Amaeda."

"Yeah, unlike Illska, our clansmen respect the orders of our chieftain," Igrid added. "Your lot seem to enjoy degrading yourselves on a daily basis."

Fritjof's bushy gray eyebrows shot up at the brazen statement. The other bearded men just chortled to themselves while Igrid held his gaze with a stubborn smirk.

"Better watch that tongue," Fritjof warned the pierced woman. "Ye' think it'll keep me in my place, but my wife's got one just like it. Happens to be my favorite flavor."

Igrid's smug grin dropped into a hardened line as the gruff warrior sent her a wink, and I tried so hard not to join the others in their amusement. Three of them were snickering through lewd grins, and as they turned for the feasting hall, I noticed how red the ruthless woman's cheeks were.

To be fair, Igrid rarely lost her composure. But anyone who'd ever seen her kill someone had to notice at least two things about her: she genuinely loved murdering shit, and she really, really needed to get laid. So naturally, the older warriors had caught on

immediately that Igrid was a virgin, and since she had no real cause to give them any shit, they loved using this to mess with her.

Igrid didn't return to her normal pallor until the band of seasoned warriors were well out of sight, and even then, she had to force an intimidating posture.

"You good?" I chuckled.

"Why would I not be, my chief?" Igrid muttered through gritted teeth.

I nodded to myself without answering the question, and the woman finally dropped her façade and rolled her eyes at me.

"Alright," Igrid groaned. "Will you... will you just sell me to a man exactly like that, but way less wrinkly? I won't ask you for anything else as long as I live."

"Igrid, when a man asks after you, I promise I will judge the situation with the highest standards," I assured her, and we walked along with my guards in tow.

"But could you see it's a man with a bit of cheek about him?" the warrior pressed. "I hate men as hot-headed as Anakol, and I don't want some charming, beacon of justice like fucking Bragi, either. I don't care what the other women say. That man smiles too much to put up with. I want a husband with some grit about him, alright? Someone who doesn't only kill for honor, but for the hell of it, too. And he has to be able to hit me back. I mean it. What good is a husband if I can't grapple with him once in a while? But I don't want a husband who's already had a wife die for him. My tits better be the first and last he ever sees."

I finally burst out laughing as I tallied up Igrid's checklist in my mind.

My guards were already scolding her in their language, and I could guess what they were saying. Farthegn women weren't supposed to make demands of any clansmen, especially their chieftain, and never when it came to a husband. Igrid and I had become more like friends lately than clansmen though, and I liked

hearing what she actually thought about things rather than an endless stream of “yes, my chief,” or “no, my chief.”

I heard those phrases about a million times a day, so I was a little disappointed when Igrid promptly sent me an apologetic look.

“Forgive me, my chief,” the pierced woman said hastily. “Anyone you choose for me will be acceptable, of course. I don’t mean to imply my opinion matters or anything. It doesn’t. Any husband will suit me, my chief.”

“Like hell he would,” I snickered. “You’re not going to any man who misses even one mark on that list. I may be your chieftain, but I’m just here to set a final price. Every woman in Dalir gets a say in whether I appraise them at all, and if the guy who comes asking isn’t up to snuff, then he’s shit out of luck.”

Igrid’s jaw unhinged. “You really mean that, my chief? You’d... you’d let us have a say?”

“Of course, I would,” I assured her. “I’d never sell any of you to someone who makes your skin crawl. You’re all fucking phenomenal women, and I’ll make sure you go to men who deserve you. I’m a big fan of women getting exactly what they want. In several ways.”

My wild women guards actually giggled at the words, and when I cocked an eyebrow over my shoulder, their telling blushes brought a grin to my face.

Every woman in Dalir knew my personal stance on matrimony by now because Eir had made sure of it. None of the men were as informed, of course, but the women who bathed at the hot springs with my wife knew damn well how good she had it. And I’d finally given up trying to make it clear to her that I liked my privacy.

Eir was just too proud of our sex life to keep her mouth shut. She was so proud that she bragged to me about bragging about me to the others, and it was honestly cute as hell when she did it. Eir would casually tousle her long blonde braids and detail the ruckus she caused among the women over a new position we tried, and every day, I caught my virgin warriors looking at me with redder faces and a lot more obliging smiles.

“Anyways...” I led, and Igrid tried to rein in her own dreamy smirk as she stared at my face. “How have things been holding up here today? I hardly had time to check in with all the fishing weirs being built.”

“Minimal beatings in the dungeon,” Igrid reported. “The last of the rebel Illskans are weakening, my chief. Only eleven have yet to be broken.”

“What about the men you let out yesterday?” I checked.

“That remains to be seen,” she admitted. “No slaves have been burned today, and the patrol I sent out this afternoon reported no issues at the southern posts.”

“Good.” I nodded. “What did the slaves have to say about the harvest?”

“The rye will be ready in two weeks’ time,” Igrid said, and we came to a stop outside the grain storage of the stronghold. “We moved these sacks of millet up from the fields this morning. Should be about a hundred and fifty pounds.”

“Holy shit...” I eyed the stacks and stacks of millet, and then I gestured to the barrels in the corner. “Those weren’t here last week.”

“All the barrels on the right side are filled with some spices these Illskans grow in the southwestern fields.” Igrid shrugged. “They smell alright, I suppose.”

I furrowed my brow as I carefully stepped around the heaps of millet sacks, and I took a few whiffs of the barrels along the wall. Most of them had a sharp, sage-like scent, but a couple were something I didn’t recognize as anything familiar from Earth. Either way, they smelled fantastic, and I could tell they’d pair nicely with the eldradyr jerky I had smoking up in Dalir.

“Let’s get one of each barrel sent north,” I decided, and I worked my way back out of the crowded grain storage. “Anakol said it’s been ages since Dalir had some seasonings with their food, and we can put all of this to good use. I want a third of these millet sacks sent up too, and as soon as the rye is ready, half of it goes to Dalir. There’s already plenty here for Illska to last through a few seasons.”

“Certainly, my chief,” Igrid said. “The last of the oats will be harvested in the next few days.”

“Let me know what the end product is,” I said as I dragged the heavy wooden door shut, and Igrid bobbed her head in understanding before we turned in the direction of the feasting hall. “The last batch of oats that I sent to Dalir should get us through the winter, but if Illska can spare it, I want a fuller stock than what we’ve got.”

“Illska can spare plenty, my chief,” Igrid snorted. “They’ve been raiding our game for months, and if anything, it’s our right to punish-”

“If anything, we should be able find a fair balance between our clans,” I cut in. “Both have plenty to offer that the other can benefit from. Have I made myself clear?”

The pierced woman pursed her lips. “Yes, my chief.”

“I’m already letting you beat the shit out of them, Igrid,” I reminded her. “Now that Illska’s mine, let’s keep the punishments and rewards on an even keel.”

“You’re certain it’s not too soon to be this gracious with them?” the warrior grumbled. “These Illskans haven’t suffered half as much as Dalir has, my chief. A little starvation would do them good. Their women are certainly a little too soft around the edges...”

“Their women seem pretty cut to me,” I sighed as I pushed the door of the feasting hall open, and the raucous conversations inside spilled over us immediately.

My five Dalirian warriors tightened their formation around me while I strolled between the lengthy wooden tables that stretched the full length of the hall. Then I nodded to the wave of bowing heads I passed, but my guards remained stone-faced with their hands on their sword hilts.

Only a quarter of the feasting hall was occupied this late in the evening. Most of the clansmen were the injured hunters I’d returned with, and the majority had their wives seated beside them now. A few random stronghold residents leaned in to hear their retelling of the

jakyl hunt, but some warriors of Dalir were interspersed throughout to keep an eye on things.

I noticed several Illskan women craning their necks to eye my blood-stained clothes with concern, and when I reached my private table at the head of the hall, it was already occupied by twelve busty warriors.

All of them shot to their feet with half-open cuirasses the moment I arrived, and I got the impression they were trying to send me coy smiles. The trouble was, women of Illska were so muscular from lugging battle axes around, so the effect was way more intimidating than they probably meant it to be.

Their smiles said something more along the lines of, “We’d like to smother you... slowly,” and I remembered how my brother Brandon used to tell me about the “Death by Snu Snu” episode of *Futurama* that gave him an appreciation for muscular women.

“We have been waiting for you, my chief,” one of the warriors purred, and she gestured to the bench at her back while she stood with her battle axe proudly propped ahead of her.

The rough wooden table was lined with full plates and mugs brimming with ale, but my own place was left empty so I could be served a fresh meal upon arrival. None of the women’s fare had been touched yet, and I noticed they’d strategically arranged their plates around my spot with no room for my guards at all.

“You didn’t have to wait,” I told the busty warriors. “You all deserve a nice hot meal, I’m sure.”

“We prefer your company, my chief,” the woman with the axe insisted. “You honor us by sharing this meal with us.”

I nodded my approval, but three of the warriors promptly adjusted their tops to catch my eye, and I found myself doing a sweep of the cleavage ahead of me whether I wanted to or not.

God damn it.

Then Igrid clicked her tongue and shoved two women aside without a word.

I bit my cheek to keep from grinning as I followed her, and once I was seated, my four wildish guards stared down the Illskan women until they reluctantly shifted their plates aside. Eventually, I had my Dalirian women arranged along the table beside me with Igrid rooted to my left.

I let out a discreet sigh. This same scene had replayed itself five times in the past two weeks.

I already knew the woman who was so proud of her axe would be the one to lean far over the table and fill my empty mug from a pitcher of ale. And just like the last four times she did this, she pressed her arms together until her tits threatened to explode out of her leather armor.

I made a point of meeting her gaze dead-on like I always did, and I politely thanked her because her six-foot-four husband sat two tables over from me. Tonight, he was covered in blood from the waist down on account of the jakyl hunt, and I could feel his Farthegn eyes burning into the side of my head from the moment I sat down.

Then his bold wife took her seat with the other Illskan women across the table, and I offered them all an uncomfortable nod and waited for my own meal to arrive. The second a man plunked a steaming plate of food down in front of me, all seventeen women finally dug in, and the sound of Igrid loudly chomping her way through her roasted boar meat made me feel a little more at home.

I already wished I'd chosen to feast with my other clan this evening, though. Not that I didn't appreciate the ample... support of my Illskan women. They were extremely forward and proud of what they had to flaunt, and why shouldn't they be? Technically, they all belonged to me now, and I was the one man aside from their husbands who was allowed to get a full view or fuck them if I wanted to.

I didn't want to be rude and snub my own Farthegns, but the truth was... it was just impossible to appreciate most of the tits I saw these days.

Every damn one of them paled in comparison to Eir's truly flawless breasts, and the women flaunting them did, too.

Yes, marriage had spoiled me rotten in only a few short weeks, and I didn't mind in the slightest.

I grabbed my cutlery while I envisioned my Nordic goddess of a wife crawling across my own dining table to strip herself down for me, and she was just snapping the tiny strap of her thong when I realized my dinner didn't look as appetizing as usual.

It could have been the lighting since the torches were pretty burned down at this hour, but the meat looked somewhat gray, and my knife cut through too easily for it to be boar.

"What is this meat?" I asked while I raised a bite to my lips.

The second it touched my tongue, the bitter undertones made me gag uncontrollably. I didn't make it beyond one chew before I spat the stuff onto the floor.

Igrid snatched my plate from me at once, and every woman at the table remained frozen in place while we watched the pierced warrior shove a whole chunk in her mouth without hesitation.

Then her expression darkened, and she nodded to herself as she swallowed the meat down.

"It's slave," Igrid growled.

I was about half a second away from hurling, but I never got the chance.

In the blink of an eye, Igrid was out of her chair, on the table, and raising her tomahawk with the seven-inch spike.

The man who'd delivered my meal was on the other side of the feasting hall by now, but it hardly mattered. Igrid let out a blistering curse as she threw her tomahawk at full force, and the second the blade struck the asshole's spine, every chiseled warrior in the hall lost their shit.



Chapter 3

The tension in the air skyrocketed all at once, and in a matter of seconds, it broke as everyone lunged into brawl mode.

Wooden benches crashed sideways as Farthegns jumped from the tabletops onto each others' backs. Arguments erupted all over the feasting hall, and the guards of Dalir suddenly found themselves surrounded by packs of commanding Illskans.

It was impossible to tell who was fighting who out there, but from what I could tell, Igrid's actions didn't only cause some clan-on-clan strife. Issues were also rising up between the Illskans who were already loyal to me and those who were on the fence. Axe-toting women started breaking their plates over their own clansmen's heads, and their husbands generally just punched anyone who came near their women.

I was relieved to at least see the warriors who'd been given their weapons back didn't draw them, but my guards were still having a hell of a time trying to talk anyone down. They ended up just kicking the Illskans' asses for getting in their faces, but none of this confusion was enough to intercept Igrid.

I stared in impressed silence while the pierced woman scaled tables and bodies, and she managed to reach the other end of the feasting hall in seconds flat. Then she dove at full force and tackled a man three times her size, and I shot to my feet when I saw five others turn on her at once.

They were directly in front of a wide-open roasting pit in the wall with no easy escape thanks to all the commotion. This meant Igrid was blocked in with the hulking bastards, and one wrong move could mean she ended up getting thrown into the blazing pit.

Several of my warriors from Dalir tried to make it over to her, but then the ominous war cry of Igrid ricocheted across the hall, and a moment later, a heavy body hit the floor.

I knew from this sound alone that another man must have been butchered at the hands of the pierced warrior, but only her bloody tomahawk was visible from where I stood. It was still swinging above the heads of the crowd while firelight glinted on the bloody bit, and most of the wrestling going on around the hall abruptly ceased.

A strained silence fell, and only the growling, scuffling, and screaming taking place near the roasting pit echoed around the hall. I still couldn't get a good visual on the situation because a flock of women warriors with Illskan hides were encircling Igrid now, but from the looks of it, not one of them was trying to stop her.

I quickly realized they were actually keeping their other clansmen from interfering in her efforts. Even the guards from Dalir didn't bother stepping in, and my stomach clenched when I heard two more bodies hit the ground.

Then I shoved the bench out from behind me, and I stormed around the table and across the feasting hall before I could lose any more of Illska's warriors tonight. Most of the onlookers leapt aside as I trudged through with my personal guards in tow, and I ground my jaw as the hacking sounds continued unabated ahead of me.

Normally, I let my warriors handle the minor issues among the clansmen, but my first glimpse of Igrid proved it was about time I reined her back in.

Between the muscular shoulders of the Illskan women, I could see Igrid wielding a jagged sword and a tomahawk, and both blades were slick with blood as she relentlessly lashed out at three beefy men at once. None of them were armed, so I knew they were rebels, but they seemed determined to use anything they could to fend Igrid off.

My ruthless warrior dodged a flying bench and a flaming log from the fire pit without missing a beat, and she sliced one of the men's shins open in the process. Then she got him pinned underfoot and raised her tomahawk to deliver yet another death blow, but before I could reach her, Fritjof's hand shot out to catch Igrid's wrist mid-swing.

I expected Igrid to turn on the gruff warrior any second, but whatever Fritjof muttered in a low tone ended the entire scuffle.

The last three rebels were panting hard, and two of them could barely stand on their feet, but they took a single step back from the pierced woman. Igrid's boot remained planted on the chest of the man whose shins were blooming a deep red, and she seethed through bared teeth while the blood of my clansmen dripped from her blades.

Igrid seemed to have suddenly cooled off by a few degrees, though. She ripped her arm free of Fritjof's hold and settled for leveling her would-be next victim with a livid glare.

"You have one day to change my mind," Igrid growled. "After that, I don't care whose son you are. You'll be weighted at the bottom of a canal with your balls shoved down your throat."

That's when I realized the burly rebel who laid sweating and lacerated under Igrid's boot was actually Fritjof's son.

He was a little younger than me, but he was as broad-shouldered as his father, and his shaved head looked like he'd used scarification to line it with thick stripes along the sides. His black eyes burned with pure, Farthegn hatred as he glowered up at Igrid, but when he turned his gaze to Fritjof, his father didn't offer any assistance. The gruff warrior just nodded in agreement with Igrid's threat, and the two other rebels spat at the three dead bodies on the ground.

Then the crowd turned toward me, and I knew it was my turn to decide the final punishment here.

The battered rebels panted on as I strolled forward. The ring of Illskan women parted for me and my guards, and I scanned the butchered bodies of the three dead warriors first.

It looked like the one who'd delivered my meal took some extra rage hits from Igrid, even after his death. Her tomahawk to his spine was the least violent wound he had on him, but the other two butchered men were unrecognizable on account of their caved-in faces. Pools of red stained the dirt floor beneath them, and thanks to

the jagged design of Brokkr's signature swords, two of the corpses had some of their innards hanging out of their lower abdomens.

When I glanced at Igrid, she only bore a few scrapes and swollen knots on her face. Then the pierced woman swiped the blood from her split lip, and she gestured to the living men with a blood slickened, jagged sword.

"They were released from the dungeon yesterday, my chief," the ruthless warrior panted. "All six of them."

I nodded in understanding.

The three living men still wore a few markings from their punishments in the dungeon, but I could tell by the unwavering outrage in their expressions that the beatings hadn't made any difference. Their brawny chests heaved with fury while their battered fists remained firmly clenched, and it was clear none of them regretted anything that had gone down tonight.

But Fritjof's skinhead son looked more pissed than the other two. His black eyes burned into mine with pure revulsion, and there was no question this beefy asshole wanted nothing more than to kill me, but not in a quick and painless way. He looked like he'd rather rip me into pieces and piss on my remains, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he got a little more inventive than that.

"Alright," I muttered as I glanced around at his dead comrades. "Message received."

"Should I cut their dicks off, my chief?" Igrid offered.

I shook my head. "Not yet. Throw them back in the dungeon, but no beatings this time."

"None?" Igrid scoffed, and the Illskan women surrounding us pursed their lips to show their disapproval of my words.

"None," I repeated. Then I grinned as Fritjof's son furrowed his brow the tiniest bit. "You guys are some sick fucks. I can appreciate the inclination, but you're of no use to me if you can't apply your efforts properly. That being said, I'm gonna give you more than a day

to reconsider where your loyalties lie. You have three weeks, and in that time, this right here is all the rations you get.”

I booted a dead Farthegn at my feet, and the rebels’ furious scowls faltered as they looked down at their dead companions.

“I recommend you start cutting these guys up before the rigor mortis sets in,” I continued. “You could wait five days, instead, but to be honest, you’re better off just diving right in and getting your fill early on before the meat sours. We’ll check in at the end of this week. If you’re still feeling a bit salty, you’ve got some spare time to reconsider. On the off-chance any of you are still alive by the end of week three, Igrid will cut your dicks off. How’s that sound? Right up your alley, no?”

Fritjof chuckled to himself while his skinhead son and the other two rebels visibly blanched. Then the three men were caught at the arms by a troop of Illskan women.

“We will see these betrayers to your dungeon, my chief,” a busty warrior breathlessly offered. “It shames us all to know you have been so mistreated here tonight, and we offer all we can to correct this degradation. Perhaps you wish to retire to your private quarters, and we--”

“Dungeon!” Igrid barked, and the women jumped to do her bidding while she rolled her eyes in my direction. “We will see this handled, my chief.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Don’t forget the food.”

I gestured to the dead bodies, and Igrid promptly summoned a troop of Dalirian warriors to haul the carcasses to the dungeons. Then I made arrangements with a few other men to oversee the meal prep the rebels would be undertaking for the next few days, but while most of the residents in the feasting hall settled back down and returned to the overturned tables, I was quickly surrounded by the women of Illska.

They all fretted, fawned, and apologized non-stop for the half-bite of slave I tasted tonight, and I couldn’t take more than two steps without one of my clansmen’s wives offering to warm my bed and

make up for it. The number of breasts pressing in around me actually made me feel claustrophobic within minutes, but then Fritjof dislodged me from the swarm and shuttled me toward the entrance doors.

My personal guards took over battling the rest of the women away while they escorted the two of us from the feasting hall. As soon as I made it outside, I drank in a deep breath of crisp night air.

At this point, I was beyond worn out. I'd only arrived back in Illska yesterday morning, but it felt like weeks since I last saw Dalir. The chaos of the jakyl hunt left my nerves shot, and the rebel bullshit only added an extra dose of irritation to my plate.

I let out a tired sigh and looked down at my matted nóttmal hide. A few women managed to get the leather straps undone when I was distracted by their fawning, so I worked on correcting the issue while Fritjof throttled my shoulder with a toothy grin.

"Say what you will of your northern women," the gruff warrior chortled. "Illska will never leave ye' without a soft body at your side, my chief."

"Uh-huh," I mumbled, but the feasting hall doors reopened behind us, and two of the dead rebels were dragged past a moment later. "Listen, about your son... I don't want you to get the impression--"

Fritjof waved a rugged hand to cut me off. "Don't worry about it, chief. He knows he did wrong, and he'll straighten up. If not... he deserves what he gets, in my opinion."

"Oh," I said. "Well, if that's how you feel about it."

"It is." The gray-haired warrior shrugged without concern. "Now, do you want some real food sent over to your hut? I can send my wife along with it if ye' like. Bruka's a feisty little thing. She'll certainly take your mind off your troubles."

I did a double-take as Fritjof's words caught me off-guard, and he wagged his bushy gray eyebrows for good measure.

I already knew it was my right as the chieftain to sleep with any of my clansmen's wives, but I'd never had a man straight-up offer his woman to me before. Usually, it was the fawning of the wives who reminded me how these Farthegns lived, but here I was. My most trusted Illskan warrior wanted me to have sex with his feisty wife tonight.

I still couldn't wrap my head around the concept.

These Farthegn men served me, and I respected the hell out of them. They were hulking, brutal-minded killing machines who were prepared to fight to the death with no forewarning needed, and even though they had decades of experience beyond my own, they heeded my orders and would enter into any battle I decided to wage.

Fucking their women seemed like the worst way to repay that kind of loyalty. Especially after these guys spent ages killing who knew how many enemies just to buy their wives to begin with.

I shifted my weight a little uncomfortably as I cleared my throat.

"No thanks," I finally replied. "That doesn't really seem appropriate. I mean... I did just sentence your son to forced cannibalism for the foreseeable future, so..."

"Bruka don't give a shit about him," Fritjof assured me. "I had that boy with my second wife. Or the third? Can't keep track these days. Either way, there's five more sons of mine running around the children's village."

"Seriously?" I snorted. "How many wives have you had?"

"This younger one I bought last year is my eighth," the gruff man answered. "The others died for me in battle, but I hope Bruka lives a bit longer. She's got an ass that'll make ye' weep. Try her out!"

"No," I chuckled. "I'm not fucking your woman. Honestly, all I want to do right now is go find my own wife."

"Ahh..." Fritjof scruffed his thick gray beard, and I could tell by the glint in his eyes that it was Eir's flawless ass he was picturing this time. "Yeah, I can understand that."

I grinned as we turned down the lane. "I'll be back down here in a couple days to check on the fish supply coming into the weirs, but feel free to set a fourth one up if it looks like we're not trapping enough. You don't happen to know how many boars are left in the reserves at the children's village, do you?"

"Aye," Fritjof confirmed. "Took a count yesterday while I was checkin' in on their training. Got seven boars left, and the guards said they're eating up a third of a beast per night. Four of those eldradyr ye' sent down are still aging, but I'd guess one should last about five or six days."

"I'll have my hunters deliver a few more," I decided. "I won't be here for the jakyl hunt tomorrow, so you're in charge of the hunting party."

Fritjof nodded. "Yes, my chief."

The two of us entered the healer's hut without knocking, so the wan woman inside leapt about a foot into the air when we arrived, and three bottles of tonic spilled across the floorboards. Eight injured and irritated Farthegns were waiting for their jakyl bites to be tended to, and the unconscious hunter I'd left in the healer's care didn't have any wrappings on yet.

It looked like the slave woman was still cleaning out his wounds, and there was just no way he'd live through the night in this healer's care. Fortunately, Amaeda never let me down, so I exchanged a silent glance with Fritjof.

The gruff warrior turned on his heels at once and left to fetch a few men to help us move the body out of here. Then I sent the healer to take care of her other patients, and I grabbed some fresh linen wrappings so I could secure them around the hunter's mauled head and stop the residual bleeding. By the time I finished wrapping up his shoulder as best I could, seven beefy warriors arrived at the hut, and they hauled the unconscious man away.

I left the healer with a curt nod.

Twenty minutes later, the mauled warrior was tied down on a drekkadyr near the stronghold gates. I mounted up ahead of the

body before I grabbed the flaming torch Fritjof held up to me. My personal guards and four other warriors of Dalir were seated on their own drekkadyr with torches held in one hand as well, and they worked to consolidate the herd of injured beasts from tonight's hunt.

Then the hefty gates slowly lifted, and I kicked my mount into motion.

I'd made the trip between Illska and Dalir over a dozen times in the last two weeks, and it didn't make any difference to me whether it was in the middle of the night or during the day. Leading my clansmen north through the red trees was as routine as taking a drive to the air strip in Talkeetna used to be, and even the risk of getting hunted along the way didn't concern me too much.

A slim crescent of the molten moon had risen by now, but our torches were enough to keep the nóttmal at a safe distance.

As long as we contained our injured herd, we'd make it to Dalir without any issues, but shortly after we galloped over the river border between my two clans, the low growls of the massive, bear-like creatures began to trail us. Still, the sound of the vicious nóttmal was one I'd grown used to. The flashes of their milky-white eyes between the trees didn't send a shiver down my spine anymore, and I just kept my attention straight ahead while I clutched my torch and urged my mount to gallop onward.

The drekkadyr brayed non-stop, but my warriors didn't let them break away from the herd no matter how many growls surrounded us. We barreled over tributaries and wove between the ashen trunks while the foliage grew denser under our mounts' hooves. Around the time the scent of smoked fish and grilled venison filled the air, the defensive walls of Dalir came into view. Then we circled around the perimeter to the north side, and the guards who'd spotted us from their lookout platforms spread the word to open the gates before we arrived.

Both lofty wooden doors were parted for me as the entire herd approached the entrance of Dalir, and we galloped through the gates to find slaves already gathering to tend to our mounts.

The sound of stamping hooves filled the clearing as I reined in my drekkadyr beside the corral. Slaves and warriors alike flocked to the four-horned beasts with anxious looks on their faces, but once I assured them there was no need for alarm, my residents settled down. They started taking stock of the injuries on the drekkadyr instead, and I caught sight of Thyrri pushing through the crowd to reach me.

My warlord wasn't as quick to jump to conclusions as Igrid was, so it only took one reassuring look from me to make the worry lines on her forehead vanish. Then I jumped down to the ground and arranged for my injured ward to be transferred to Amaeda's healing hut, and I briefed Thyrri on the mishap with the jakyl hunt.

"I thought this sort of thing was a rare occurrence," Thyrri said in a skeptical tone.

I smirked. "Accidents happen, Thyrri. It wasn't planned. Trust me."

"Very well, my chief," the warlord muttered. "You will be pleased to hear your true clan has suffered no accidents in your absence. Dalir honors you well enough to do better."

"I'm glad to hear it," I chuckled, and Thyrri gestured to the slaves who were tending to the nearby drekkadyr.

"These new slaves have been misbehaving, though," the warlord said. "I am having trouble keeping track of them all, and I worry they are taking liberties with their duties. I caught five women spinning wool into yarn this afternoon, and no one knows who told them to do such a thing."

"We can go over all of this tomorrow," I assured her. "Right now, I just want to get cleaned up and eat some food in peace."

"I will see to it that your evening meal is waiting for you in your private quarters," Thyrri replied. "Eir has already requested water be delivered to your hut for bathing, but I'm not certain the tub has been filled entirely just yet."

"That's alright," I sighed, and I nodded a greeting to a few wildish women who offered me bows in passing. None of them had

their tits hanging out, but they did have longbows hitched across their chests. “It’s just nice to be back.”

“Dalir has missed you, my chief,” Thyrri said with a smile.

I returned the gesture in earnest, and my warlord blushed the slightest bit under my gaze before she fussed with her messy brown hair and looked away.

I’d noticed Thyrri was blushing more often around me lately, but I figured this had more to do with Eir’s bragging about our sex life than it did with me specifically. Out of all the women in Dalir, Thyrri got the most X-rated renditions of our trysts, but I pretended I didn’t know this fact.

Then someone shouted “Aaron Briggs” from the lanes, and an automatic grin broke across my face.

Eir had an ecstatic smile on her soft pink lips when I turned around, and I could tell she’d dressed herself in the hopes I’d be coming home tonight. It didn’t seem to matter at all to her that it was only forty degrees out, either.

The perfect breasts I’d been missing since yesterday strained against a tiny leather bikini that just barely concealed Eir’s nipples, and her buckskin pants were so tight against her toned thighs that I already wanted to tear them to shreds. The black-winged woman had her long blonde braids and knots tied half-up with tight coils near both temples, and her sea green eyes glowed in the torchlight as she came bounding toward me.

I couldn’t help but notice Eir had blood caking her exposed abdomen, though. Streaks of red sprayed across her cleavage, arms, and neck, and even her feathers glistened with the stuff. But when she came to a panting stop in front of me, Eir’s sea green eyes dropped to my matted nóttmal hide like I was somehow a more shocking sight than her.

“Aaron Briggs, you are covered in blood,” my wife pointed out.

“Speak for yourself,” I chuckled.

Then I dragged Eir into my arms, lifted her clear off the ground, and devoured her lips.

The Nordic beauty shimmied with excitement while her bloody fingers locked themselves in the roots of my hair, and I didn't hesitate to knead her perfectly sculpted ass like a bread dough I was gonna bake for Gordon Ramsay.

I'd only been gone from Dalir for a day and a half, but I'd missed everything about my winged wife from the second I rode south. The sweet taste of her tongue had been periodically haunting me, and I'd heard her laugh in the back of my mind at least fifty times. By now, I'd pretty much accepted this was all just part of being married to my dream woman, but I never got used to it.

The truth was, I couldn't bear to be more than a mile away from Eir these days, and the only thing that could make the hollow feeling in my chest go away was seeing her again.

I took my sweet time groping all my favorite curves on her body, and Eir was blushing to her roots when I finally released her lips with a light bite. Even then, I kept my gorgeous wife locked tight against me, and Eir ignored all the amused chuckles surrounding us as she gazed up at me with her mesmerizing green eyes.

"Please tell me it is the blood of our enemies that you wear this evening," Eir sighed.

"Not tonight," I said with a grin. "Just some vicious beasts we slaughtered."

"Me too!" Eir gasped, and her eyes lit up at the notion. "I am so relieved to know you had as much fun as myself! Come! You will love to see what we have done!"

My winged wife clasped my hand in her bloody grip, and I chuckled as she dragged me down the torchlit lane with her. I vaguely registered the slaves and warriors parting for us as they offered me bows along the way, but my eyes were glued to the Nordic beauty beside me now.

Eir's enthusiasm was contagious, and it kept a broad grin on my face as we jogged at a clipped pace through Dalir. The firelight

illuminated her high cheekbones and bright eyes the whole way across the village, and I couldn't stop staring at her for anything. Everything about Eir was magnetic to me, and now that she was back by my side, I felt like I needed to keep her there at all cost.

Then we reached the central clearing, and Eir sent me an eager smile just before I finally found something more distracting than her to look at.

My feet stumbled to a stop.

I'd thought Eir was a bloody mess, but she didn't even compare to Anakol right now.

My braided warlord threw his drenched, red arms out to the sides like a circus ringmaster when he saw me arrive. His huge grin was larger than I'd ever seen on him before, and it would've been a blissful one if it wasn't for the blood literally dripping from his scruffy jawline. Even the shaved sides of his head were smeared with the stuff, but he didn't seem to notice or care how jarring this all was.

Anakol was too proud of himself at the moment, and I honestly was, too.

Because my braided warlord was standing on top of a massive, bald-faced, milky-eyed beast, and the dead nóttmal under his bloody boots was even larger than my entire hut.

"Holy shit!" I laughed as I came over to size up his kill. "You fucking did it!"

"Yes, my chief," Anakol sighed through his grin. "I have finally conquered the nóttmal to honor Dalir, and I did so with no assistance needed."

"What?" Eir demanded.

"With very little assistance needed," Anakol corrected, but my winged wife crossed her arms across her bloody tits.

"Aaron Briggs, do not believe anything this man says to you," Eir huffed. "He has certainly honored Dalir, but he did so with my assistance every step of the way, and frankly, I find it insulting that after all I have done and put up with..."

My wife continued on like this while Anakol calmly argued with her about the pettiest details of their hunt. I'd gotten pretty used to the back and forth between my wife and warlord by now, and to be fair, they were way less hostile toward one another than they used to be. But their competitive streaks hadn't changed, and I usually enjoyed watching the stubborn pair try to one up each other for my own sake.

Tonight, though, I was only interested in one thing, so as soon as Thyrrri arrived to announce my meal was waiting in my hut, I hooked my fingers in the tight waistband of Eir's buckskin pants.

Then I tugged her tight ass away from the enormous nóttmal carcass, and Anakol was still vehemently detailing his efforts when I finally tossed Eir over my shoulder to haul her off.

Not that I wasn't impressed with Anakol's achievements, but enjoying some roasted venison, rye bread, and ale while my wife slowly bathed me in our private tub was definitely at the top of my to-do list.



Chapter 4

I should have been up and about in the village an hour ago, but Eir refused to let me get out of bed. Even when the slaves arrived to deliver our morning meal, she kept riding my dick without quieting her moans at all, and I could tell she was resisting her own orgasm on purpose.

The blonde beauty quaked in the effort as a dewy sheen of sweat dotted her jolting breasts, and I was ten seconds away from losing all restraint while her unbelievably tight pussy massaged my shaft. I'd sprayed buckets of cum into her all last night, and both of us were just fucking drenched in a mixture of our juices, but she wasn't even close to fully satiated yet.

I finally just hollered for the slaves to leave our breakfast outside, and then I rolled the ravenous woman under me, locked both of her legs up by the back of her thighs, and forced her to ease off my painfully hard dick for a minute.

"Are you trying to torture me?" I panted.

"Yes," Eir shamelessly moaned, and she rolled her bright pink pussy lips against the tip of my cock. "Please don't stop, Aaron. Show me you own me and make me climax like you want me to. You know you can have me any way you like. Prove it to me. Pound your cock into me. Make my womanhood ache. Pour your seed into me again. My body needs it..."

"You're gonna regret teasing me," I warned.

"I haven't regretted it yet," my wife purred, and I locked my jaw at the taunting look in her eyes.

Then I swiftly flipped her over and forced her up onto her knees, and I plunged my full length into her taut tunnel while her nails tore across the dense fur of our bed.

It never ceased to amaze me how hard a pounding Eir could handle, but knowing she loved when I took her at full force practically

rewired my brain.

All my life, I'd held back with the women I fucked since I was taller, stronger, and usually had a dick bigger than they were used to, but damn it if Eir didn't suit me perfectly.

The harder I fucked her, the more she begged for it, and it didn't matter if I pinned her down, tore my teeth through her back, or broke the furniture I braced her against... my Farthegn wife always wanted more.

The fact was, Eir grew up in a society where the men were completely in charge of their wives, and deep down, she loved when I dominated her. She also loved getting to fuck my brains out and tease me to within an inch of my life, but whenever she was in a mood like this morning, I made a point of delivering the firmer treatment she begged for.

With Eir's back pinned down and her ass up, I claimed her body with unrelenting thrusts that would have broken a less fit woman. The Nordic beauty shrieked from the impact, but I didn't let up. I could feel her trembling around my cock from her arousal, and I knew she wouldn't be able to hold out for long now. Not when I was balls deep in her and had total control over her body.

I braced her more firmly against the bed when she started wailing my name, and I fucked her so hard that I could hear her struggling to breathe. Her tight entrance seared around my shaft as she got wetter and wetter for me, and my loins burned with a vengeance while Eir started screaming from the effort of holding back.

I couldn't last for another second. I let myself release deep inside Eir's womb for the dozenth or so time since we got back to my hut, and her resolve finally broke down. The feeling of my heated seed filling her tight tunnel forced my wife over the brink, and she bucked wildly in my hold as her orgasm shook through her whole body.

Still, I kept thrusting throughout my entire climax until her trembling walls had milked every last drop of semen from me, and even then, I only let up enough so Eir could come down gradually

from her quaking orgasm. Every slow thrust made her mewl like a kitten and roll her hips against me, and I reveled in the sound while I watched a stream of my pearly cum seep from her flooded pussy.

Eir was completely limp when I collapsed beside her on our bed of eldradyr hides. Then the green-eyed beauty let out a shaky and satiated sigh as I tried to catch my breath.

“I missed you so fucking much,” I panted toward the ceiling.

“Me as well,” Eir groaned.

My winged wife crawled closer to me and laid out on her tummy with her breasts wedged against my side, and I tucked a few kisses in her blonde braids.

“It feels like it has been weeks since you left me to travel to Illska,” Eir murmured. “I kept telling myself I am being pathetic over you, and that a day is not long enough to miss a husband so much, but I could not help it. I missed you every single moment you were away.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “Normally, I don’t have any trouble focusing on work, but I can hardly get shit done down there when you don’t come with me. Even when I force myself to focus, I still feel...”

“Only half there?” Eir guessed, and her brow crinkled in the most adorable way.

“Exactly,” I said. “Then when I do see you again--”

“You can never get enough of me,” my wife finished for me. “Every moment is twice as pleasurable, and you don’t want to look at anyone except me for hours and hours.”

I smirked and nodded in full agreement, but as ridiculous as this all sounded, at least I wasn’t the only one who was hardcore addicted in this marriage. Eir’s guess defined my predicament to a tee, and I knew she meant every word because I could feel how much she’d missed me in the way she’d undressed me, bathed me, and fucked me for most of last night. Then the sun rose, and she woke up still wanting more of me.

And I was aching for more of her, too.

My wife sighed heavily and let her cheek rest against my shoulder. I shivered a little as she started tracing her fingers across the scar of interlocking triangles on my chest. This one touch alone was enough to make my dick twitch like a call to duty, but I never stopped her.

It was only fair that Eir got to tease me like this.

The same mind-numbing, spine-tingling sensation happened to her when I stroked her black feathers, and I took full advantage of this perk whenever the hell I wanted to. These days, neither of us minded in the slightest that we had this kind of hold over each other, and every time Eir grazed the marking carved into my chest, I let the overwhelming sensation spread through me no matter how torturous the pleasure sometimes got. Even without a speck of semen left in me, it was one of my favorite feelings.

I laid back and watched the flecks of sunlight seeping in through the vents in my roof, and my wife teased me with slow, soft strokes across my chest for several quiet moments.

“Perhaps it’s only the magic in your mark that makes us so close,” Eir said against my skin. “What if--”

“Absolutely not,” I mumbled hazily. “The magic might have some influence on the separation issue, but I was crazy about you before I ever gave you these wings. I refuse to believe magic is the only reason I love you this much.”

“You what?” Eir gasped and sat up.

I blinked at her. “What?”

“What did you just say?”

“When?” I checked.

Eir narrowed her green eyes, and I remained frozen exactly as I was.

I’d never in my life told a woman I loved her, and I sure as shit didn’t realize I was about to suddenly drop that bomb. The words came tumbling out before I could even think twice, and I was so

stunned to hear myself say them that I couldn't comprehend what was happening anymore.

All I could do was hold my breath and hope Eir somehow forgot the last ten seconds so I could process what the fuck I'd just said.

But she definitely wasn't about to do that.

My Nordic goddess of a wife looked ready to burst with happiness. Her sea green eyes glittered down at me, and the pinker her cheeks got, the more knotted my intestines became.

"Aaron Briggs..." Eir whimpered. "Do you really mean that? Or are you only saying you love me because I am your wife? Or is this another strange thing that is said in Alaska? Do your people say 'love' but not mean 'love?' Like how I say I will 'visit' the rebels in Illska when I really mean 'torture?'"

"Um." I blinked again. "I-I mean... uh..."

"Wait!" Eir gasped. "You are a man who says what he means! You told me this on the very night you claimed me for your own."

"Did I?" I asked. "I'm not sure what I said. Then or now. It's a toss-up on both."

"I could never forget such an honorable statement," my wife insisted. "You would not lie to me, ever, and you have just said you love me. So... you love me, yes? Is this in earnest?"

It was no use. Time wasn't about to rewind for me, and Eir was ready to sprint headlong into this conversation. My mind seemed incapable of moving forward by even an inch though, and I was stuck in a stunned state with the most beautiful woman I'd ever met staring at me through shimmering, hopeful eyes.

Then, for the first time in longer than I could remember, I completely lost all of my chill.

In every way.

I not only panic-leapt out of bed, but I clocked Eir on the chin with my shoulder as I did so, and I almost broke one of her wings when I tripped over her legs trying to check if her chin was alright. I

ended up half-crushing the woman with my six-foot-two naked body, but I played this off by grabbing my jeans in the process. Forgetting there was a giant wooden tub in the middle of my hut came next, of course, but I did manage to catch my fall before I could end up submerged in old bath water.

By the time I got my pants zipped, Eir was on her feet. Her wide, sparkling eyes watched my every move as I desperately tried to get my boots on faster, which obviously didn't help my fumbling fingers.

"Aaron Briggs, you love me!" Eir accused with a gaping grin. "Admit it to my face!"

"Why?" I scoffed, and I dragged my tunic over my head as I stumbled backwards toward the door.

My chieftain's hide was dangling off one shoulder when I finally made my quick escape, and since I forgot the slaves had left my breakfast outside, I kicked a clay bowl across the lane on my way out the door.

Four clansmen yelped and jumped aside as porridge soared in their direction, but I didn't even bother trying to play this smoothly anymore. There was already no coming back from my stumbling, naked, panic show. All I wanted now was to get as far away from the scene of the crime as possible.

"Aaron Briggs!" Eir sang down the lane, and I whipped around.

My wife was buck naked outside our hut with her tits clamped in her palms and a river of my cum dripping down her thighs. Her perfect skin glowed a peachy-cream in the early morning light, and she sent me a blushy smile that nearly stopped my heart. But I quickly realized she was drawing the eyes of every warrior who happened to be passing my private quarters.

"I love you, too!" Eir preened.

"Woman, put some damn clothes on!" I ordered, and the Nordic beauty giggled her way back inside.

I rifled my hair as I barreled toward the central clearing. I was so flustered at this point that I couldn't get the straps of my hide to cooperate, and I ran into almost every warrior I passed while I wrestled with the leather and fur. Eventually, I tripped into the clearing with my fingertips stuck in the knot of the straps, and I slammed straight into Anakol's brawny back.

Luckily, the braided warlord caught my arm in a vise grip before I could faceplant into a tree.

"Shit," I growled once Anakol righted me again.

"Are you alright, my chief?" the warlord gasped.

"Yes," I lied. "I'm totally fine."

"Are you sure?" Anakol checked. "You look a little red in the face this morning."

"No, I don't." I cleared my throat.

Anakol sent me a curious grin, but I ignored the gesture and roughly adjusted my leather straps to get my chieftain's hide in place at last.

"Let's go," I muttered.

Then I set a determined pace across the central clearing, and I made it four steps before Anakol caught up to me and nudged my arm.

"My chief, you are not wearing your sword belt," the warlord pointed out. "A chieftain must remain armed at all times, and you have forgotten to wear the furs of Illska, too."

I glanced down at my beltless waist, and sure enough, not one blade was where it should be. My weapons were still mounted on my rack in my private quarters, and I'd even forgotten to grab my Leatherman tool for the first time since my fifteenth birthday. The two bands of shaggy gold fur I usually wore around my upper arms nowadays weren't in place, either, but there was no going back home now.

"It's fine," I said and kept my stride. "Congratulations on the nóttmal hunt, by the way. We'll have a feast in your honor this

evening.”

Anakol perked up at once. “Thank you, my chief.”

“Thyrri mentioned you were having a situation with the slaves while I was gone,” I continued.

“Yes, my chief,” Anakol confirmed. “They are getting entirely out of hand.”

“We’ll head to the longhouses first, then,” I said. “What happened?”

“Well, as you know, none of them should have been doing anything without you around to deliver orders,” the braided man said in a disapproving tone. “And yet, they were running rampant all day long. I found them weaving tunics, assisting the tanner without his consent, and turning a deserted hut into some sort of lair for charming bees. Thyrri discovered rogue slave women spinning yarn unsupervised too, and there was even a tiny elf boy sitting in the middle of the village, in broad daylight, as if this was in any way acceptable.”

“Did you ask the elf what he was doing there?” I asked, and I tried not to smirk at how disgusted Anakol looked about all this.

“Oh yes, I demanded to know what he was doing there,” the braided warlord assured me. “You will never guess what the slave boy had the audacity to say.”

Now I couldn’t help smirking. “What did he say?”

“My chief... he claimed to be keeping a cloudless sky above the village,” Anakol scoffed, and I raised my eyebrows. “I know. I did not believe it, either. These slaves have taken liberties in your absence, my chief, and this behavior must be reprimanded. They are too numerous to allow them to get out of control like this. They disrespect your authority!”

I nodded slowly as we approached the first of our new longhouses, but I paused on the threshold before entering.

“Was there a cloudless sky yesterday?” I asked out of curiosity.

Anakol shrugged and scrunched up his nose. “Yes, but that proves nothing.”

The two of us entered the longhouse where the majority of my unruly slaves were staying for now. The moment they saw me in the doorway, every ragged elf, sorcerer, and human shot to their feet. Then they began bowing as low as possible while the buzz of their voices filled the air, and I offered a kind smile as they collectively thanked me over and over again.

This was only one of the four new living quarters I’d ordered to be built in Dalir. It was twice as large as the slave houses we had already, but I’d relocated about a hundred slaves from the dungeon in Illska, so I needed structures that could comfortably house over twenty people in each. My warriors had more than delivered on the order, but two of the new longhouses were still being constructed, so the new slaves were consolidated in the completed ones for the time being. None of them minded the tight living quarters, though. Compared to the rotted dungeons in Illska, Dalir was like a haven for the slaves, and I’d worked hard to make it so.

Within three days of their arrival here, Amaeda addressed all of the neglected slaves’ ailments, and most of them were well on their way to recovery. All that remained was for me to get them back up to a healthy weight, but this was the easy part.

Unlike most of these Farthegn clans, I already kept my slaves on a well-balanced diet and ordered them to eat three meals a day. All I had to do to accommodate my new ones was add another private fishing weir to the tributary for them, and I’d increased the daily harvest in the western grounds to make sure they got plenty of greens as well.

Once winter set in, I’d have my meat reserves stocked enough to feed them just as heartily, but that was still a month or so away. For now, everything was well in hand.

Well, aside from their habit of taking on work without being forced to do so.

“You can all be seated,” I announced once I realized the slaves weren’t going to stop thanking me anytime soon. They still wouldn’t

sit in my presence, but they did quiet down, at least. “I only came to discuss the protocol around here. I heard you’ve been taking the initiative to complete necessary tasks while I’m away.”

It was suddenly so quiet in the longhouse that I could have heard a pin drop, and I nodded at the nervous faces peering back at me from every corner.

“I just wanted to thank you,” I continued. “I know there’s plenty to be addressed in Dalir, and we’re always seeking improvement. Feel free to let me know where you see an opportunity to contribute, and we can work out a system to address the situation long-term. I’m aware some of you were born with unique powers. This is somewhat rare in our neck of the woods, so I don’t know very much about that sort of thing. I’m always interested to hear what you’re all capable of, so let me know if you require anything in particular to keep your powers functioning properly, and again, if there are any services you think your magic might provide to the clan, feel free to approach me about it. I’m usually around the village somewhere or at the blacksmith’s shop, but if I’m gone looking after the southern clan for the day, locate my wife, Eir. She’ll hear what you have to say and report it back to me.”

Nobody moved a muscle when I finished speaking, but I knew they understood my words since we spoke the same language.

“Soooo... yeah. That’s all.” I nodded once more, asked them to pass my message on to the next slave house, and gave them the freedom to complete whatever tasks they wanted today.

After I bade the slaves a good morning, I turned to find Anakol stone-faced and lock-jawed behind me. I calmly led the warlord back into the lane while a heavy silence reigned in the longhouse, and then Anakol and I proceeded through the village.

“How did the morning patrol go?” I asked, and my warlord took a steadying breath before responding.

“Uneventful, my chief,” he reported. “As Eir expected, Hylmrek has remained silent. No patrols have neared our border in weeks.”

“Same goes for Illska,” I told him.

“Truly?” the warlord asked. “Hylmrek hasn’t delivered another warning yet? Not one?”

“Not one,” I confirmed, and the two of us exchanged a loaded glance as we turned down the slim footpath to the training fields.

“My chief, this is not a good sign,” Anakol bluntly stated. “Their attack will surely begin soon, and we are not prepared to battle Hylmrek. The divide between Illska and Dalir remains too great, and even if all of the south pledged their loyalty to you tomorrow, we still do not possess enough warriors to come out the victors.”

“I know, and I’m working on addressing the issue,” I reassured him.

“How?” the warlord demanded. “Igrid told me the children in Illska are nowhere near ready to join in this fight, the men who have no wives are only partially in hand, and the guards at the southern posts--”

“I’ll handle it,” I cut in as I offered a grin to a pack of wildish women in passing.

All of them were covered in sweat and sporting bruises from their morning training session, and they sent me bloody smiles beneath their battered lips. Then I noticed Anakol watching me with his dark eyes narrowed, and I knew my off-handed response wasn’t enough to appease him.

“If we can’t match Hylmrek in numbers, then we’ll just have to outdo them in weaponry,” I explained. “As you know, this has been our intention for weeks, and Brokkr is still on top of the situation, alright?”

The muscles in Anakol’s jaw twitched, and his disapproval was written all over his face. On the plus side, he’d finally caught on by now that anything he had to say against Brokkr wouldn’t sway my opinion of the blacksmith, so he didn’t waste his breath.

Arriving at the training field seemed to cheer Anakol up a bit, and I didn’t miss the self-satisfied smirk he wore as he gestured broadly toward his disciples.

“I am pleased to report your true clan remains steadfast in their efforts, my chief,” the warlord announced. “Due to our recent victory over the inferior Illskans to the south, it has been decided Dalir will not bother with shields ever again. We have entered a more vibrant stage of our training instead. What do you think?”

I laughed at the question.

Half the training field was a blur of ragged beards and the wild hair of my women warriors, and my clansmen beat each other with two different-sized sticks at once. Splintered shards of wood littered the dirt from how many times they’d broken their trial weapons against someone’s body, but the more impressive point was that every warrior in this area had a strap of buckskin tied across their eyes. They fought based on their instincts alone, and a surprising number of them were holding out while they relentlessly fought to cut down anyone in their vicinity.

The other half of the training field held warriors armed with sickle-swords and tomahawks, and I was relieved to see this group wasn’t blindfolded for their combat training. This side of the field seemed more focused on perfecting precision rather than full-blown massacre energy, and I nodded my approval at the sight.

“This is excellent,” I told the warlord. “What about the captives?”

Anakol sobered a bit, and the two of us eyed the group of beefy warriors on the opposite end of the field. A tribe of men and women were gathered near the water’s edge with Thyrrri and a handful of guards. Unlike the rest of my clansmen, they stood with tense hunches in their broad shoulders, and they barely raised their eyes up off the ground.

One of the first things I’d done after conquering Illska was locate and remove all the children of Dalir who’d been sold to the southern clan in exchange for more territory. But most of the children weren’t children at all anymore, and they’d undergone rigorous correctional training to try and alter their loyalties.

I didn’t have any idea what tactics the Illskans used to do so, because no one, not even Fritjof, would own up to any of it, and the

captives rarely spoke at all.

The only time I could get them to say anything to me was if I spoke about non-essential topics, like what we were eating for our afternoon meal. Beyond this, they kept their eyes lowered and silently did as they were told.

Most of them did, anyway.

It was the youngest of the captives who concerned me more than anything right now because they'd been sold to Illska as infants. They were only preteens now, but they were as hot-headed and violent as any of their adult counterparts. They'd also been trained too hard at too young an age, so they were both oddly chiseled and suffering some malnutrition. For some reason, knowing I was chieftain to both Illska and Dalir didn't warm them up to me at all.

And quick-tempered preteens with battle axe training was not something I knew how to address.

But overall, the captives I'd returned to Dalir seemed to feel they had no right to be back with their home clan. This was what my warlords wanted to address first thing. Thyrrri pointed out the captives would most likely feel like traitors now, but she was working hard to rehabilitate them as quickly as possible. It was crucial that she succeeded in this, too.

With more than forty captives returned to their home clan, Dalir was nearly a hundred and twenty warriors strong. Given how effective they'd proven to be as a collective, they were the more valuable of my clans, and I wanted them to count for as much as possible when the time came to destroy Hylmrek.

This was why I'd assigned my most skilled fighters to ensure the recovered warriors would do us proud. This selected band of clansmen spent hours a day training the captives with Khopesh swords rather than battle axes, and they spoke at length about the might of Dalir and our traditions to instill a clearer sense of what we stood for. Whether this was going well, I wasn't sure, but it was all we could do right now.

“They are improving,” Anakol said with a slightly concerned frown. “Bragi is making the most progress with them I think, but there is much to correct. I believe they maintain some of their inner devotion to Dalir, but Illska did their best to punish this out of them, my chief. It will take time to see a lasting improvement.”

“What about the youngest ones?” I asked.

Anakol snorted. “They are not improving at all. We’ve had to confiscate their weapons for the safety of our clansmen.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

“Do not concern yourself with the training, my chief,” the warlord said. “I take this challenge on myself, and I give you my word, these warriors will do you great justice in the future. I have said it many times before-- the loyalty of a warrior to his true clan is an unshakeable thing. You will see this when they recover the true brutality of Dalir that dwells within them.”

“I’m sure you’ll get them there,” I replied. “Why don’t you start them on tomahawks today? Keep cycling them through our most prominent weapons for the rest of the week, and see if that doesn’t distract them from their thoughts a bit.”

“Certainly, my chief.” Anakol nodded. “Bragi tells me you have a new style of sword for us to work with. Do you expect the blacksmith to deliver on this promise any time soon, or...”

I hesitated to respond for a split second, but then I shrugged.

“I want him to make some adjustments to the design first,” I answered. “They’re almost perfect, but I have a specific style in mind with this batch. I’d rather not distribute what he’s finished so far until I’m certain we’re gonna stick with the design.”

“Then they are shit?” Anakol assumed.

“No, they’re just not finalized,” I clarified. “I’d better get over to Brokkr’s shop, actually. I haven’t checked where he’s at with the new blades in the last couple days, but I’m sure they’re almost completed. Let me know how the recovering warriors do with the

tomahawks, and have the huntresses bring four boars down to Illska by this evening.”

Anakol bowed his head in agreement, and I only stuck around long enough to watch three of my clansmen try and fail to bludgeon two blindfolded women warriors. My braided warlord chuckled with pride as the women dropped all three of the men into the dirt in four quick maneuvers, and I clapped him on the shoulder before I headed back down the lane.

As soon as I was beyond Anakol’s line of sight, I quickened my pace and only derailed my path long enough to touch base with the local tanner about our winter armor. The toothless man had started lining vambraces and cuirasses with fur just last week in preparation for the colder season ahead, and I was surprised to see how much progress he’d made in such a short time.

This was mostly on account of the seven slaves who’d been assisting with his efforts, and the tanner didn’t seem half as irritated as Anakol was about having them around.

I’d figured as much.

When I reached the blacksmith’s shop, I found Bragi seated near his anvil with a jagged sword in hand. The warrior’s long brown dreadlocks were gathered over one shoulder while he flipped the hilt of his sword across his palm. A cocky grin hitched at one corner of his mouth as he managed to spin the sword in three turns without catching his sleeve once.

Brokkkr stood nearby attempting to mimic the maneuver with his own sword, and our old sorcerer, Westin, sat smiling in his corner stool at the back of the shop.

I sent the old guy a wave in greeting, but then I settled in with my back against the wall to watch Brokkkr and Bragi’s progress. It was always entertaining to see how the two progressed with their lessons.

Both men chuckled through most of their training these days, but Brokkkr still took his lessons seriously. Over the last two weeks, Bragi and Eir had completely dedicated themselves to the task of

educating the blacksmith in all manner of combat skills, and he spent at least five hours a day training with one or both of them. The improvement in Brokkr's skill set was only one of the more striking differences in him, though.

Not only did he now dress in the bluish-black hides and leather garb of Dalir every day, but he weighed about twenty pounds more than he did when I first met him, and all of this weight gain seemed to be from muscle alone. His work in the blacksmith's shop, combined with his new training, left him both lean and shredded to a surprising degree, and I couldn't help wondering if Brokkr might actually be able to drop Anakol if he really tried. He looked less exhausted than he ever had, and he was nearly as stout as my braided warlord these days, but it was probably for the best the two hadn't gotten to that point yet.

I kept expecting things to escalate between them any day now, but ever since Anakol learned Brokkr was officially a member of Dalir, they'd avoided one another like the plague. The two were both largely involved in my daily routine around here, and they knew I valued them equally, but their avoidance of each other seemed to be holding firm. If my warlord had to speak to me at the blacksmith's shop, he pretended Brokkr didn't exist, and Brokkr did the same. Neither of them bothered trying to piss each other off with backhanded comments, either, but I had a feeling this didn't bode well.

It was too quiet between the two men, and something had to give eventually.

Still, Brokkr never joined the rest of the clansmen at the training fields, and he preferred to take his meals in his shop, so it wasn't that difficult for the two to exist in separate worlds for the time being.

The blacksmith actually kept to himself as much as he had when he was only a slave. However, now that he could actually defend himself, he was at least able to make the trip to and from the hot springs without getting murdered along the way, so overall,

Brokkr was cleaner, leaner, and more intimidating than he had been only a month ago.

But deep down, he was the same snarky bastard he'd always been.

"The hell do I need to know this shit for?" Brokkr demanded as his sword went flying from his palm again. "Name one instance when a man's gotta know how to flip a fuckin' sword like this."

Bragi smirked and shrugged. "For the women. They like a man who can afford to be careless with a lethal weapon."

Brokkr rolled his eyes and abandoned his lesson right then and there. Then Bragi saw me chuckling in the corner of the shop, and he sent me a brazen grin as he handily flipped his sword around his palm.

None of the jagged notches on the blade caught his inner arm. He even flipped the sword another three times for good measure, but Brokkr just shook his head, grabbed his tongs, and went to retrieve a tomahawk bit from the forge.

"Surely our honorable chieftain will support my efforts in this," Bragi called above Brokkr's hammering. "What do you think, my chief?"

"I think I'd rather keep my arm than lose it trying to impress a woman," I hollered back.

"Aye," Brokkr agreed. "You can be a blacksmith without a leg, but ye' need two arms for this line of work, Bragi."

I cringed a little at the jab, but Bragi didn't flinch.

The amputee nodded in full agreement, and he set his jagged sword aside to pick up his own tongs and get back to work.

"Very well, you may remain average if you like," Bragi sighed. "But one day you will come to me wanting to know how to impress your future wife, and I will tell you the same as I am now: A woman of Dalir does not value how many limbs you have. She values cunning, ruthlessness, and the ability to behave as if it is quite a simple thing to be as deadly as we are. You have almost perfected

this last part in your little stints to sabotage our clan with shitty weapons, but that is a less admirable way to go about it.”

I chuckled heartily at the sentiment, and Brokkr snickered between his strikes against the glowing steel on his anvil.

No matter how many times Bragi brought up Brokkr’s past sabotage against Dalir, neither of the men ever clashed over the subject. I had to admire their ability to move on. Bragi could’ve hated Brokkr as much as Anakol did for costing him a leg with his shitty, shattering swords, but they never butted heads about it. From what I could tell, Bragi held no grudges against the blacksmith, and Brokkr paid the celebrated warrior his due respect. In his own way, at least.

“How are we doing on the next batch of tomahawks?” I asked Brokkr as I joined him near his anvil.

“Fifty should be ready for distribution in a couple days,” Brokkr answered without slowing down his hammering. “We’re forging the last ten today, and then there’s cleaning up the scaling and doing some sharpening on most of them. The handles are mounted on all but these ten.”

“What about the new swords?” I checked.

“I haven’t been able to finish the whole batch ‘cause we’re about to run out of 5160 steel.”

“Run out?” I asked in surprise. “Even the sheets?”

“All of it,” the blacksmith said, and he sent me a side-eyed glance rather than elaborate.

I nodded in understanding. “I’ll have some more sent up from Illska, but why don’t you give me a hand with the coal?”

“Sure thing, my chief,” Brokkr agreed, and he promptly ceased his work.

Then the blacksmith grabbed a dirty rag to mop the sweat from his brow, and the two of us picked up four empty pails near the back door before we left the shop.

There was already plenty of coal in the place, but Bragi never seemed to notice this whenever Brokkr and I left to fetch more. The

warrior took our coming and going in stride along with everything else that happened in the blacksmith's shop, and he continued forging more tomahawks without giving our disappearance a second glance.

The real reason we left so frequently with the empty pails was because the coal storage was at the far northeast end of the village, and it was an ideal spot to discuss our more private weapon endeavors. The area was surrounded by the vacant huts of deceased warriors who'd died in poorly planned raids of the past, and only a handful of clansmen ever passed by on their way to and from our new chicken coops.

So, every few days, Brokkr and I made a trip to fetch more coal we didn't actually need.

Heaps of the coal filled the entire shed from back to front with only a small slip of walking space at the entrance. As soon as we arrived in the dim hut, I started scooping chunks up into my metal pail to cover up the sounds of my voice.

"How much were you able to finish before you ran low on 5160?" I asked Brokkr.

"Fifty of the cutlasses are done, and a little over half of 'em are engraved," Brokkr said. "I haven't put the fire rune on all of them yet because Bragi's been real curious about the new design. I figured I'd hold off until he lost interest. He's a clever one. He notices every little detail lately, and he's always got questions. Better if he doesn't see the engravings at all for now."

"True," I agreed. "Did you at least test out all the cutlasses you got engraved?"

"Hell no, I didn't," Brokkr snorted.

I sent him a pointed look as I grabbed another pail to fill. "They're no use to us if you're not positive the fire rune works."

"Well, I tested a few and compared the engravings to the ones you did yourself," the blacksmith countered. "Looks close enough, and I'm sorry, but I'm not lightin' half these woods on fire fucking

around with magic swords like an idiot. I'll let you do that. This clan hates me enough as it is."

"Brokk," I sighed, and I straightened up to shove a filled bucket of coal into his arms. "Fuck what this clan thinks of you. You're the only man here who can save our asses by helping me get these blades finished, and if you don't test them out, we'll end up marching straight to our deaths when Hylmrek brings war down on Illska."

"Yeah, I know." The blacksmith grimaced.

"Then test the damn swords," I said. "You don't need to light whole trees on fire for a trial run. The size of the blaze should be within your control, and there's plenty of scrap wood in the shop from Westin cutting handles and scales. Test it out on some of those. All we need to know is if the blades on the cutlasses can produce fire at all when they strike something."

"Pretty sure that's not all you need to know," the blacksmith muttered, and I furrowed my brow. "I'm tellin' ye', half the time I try them out, nothing happens."

"With your engravings, or mine?" I clarified.

"Both, which means it's not so easy summoning this magic as you thought. If I can only sometimes make 'em work, what the hell do you think might happen when you distribute the runed blades to the clan? There's no saying whether or not these Farthegns will be able to wield them like you can."

"We'll teach them how to," I replied. "It's honestly not that hard. I haven't had any issues getting my runed blades to start a blaze."

"That's because you're a fuckin' freak of nature!" Brokk snapped. "Look at you! Carved up with some magical mark, and makin' women raise the dead for ye'! There is a hell of a lot of difference between you and me, chief, and the same is true of your clansmen."

I sighed as I pushed the hair out of my eyes. "Yeah, well, I've seen you use the rune before. It worked that time last week, so just keep practicing, alright? You'll get the hang of it eventually, but if we don't have these cutlasses finalized and distributed by next week, we

won't have enough time to train the warriors with them. So... test out the damn swords."

Brokkr nodded without much enthusiasm, and the two of us grabbed the last few pails of coal before we ducked back out of the coal storage.

I nearly leapt right out of my skin when I found my winged wife fully suited in leather armor and waiting in the lane outside.

Eir jumped as both of my buckets dropped and scattered their contents all over the dirt, and Brokkr barely managed to catch his own in time to save his coal. We probably looked guilty as hell when we finally recovered enough to look Eir in the eye, but my wife had a silly smirk on her lips now.

Based on this and the glint of amusement in her eyes, I could tell she assumed my reaction was on account of how fucking frazzled I'd been this morning.

This was only half-true. The other reason was I did actually feel super guilty. I'd been keeping my magical weapons plan a secret from her for weeks.

"Hey," I said in a forced casual tone.

"Hello," Eir chuckled. "Shall I refill your little buckets for you, my chief?"

"Uhh..." I glanced down at the scattered coal around my feet and cleared my throat. "No, it's fine. We don't really need any coal."

Eir furrowed her brow in confusion, and Brokkr shot me a wide-eyed glance.

Then I inwardly kicked myself for still having not a scrap of smoothness left in my body, but the blacksmith ditched the scene as quickly as possible, so I was left alone with Eir, my spilled buckets, and only half my dignity.

"So..." I tried. "What's up?"

Eir glanced up at the red boughs above our heads, but I spoke up before she could answer the question too literally.

“It’s a saying,” I clarified. “It just means what are you doing?”

“Ahh... a saying from Alaska. Interesting...” Eir mused, and she held out a loaded down sword belt. “You left these in our hut, my love.”

My eyebrows shot up at these last two words, but I mechanically retrieved my forgotten weapons. I only fumbled a few times getting the belt secured around my waist. Then I remained stock-still as the Nordic beauty sauntered closer with a couple scraps of shaggy gold fur in her hands, and I didn’t say a damn word when she started tethering them around my upper arms for me.

“Are you blushing underneath that beard?” Eir whispered after a moment, and her sea green eyes flicked up to mine.

“Probably,” I mumbled.

“Hmm...” my wife hummed, but then she finished her work and offered a casual shrug. “Well, do not worry. I am not here to make you confess your undying love for me. I simply wanted to deliver your belongings and to let you know I will be training some of our women with their bows in the western grounds today. So, if you find yourself feeling incredibly lost without me, and needing to speak words about these things in a manner of confession, that is where I will be.”

Eir flashed me a cheeky grin, and I let out a long, chuckling sigh as I pulled her into my arms.

“Alright, about this morning,” I said. “I obviously said more than I intended to, and I lost my composure a bit. I’ve bounced back now though, and I feel like we can move on like it never happened. Deal?”

“Deal,” Eir agreed. “Does this mean you do not love me as you so boldly announced?”

My palms instantly started to sweat. “Oh, uhhh... well... it’s, ummm...”

“I am only teasing you,” my wife laughed.

“It’s not that I don’t,” I quickly clarified. “Or that I do... I just don’t really go around saying that kind of thing. Ever. And maybe I’d say it to you, I don’t know. Clearly I suck at this.”

“I see.” Eir’s smile widened. “Well, I have never told a man I loved him before. I only ever say this to Dyggur, but it’s a different sort of love than what I feel for you.”

“I would hope so,” I snorted.

“What I mean to say is you can take as long as you need to decide how you are feeling about me,” my wife continued in a lighthearted tone. “But I will continue reminding you how I feel, because I do love you, Aaron Briggs, and I am certain you should be forced to hear me say it quite often.”

“That’s... kind of sweet,” I chuckled. “A little devious, but I’ll take it.”

“Yes, you will,” Eir curtly agreed. “Now, I am off to hunt, my love.”

The winged woman tipped her soft pink lips up to wait for a kiss, and I numbly delivered while I considered how fucking good I had it. Despite all my bumbling, Eir didn’t seem ruffled in the slightest, and as she turned away to saunter back down the lane, my eyes dropped directly to her skin-tight pants.

I watched the tip of her longbow bounce methodically against her right ass cheek, and just like that, my mind dragged me back to this morning when I had my wife pinned on her knees while I plowed into her mercilessly. Eir’s feathers framed her lithe figure like a jet-black halo as a few of her longer dreadlocks hung down over her quiver of arrows, and I was briefly overwhelmed by a strange feeling blooming in the pit of my stomach.

Then my gaze caught on her blood-caked dagger, and the moment shattered.

I hadn’t seen Eir with a clean blade on her in a while, and I usually let the habit slide when she was hunting nóttmal, jakyls, or anything else we wouldn’t be eating. I’d actually warred against the urge to lecture her for this exact reason, but even if my other

huntresses handled the field dressing today, the outdoorsman in me couldn't let it go.

That knife was just too fucking atrocious.

"Hold up!" I called out, and I jogged to catch up with my almost flawless wife. "You said you're hunting?"

"Naturally," Eir purred. "The boars have been out near the tributaries preparing for winter, and you require reserves for your southern clan."

"You haven't washed the nóttmal blood off your dagger from last night," I pointed out.

"Oh." The green-eyed beauty sent an annoyed glance toward her sheathed dagger. "I forgot. You see, this is yet another reason I dislike blades. It is impossible to ever remember to clean them, and they are always--"

"Eir, you remember to clean your arrows off when you hunt," I said. "There's no difference."

"There is a world of difference," Eir scoffed. "My arrows are endlessly useful. It is essential that I care for them, and it pleases me to do so. This wretched knife is almost too dull to bother with already, and I have only had it for a few months. I should really get a new one, I suppose."

I caught my wife's arm and turned her to face me head-on. "You don't need a new knife every few months. You need to take care of the one you have. Everyone, hunter or otherwise, should be able to keep a good, reliable blade intact. They can come in handy for just about everything, and you never wanna be in a situation where you need a decent knife, but don't have one. Especially out here, and especially in your case. If you just cleaned it, sharpened it, and treated it with some respect, this blade would be endlessly useful, too."

Eir cocked an eyebrow, and I held up a hand in my defense.

"Alright, maybe not this blade specifically," I allowed. "This one's a rusty piece of shit now, but Eir, you're a hunter. You know

you need a decent knife, and dismissing the proper care required could cause disease or--”

“Of course, I need one,” Eir sighed. “I would not be able to deliver my final and most perilous strikes against my largest quarries if I did not have a knife. I have utilized them all my life to dress my kill, but I am simply saying I feel no sense of duty toward my knives. You speak as if I should honor them in some way. I am telling you a blade is just a blade. It does not need to be doted on, it needs to do its work. Perhaps if this one performed better, I would clean it, but it fails to do so. It is also easily replaceable with any other exactly like it, so I find I don’t care.”

I furrowed my brow severely, and it was at that moment I realized I couldn’t put this issue off any longer. My wife’s logic when it came to blades was a clusterfuck in my opinion, but the root of the problem seemed pretty straightforward, and I knew what I had to do next.

It was past time I educated Eir about the value and merit of an expertly crafted blade.

“Okay, I’m making you a hunting knife,” I informed the woman, and I continued toward Brokkr’s shop with long, purposeful strides while Eir trotted to keep up with me.

“Wait, you will be making a blade for me yourself?” my wife asked.

“Yes, I will.” I nodded. “There’s plenty of hours left in this day, and I don’t see any reason I can’t tend to the needs of the clan and work at the same time.”

“Well, if you are determined, I am sure I cannot stop you,” Eir muttered. “But keep in mind, I could not care less about this sort of thing. I would rather you not waste your time on such inferior work--”

“Inferior?” I scoffed, and when I rounded on my wife, her green eyes glinted with amusement. “Woman, go hunt, and just know that before I fuck you tonight, I intend to have you begging me to forget you ever said that.”

“Whether or not this is the case won’t matter,” Eir purred. “You may not know how you feel about me, but I love you with all of my heart and soul, Aaron Briggs. I would never let such a trivial disagreement keep me from pleasuring you in any way you desire.”

With that, my gorgeous wife tossed her blonde braids over her shoulder and strutted off down a side lane.

I stared blankly at her jet-black feathers, and her words left me feeling all kinds of ways. It took me several beats to recover, but hearing Eir proudly declare so much in such a sweet and satisfied tone made me realize I was the luckiest bastard I’d ever known.

And no man in his right mind would leave a woman like Eir wondering if he loved her or not. Especially when he finally knew for damn sure that he did.

By the time my winged wife disappeared around a distant hut, I’d decided I needed to get my head out of my ass real quick. Maybe saying this kind of shit outright didn’t come so naturally to me, but I’d never been the kind of man who felt like everything needed to be said. If a thing was true, then it was true, and whether or not I threw all my cards on the table didn’t change that.

There was a good chance I’d have to alter this approach now that I had a woman on my arm.

Until I sorted that out though, there were plenty of ways I could go about making my feelings undeniably clear, and I sure as hell didn’t mind dedicating hours and hours of painstaking effort to the task. This came more naturally to me than just about anything else.

When I finally arrived back at the blacksmith’s shop, Brokkr turned from his worktable with an anxious frown, but I didn’t bother pausing to assure him we were in the clear where our runed weapons were concerned.

“I need to use this table,” I informed the blacksmith.

Then I shuffled all of his work aside, grabbed some parchment, reached for a rod of 1095 steel, and settled in for a day of bladesmithing.



Chapter 5

Impressing and spoiling my wife was now essential, but I couldn't lose sight of my primary goal.

Correcting Eir's misguided opinions was a challenge I refused to drop the ball on, and after contemplating my options, I decided she needed more than the one blade I initially wanted to make for her.

Eir prided herself on hunting the biggest game, and she preferred stabbing her quarry in the skull for the final kill once she wore them out with an onslaught of arrows. This meant a large, sturdy, and durable knife was an obvious necessity, and I settled on a ten-inch Bowie knife since this hit all my marks and looked badass enough for a Farthegn woman.

On the other hand, my winged wife wouldn't be able to skin smaller game with precision if this was the only blade she carried around, and any woman of mine had to be fully equipped no matter the circumstances. This was why I started cutting a standard six-inch fixed blade from Brokkr's sheet stock while I waited for the rod of 1095 to heat up in the forge.

Then I spent the next couple hours going back and forth between the forge, my anvil, and the grinding stone. Whenever I wasn't drawing out and hammering the steel of the Bowie knife, I worked on shaping the profile of an everyday utility knife that I modeled after my own. I'd been carrying my grandfather's bone-handled knife for most of my life, and it had proven the most adequate design I'd ever worked with.

I got Westin on woodworking duty rather than replicating my knife entirely though, and the old slave assured me he'd have both handles ready by the time I finalized the heat treat on Eir's new blades.

"You're giving this to her?" Brokkr scoffed, and he eyed the sweep of the Bowie knife with deep regret. "Don't abuse it like that,

chief.”

I smirked and checked the taper on the glowing blade, but then I set the rough Bowie knife aside to cool down so the steel could normalize again.

“That wife of yours don’t even take care of the knife she’s already got,” the blacksmith groaned. “I watched her drop that dagger, tip down, on the stones while we were training at the tributary, and she didn’t even check if it was chipped! The damn woman rolled her eyes like it was the knife’s fault! And don’t get me started on how fucking filthy it was to begin with.”

“Yeah, but her dagger’s a piece of shit anyways,” I said as I headed over to the forge to check the annealing process on the smaller knife. “I’ve looked at it plenty of times. The spine is warped, the handle sits at a weird angle, and the grip is too broad for Eir’s hand. I tried sharpening it for her while she was asleep last week, and it barely even holds an edge. Whoever forged that blade was an apprentice at best, and she’s been stuck using it for months. I’m honestly not surprised she doesn’t care about the thing.”

“Right, well, she treats my swords just as bad,” Brokkr informed me. “You and I both know my work don’t deserve it.”

“True,” I agreed. “That’s why it’s important I do this. A new set of quality knives that she can rely on will teach her to appreciate expert craftsmanship.”

“Sure, it will.” Brokkr sent me a slow, sarcastic nod with his eyes open wide to accentuate his point. “Your wife’s not born of Hylmrek or anything... She’s exactly the sort of woman who likes to be taught a lesson about something she’s already made up her mind about.”

I sighed in response as I brought the searing-hot hunting knife over to the front table to let it cool. Then Bragi looked up from his forge welding to weigh in on the subject.

“You do our women no justice, Brokkr,” the warrior said. “Eir may be born of Hylmrek, but she respects her husband like every Farthegn woman should. Our wives know better than to disobey their

husbands' wishes. Trust me. Thyrri has corrected her shortcomings to appease Anakol dozens of times."

"What shortcomings?" Brokkr demanded. "Thyrri's a quality woman, and a damn sight too pretty for a prick like him."

"I must agree with you there," Bragi chuckled. "But Anakol paid a thousand skulls for her. His word is the one that matters, and if he finds Thyrri lacking in any way, it is his right to insist she improves herself. Eir will do the same for our chieftain. He only needs to demand it of her."

"I don't need to demand shit from my wife." I sent the warrior half a grin. "Eir knows a good thing when she has it. I'd bet you anything she takes care of these knives without me having to be a dick about it."

"Ahh... you are leaving this up to her own inclinations?" Bragi clarified, and I nodded. "Brokkr is correct, then. You are wasting these blades on your wife, but I accept your bet. When I win, I want one of these new short swords. Brokkr would not even let me forge one, and now that they are done, he refuses to let me play with them, too."

The blacksmith casually made himself busy wire brushing the scale from a tomahawk head, but I didn't tiptoe around the subject of our new swords as much as I would have a few days ago. If everything went well testing out the fire runes, I'd have every warrior in Dalir carrying one by the end of the week.

"The short sword is called a cutlass," I explained. "And you've got yourself a deal. If you see either of these knives caked in old blood within the next week, then you'll be the first clansman to wield the newest weapon in Dalir."

A greedy snicker slipped from the warrior's mouth while he reached across his anvil to shake hands on it. Then he went back to forge welding, but I noticed Brokkr's posture was as stiff as a rail. The blacksmith seemed determined to keep his eyes on his work, so he didn't see me sending him a pointed look on my way to the worktable, but I knew he'd finish the magical weapons in time.

Brokkr never shirked on his duties these days. He worked his ass off for me and wanted my clan to succeed in this battle against Hylmrek, but more than this, he was actually stoked about our future prospects. Concerned and skeptical to some degree, but still stoked, and I was right there with him.

No clan in the Red Forest had ever wielded a magic like the stuff we were dabbling in. Hardly any beings in the world did, or so it seemed. Only a scant few wanderlings knew where to find the secrets of what they called the “old magic,” and they kept a tight lip about it. Rune magic was a virtually unheard of, hidden magic that could be harnessed by anyone if they only knew the nuances of working with it, and if I could teach our warriors to harness the power of this one fire rune alone, nothing would ever be the same.

Dalir would be unconquerable, and every clan in the Red Forest would be at our mercy if we wanted.

Which wasn't to say I was that power hungry yet. Right now, I had one goal in this endeavor, and it was to ensure my clansmen, myself, and my beautiful wife never had to worry the end was near for us. This was a brutal ass forest populated by barbarians with violent superiority complexes, but as long as I had a power that could guarantee lasting peace in our own lives, I really didn't give a shit what the rest of these clans were up to.

Well, except for Hylmrek. But I'd already determined I could use the issue of Eir's birth clan to my advantage.

A few weeks ago, Eir told us her former chieftain planned to wipe out all of Illska in the name of Hylmrek, and there was no doubt in our minds he'd carry on slaughtering one clan after another once he succeeded.

This was only part of our concerns.

The chieftain's brother, Stranholf, also happened to be the man who'd paid three thousand skulls to lay claim on Eir, and he wasn't going to forgive the fact someone else beat him to the punch any time soon. A promise of retribution had already been delivered to every clan in the Red Forest, and the message was clear. Stranholf

was prepared to start a war over Eir, and if that's how he wanted to settle this, then I'd gladly rise to the occasion.

Eir was more than worth it, but unleashing my magical arsenal on one of the largest and most formidable clans was also the perfect means of making my presence understood. I didn't make this forest my home just to end up butchered a couple months down the line, and there was no way I'd let Hylmrek get away with a power grab like this one.

This crazy, violent, rugged life in the Red Forest meant everything to my beautiful wife, and I had every means of outmaneuvering Hylmrek at their own game.

And that was exactly what I planned to do.

A scheming grin hitched at the corners of my mouth, and it stayed there while I worked on forging the trap guard and pommel for Eir's Bowie knife.

Two months ago, I would've done anything necessary to avoid an all-out war with a bunch of asshole, scalping, skull-collecting Viking fucks, but then again, I wouldn't have believed an issue like this could've come up. Back in Alaska, I was a simple man who kept to himself, did his work in the wilderness, and lived his life the way it suited him. I minded my own damn business when I was only a wildlife biologist, but now, I was a Farthegn chieftain, and conquering both Dalir and Illska had altered my perspective a bit.

I still believed good old-fashioned mettle and rationale were what it took to get a thing done, but there were other options, too. Massacres and unusual punishments worked pretty well when it came to Farthegns, and I could respect the "eat or be eaten" mentality.

Hell, I was raised on it myself.

"My chief?" I heard a woman call out, and I quickly dropped my deadly grin as I looked over my shoulder.

A small group of slaves stood on the other side of Brokkr's front tables, and they nervously shifted their ragged tunics on their bony frames. I recognized a couple of them from the slave house I'd

visited this morning, and I motioned for the group to give me a second before I finished hammering a subtle swoop in the trap guard for Eir's Bowie knife.

Then I set the piece aside and headed to the front of the shop. "Do you have some suggestions for me?"

"Y-Yes, my chief," an older woman stammered. "I-If it is acceptable to you, my chief. W-We don't wish to disgrace--"

"Of course, it's acceptable," I gently cut in. "I asked you to approach me about the work to be done, didn't I? Let's hear it."

The older woman bobbed her head several times, but she couldn't stop shifting her weight anxiously. The longer I held her gaze, the more fidgety she got, and I realized this woman had never given a chieftain advice before. There was actually a good chance she'd never spoken to one directly, so I offered her a reassuring smile while I waited patiently for her to get her nerves in hand.

After a minute or so passed like this, the younger woman beside her spoke up instead.

"M-My chief, w-we were assisting the tanner, and he... he said... well, he said winter is coming up," the young woman stammered.

I nodded. "It is. Preparations began this week, but there's a lot to be done. Are you able to help in some way?"

"Yes, my chief," the woman hastily answered.

"Great." I grinned. "How so?"

"W-We can weave and sew, my chief. Your warriors need woolen wear, and hats. Th-The tanner says he's making the leather jerkins now, but we can make woolen tunics to wear beneath those. Trousers and socks, as well. We did this work when we were enslaved in Svelgard."

"That'd be helpful, thank you," I replied. "We have no weavers in Dalir these days, so feel free to take over the work. Dalir numbers about a hundred and twenty warriors, and each clansman will need a

few of each item. Do you think you can accomplish as much in the next four weeks?”

“Absolutely, my chief.” The young woman nodded vigorously. “Eleven of your slaves can do this work. We will accomplish it all with plenty of time to spare.”

“Damn, that’s impressive,” I said. “Well, in that case, you can start on the winter wear for the slaves as soon as you’re done. There’s a hundred and forty of you here, but if you finish all that as well, start on reserves for the clan. If you run out of materials, let me know, and I’ll transfer some from Illska. They’ll be shearing another flock of sheep in two weeks.”

The slaves stared at me with wide eyes, and the older woman who’d been too nervous to address me started tearing up. Then she licked her cracked lips and spoke up in a trembling tone.

“W-Winter wear for the s-slaves, my chief?” the woman stuttered. “You... you would spare your wool for the slaves?”

“Yes.” I smiled at her even though I couldn’t fucking believe these Farthegns sometimes. “I’ve worked in cold environments the majority of my life. I wouldn’t expect any of you to do so without the proper attire. Just let me know when we’re running low on wool. If you need more looms, speak with the carpenters. There’s usually four or five slaves in the shop across the clearing. You can let them know I give permission for them to assist you in any way they can.”

Another long silence commenced while the slaves stared some more, so I thanked them for taking the initiative and turned back to my work. The group frantically offered a dozen bows and thanks before they stumbled away.

Then I went back to tracking the annealing process of my pieces and perfecting the design of the hilts and handles. By the time the hunting knife was soft enough for grinding out the edge, the Bowie knife was done normalizing, and I put the larger blade back in the forge to start annealing it as well. Then I set up shop at a grinding stone, and Westin used his arctic wind magic to keep the grinder spinning at any speed I required.

It was only mid-afternoon by now, but I was well on my way to finishing my projects in time for tonight. The final tempering process would be the most time consuming, but I hustled through cleaning up Eir's hunting knife so I could make my quota, and I managed to complete this step of the process in under an hour.

Throughout the rest of the day, I was approached by several more slaves, and the conversations became too fascinating to rush through. I'd known there were elves among the slaves I transferred from Illska, but I hadn't realized just how many there really were, and hearing what they were capable of blew my mind.

Brokk couldn't resist listening in whenever another elf showed up at the front tables of the shop, and the two of us stood side by side with our eyes narrowed in intrigue while the slaves explained what their magic could do for Dalir.

They all spoke with different, trilling accents but seemed to know my language perfectly well, and I slowly realized there were subtle differences in their features. Some elves had an almost green tinge to their skin, while others didn't grow any eyebrows, and one man's pointed ears were at least two inches longer than any of the others. But for the most part, I came to the conclusion that elves in this world wielded nature-based powers that varied depending on what kind of elf they were.

I'd only ever spoken with my elderly elven healer, so I didn't even know there were multiple kinds of elves in this world. Now I knew that none of them were identical to Amaeda.

Two older elven men with dull-green skin came around first, and as I noted their pale gray eyes, I immediately recognized the condition from when I first met Amaeda. My healer's eyes never glowed yellow until she restored her depleted powers by sitting out in the sunlight, and I found out these gray-eyed men needed to bathe in mud every few days in order to restore their magic. It turned out they were called wood elves, and they could alter the quality of any soil they came in contact with. The elven men offered to help me cultivate winter crops for Dalir, and they informed me there was

another elf in the village who would assist them in warming the soil with her own wood elf powers.

The next elf to come by the shop called herself a sky elf instead, and Brokkr openly gawked at her crystal blue eyes while I tried to decide if her skin was actually glowing. Her cheeks seemed to emit a soft and shimmering sort of light.

The woman was named Eleni and looked as old as Amaeda, but she said she was only eighty years old. She'd been enslaved eleven years ago by Hylmrek. This meant she still recalled most of her life outside the forest, and she was able to tell me she hailed from a land across the sea called Aushnaes. Apparently, this region was inhabited solely by the sky elves, and when I asked if they all shared the same powers as her, she elaborated on the ways of her people for what must have been a half hour.

Brokkr and I hung on Eleni's every word while she explained the patterns in the stars, their magnetism, and how her people harnessed their magic to read through time and the "flow of fate." Then the sky elf offered to be my personal celestial advisor whenever I needed the stars' opinions on things.

Not all the elves who visited were able to remember as much about their homelands, but they eagerly shared their magical talents with me, and I got the sense they took pride in speaking to their chieftain directly about it all. According to one elven man who stopped by, not every elf was born with the ability to tap into the powers of their kind, but regardless of whether they could or not, each of them had been beaten and imprisoned in Illska for failing to provide any useful powers.

The ones who did possess magic suffered like Amaeda had suffered, and they'd only been lacking the proper means of restoring their powers.

One after another, I approved their requests for mud baths, starlight, fish bones, tree bark, fermented tonics, and everything in between. In return, I found myself in possession of excited slaves who could grow food in the coldest months, alter wind patterns,

summon whole flocks of birds, and even predict the weather through the current in the river.

Then I left the shop to visit my private reserves, and I came across a young elf boy sitting in the middle of the village with his eyes tightly shut in concentration. I guessed this was the same slave Anakol had been irritated with the other day, and I watched him slowly rock back and forth while I considered his unevenly chopped white hair.

“Clearing the skies?” I asked.

The elf boy jolted in surprise, and he looked up at me with wide, silver eyes and a quivering lower lip. He couldn’t have been older than ten, but he had several angry scars all over his pale, bony arms. When he spoke, he didn’t have a trilling accent like the rest of the elves I met today, he sounded more like Brokkr instead. But the British undertones were less harsh, and he was so nervous that he practically hyperventilated through every sentence.

“Yes, my chief!” he gasped. “I’m sorry, my chief! I thought it might warm the warriors, my chief! I didn’t mean to--”

“It’s alright,” I assured him, and I glanced up at the bright blue sky and sunlight above us. “I appreciate it. It’s been raining around here for weeks. Do you have everything you need to restore your powers?”

The elf boy jumped up to his feet and started rooting around in his pocket, and he pulled out a tiny, translucent stone the same silver color as his eyes. Then the kid handed it over to me with shaking fingers.

“This is really all you need?” I asked.

“Yes, my chief!” he panted. “I won’t lose it, I promise.”

“Where did you get it?”

“My mother,” the elf answered. “She was thrown overboard off the ship in Óhreinn, my chief. She gave me her stone, and I promised her I wouldn’t lose it.”

I stared as the boy declared all of this without batting an eye. “I’m sorry to hear that. Are you a sky elf?”

“Don’t know, my chief.” The elf boy offered a shaky shrug. “I was born on a ship of Óhreinn.”

“Right... well, thank you for clearing the skies,” I muttered and handed his silver stone back.

Then the boy bowed so low and so quickly, he tipped forward, and I chuckled a bit as I caught him, stood him upright again, and patted him gently on the head. He was still shaking like a leaf when I left him to his work in the middle of the village, but when I glanced back a little ways down the lane, the elf boy was seated in the dirt with his eyes pinched shut again.

I shook my head as I tried to imagine what it’d be like to be born a slave in this land. But after everything I’d seen since arriving here, I kind of didn’t want to know. The elderly sky elf I’d met at the shop made her homeland of Aushnaes sound like a paradise, and there was no doubt in my mind the Red Forest was hell on earth by comparison.

Or at least, it had been when the wrong chieftains were in charge of these slaves.

Now, they belonged to me, and I felt a little better knowing none of them would be treated so badly again. The way I saw it, the more slaves I gained, the less suffering there’d be in this world, but I still couldn’t get the shaky elf boy out of my mind.

When I was his age, I had twice his muscle mass and could take down a buck with a spear, bow, or gun if I had to. I’d solo camped in bear country more than a dozen times, and at ten years old, I’d probably helped my grandfather trap over twenty timber wolves as well.

This kid looked like he’d only ever learned how to clear skies, cower, and stutter through questions as quickly as possible. One of those was a useful skill, and the rest just made me want to train him up in any way I could. Technically, slaves weren’t supposed to know much more than he already did, but I didn’t feel right leaving the elf

boy completely unprepared for the rest of his life in service. Hopefully, he'd be growing up in Dalir from here on out, but anything could happen in the Red Forest.

I made a mental note to keep tabs on the elf boy, and after I entered the cellar of my private reserves, I grabbed a bundled-up sheepskin from a shelf for him.

Then I headed to the glittering pile of finery in the back corner, and I knelt down to rifle through my wares a bit. The treasure trove I had in Illska was about fifty times larger than this one, but I had a specific gem in mind, and I dug around the pile until I located a polished shard of green crystal.

It was an inch long, crystal clear, and carved into an elongated triangle, and I would've said it was an emerald, except it was a much lighter shade of green. Whenever the torchlight hit it, the green actually became brighter rather than warming in hue, and the first time I saw it in here last week, it had reminded me of Eir's eyes.

At the time, I didn't think my bowhunting wife would be the type to fawn over glittering jewelry. But a tastefully bejeweled weapon... that seemed more likely.

I pocketed the green gem and closed up my private reserves, and I stopped off at the elf boy's spot on my way back to the blacksmith's shop. I only wanted to give him the sheepskin to sit on instead of the cold hard ground, but when he shot to his feet and saw the gift, the lanky elf fainted dead away from the shock.

"Shit," I growled as I lunged to stop his fall.

I managed to catch the boy's back before he could clock his head against the dirt. A group of slaves who'd just returned from foraging rushed over to assist me, but considering the boy only weighed about fifty pounds, I really didn't need any help. Either way, I passed him off to the group to look after him for the time being.

"Do any of you know this kid?" I asked.

An elf woman I hadn't met yet nodded her head at once. "He is the boy who clears the skies, my chief."

“But what’s his name?”

“He does not know, so the elves call him Silma,” she replied. “For his eyes, my chief.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “Get Silma back to the longhouses, but carry him upright if you can. He’s got a stone in his pocket I don’t want him to lose. Take this sheepskin with him, and from now on, I want this kid eating two extra meals a day with a ration of meat in every one of them, understood?”

“Yes, my chief,” the woman elf promptly agreed. “We will see it done.”

The poor kid was still pale and limp in a slaves’ arms when the group hurried away to get him home, and I shook my head once more as I eyed his bony ankles and bare feet.

Then I continued onward to the blacksmith’s shop, and I arrived in time to start tempering Eir’s hunting knife. Brokkr offered to keep an eye on the heating and quenching process for me so I could focus on cleaning up the edges of the Bowie knife, and I was relieved he didn’t mind lending a hand because I had a lot of ideas I wanted to get exactly right when it came to stylizing my wife’s new weapon.

The steel had softened just enough now, and I began by grinding a primary bevel along the full length of the blade to keep it classy. Then I perfected the supple sweep along the belly with a secondary bevel to sharpen the front edge, and the swage of the point beveled off for about four inches on the back side of the blade. This technique was utilized on a knife like this to improve the overall piercing ability, but I deviated from the standard design here a bit.

Knowing my wife appreciated lethality more than most people, I left this back edge a little sharper than I would have if I was making this blade for anyone else. Next, I rounded out the lower spine with only a light bevel and left a thicker bolster at the base so Eir would have maximum rigidity behind a killing thrust. Then I brought the blade over to the worktable to add some finer details with a hand file.

Offsetting the dramatic sweep of the belly with a subtle choil near the bolster felt appropriate, but again, I left the hooked edge of this curved indentation razor-sharp rather than dull. I figured if anyone got close enough to my wife for her to slash the full length of a Bowie across their face, then they probably deserved this added bit of flesh-tearing power.

I didn't dress up the face of the knife much, since the primary bevel met with the swage in a clean curve that was just too pretty to fuck with, but where the face flattened out near the base, I did chisel in a few smaller details that mimicked the markings of Dalir.

This was mostly to hide the fire rune I etched into the blade.

One day soon, I'd tell Eir what I'd been up to with my new enchanted weapons, and when I did, I wanted my deadly wife to be fully capable of joining in on the fun.

The sun was below the boughs of the red trees when I was finally ready to heat treat the Bowie knife and harden the steel up again, and Brokkr was on his last tempering process with the smaller hunting blade. This knife was much less stylized than the other, but the edges were as crisp and deadly as Wolverine in a Canadian snowstorm angrily smoking a cigar.

I was confident it didn't need any elaboration to serve its purpose.

I may have wanted to impress my wife, but I was a big fan of not being a jackass when it came to field dressing. It mattered to me that Eir fit into a respectable class of hunter when she wasn't taking down thousand-pound beasts. My grandfather sold thousands of this exact same design in Alaska, and it was always considered a respectable and pro-level hunting knife that never went out of style.

I wiped the quenching oil off the blade one final time as I held it up to check for any imperfections. Now that the steel was sufficiently hardened again, all that was left to do was let it cool before I polished it up, sharpened the cutting edge, and set the handle.

Unfortunately, I had my chieftain duties to attend to, so with Brokkr manning the temper on the Bowie, I left the hunting knife to

cool and headed into the village. I'd promised Anakol a feast in honor of his first nóttmal kill tonight, and I intended to deliver.

According to the story I got from Eir, my braided warlord had gone out more than six times with her in the last couple weeks to learn the tactics of big game hunting. Two of those times, he'd nearly gotten mauled by the nóttmal instead. Luckily, Eir saved his ass on both occasions, but he never let these circumstances get the better of him. Anakol just became more and more determined to kill the apex predator of our territory, and he'd embraced all the options Eir offered up with a zeal.

The warlord even tried to slit a nóttmal's throat a few days ago out of sheer impatience, but after all his efforts with various weapons, he'd finally succeeded. And in my opinion, he deserved one hell of a feast.

I hustled to get everything in order as the sky started dimming with evening light, and I hauled out jugs of mead along with plenty of ale before I had my huntresses prepare half an eldradyr and half a boar. There would also be grilled fish at the feast since we trapped more than enough to spare lately, and a quarter of my slaves leapt at the opportunity to assist once they saw how elaborate our meal would be tonight.

Breads were already baking by the time the central fire pit was lit up, and thanks to the delivery from Illska today, everything would be seasoned with an array of spices for the first time since I took Dalir.

I didn't return to the blacksmith's shop until I stopped to have a word with the tanner, and I gave him a rundown of the dimensions on Eir's new blades so he'd be able to start on her sheaths first thing tomorrow.

Then I got my ass in gear fixing the handle to Eir's hunting knife and polishing up the final product. I was still waiting for the Bowie knife to be done tempering, so I had time to inlay the green gem in a triangular pommel and help Brokkr catch up on his tomahawks, too.

Westin ordered ale for everyone in the blacksmith's shop like he always did at sundown, and then warriors started trickling into the central clearing as darkness fell in the village.

They gathered at the long tables and benches near the pit, and everyone tended to their own wounds from the training field. The voices of my warrior women came drifting into the shop while they chided one another over their injuries, and I could hear the deep timbre of my clansmen discussing things in their own language or bursting into throaty laughter. The smell of the strange new spices laced the smoky air and made my mouth water the whole time I worked, but I washed this all down with another mug of beer while I checked the final look of the cooling Bowie knife.

The blade was finally at the ideal hardness and not too hot to work with, so I was in the home stretch. But now it was about that time of day when Bragi's favorite women flooded the shop.

"Here we go..." Brokkr sighed from his anvil, and we exchanged a smirk.

Every night before the feast, a slew of wildish warriors came around to see what Bragi had been up to that day, and Brokkr would end up tiptoeing between them to try and keep at his own work. I'd advised him multiple times to just tell the women to stick to one side of the shop, but he never did, and I wasn't about to handle the situation for him.

This was Brokkr's shop, not mine, and he wasn't a slave anymore. If he wanted all their asses kept twenty feet away from the place, it was within his rights to get it done. Still, the blacksmith carried on letting the women mull around anywhere they pleased, and I couldn't count how many times I'd heard him mumble "excuse me" on his way to and from his anvil without any of the women hearing.

Brokkr hardly existed to them, but I kind of wondered if he even cared. When I really considered the arrangement, these were probably the only times Brokkr hung around any clansmen besides Bragi and my wife.

Bragi took his time asking each of the women about their training, so this gathering always lasted until the evening meal began. I'd usually end up answering any of the women's questions when they came over to see what I was working on too, but sometimes we'd talk about our hunting schedule for the week or discuss the guard rotation down in Illska.

Tonight, I was too in the zone to do much more than nod a greeting to them all. Then I dropped onto a stool near Westin at the back of the shop to finish my final blade.

The old sorcerer slid another mug of ale my way while he kept a cool breeze circulating in the crowded shop. Westin had already completed the wooden handle for the Bowie knife a couple hours ago, and he'd even sanded out the finger grooves at the exact spacing I asked for. I only had to accentuate the top ridge on the handle so it'd mirror the curve of the choil at the butt of the blade, and then I slipped the trap guard over the tang, painted some pitch on the steel, and secured the handle snugly in place.

The final detail was to screw the bejeweled pommel into the base and give the blade a last polish, and it looked so damn good by this point that I worked with more enthusiasm than usual.

Bladesmithing was always enjoyable to me, but I generally took it in stride as a task that needed completing. I did the work until the work was done, and then I felt mildly content that I'd done it well.

I'd never made a knife for a woman I was in a relationship with though, let alone two knives.

I was so certain Eir would fucking love this new set that I ended up polishing both blades to within an inch of their lives, and I polished up the light-green gem as well so it'd gleam even without torchlight on it.

When I finally finished, I straightened up and grabbed a scrap of buckskin from Brokkr's shelf, and I dragged the smaller hunting knife through the skin to test the edge. The buckskin split down the middle like butter, and Westin's wrinkly face crinkled into a smile as the Bowie knife performed just as well. I chuckled a bit in pride, but

then I heard a low whistle from behind my shoulder, and I realized the shop was quieter than usual.

That's when I glanced back to find Brokkr rubbernecking my progress with a deeply furrowed brow. All twelve of the wild women warriors were gathered around too, and Bragi was propped up between two of them.

"Everything alright?" I checked.

"Yes, my chief," a woman murmured, and the others nodded blankly as they licked their lips and flushed as bright as summer tomatoes.

I nodded back. "Okay..."

I could tell every eye in the shop was on the Bowie knife now, and I couldn't help smirking as I imagined this exact reaction from my stubborn wife. To be fair, I could hardly keep my eyes off the damn thing myself, and I turned it over a few times in my hands to admire the way the torchlight glinted off that clean-ass bevel on the sweep.

Then Brokkr sighed and snapped me out of my reverie.

"It really is a shame they'll both be wrecked within the week, chief," the blacksmith mused.

"What?" a warrior woman demanded. "Why would you say such a thing? Our chieftain's work would never falter!"

"Do not worry yourselves," Bragi chuckled. "It is not our chieftain the blacksmith doubts. These knives are a gift for his wife."

Brokkr cracked a smug grin at the words, but to my surprise, none of the warrior women seemed to register the point the men were trying to make about Eir.

Their lips parted in awe, and the women shoved Brokkr aside to press in closer for a better look at the blade. Suddenly, I was wedged in among them while they all began talking at once, and the women went on and on about how beautiful the set was, and how lucky Eir was. More than a few of them said they wished their own husbands were half as considerate, but then one of my warriors told

me I must be the most talented man in the Red Forest. The others agreed with loud sighs, and I could almost hear Brokkr's massive eye roll behind us.

I assumed the blacksmith walked off at that point since Bragi burst out laughing, but I couldn't blame him.

The irony wasn't lost on me, either.

My warrior women kept on admiring my work for several minutes longer, but I grabbed a couple slips of buckskin from the shelf and some hide scraps to use as ties. Even after I'd carefully wrapped the two knives up, the women still weren't over the gifts, and I offered them a few appreciative grins while I finished my ale.

I was chomping at the bit to see my wife's reaction, so I left the warriors to their discussion as I got my workspace cleaned up for the day. I was so impatient that it took me all of five minutes to straighten everything up, and I didn't pay attention to the conversations taking place around me anymore. I had an anxious and restless energy buzzing through my veins that I usually never had when it came to showcasing my work, and I found myself wondering if I should make some last-minute alterations to the blades.

Then I realized I was overthinking all of this. If Eir didn't like the blades, I'd just make her more of them until she did love them.

I nodded to myself as I swept up the last of my metal shavings and dumped them in the bucket under the worktable, but as I tuned back into my surroundings, several things occurred to me at once.

The first was that Bragi had three different women toying with his long brown dreadlocks near the forge, and they looked a bit flirtier than usual. Most of the warriors were gathered around him and detailing the kinds of blades he should make them sometime, but the rest were gossiping to one another in hushed voices. These women kept eyeing me up and down like I wouldn't notice their blatant admiration, and I wasn't too surprised to see how pissed off Brokkr looked now.

The blacksmith stood posted with his back to the wall on the opposite end of his shop. His brawny arms were crossed in firm

disapproval, and he kept a stern glower on his face while he listened to the Farthegn women chuckle to each other and flirt with Bragi over tomahawks and swords.

Then he finally reached his limit.

“Alright, that’s it!” Brokkr snapped, and every warrior woman fell silent as he shoved through the pack and tore the back door open wide. “Unless you’re working some fuckin’ steel, get the hell out of my shop!”

Bragi quickly sobered up and nudged the nearest women toward the exit. The rest of the warriors grumbled their way out into the night, and the blacksmith looked down on all of them with a withering glare. Then he slammed the hefty door shut behind the last of them, and when Bragi opened his mouth to say something, Brokkr held up a hand and walked off.

“I don’t wanna hear a fuckin’ word,” Brokkr growled over his shoulder.

“Yes, okay...” Bragi muttered. “My apologies, of course...”

I exchanged a glance with the warrior, but Brokkr was busy slamming his tools around to clean up, and I really couldn’t blame him. The blacksmith worked his hands to the bone on the weapons for Dalir, but since he wasn’t Farthegn, his efforts didn’t count for much of anything amongst the clansmen.

The real kicker was I didn’t have a drop of Farthegn blood in me, either, and Brokkr knew more about swordsmithing than I ever would. Still, my one Bowie knife sent the warrior women into a tizzy more than anything he’d ever put out.

I awkwardly cleared my throat as I grabbed Eir’s wrapped up knives from the worktable.

Brokkr snorted at the sound, and he sent a grin over his shoulder. “When that wife of yours wrecks those knives, I expect full rights to the ten-inch design, and you’re telling every damn woman in this clan that I came up with it myself.”

“Deal,” I chuckled.

Then I dipped out the back door and headed down the lane, but despite my nerves, I couldn't rein in the cocky smirk on my face. Even if Eir didn't appreciate the craftsmanship of these blades, I knew damn well this Bowie knife was some of my best work to date. And if she wrecked it... well, at least Brokkr and Bragi would get something out of the situation.

That was cool, too.

But I had a feeling she was gonna fucking love her gifts.



Chapter 6

Eir was changing out of her hunting gear when I got home, and she sent me a seductive smile as I closed the door. The fire was lit behind her, and a line of rugged candles flickered from the tabletop, so my winged wife looked more like a goddess than ever with her satiny skin glowing in the firelight. Her tiny buckskin thong barely clung to the cleft between her thighs, but then I refocused on the half-open, buckskin halter Eir was trying out tonight.

She was taking her time threading the ties through the little eyelets on the front, and it took all my willpower not to undo her progress and tear the strings apart with my teeth right now.

“There you are...” Eir purred, and I dragged my eyes up to hers. “I was worried you might work through Anakol’s feast. Have you been toiling away like a blacksmith all this time?”

“Bladesmith,” I corrected. “And yes, I have. It takes hours, sometimes days, to complete a quality blade, and I’ve made you two. The feast is almost ready to start, but we have some time before we have to head over there.”

Eir paused with her cleavage still straining against the loose ties, and her shoulder strap slipped down to torment me.

“You made two knives?” my wife asked. “What do I need two for? I already told you I could not care less about this sort of thing. Why have you wasted your valuable time?”

I sighed and set the bundled-up knives on the table, and I strolled over to my beautiful wife while she kept her bright green eyes on me. Then I nudged her hands away from the ties of her top, and I finished threading them into the eyelets to spare my sanity.

“First of all, I never consider bladesmithing a waste of time,” I said. “It’s engaging work, and I enjoy it. Second of all, you need two knives because you’re not a one-trick pony when it comes to hunting.”

“What is a one-trick pony?” Eir asked. “I have never heard of this predator.”

“It’s not a predator,” I chuckled. “It’s a saying from my world. A one-trick pony is someone who can only do one thing well. Are you a hunter who only goes around stabbing thousand-pound beasts in the skull?”

“Not at all,” Eir curtly answered. “There are numerous smaller creatures I kill for sustenance, of course. Not to mention those I kill when they become a nuisance around our food storage, or those I kill to bait larger quarry, but as I have told you several times, my bow is perfectly adequate for this work.”

“You can’t skin an eldradyr with your arrows,” I pointed out. “I’d wager your dagger makes sloppy work of the field dressing process on account of how cumbersome a blade that size is to work with.”

“This is true,” Eir allowed. “The sharpness of the back edge punctures organs more often than I’d like. It is infuriating.”

“Then you do need more than one blade,” I concluded.

Eir pursed her lips at my iron-clad logic, and I admired the swelling of her cleavage while I gradually tightened and knotted the ties on her halter. Then I adjusted the soft strap that had slipped over her shoulder, and my wife still had no arguments to make when I grabbed a pair of clean buckskin pants from the corner of the table.

I handed them to her before I headed over to the table, and then I settled in on the thick fur rug to wait for my wife to finish getting dressed. She intentionally turned around during this process to give me a clear view of her perfectly sculpted ass, and the winged woman sent a sly smile over her shoulder as she slowly inched and wiggled her creamy curves into the tight pants.

Eir always made a point of both dressing and undressing for me like she was my own personal courtesan, but she’d honestly turn anything into a sexy show these days. Whether she was eating her dinner, licking ale off her lips, or skinning a boar with me, Eir could make everything pornographic if she really wanted to.

The best part was she did want to. None of this was solely because I liked it.

Every sigh and slow turn was matched with a lusty smile that proved how much she loved when I looked her over like this, and these were just some of the hundreds of reasons why I loved her so damn much.

Genuinely... loved her.

The notion made my palms a bit clammy all of a sudden as I watched Eir shimmy her shoulders into a thick stole of nóttmal fur, but I calmly waited until she finished getting her hide in place.

Then Eir sauntered over to join me near the table, and she splayed her thighs toward me as she squatted and got comfortable on the rug. Even the way she tousled her long blonde braids was sexy as hell, but once she'd finally settled in with her legs tucked under herself and her thigh pressed against my own, her black wings started slowly shifting back and forth.

I knew this was her version of drumming her fingernails on the tabletop, and the Nordic beauty sent me a coy glance.

"Very well, Aaron Briggs," Eir sighed. "Let us see these two knives you have made, but I must ask that you not take offense if I continue favoring my bow above all else. You know by now that I respect you entirely, and my opinions of this work are not meant as an insult to you."

"I won't take offense," I said. "But I want to clarify I'm not snubbing your love for bowhunting. I've always enjoyed bowhunting, and you're more talented in the field than anyone else I know. I hope you never stop favoring your bow. I'm only trying to show you that a well-crafted blade is more than some irritating tool you're required to use, and that a lot of finesse and careful consideration goes into bladesmithing. So, if these particular knives don't impress you to that degree, I'll keep making you better blades until you realize I'm right about this. Because I am."

Eir chuckled and shook her head, and I slid the two bundles closer.

Then I untied the scraps of fur and unfolded the wrapping, and I carefully laid the hunting knife and Bowie knife side by side in front of my wife. At first sight, Eir's lips puckered into a soft O shape, but she didn't say anything. The woman just stared down at the knives as her black wings came to a sudden stop. After a long, silent moment passed without her reacting at all, I cleared my throat a little awkwardly.

"Uh... so this smaller knife is obviously meant for field dressing your smaller kills," I explained. "It's simple and similar to my own, so I can vouch for how effective it is for most of your everyday needs. The blade's only sharpened on the one edge, and it's not too long, so it'll keep you from bursting the organs like you mentioned before. The larger design is called a Bowie knife where I'm from, and it should be a decent replacement for the dagger you've been using on larger game."

My wife remained stock-still, but I tried not to take this as a bad sign. Instead, I continued giving her a run-down of the ten-inch design and my thought process while forging it.

I detailed the perks of the double bevel on the belly and the alterations I made in terms of sharpening the swage for her, and I explained why I'd added the trap guard so her grip wouldn't slip down to the blade when she applied extra force in her thrusts. Then I clarified the front-side hook wasn't a poorly placed gut hook, but actually a fun and more violent addition for the Farthegn in her, and I mumbled my way through the fact that the gem happened to match her eye color to a tee.

I did not mention the fire rune etched on the blade, but after I'd finished going through all the other specs, Eir still hadn't done much more than blink in minutes.

Then she slowly placed her fingertips on the two handles like she didn't want to break them.

"They're... perfect," my wife finally whispered. "Every little detail is so thoughtfully placed to meet my needs. The size, the shape, the weight, and even the handles are exactly what I require."

I smirked with instant pride, but I resisted the urge to take a victory lap around the room.

“Yeah, that’s kind of how bladesmithing works,” I replied instead. “The same is true of the swords on the rack over there, and even the tomahawks. Axes, too. All those blades have been crafted with equal consideration.”

“Perhaps, but those are just blades,” Eir clarified, and she said the word like they were the lowest caste of society. “These are so much more than that, Aaron. They are exquisite.”

“I know,” I said with a nod. “I made them for you.”

Eir smiled from ear to ear as she looked over at me, and I didn’t hide my cocky grin.

“Oh, you are prideful about this,” she realized.

“Damn right, I am,” I wholeheartedly agreed. “I’ve spent most of my life perfecting my skills in this craft, but I’ve only ever made one other Bowie knife. It’s actually against the law to have this design in a lot of areas where I’m from. They’re too dangerous and obviously aren’t much use unless you’re trying to kill something. In Alaska, we’ve got big enough predators where a blade like this might be needed for self-defense, so it’s only against the law to conceal them. I never used the one I made, though. It was more for fun. My grandfather wanted me to learn about achieving that double bevel on a blade this large, and I was interested in classic, Old Western weapons at the time. This one turned out infinitely better than the last. I kind of wish I would’ve kept making them years ago. The process is pretty fun, and they probably would’ve sold well.”

“How much would you sell a knife like this for in Alaska?” Eir’s eyes glinted with fascination. “Two hundred skulls? Three hundred skulls?”

“Nooo,” I laughed. “All things considered, with the alterations and the gem included, I’d probably let that knife go for about a thousand dollars. Maybe a few hundred more since it’d be made of a nicer steel, and I’d rather give it to you than sell it.”

Eir furrowed her brow. “What are dollars?”

“Dollars are how we pay for things in my world. Think of them as skulls.”

“A thousand skulls?” Eir gasped and looked down at the Bowie knife. “That is how much Thyrrri cost... and she is a remarkable wife to buy.”

“It’s a remarkable knife,” I assured her. “Both of them are. I know the handles aren’t stained yet, but I didn’t want them to be damp when I gave them to you. I’ll fix that tomorrow. I was thinking of using a darker, ruddier stain to offset the green of the--”

Eir promptly slid the knives away from me before I could finish, and I cocked an eyebrow at her defensive posture.

“No, you cannot change anything about them,” Eir insisted. “These handles are the color of our trees, and I like them. It makes me proud to hold them, but do you think the blood of my quarry may stain the wood a little, too?”

I chuckled at her deadly smile. “Yeah, if I don’t varnish it at all, but just like with your bow, the wood will weaken over time if I don’t put a protective layer on it. Normally, I’d at least put a clear varnish. Then you’ll keep the ashier color without having to replace the handles too soon.”

“This is acceptable,” my wife decided. “As long as my beautiful knives look this way forever, I do not mind if the handles aren’t stained in blood. They will last forever, won’t they?”

“That depends entirely on you,” I said, and Eir blushed under my stern gaze. “No knife, no matter the quality, will hold up if you don’t take care of it. So clean them off after every use, sharpen the edges when they start to dull, and don’t drop them on the damn stones. You should also keep them dry and in their sheaths when you’re not using them. I’ve already talked to Orn about the dimensions, and he said he’d have a couple leather sheaths finished up by tomorrow evening.”

“Yes, my chief.” Eir gave a diligent nod. “I will never in my entire life disrespect these knives. I will do anything I can to honor them. Not a day will pass that I do not look on these tools with deep

adoration and gratitude, and each night, I will go to bed feeling like the most fortunate Farthegn woman who has ever lived because they will rest within arm's reach, even when I sleep."

"Alright, not all of that's necessary," I chuckled. "You don't have to think about them all day long, or sleep with them--"

"But I will," my wife cut in. "Not only because they are so beautiful and perfectly crafted for my needs, but because my husband made them for me. When I think how a man of your stature, with countless duties to attend to, and so many clansmen relying on him, has chosen to spend his time on this endeavor for me..."

Eir trailed off while her green eyes became a little dewy around her lashes, and she bit down hard on her lip. That's when I realized she was trying not to cry over all this, and she looked so fucking cute doing it. My wife glanced down at her knives, and her voice was barely above a whisper when she continued speaking.

"You must really care for me to take so much time crafting these exquisite blades for hours and hours," Eir murmured. "It is quite a loving gesture..."

The Nordic beauty snuck a peek at me to check my reaction, and the innocent blush on her cheeks deepened while she searched my gaze.

At this point, I couldn't have reined in the grin on my face if my life depended on it, so I left it there while I scruffed my beard a bit and nodded in the affirmative.

Then Eir let out a giddy squeak, buried her burning cheeks in her hands, and leapt into my lap.

I chuckled against her lips as she delved her tongue into my mouth. She knotted her fingers in my hair while I tried to stay upright, but she was so enthusiastic that I had to brace one hand on the table just to keep my balance.

Mostly, I was just relieved that my wife hadn't missed any of the points I wanted to make tonight. Not only did I break through her ridiculous bias against blades, but I managed to clarify my feelings

for her in my own Alaskan way, and crafting my best knife to date in the process only added to the win.

I reveled in the moment while I let the Nordic beauty cover me in kisses and nip at my tongue for as long as she wanted to. I teased her wings every now and then to make her giggle a bit too, and when Eir finally calmed down, she stayed right where she was.

My wife's toned thighs clung to my hips while her arms remained locked around my neck, and the way she smiled when she held me like this made it impossible to look away.

"Aaron Briggs, I love you more than anything in the whole forest," Eir purred.

"I've realized this," I assured her.

"And you feel the same," Eir continued. "Even if you don't feel like you have to say it."

I laughed at her smug expression. "I do."

"I think I love you much more than I can even explain with words, though," Eir sighed with a dreamy smile. "You are the most considerate man I have ever met, and you are always surprising me with everything you do. The way you penetrate me is so pleasurable, I find myself haunted by your touch even in my dreams. But you also conquer clans, lead your warriors with a firm and fair hand, and I never imagined steel could be so beautiful. Somehow, you have turned even this cold, slave material into perfection. I only wish I had something to kill right this moment. I know my new knives will make the work twice as invigorating as it ever was."

"You'll have plenty of opportunities to try them out soon," I told her. "I was thinking about it earlier, and with the number of slaves we have around, and Igrid watching Illska, now's as good a time as any to travel north."

My wife's flirty smile dropped. "Travel north?"

"Yeah, to visit the cave Vegvisir told us about," I reminded her. "You know I've only been waiting to make sure everything was under control with the clans. I figure things are settled as much as they'll be

for a while, and we can't risk waiting too long and end up leaving right as Hylmrek shows up in Illska. You said the attack would most likely occur within the next few weeks, right?"

"Yes, this is most likely," Eir said in a monotone.

"Then now's the perfect time to handle our own shit and find out about your wings and my mark," I concluded.

Eir released her hold on me and slid off my lap, and it was like someone had flipped an invisible switch in her. Suddenly, my wife wasn't blushy or sappy at all, and she seemed to be avoiding my gaze. Eir even adjusted the position of a candlestick for no apparent reason, but then she settled for fidgeting with the Bowie knife on the table.

"Okay, so something's wrong," I realized. "What is it?"

"Well..." Eir hummed in an oddly high voice. "I have been thinking about this cave as well, and is it really so important that we go there? After all, you are quite busy with your chieftain duties, and your mark is rather fun in my opinion. I see nothing wrong with it, and I am fond of my wings without needing to know everything about them. I have not vanished since the night you conquered Illska, either, so we can probably carry on with our lives here, and not travel to the cave in the north."

"What?" I snorted. "Where is this coming from? Eir, you fucking vanished. You have the power to raise souls from the dead and take them who knows where. Now, I was fine with not talking about this much since you said you didn't want to, but we're not ignoring it forever. You grew wings, and my chest lights up when I murder shit. That needs to be addressed. We're getting answers."

"But do we need to go so far for these answers?" Eir asked, and I furrowed my brow at the uneasy look in her eyes. "The old wanderling says it could be more than two days' travel to reach the cave, and that means we will be very, very far from the Red Forest. Much farther than a Farthegn woman should be."

"Eir, I thought I made this clear," I sighed. "You have every right to cross any border you want. I don't care what codes the other

chieftains use with their women, I'm not confining you to our territory alone. It's fine with me that you go this far from the forest."

"It's not fine with me," Eir said stiffly. "I do not want to go, and I won't."

I blinked in surprise. "Can I ask why?"

"Because I have never left the forest, and I don't want to," my wife groaned. "Aaron Briggs, I belong here. I am suited to this place, and it's all I know. I have no idea what lies in the north or how to prepare for it. I have never even seen the foothills of Svelgard. Their clan brings their army into Hylmrek whenever they gather the nerve to war with us."

"You're afraid to leave the Red Forest?" I clarified, and Eir offered an ashamed shrug.

"Not afraid," she insisted. "Only... a little anxious. I feel as if the expanse of unknown elements in this case is too daunting to even be considered, and if I do allow myself to consider them, I cannot breathe properly. That is all."

"Well, I get that. I never left Alaska before I came here, but as you know, that turned out alright. You'll be with me and Vegvisir too, and we'll make sure we're prepared to handle anything we find up there. This is a good chance for you to step outside your comfort zone and see some of the world for once. It's exciting, if you think about it."

My winged wife looked anything but excited. She dropped her gaze to the tabletop once more as she traced her finger over the gem on her Bowie knife. Everything about her body language made it clear this venture was the last thing she wanted to do, and I hated seeing my deadly wife so put out. But I could understand why she didn't like the idea of leaving. I didn't want to force her to go on a trip like this if it just wasn't her thing.

"Listen, you don't have to go with me if you don't want to," I compromised. "I'm not gonna make you leave the Red Forest. I'll travel to the mountains with Vegvisir alone, and I'll be back within the week. I can fill you in on anything I find out when I get home, and--"

“You are still going to leave?” Eir scoffed, and my eyebrows shot up as my wife bristled at the suggestion.

“Yeah, like I said, this isn’t something we should ignore. It’s an ideal time to handle the situation, so I’m gonna go handle it. I don’t mind trekking through the mountains to do that. I was raised in the mountains. Should be a rugged journey, but I’m looking forward to it.”

My wife’s grip tightened on the handle of her ten-inch knife, and I leaned away out of instinct. I couldn’t tell where her mind was at right now because her expression was a hardened mask, but Eir was clearly warring with some heavy shit behind those bright green eyes. She took quick and shallow breaths as she eyed me up and down with her Bowie knife locked in one hand, and even when she finally let out a longer breath, it didn’t seem to calm her down at all.

“No husband of mine is crossing perilous and unknown lands without me there to ensure he survives,” my wife said through gritted teeth. “Anything could be waiting in the north, Aaron Briggs. Anything could happen to you, and I refuse to let you remain so unguarded. If you are going north, I am going with you!”

I nodded and eyed her white-knuckled grip on the knife. “If you’re sure you want to. I can protect myself, so you don’t have to be worried--”

“I am not worried, I am furious with my own weakness!” Eir hotly informed me. “No chieftain as honorable as you should have to protect himself! This is why you have such a formidable wife, and I am certainly not the sort of woman who would leave you to your own devices when peril awaits around every mountain!”

“Okay...” I smirked. “Mountains are huge, so the peril is more likely to be around every rock instead of the mountain itself.”

“It does not matter!” Eir snapped. “I will be beside you for every rock! I will not abandon you for anything, and I don’t care how many mountains we must walk on top of. I will ensure you live to return to your people unscathed!”

“Walk over,” I corrected. “But it’s more convenient to travel ‘through’ the mountains, depending on the terrain. No sense fucking

around scaling every peak when there's plenty of passes at a more manageable elevation."

Eir furrowed her brow in utter confusion, but my smile stretched wide as I considered what she'd get to experience for the first time on this trip. I knew too well how much my adrenaline-junkie woman thrived on challenging situations, and the chance of introducing her to the mountain life made me wanna all-out sprint for the foothills right this second.

"You're gonna love this," I promised Eir. "Trekking and camping in the mountains is fantastic, and I can guarantee you'll find it invigorating. You're more than equipped to handle yourself out there. Plus, our first honeymoon when we infiltrated Illska wasn't ideal. The water-logged bodies kinda killed the romance, so we could look at this like a second honeymoon if that makes it more fun."

"What is this moon you keep talking about?" Eir laughed. "There was no moon in the sky when we snuck into the dungeons."

"A honeymoon is when a new husband and wife go on a trip," I explained. "They adventure around and fuck a lot to celebrate the fact they'll be fucking each other for the rest of their lives. We fuck all the time already, but the travel component shakes it up. Lots of potentially bad decisions to make together."

"This sounds fun..." Eir's green eyes sparkled at the idea. "I like this kind of moon, let's have it."

"We will," I assured her. "The mountains are the perfect place for a honeymoon, too. Judging by what I've seen of the coast, this might be as close to Alaska as you'll ever get. You can see what my homeland's like for once. The real one... not the creepy tomb you keep insisting is Alaska."

My wife immediately smiled at the prospect, and her mood was already vastly improved as I offered her a hand to help her up. We'd be late for the feast if we sat around chatting like a sappy pair of newlyweds all night, but Eir only delayed our departure long enough to kiss each of her knives on the handle first. Then she promised them she'd carry them everywhere once she had the proper sheaths,

and she spent the whole walk to the central clearing wondering aloud about my “mild Alaska.”

The first thing Eir wanted to know was if mountains sat on each other, or if they grew with space between them like trees. She asked if snow tasted different on a mountain than when it was in a forest, and she was shocked to hear what an avalanche was. My wife decided this sounded like a lot of fun even though I tried to make it clear how dangerous the phenomenon was, but after I described the taste of ocean water, her interest in traveling plummeted again.

It was just as well. The central clearing of the village was packed from one line of shops to the other when we arrived, and we were right on time to get some piping-hot food off the grill.

All of Dalir gathered at the long wooden benches in the cold night air, and the torchlight encircling us illuminated the glistening meat piled high on everyone’s plates. Heaps of freshly baked bread were laid out on the tables along with vats of stew and greens, and when I glanced around, it looked like even the former Illskan captives were enjoying themselves.

They wolfed down the boar, venison, and fish without saying a word to anyone, but they didn’t glare at us all while they did it. I took this as a good sign. I still didn’t like the way the younger of the former captives were eyeing their neighbors’ tomahawks, but for the most part, tensions were low.

Either way, it was hard to worry about much of anything tonight. Raucous conversation and the clanking of drinking horns surrounded me non-stop, and I had my wife tucked against my side with my most loyal warriors seated around me. A stream of clansmen kept stopping by our table to congratulate Anakol on his nóttmal hunt, so there was never a lull in the celebration, and for once, my rigid warlord let himself overindulge a bit.

The warrior women seemed to be filling his horn with ale one moment and then mead the next, and it turned out Anakol smiled as much as his brother when he drank enough. The pair looked strikingly similar sitting across from me with wide, drunken grins

slapped on their faces, and Bragi goaded his brother into retelling the story of his hunt about ten times.

Each time, the tale got more elaborate as the nóttmal became more unmanageable, but after a couple hours went by, the braided warlord started giving Eir her due credit for teaching him to hunt the beast. Anakol ended up bragging more about my wife during that feast than I'd done since I met her, and Eir soaked up all his praise with stoic agreement. It was like she knew this day would come eventually.

I couldn't help laughing my ass off when Anakol thanked me for having the good sense to steal a woman like Eir, but by this point, his words were slurring so badly that I doubted he'd even remember saying it.

Thyrri helped him stumble back to their hut not long after that.

I followed in case he passed out before they made it, and Bragi crutched along beside me with Eir snickering on his other side. I lost track of how many times Anakol reminded Thyrri it was very respectable for her to have a husband as honorable as him, but she was too busy trying to support half her husband's weight to ever respond. Bragi just kept agreeing with Anakol on Thyrri's behalf, but I ended up taking over the heavy work when the braided man almost knocked his wife into a flaming torch.

Eventually, we managed to get the drunken warlord home and hauled him up the front steps. I booted the door open to get him inside, but then Anakol halted, stumbled back around, and swayed in my hold while he loudly informed his wife that he expected to be pleased until the sun came up.

Eir crumpled to the ground from laughing so hard, and I wasn't sure I'd ever seen Thyrri blush this badly before.

Then Anakol tripped through the door, collapsed on his bed of hides, and passed out cold.

We bade Thyrri a good evening, and while Bragi headed for his own hut, I led my tipsy wife back to our private quarters.

Eir ended up fucking me until pretty close to sunrise, but I did my best to tire her out way before that. She was just too determined to show me exactly how grateful she was for the gifts I'd made her today, and apparently this required cycling through damn near every position I'd ever taught her, but I didn't mind her approach in the slightest.

We didn't stop tumbling around our hut until Eir was unable to hold herself upright anymore. As she curled up in a kitteny ball in my arms, I couldn't help noticing her two knives were carefully placed within arm's reach.

Then I slept like a fucking rock.

I didn't wake up when the chill of the day worked its way through the woodwork, and I didn't even hear the slaves deliver our morning meal. I stayed in a sex coma for longer than any chieftain should, and when I finally got my eyes open again, Eir was sleeping in my arms with her black wings tucked neatly behind her.

Every muscle in my body was stiff from last night, but in the best way. I smiled with pleasant surprise when I noticed the handprint I'd accidentally imprinted on Eir's ass, and I grinned a bit more as I eyed the knives I'd made for her.

Then I tried my best not to wake up my insatiable wife as I slid my arm out from under her head. As much as I wanted to do nothing but lay around recovering with my Scandinavian supermodel wet dream, that wasn't the kind of life I led in this forest. I had slaves to tend to, enchanted swords to check on, and underground cellars being constructed all over my village.

More importantly, I had a creepy old wanderling to visit because it was finally time for me to leave the Red Forest and check out the mountainous coast this world had to offer.

This prospect alone was enough to make me almost forget Eir even had breasts.

It had been too long since I hiked a grade higher than six percent. I missed the sight of a frigid, blue coast so badly I could almost smell the brine in the air already. Every inch of me ached to

hear some wolves howling again or to take an icy plunge in an arctic sea, and getting to do all this with a Nordic beauty at my side made me twice as eager to get going.

I swiftly doused my head in the cold basin in the corner, ran a carved bone comb through my hair, and got dressed before I slipped out the door. I ate my breakfast of millet and eggs while walking through the lanes to make up for lost time, and I touched base with my huntresses and slaves first thing. Then I headed for the gates of Dalir, but I only made it halfway across the village before I found Anakol in a strikingly different state than the last time I saw him.

The braided warlord was overseeing the underground construction of a new cellar for our meat storage, and he wore his usual, stoic expression while he stood tall with his hand resting on the hilt of his jagged sword. He didn't seem the slightest bit hungover, and to look at Anakol now, I never would have guessed he'd been smiling, stumbling, and openly bragging about my Hylmrek wife last night.

"How's it going?" I asked as I joined the warlord.

"Quite well, my chief," Anakol answered.

I nodded. "I'm sure everything's a bit fuzzy from last night, but-
_"

"Not at all," Anakol replied, and I was impressed to hear him say this without an ounce of embarrassment. "I enjoyed the feast immensely. Thank you for honoring me with such a celebration, my chief."

"No problem," I chuckled.

"I would, however, like to make it clear that I do not think the stealing of women from other clans is a respectable thing," Anakol continued. "Last night, I was too inebriated to clarify my full opinion on the matter, but it is only because you are an honorable man, and Stranholf is a maniacal bastard, that I appreciate your actions in this case. Were the circumstances different, the breaking of a code like this would be deplorable. Women are the most valuable assets we

have in the Red Forest. They should never be stolen. Only bought and owned.”

“Understood,” I muttered. “And I agree. Stealing women in general is bullshit.”

Anakol bowed his head. “Now, about the cellars. The warriors have decided to expand your recommended dimensions, and--”

“Can we go over this later?” I interrupted. “I’m on my way to see Vegvisir, and we have a lot to discuss once I get back, so we can cover all this then.”

“Certainly, my chief,” the warlord agreed. “While you are there, I urge you to reiterate to the wanderling that he is only to defecate in the designated areas I assigned to him. One of your huntresses stepped in his feces this morning. This is a degradation, my chief. Our women should never be forced to step in the feces of such an inferior being.”

“Right,” I said. “I’ll take care of it.”

I had no idea Anakol was enforcing rules where Vegvisir was concerned, so this issue of designated shitting areas was news to me.

I didn’t bother mentioning this. I just clapped Anakol on the shoulder, continued through the village toward the north side, and crossed the threshold of Dalir’s gates to find Vegvisir. Then I assured my warrior women about ten times that I didn’t need a guard to travel half a mile into my own territory. It took a lot of persuasion and referencing the seven blades on my belt, but the women finally let me leave, and they planted themselves outside the gates instead as I headed to Vegvisir’s campsite.

Or rather, I headed in the general direction of where it should be.

The old wanderling wasn’t being held prisoner anymore, but he’d volunteered to stick around until I was prepared to travel north. His only caveat to this was that I bring him from Illska to Dalir because the risk of being murdered in his sleep was lower here. Two weeks ago, I made good on the agreement and moved Vegvisir into

my northern territory, and I hadn't talked to him since. But this wasn't because I was avoiding him.

Vegvisir struck me as an incredibly interesting guy, and part of why I looked forward to my journey north was because he'd be leading the excursion. He was more alert than the old men I'd known on Earth, and he seemed to notice every little detail about his surroundings with only a single glance. He also knew more about this world than the Farthegns ever would.

Vegvisir was a real-life case of someone who'd seen it all and lived to tell the tale, and after our talk in Illska the night I conquered their clan, he made a lot more sense to me. I understood how a guy who traveled alone for decades in a world this dangerous could end up a little... unusual. I knew plenty of old guys up in Alaska who'd almost give Vegvisir a run for his money on the creepy scale, but I could only imagine how much he'd seen in all his years of traveling.

I hoped I'd learn about some of it in the following week, and hopefully, I'd learn more about rune magic, too.

Vegvisir only alluded to a couple things about the magic his staff possessed after our first talk on the subject, and my curiosity had been running wild ever since. I was never the type to hear an interesting fact and let the subject drop, and I didn't want to know just the one rune. I wanted to know all of them, and this old wanderling was my ticket to the rarest knowledge this world had to offer.

But he told me upfront he didn't like company, so once I got him settled in a plot of land he liked, I gave him his space.

Now, I hiked through the hedges and dense purple vines overgrowing my woods, and I looked all around at the ashen trunks and red boughs while I kept my eyes out for a sign of a camp. I never stepped in any feces along the way, and as far as I could tell, the area was completely uninhabited. I was starting to worry the wanderling took off and I'd never locate the cave in the north, but then I heard a gravelly voice hollering nearby.

"Watch your step, boy!" Vegvisir called out of nowhere, and I halted on the spot.

Then I eyed the ground around me.

It took me a minute before I noticed the well-concealed trapping pit two steps from the toes of my boots.



Chapter 7

“Holy shit,” I muttered.

That was too close of a call.

I gave the trapping pit a wide berth, but Vegvisir called out to me again as I rounded the other side.

“On your left!” the wanderling warned.

I froze once again. “How much of this land is rigged out here?”

Vegvisir chuckled at the question, and I took this to mean pretty much all of it was booby trapped. I stayed right where I was and scanned my surroundings until I noticed a patch of sharpened sticks poised to impale my boot if I stepped to my left. Two log swing traps also laid ready to release from the trees near me, but then I caught sight of a peculiar mass of dense purple vines up ahead.

The more I looked at the tangle of foliage, the more it reminded me of a squirrel’s nest, except it was about five feet tall, four feet wide, and strategically placed. Thirty feet above the ground, the vines were woven tightly together and balanced on a broad branch, and I thought I saw a makeshift climbing rope concealed at the base.

I craned my neck upward and cupped my hands around my mouth.

“How’s it going?” I hollered.

“Not bad, not bad...” I heard in the distance.

Vegvisir’s voice came from the direction of the clump of purple vines, and a moment later, the foliage of the nest shifted in one spot. Then the wanderling’s crazy gray eyebrows appeared. The rest of his face stayed concealed, but I could make out his sharp eyes peering through the purple leaves.

“You done fucking around with these Farthegns yet?” Vegvisir drawled.

I smirked. "For now, yes. I came to let you know my clans are mostly settled. How's about heading north in a couple days?"

"Bout damn time," the wanderling grumbled. "Better pack some hides, boy! I reckon you're a ground sleeper."

"Should I bother bringing any weapons, or are you gonna protect us all with that staff of yours?" I called back with a grin.

Even through the vines, I could tell how unamused Vegvisir was. "Staff's not a weapon. It's a staff."

"Right," I muttered. "I'll bring the weapons, then. You just get us headed on the proper course."

"Two days?" he checked.

"Yeah, we can set out the day after tomorrow. Get over to the village around sunup, and we'll be ready to go."

"Got any wool?" he asked next.

"I do," I said. "I'll make sure we're set for the weather. Provisions, healing supplies, all that. I've got a mount you can ride on, too."

"Appreciate it," Vegvisir drawled.

"Hey, I think one of my warlords may have been out here," I continued. "He mentioned some designated areas he set for you. I just wanted to let you know I didn't hear anything about all that until today, but you don't have to listen to him. You do you, alright?"

"No shit, I don't have to listen to him," the wanderling snorted.

Then the vines shifted closed again, and I nodded to myself as I realized the old man was done with this conversation.

"Good talk," I muttered.

I turned around slowly and eyed the low-lying branches, and I kept my senses sharp as I snuck around a snare trap, the trapping pit, and two more swinging log traps I hadn't noticed when I first arrived.

"You'll wanna take four steps to your left!" Vegvisir hollered.

Upon closer inspection, I realized I was about to walk into a smaller, thinner trapping pit that would've busted my leg for me, so I promptly followed his advice.

"Thanks for that!" I called over my shoulder.

Once I was out of the minefield Vegvisir had set up around his campsite, I quickened my pace again. My wildish guards were still waiting for me outside the village when I came trudging back through the undergrowth.

"Told you I'd be fine," I said, but the women surrounded me with their bows drawn and at the ready anyways.

They eyed the perimeter of the forest as they escorted me back through the gates, and once the doors were shut behind me, I didn't waste any time barreling through the rest of my duties for the afternoon. I'd gotten a late start on the day, but I had a lot to attend to if tomorrow was my only full day to prep, and I knew I'd probably be running around non-stop up until the time came for us to leave Dalir. Prepping for a journey was one of my favorite parts of any trip though, so I was looking forward to this stage.

With half my mind already up in the mountains, I proceeded with my chieftain duties. I stayed on autopilot while I checked my reserves, my patrols, my weirs, slaves, lumber, smokehouses, captives, and training field within a few hours. Then I wolfed down my afternoon meal hours late, and I met my messengers who rode in from Illska. After a brief update on the southern clan, I made sure everything in the south would be locked down by the time I left for the north, and I sent word for Igrid to come work with the former Illskan captives.

If anyone could get the younger warriors in line before my departure, it was Igrid, but she'd also be my primary means of keeping Illska in hand during my absence. This meant I had a lot to fill her in on and little time to do it in.

Once the messengers set out to summon the pierced woman, I hunted down the elf boy and got him measured for some winter boots. Then I headed to Amaeda's healing hut so I could check on the mauled hunter I'd brought up from Illska.

Amaeda was huddled near her fire with her head cloaked when I entered, and she stirred one of three vats of tonic brewing over the flames. The moment her vibrant yellow eyes found me, they crinkled around the edges as a warm smile spread across her weathered face, and I returned the gesture.

The healer's hut was filled with drying herbs and baskets brimming with supplies nowadays, and it was one of my favorite places to visit. Not only because the scents of the healer's remedies always forced me into a heady state of calm, but because Amaeda seemed to radiate warmth like the sun itself. The improvement in her since I'd come to Dalir was honestly one of my proudest achievements.

Lately, the elderly elf was like gold in every sense of the word, and to see her gaining strength in her frail limbs and color in her papery skin was a constant relief. She was over a hundred years old, but she was more powerful than any being I'd met in this world so far, and she was more than a loyal slave to me.

Amaeda and her enchanted remedies had proven more valuable than just about anything I'd gained between both clans. Now that she had her own private living quarters aside from her healing hut, I considered her a member of Dalir and a highly trusted one at that. None of my injured warriors were ever lost under Amaeda's care, so I wasn't surprised in the slightest to see the bearded Illskan I'd sent to her looking ten times better already.

The beefy warrior was fully alert and sitting up in a grass bed near the far wall of the hut. Half his face was freshly wrapped with only one eye visible. His shoulder was heavily bandaged as well, so he was shirtless for the time being, but Amaeda had given him a wool blanket, plenty of hides, and what looked like a fresh cup of tea.

It was almost comical to see a weathered warrior of his build sitting quietly under hanging flowers and holding a mug too small for his hand, but he seemed comfortable and calm as I came over to his grass bed.

"You're looking much better," I said.

“I’m feeling better, my chief,” the bearded man replied in a gruff timbre. “But I have received no word about the hunt. Did you slaughter the final jakyl?”

“I did,” I answered. “You and I took down the last of them, and my guards informed me the hunt last night went off without any issues.”

“What of my mount?” he asked. “Did she survive?”

“I rode her back to the stronghold after the last jakyl died,” I assured him, and he nodded with some relief. “All the drekkadyr from the hunt are staying here in Dalir to recover.”

“Why am I in Dalir?” the Illskan warrior asked next.

“I brought you to see my own healer because the healer in Illska wasn’t equipped to properly tend to your bite wounds,” I explained. “We gave her a chance, but it was clear you wouldn’t make it through the night down there. I’ll have my guards escort you and your mount back to Illska as soon as Amaeda approves it.”

“Thank you, my chief,” the Illskan man grunted. “I owe you a great debt for this. I never heard the second jakyl arrive. When he pounced, I thought that was the end.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” I said. “You helped me finish off the jakyl attack, and you’ve proven to be a loyal and persistent warrior. That’s all I ask. Amaeda, how are his wounds doing?”

The old elf looked up from her vat near the fireplace, and she sent me another soft smile.

“He is mending well, my chief,” Amaeda said in her wavering voice. “Two days more, and he will be able to tend to his wounds on his own. I am only waiting for the infection to clear. The jakyl bites were not clean. He has also been suffering from a stomach malady for the past year, but I believe I’ve almost cured him of this. A few more treatments should do the trick.”

“Thank you,” I replied, and I turned back to the bearded man. “Is there anything I can get you while you’re here?”

“No, my chief.” He shook his head. “The slav-- the healer has made arrangements for my meals. Her assistants maintain the fire in the evening for me, and as she said, my health has greatly improved in a short time. This is... a respectable healer you have here, my chief. I need nothing.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said with an appreciative nod. “I’ll leave you to your rest.”

The Illskan bowed his bandaged head in gratitude, and I bade Amaeda a good day before I left her and the bearded warrior in the quiet hut. He was sipping tea from the small clay mug when I glanced back, and I smirked at the sight before I crossed the lane to make a quick stop at the tanner’s shop. This proved to be my briefest update of the day, and I was finally able to start in on my preparations for the trip north.

The first thing I needed to handle was alerting my warlords to my plan.

None of them knew I had any intention of leaving our territory, let alone traveling out of the Red Forest and into Svelgard’s land. This meant they also didn’t know I’d be making my journey without a slew of guards in tow, and I knew updating them would be my biggest hurdle. My warlords were fiercely loyal to me, and to say Anakol was protective would be a gross understatement. He was really my main hurdle to get over in this, but I knew if anyone could help smooth the situation out, it was Bragi.

I had to play this right, so I summoned Anakol’s brother from the blacksmith’s shop as a mediator, and I sent word to my warlords that we’d be meeting at their hut in ten minutes.

I rehearsed my speech about four times on my way there, and I made sure to come up with a wealth of counterarguments to anything my warlords might have to say. I decided swaying their focus to preparations for our battle with Hylmrek would be the best way to divert their energy. If that didn’t work, I had a couple other ideas up my sleeve.

I felt mostly confident I could handle this conversation in thirty minutes, and I was already waiting outside Thyri’s hut when she and

Anakol came up the lane. Bragi was crutching behind them with a look on his face that assured me he already knew why he was invited today, but I was pleased to see a pair of jet-black wings pluming beside him.

My wife's cheeks were still stained pink from our nightly exertions, and her sea green eyes glittered the moment they landed on me. She did her best to remain professional until everyone else entered the A-frame hut ahead of us, but then she hopped into my arms to steal a fiery kiss before the meeting.

"Good morning, my love," Eir murmured against my lips. "I was distraught to wake up without you beside me."

She didn't look at all distraught, and I chuckled at her teasing grin.

"Woman, if you keep me up all night, then I start my day already behind on my work," I informed her.

Eir rolled her eyes playfully. "You do not mind when I keep you awake all night."

"And you don't mind having a husband who takes his duties seriously," I said.

Eir chuckled in agreement before she tried to steal a few more kisses from me. Then Anakol cleared his throat inside, and she quickly hopped back down to the ground and forced an all-business frown.

"After you, my chief," the Nordic beauty offered.

The two of us entered my warlords' hut to find the others already seated around the rough wooden table with empty mugs waiting in front of them. The moment I took my seat, I launched right into the meeting with all my talking points filed at the forefront of my mind.

"Alright, this should be brief," I announced, but Thyri had the good sense to start pouring the ale anyways. "I wanted to touch base with you all real quick about the plans for the week. The day after tomorrow, Eir and I are riding north with Vegvisir, and we'll be gone

for about six days, depending on the terrain. With that in mind, I've got a list of tasks I need you all--"

"Terrain?" Anakol growled, and he slowly lowered the ale that hadn't made it to his lips yet. "What terrain is this, my chief?"

"Mountainous terrain," I answered upfront. "We're traveling along the northern coast to seek answers about Eir's wings and my mark. Now, as I was saying, I have a list of tasks I'd like--"

And that was it. That was all I got to say on the matter.

Even Bragi broke into a heated rebuttal while Anakol and Thyrrri tried to talk over one another. I suddenly found myself looking around the table at a wash of angry and insistent faces, and Thyrrri had the sharp eyes and hard frown of a strict mother as she stood up to compensate for how small she was compared to me. Her scolding tone made it difficult to look her in the eye, and I couldn't help feeling like I'd let her down even though I knew damn well I had every right to leave my own land for a few days.

Anakol was louder than his wife, and he kept one fist clenched on the tabletop as his other hand gestured furiously with every word. His ale was long forgotten as spit flew from his lips with every disapproving phrase, but Bragi was slightly calmer in his delivery. He spoke reasonably in an endless, streamlined sort of way, but he was so pissed off that he switched to speaking in his native Farthegn language to get his words out faster.

Meanwhile, Eir listened intently to the dreadlocked man as she nodded along and ignored his braided brother completely.

Forty-five minutes must have passed like this, and Anakol ended up pacing the full length of his hut while he rambled off his opinions.

Thyrrri eventually tried a new tactic of speaking to me in the most imploring, womanly way she could, but she managed to keep refilling my mug with ale no matter how many times I drained it. The whole time she spoke, Thyrrri calmly clutched my arm and explained how much my people needed me here, and she urged me to

consider my hundreds of warrior women who looked to me for protection.

The woman warlord assured me of how tormented they'd be by my loss if I were to abandon them in such a risky endeavor, and she littered all of this with several firsthand accounts of times she'd heard the women speaking at length about the faith they placed in me.

Eir's expression matched Thyrri's completely while she crinkled her brow and intently heard all the warlord had to say, but Bragi had fallen silent by now.

The amputee sat with his elbows on the table and his fingertips pressed together. His long brown dreadlocks fell forward to hide most of his dark face, and his eyes remained closed in concentration. I got the impression he was gathering energy for his next rant.

Then I tried to get another word in, and Bragi resurfaced fully prepared to have his say.

The warrior unleashed a jetstream of well-organized and articulate rebuttals, and he spoke concisely with the solemn delivery of a forefather. Bragi went on and on about my integrity, my sense of duty, my legacy, and everything else that essentially meant my trip was a terrible idea because I was the best thing that had ever happened to any of them, and another twenty minutes crawled by like this.

I tried to track how many breaths Bragi took, but it was impossible to tell. I didn't bother interrupting him, either, since I was already hoarse from trying to holler over everyone. It was hard not to laugh through most of the situation though, because I'd never had anyone challenge a camping trip I suggested.

Not a damn one of my excursions from the age of seven onward was shot down, even when I got the bright idea to camp in my grandfather's woods in negative thirty-degree weather. Burt just checked my supplies and sent me out with a hard pat on the head. But those days seemed to be long gone now.

Here I was, a grown-ass man with three overprotective and heavily armed parents bearing down on me.

And I only wanted to take a six-day trip.

Six days. Maybe less.

“I’m going,” I loudly announced, but the rebuttals continued at full volume, so I calmly repeated myself. “I’m going, and I’ll be back by the end of the week. Should Dalir and Illska fall to shit while I’m gone, I’ll blame each of you for your lack of attention in hearing my orders before I leave.”

Thyrri was the first one to clamp her mouth shut. Then Anakol fumed through flared nostrils as he finally stopped pacing. But Bragi stayed his course, and he finished his final statement in a steady tone that made him sound more like a preacher than a Fartheegn warrior.

“...a legacy so illustrious I would go so far as to say no chieftain will ever be able to match it. It is you, my chief, who has won the unwavering loyalty of both Illska and Dalir, and this is why I am certain a man of such acclaim as yourself will make the proper decision in this case. You are too noble and clear-sighted not to realize that remaining with your people is the only rational choice,” the charming man concluded, and he sent me a frank nod.

“Thank you for your perspective,” I muttered. “Now, while I’m gone, the following protocols will be in place.”

“Guards,” Anakol interrupted, and he jumped back into his seat at the table. “Forty guards to escort you north is all I can--”

“No guards,” I countered. “The more people we bring, the longer the journey will take, and we don’t have a limitless amount of time to accomplish this. We also don’t have limitless resources to accommodate that many warriors trekking through such harsh terrain. The risk of drawing the attention of Svelgard’s patrols is higher with more guards, too.”

Anakol ground his jaw, but I continued before he could come up with another argument.

“You’re all correct,” I told the warriors. “There’s too much at stake to risk losing it all over this journey. That’s why I’ve planned to keep my trip as short and simple as possible. Three people traveling without guards are easier to defend, conceal, feed, clothe, and haul across steep terrain. My estimation on the time it’ll take to reach our destination includes all accounting for error. If the predators aren’t too numerous, and we avoid drawing the attention of Svelgard’s patrol for the first leg of the trip, I could be back in Dalir as soon as four days from now.”

“And Aaron Briggs will not be without a guard,” Eir added. “I will be beside him every step of the way.”

Anakol clicked his tongue in disapproval, and my wife arched an eyebrow.

“I believe it was you, Anakol, who said last night that my senses are unparalleled,” Eir coolly reminded the warlord. “You said no woman has ever proven so dependable, so skilled, or so capable of defending her companions among the most vicious beasts in the Red Forest.”

“That is because you were defending me against the beasts!” Anakol growled back. “This is our chieftain’s safety we discuss now, and no one woman alone could be trusted with such an important task as his safety. Not even you.”

“Well, that is... rude and potentially accurate,” Eir shot back. “But I will stop at nothing to defend my husband.”

“Then stop him now,” Anakol harshly countered. “Go on. Your husband is making a terrible decision that could cost us his life, and you pride yourself on having some sort of say within your union. Do not sit there so uselessly. Make our chieftain see sense if you have such an important place in his home.”

Eir narrowed her sea green eyes into perilous slits. “How dare you.”

“No, how dare you,” the warlord corrected. “You could prevent this, and yet you do nothing.”

“Lay off,” I sighed. “She doesn’t--”

“No, I will handle this, my chief,” Eir cut in, and she leveled Anakol with a withering glare. “I can name five different ways I could make my husband remain in Dalir, and I assure you, every one of them would prove effective. However, I will not be shamed into stooping so low because I respect my husband. What he seeks is important to him, so it is important to me, and if our chieftain has cause to venture north, then I trust he has chosen the best course for himself and his clans. As you should, Anakol.”

I raised my eyebrows at my wife’s unyielding tone, and I couldn’t help giving the Nordic beauty a quick once-over out of the corner of my eye. Eir was even sexy when she stubbornly supported my endeavors, but more impressive than this was the fact that Anakol seemed to hear her point.

The braided man brooded on Eir’s words for a moment. Then he offered her a small nod of approval. “You give us your word you will do anything necessary to see that he returns?”

“On my honor,” Eir promised. “Should his life be threatened, I give my oath to sacrifice myself--”

“No one’s sacrificing shit,” I groaned. “I’ll defend myself, Eir will defend herself, the both of us will kill off anything we come across, and we’ll be back within the week. Now... on to the tasks that still need to be addressed. The threat of Hylmrek looms over both my clans, and you’re all responsible for continuing our preparations for battle in my absence. Thyrri, you’ll share the guard with Igrid in Illska. The two of you are to finish breaking the rebels and increase the training regimen of the warriors by twenty-five percent. Later today, Igrid’s coming to Dalir so she can work with the former captives until I leave. As soon as she arrives, converse with her about her operation in Illska. Then travel south to stand in for her, and you’ll remain at your station until I return from the north.”

“Yes, my chief,” Thyrri agreed.

“Anakol, as usual, Dalir is in your command during my absence,” I continued. “Your training regimen can continue as it is for now, but keep an eye on the captives, and remember, I’ve given every slave the go-ahead on tending to the tasks as they see fit.”

“This is unwise,” Anakol told me flat out. “The slaves are too dumb to be trusted with--”

“They’ll be fine,” I interrupted. “The huntresses have the daily hunts in order, and they already know my system for our winter preparations, so just make sure the patrols remain out in the territory while they do their work. I also need you to oversee the shipment of goods between Illska and Dalir. Another batch of eldradyr jerky will be coming out of the smokers in three days, and we’ll be exchanging two barrels with Illska to pay them back for the spices we got yesterday. Make sure they know to send one barrel to the children’s village, and they can keep the second in the stronghold.”

“As you wish, my chief,” Anakol reluctantly agreed.

“Bragi, you obviously take Anakol’s place whenever he’s out on patrol,” I said as I turned to the warrior. “Keep up the good work with the former captives, make sure Orn stays on top of his work with the winter armor, and as soon as you and Brokkr finish this batch of tomahawks, start making spare cutlasses. I’ll have more 5160 brought up from Illska before I leave.”

“We are low on the quenching oil as well, my chief,” Bragi told me.

I furrowed my brow. “Brokkr didn’t say anything about quenching oil yesterday.”

“I knocked a vat over before I left to come here,” Bragi admitted with a grimace. “Brokkr’s cleaning it up now and is quite pissed with me.”

“Damn,” I snorted, but then Anakol spoke up, and I glanced his way as he addressed his ale.

I couldn’t understand the man since he’d spoken in his own language, but his tone was ominously low, and both Thyrrri and Eir looked surprised by his statement. Bragi didn’t acknowledge anything his brother said, and after an uncomfortable beat of silence passed, the warrior cleared his throat.

“More quenching oil would be of use, my chief,” Bragi told me.

“I’ll have more brought up with the steel,” I said and continued despite the sudden tension in the air. “Other than that, everyone in the village needs to stay on top of the construction for our new cellars, and the slaves will need a fermenting station set up in a spare hut. They’re gonna preserve pickled greens for the winter. A few elves will be working on enchanting a plot of land near the coal storage as well, and absolutely no one is to fuck with the elven kid who clears the skies. Any questions?”

Thyrri shook her head, but her eyes were on her husband who was still glaring at his ale.

“Anything you want to discuss, Anakol?” I asked. “Now’s the time.”

The braided man ground his teeth together before he met my gaze, and his dark eyes burned with silent fury.

I waited him out.

“You... have made your decisions, my chief,” Anakol eventually replied. “I am certain my advice will not be taken.”

“In this situation, no, it won’t,” I agreed.

“Then I have nothing to discuss,” the warlord said.

I nodded. “I’ll be focusing on wrapping up the final details and preparing to leave. Illska will not be informed about any of this, though. You can alert the warriors in Dalir, and let them know everything should continue as if I’m still within the walls of the village. If anyone asks, I’m busy training our warriors with new weaponry. Eir and I ride north at sunrise the day after tomorrow.”

Eir sat a little taller with her jaw set firmly when I looked her way, and I couldn’t help grinning. Everything was falling into place to make our departure a seamless one, and we were that much closer to finally getting a look at what lay beyond the borders of the Red Forest.

But Bragi wasn’t grinning for once. He slowly rose from his seat, grabbed his crutches, and headed for the door.

“Very well, my chief,” the warrior muttered along the way. “I must return to my work, but I will inform Brokkr of this ill-advised journey, and I assure you, he will have much to say on your behalf.”

The second the words left Bragi’s mouth, Anakol shoved the bench out from under him, and Thyrrri jumped in her seat. Then the braided man stormed out of the hut without a word, and he nearly flattened his brother in the process. Bragi sighed and continued crutching his way toward the lane, and I glanced between Thyrrri and Eir until both men had left.

“Should I be worried about that?” I asked.

“No, my chief,” Thyrrri hastily replied. “Anakol is obedient. He is only concerned for your safety on this journey. I am sure you understand.”

I nodded slowly as Eir avoided my gaze. “Right... I’ll get back to my evening, then. Meet with Igrid when she arrives, but give me a heads-up before you travel to Illska.”

I led my winged wife into the village while Thyrrri headed to the training field. The moment we didn’t have any warriors passing on both sides, I sent Eir a pointed look.

“What did Anakol say after Bragi mentioned the quenching vats?” I asked.

Eir bit her lip. “I would rather not repeat it, my chief. You know how Anakol can be. He struggles with the idea of Brokkr mentoring a warrior of Bragi’s status. He is... a little hostile, but perhaps this journey is the distraction he needs. If anything can preoccupy Anakol, it is the threat of losing his honorable chieftain.”

I cocked an eyebrow at the notion, but she made a good point.

As worked up as Anakol got about this trip, he’d never ranted half so long over Brokkr, so I decided to lean into this for the time being. I had no problem letting Anakol get as pissed as he wanted about me. Then he’d have a little less energy for despising my blacksmith.

That was why I decided to have my warlord help me organize provisions for my journey as soon as I tracked him down again.

I let Anakol scowl and slam the lids of barrels shut all he wanted, and the two of us spent the next hour or so packing sacks of fish jerky, venison jerky, salt, millet, and anything else I could think of to make the journey more comfortable for my wife. By the time I sent him back to the training fields, he was still tense, but less ragey, and I took this as a positive development.

Then I headed to Brokkr's shop, and I braced myself for one last lecture about whether a man like me had any right to go wherever the hell he wanted when he chose to.

To my surprise, Brokkr sent me an easy grin when I entered the place, and he carried on sponging the quenching oil off the floor while he crawled around on all fours.

"Heard your wife's not wearing her new blades today..." Brokkr said, and he waggled his eyebrows. "She threw 'em in the river, didn't she?"

"As a matter of fact, Eir loved her gifts," I informed the man. "Kissed the handles and everything. We're only waiting on the sheaths to be finished, and then she's decided to carry them at all times. Even in her sleep."

"Horse shit," the blacksmith snorted, and Bragi chuckled near the forge. "That woman's kissin' your ass, is what she's doing. In a few days, you'll ask her where her new set of knives is, and she'll be twiddling her fingers 'cause she forgot 'em in the damn woods."

I waved the man off and eyed the slickened floor of the shop, but it looked like most of the spilled oil was mopped up by now. There was only a bit pooling in the back corner, so I grabbed a few old rags to help the blacksmith out since Bragi was busy.

Brokkr had put him on scale-removal duty as a punishment for dumping gallons of oil all over his shop, but the warrior didn't seem to mind. He looked more at ease in his work than he had during our discussion at Anakol's hut, and I was relieved to see his temper didn't hold out as long as his brother's could.

“Where’d you learn to make a blade like that, anyways?” Brokkr called from across the shop. “The real nice ten-incher?”

“My grandfather,” I said with a shrug.

The blacksmith’s head popped around the corner. “I fuckin’ knew it. You might not be a first-generation slave, but you’re from the same stock as me. I wonder if that’s how it works...”

“How what works?” I chuckled.

“Maybe a child of mine would end up being more talented and impressive than me,” Brokkr mused, and he slowly sponged the oil without paying much attention. “All the better qualities could be amplified the second time around, ye’ know? What was your grandfather like? Not strappin’, like you, I’d reckon. Kinda gawky and short... beady little eyes.”

I smirked as I grabbed another rag and kept on working. “No, my grandfather was about six inches taller than me with a better beard. He was a real rugged type. Slept right on the floorboards because he said it was more comfortable than a bed... that kinda thing.”

“Ah.” Brokkr nodded. “So, it works the opposite way.”

“Fuck you,” I snickered.

“Hey, it’s alright, I get it,” he assured me. “You’re trying to make up for your shortcomings and whatnot. Probably think traveling north will add a few inches to your dick. Make ye’ more rugged and shit.”

“Pretty much,” I sighed. “I take it you’ve got a list of reasons I shouldn’t go though, so let’s hear them.”

“No list over here.” Brokkr shrugged and tossed a drenched rag in the metal bin near the worktable, and I sat back on my knees.

“Come on, everyone else already got it out of their systems,” I said. “I can handle one more argument today.”

“Well, ye’ won’t get one from me, chief,” Brokkr replied. “Your wife’s raisin’ the dead for ye’. You do whatever you gotta do.”

I stared in disbelief, but the blacksmith seemed to have no issues with my plans. It caught me off-guard since he probably stood to lose the most if I did end up dying in the north, but Brokkr just grabbed another rag to finish up his end of the shop, and he sent me a smirk when he realized how dumbfounded I looked.

“Don’t get me wrong... you’re a damn fool,” Brokkr clarified. “All this business sounds like a terrible idea, but so far, your craziest ideas seem to turn out alright. Ye’ got both these clans and stole a woman from Hylmrek without ending up dead. Then there’s those jakyls you waltz about with in the dead of night, so I’d wager you’ll do fine. It’s only a few days of roughin’ it, after all. How bad could it be?”

I threw my arms up as I realized Brokkr understood exactly where I was coming from. Then I turned toward Bragi and gestured to the blacksmith.

“See that? That’s what I tried to tell you guys,” I clarified. “It’s not that big of a deal, and I’ve tackled worse.”

Bragi offered half a reluctant grin. “The blacksmith does speak some sense. You have accomplished a lot, my chief. Perhaps I need to loosen the reins a little.”

“You do,” I agreed. “Work on that while I’m gone.”

“Besides,” Brokkr continued, “it’s not like you’ll be up there without the necessities. You’ll be properly armed... have all the weapons you could need.”

When I looked back at the blacksmith, I caught the slightest bit of concern in his eyes, but I nodded to ease his mind on the subject. I’d definitely be bringing a couple runed blades with me, just in case, and the moment I confirmed this, Brokkr relaxed again.

“Yeah, you’ll be fine, chief,” the blacksmith muttered.

I chuckled in agreement, and even though I didn’t want to have any run-ins with Svelgard during this trip, I couldn’t help imagining the looks on their faces if they got a glimpse of a flaming cutlass slashing toward their throats.

Brokkr must have been imagining the same thing, because he had a cryptic grin on his face while we finished clearing up the last of the oil. Bragi seemed less worried too, and he thought aloud about his recommendations for travel-sized weaponry while Brokkr agreed with every suggestion and added a few of his own. Between the two men, it sounded like I'd be bringing half our stock with me, and I was about to start crossing several items off their list when Bragi suddenly lowered his voice.

“Brokkr!” the warrior hissed, and both of us turned around to see a sword in his hand and a scheming glint in his eyes. “Watch this...”

Then Bragi gestured toward the front tables, and I realized Igrid was approaching the shop. She was still bruised and black-eyed from her work in Illska, but she walked like her many wounds didn't even exist to her.

I quickly finished my work before I stood up to meet with her, but the moment Igrid stepped around the front tables, Bragi casually flipped his jagged sword around in his palm, and the woman came to a quick stop at the sight.

It was the same maneuver Bragi had tried to teach Brokkr a couple days ago, but he did it with way less cockiness this time. I had to admit, the warrior oozed suavity as he pretended not to notice the pierced woman watching him. Then he glanced up and deftly caught the hilt again.

“Oh, hello, Igrid,” Bragi said with a charming smile.

The pierced woman arched a split eyebrow. “You know... for a man without a leg, you sure seem determined to lose another limb, Bragi.”

Both Brokkr and I burst out laughing as Bragi's grin fell flat, but when Igrid passed the blacksmith, she made sure to punch him in the arm along the way.

Brokkr hissed and recoiled, and he shot the woman an affronted glare without telling her off at all.

“Igrid...” I sighed.

“Good afternoon, my chief,” Igrid lightly replied. “I came to work with the former captives, as you requested. I thought you might like to know your punishment of the rebels is going well. They’ve thrown up more than ten times since you left Illska.”

“Why are the rebels vomiting?” Bragi asked.

“The chieftain is forcing them to eat their dead,” Igrid answered, and Brokkr set his rag aside to level me with a loaded stare.

“It’s a very specific situation,” I assured him. “I promise, they’re not eating slaves. I’m actually punishing them for serving me a dead slave for dinner. And for burning up a few others over the last couple weeks.”

“Hold on,” Bragi scoffed. “They are not even eating slaves, and they feel they must vomit? The Illskans do not know what true suffering is. Igrid, go back down there and explain to them how good they have it. They should know that there is a difference between the meat of a scrawny slave and the meat of a muscly corpse. Tell the rebels how the meat of the slaves takes forever to chew through, and the bitterness in the flavor increases the longer it is in your mouth. Explain precisely how corded the texture is when the dead do not have enough meat on their bones, and then we will see if they still think they have the right to vomit up these dead Farthegns.”

Igrid nodded in full agreement, but I had my eyes on Brokkr.

The blacksmith was on his feet and looked ready to hurl, and he stared at Bragi while his pallor took on a sickly-gray hue.

Bragi noticed his expression too late. I could see the light bulb finally going off now as the warrior realized there was a former slave standing in the room, but before Bragi or I could say anything, Igrid cornered the blacksmith.

Then she planted her fist in Brokkr’s diaphragm without holding back.

The blacksmith heaved in pain and dropped to his knees on the oily floor.

“Igrid, what the fuck?” I growled.

“What?” the pierced woman asked, and she looked down on the blacksmith who was wheezing at her feet. “You are not a slave anymore. Stop acting like one. If you don’t want me to beat you, then fight back.”

“Fuck you, ye’ crazy bitch,” Brokkr croaked from the floor.

“That doesn’t count.” Igrid rolled her eyes. “If you want to be Farthegn, you better act as if you are.”

“Jesus Christ,” I sighed and stooped to pull Brokkr back to his feet.

The blacksmith was still struggling to draw a breath, and he barely made it over to a stool as he clutched his gut. Then he collapsed onto the seat and mumbled a few more curses to himself.

I turned on Igrid and pointed to the back door. “From now on, you update me outside.”

“As you wish, my chief,” Igrid agreed without concern, and she headed for the door. “Bragi, teach this blacksmith how to fight with his hands. Any clansman should be able to take on a woman my size.”

“I know very few warriors who could beat you bare-handed, Igrid,” Bragi pointed out. “I certainly have never managed it.”

“Yes, but at least you tried.” The pierced woman smirked.

Brokkr swore some more at the sentiment, but he waved me off when I offered to get the healer for him. He even turned down the ale Westin slid his way, and he was still crumpled against his worktable when I left to meet Igrid out back.

I waited until we were farther down the lane and out of earshot before I addressed her.

“You’ve gotta stop beating up Brokkr,” I informed the woman. “He hasn’t done a damn thing to deserve it.”

“Exactly,” Igrid said. “My chief, I’ve been punching that blacksmith almost every day for weeks now. He’s never done

anything to provoke me, and yet, he hasn't done anything to stop me, either."

"Then why do you keep fucking with him?" I demanded.

"Because you made him a clansman."

I caught Igrid's arm in a vise grip and forced her to a stop. "Igrid, I promoted Brokkr for a good reason, and any issues you have with that honestly don't matter."

"I have no issues with his promotion," Igrid assured me, and I furrowed my brow as I released her arm. "I respect your choice, my chief, and I can understand why you've made it. The blacksmith is a valuable man, and he does this clan justice in his work. But you know I speak my mind, so I will be blunt. No chieftain lives forever, and one day, you will likely be slain. When that day comes, nothing will stand between the blacksmith and the rest of the forest. He isn't a Farthegn by birthright. He'll be punished twice as hard for wearing the hides of a clan unless he has proven himself worthy of wearing them. If you wish him to keep his place, apart from your own say in the matter, then he must earn his position himself."

I couldn't deny the woman made some good points. I scuffed my beard while I considered the truth of the matter.

"Do you have to punch him so fucking much to accomplish this?" I asked.

"I am doing him a favor by beating him," Igrid replied. "This is the simplest test I could offer. No clansman would stand for such treatment, especially without provocation. The blacksmith has to stop thinking of himself as a slave, or I will keep treating him like one."

"You know, some guys don't hit women," I muttered as we continued walking. "Personally, I wouldn't hit you back, either."

"Yes, you would, my chief," Igrid snorted. "If I hit you that hard, over and over again, you would not stand for such treatment. You would find yourself outdone in strength and brutality, and you would defend yourself. I have trained since the age of five to inflict pain on others, my chief. You know I am good at it. Do you really think you'd

let a woman of my skills hurt you just because I have remarkable breasts?”

I side-eyed the ruthless woman, and her pierced nipples flashed into my mind as clear as the day she'd shown them to me. There were few breasts in this world I wouldn't mind getting another look at, but Igrid's were at the top of the list. I'd be lying if I said I didn't recall her pillowy cleavage and deep purple nipples at least once during every conversation I had with her, but she was right... even her breasts didn't make a difference when I considered how many beefy, towering warriors I'd seen her flatten.

“Okay, I see your point,” I admitted. “I'd probably hit you back.”

“The blacksmith will see my point, too,” Igrid said. “He isn't as dumb as a slave, and he looks closer to a Farthegn now that he has been eating good food. Give it a few more hits, my chief, and Brokkr will kick my ass like he should have weeks ago. Well, he'll try, at least.”

“You're clever, I'll give you that,” I chuckled at the woman's crooked grin. “Now, update me on Illska.”

The two of us continued through the crowded lanes while she let me know how Illska was holding up. Apparently, news about my punishment for the rebels spread rapidly among the warriors of Illska, and Igrid's work had been pretty easy for the last day. Other than getting hounded by the Illskan women about my whereabouts, she had no complaints to make, and she'd already met with Thyri when she first arrived.

My woman warlord didn't mention my trip to her though, so she assumed I was sending Thyri south to help her out.

I decided not to fill Igrid in on my real plans, yet.

The day was winding down, and Brokkr's support in the matter felt like a good place to put a pin in the topic for now. I only had two more nights of bliss in Dalir before the intensity would kick up a few notches, and I wanted a no-drama evening from here on out.

I strolled along at an easy pace as I updated Igrid on the issues with the younger ones among the former captives, and I filled

her in on our approaches so far and my reluctance to beat the Illskan training out of the younger kids.

Igrid agreed with me on this point, but then we reached the dim training field, and the first thing I noticed was Eir storming in my direction.

The muscles in her thighs rippled with every furious step as her green eyes flared, and her black wings arched back with her feathers splayed ominously. From the looks of it, she'd been speaking with Anakol in the middle of the field, and while the braided man didn't seem as mad as my wife, he did trail behind her to come join us.

I racked my brain for anything that could've happened in the last couple hours to make Eir this mad at me. Then she came to a huffy stop and propped her hands on her slender hips.

"Aaron Briggs, how dare you not tell me you ate slave meat!" my wife seethed.



Chapter 8

I glanced at Igrid, and the pierced woman offered an apologetic smile.

“I also ran into your wife while I was talking to Thyri,” Igrid clarified. “I thought you would have told her about the slave meat in Illska.”

“Because you should have!” Eir snapped. “This degradation cannot be borne!”

“It isn’t being borne,” I calmly replied. “I didn’t tell you about the slave meat because the situation has already been addressed. I’ve punished the men responsible.”

“Yes, the eating of the dead is a nice idea,” Eir allowed. “I commend you for your good judgement there, but it is not enough. Not when my honorable husband has been treated so hideously. How would it look if I did not make my feelings known on this matter? No one in Illska would fear me half so much if they thought I would allow such mistreatment of you! And I would not respect myself!”

Anakol nodded in agreement with all of this, but Eir was already stomping past me and toward the gates of the village.

“Eir... what are you doing?” I hollered after her.

“I am going to visit the rebels in Illska!” Eir announced. “I will be home tomorrow if I feel they have gotten all they deserve by then!”

“Don’t go to...” I sighed and dragged a hand through my hair. “Eir, they’re already being tortured! You don’t have to...”

I gave up once the winged woman shoved three passing clansmen out of her way, and I figured I might as well let her go. She really did despise the rebels for not immediately recognizing how superior I was, and nothing I did now would calm her down. My Farthegn wife just needed to work this rage out of her system, and who knows? Maybe she’d be more effective than forced cannibalism.

Then I noticed Igrid was inching in the same direction.

“My chief, can I go with her?” Igrid asked. “Only to watch for a little while. I’ll come straight back and work with the former captives after--”

“Nope, you’re staying here.” I caught the pierced warrior by her nóttmal hide. “Plenty of rebels have been tortured by you this week, and the former captives aren’t the only reason I summoned you here.”

“Very well, my chief,” Igrid grumbled, and she crossed her arms as she sent a longing glance in the direction my wife had gone.

“There’s some adjustments being made over the next week,” I explained. “Most of the details aren’t important right now, but I wanted to let you know I’ve been pleased with your performance. More than pleased, actually. You fought admirably in the siege against Illska, and you’ve proven time and time again that I can rely on you no matter what’s going on. The position you’ve taken on in Illska isn’t an easy one, and it’s not something I’d trust just anyone with. That kind of trust counts for a lot in my mind, so you are now a warlord.”

Anakol chuckled his approval as Igrid’s jaw unhinged. Her crossed arms went slack with shock, and her huge, battered eyes looked ready to bulge out of their sockets. I gave her a moment to process the news, and I thought for sure the ruthless warrior would lunge at an opportunity to gain a title as distinct as this, but to my surprise, Igrid was more modest than she usually let on.

“Y-You’re sure, my chief?” Igrid whispered. “I don’t wish to earn such a title without absolute certainty on your side.”

“Do I not sound certain?” I asked. “You know how much I rely on you.”

“Yes, but this is an honor reserved for only the highest in your clan,” Igrid argued. “Women like Thyrrri are the worthy sort, my chief, and I would never assume I was on par with her. Don’t promote me solely because I’m loyal, alright? The will to enact your revenge isn’t a superior quality in me, it’s only something I enjoy, my chief. It can’t be taken into account here. Allow me to carry this title only if you are certain I possess all qualities required, and there is nothing lacking.

Actually... I know I'm lacking in several areas. I'm unworthy at this point in my life, but I promise, if you give me more time to improve--"

"Igrid," I sighed. "Take the title. You've earned it."

"You have," Anakol assured her. "Thyrri has been saying so for weeks."

"Thyrri said I'm worthy?" Igrid gasped, and she looked so close to being convinced.

She still kneaded her bruised knuckles while she thought it over, and the athletic muscles in her upper arms twitched with every movement as she looked between the two of us.

"I... I suppose I will accept," Igrid eventually said. "I don't feel I deserve it quite yet, but I respect your opinion, my chief, above all others. If you and Thyrri both say I'm acceptable, then I have to take your words for it... even if there are several areas needing improvement in myself."

"Several?" My eyebrows shot up as I looked over her bone-studded hips and chiseled physique. "Personally, I disagree with you on that, but would it make you feel better if I told you your remarkable tits are thirty percent responsible for this decision?"

Igrid instantly clutched her breasts at the praise. "You mean that, my chief? They're good enough to be a warlord's tits?"

"Absolutely," I snorted. "Beyond good enough."

"Would... would you mind saying that louder?" the woman whispered, and she looked around at the crowded training field. "I'd really like to lure a husband in, but the men tend to see me as an insurmountable opponent more than anything else. Being a warlord will only add to that, but if you truly think my breasts are that good, it'd help me out a lot if you said it real loud."

I grinned and raised my voice to a booming timbre.

"I said your breasts are so phenomenal I'd have to be a fucking idiot not to promote you to warlord based on that alone!" I announced, and Igrid's crooked grin spread wider. "Truly, they're some of the most fantastic tits I've ever seen, but on top of this,

you're the most loyal and bloodthirsty woman in Dalir. That had something to do with my decision as well!"

By now, half the field slowed their training exercises to look our way, and Igrid ate up the attention as she plumped her breasts beneath her armor. Then she let her smug gaze sweep across every man in the vicinity, and she offered me a curt bow of her head.

"Thank you, my chief," Igrid replied in a professional tone. "I only seek to please you. I'll carry this title as I do my breasts... with the greatest of honor."

With that, my newest warlord headed off toward the group of former captives across the field, and the result of our exchange was instantaneous.

There wasn't a single man out there who wasn't eyeing the new warlord from her blood-stained boots to her dark brown dreadlocks, and more than a couple of them exchanged competitive glances with their neighbors. The women warriors chuckled with pride as they sent their appreciative smiles in my direction, and I had a feeling I'd be getting several offers to buy Igrid in the near future.

The notion made me almost as proud as her, and I realized I was looking forward to naming a price on my first warrior woman soon. This was one of the Farthegn traditions I hadn't partaken in yet, and it seemed fitting to me that I'd get to start out with a woman I admired so much.

Until I remembered I'd have to strip Igrid down to do a full appraisal.

And check if she was a virgin.

I immediately shoved this recollection out of my mind as quickly as it came, but it was too late. Suddenly, I was hyper-aware of how many wildish women I saw in the field right now. Dozens of deadly, loyal, and skilled women who I worked with every day, and the majority were still waiting for me to give their naked bodies a thorough once-over.

I swallowed hard while I tried to imagine how I'd carry on with my hunts after getting that up close and personal with my hunting

companions, but then Anakol nudged me in the side, and I jolted back to the present.

“Well done, my chief,” the braided man muttered out of the corner of his mouth. “You have honored the women of Dalir today.”

I nodded blankly. “That’s good.”

“It certainly is,” Anakol snickered with a lewd grin. “After praise like that, even I wish I still needed a wife.”

Like all the men in the area, I could tell the braided warlord had his eyes on Igrid’s ass when he said this, and I was about to respond when I realized Thyrrri had appeared at Anakol’s side.

I didn’t think either of us knew how long his wife had been standing there, but Anakol’s brazen grin deflated at the sight of her hardened expression.

“My chief, I came to let you know I am departing for the south with Eir,” Thyrrri said in a hollow tone. “I wish you safe travels.”

“Thank you,” I quickly replied. “Make sure to bring some torches in case anything comes up along the way, and don’t forget to have the guards check the underground tunnels a few times each day. Keep close tabs on the outposts too, and good luck. I know you and Igrid will do Dalir justice down there.”

Thyrrri bowed her head before she side-eyed her husband. “Anakol... I will see you next week unless my presence is required for an extended period in the south. Based on what Igrid has divulged of the situation there, this will likely be the case. You will just have to pleasure yourself in my long absence.”

The woman warrior turned on her heels before Anakol could get a word out, and he visibly paled as he watched his wife strut off without so much as a kiss goodbye.

Then Anakol lunged forward, and he dogged after Thyrrri like a dying man. I’d never heard a Farthegn speak so soft and sweet as my braided warlord did after that, and he muttered on and on in his language no matter how many chuckles he drew from the clansmen he passed.

I would've felt bad for him, but... I didn't.

Thyrri was honestly a very beautiful and totally badass warrior. The way she put up with her husband's quick temper and ego was an art form. She'd suffered a lot on account of his temper with the former chieftain too, and the way I saw it, Anakol could stand to learn a lesson or two when it came to appreciating his woman.

So I just smirked while I watched Thyrri freeze him out all the way through the lanes, and the braided man was still desperately sweet talking her when they disappeared from sight.

"So much for no drama," I mumbled to myself.

On the plus side, Anakol's absent wife might help distract him more, and with my own wife gone torturing the rebels in Illska, I'd get a full night's sleep and an early start on tomorrow's tasks. I had enough preparations ahead of me to possibly distract myself from her absence too, so I promptly turned away from the training field as I eyed the last bit of blue light in the sky.

That night, I handled everything I could before the evening meal and turned in early immediately afterward. By the time the sun rose above the red boughs of the trees, I'd already been up for three hours, and the varnish for the handles on Eir's knives was setting before half the village woke up. Her new sheaths had been picked up from the tanners along with two pairs of woolen pants from the weavers' shop, and I was able to snag two woolen tunics, four pairs of socks, and half the furs she'd be wearing for our journey while I was there. My own winter wear would be finished by tonight, so I focused on getting a decent stock of spare arrows, and I had five fresh bowstrings waxed for her in case the harsher conditions up north got to the fibers.

Once everything my wife needed was neatly organized in one corner of my hut, I visited the healer's hut to have a first-aid kit assembled.

I made sure to bring the old elf out into the clearing for our discussion so her Illskan ward wouldn't be aware of my travel plans, but Amaeda ended up making a huge scene over the news of my departure. I hadn't seen this one coming.

Instead of arguing with me like my warlords had done, the elderly woman broke down in weepy tears and dropped to her bony knees, and she begged me to take her along in case something happened to me. Brokkr came sprinting from his shop when he saw me frantically trying to calm the elf down, and as soon as he caught on to what was happening, he helped me reassure her any way he could.

Still, the way Amaeda clung to my hide like her life depended on it almost broke my resolve. Her protests came closer to canceling my plans than anything else, but I'd never had an old lady this genuinely torn up about my safety before. It was definitely uncharted territory for me.

All I could do was try my best to remain firm with her, but Amaeda shook in a heap on the ground until I thought she might have a heart attack at any second. Brokkr insisted over and over again that this trip was a simple thing, but I still ended up making a slew of blind promises to the old elf whether or not I could keep them. Normally, I wouldn't abide by that kind of thing, but I figured standard rules didn't apply when it came to elderly women.

Especially ones as angelic as Amaeda.

Brokkr and I eventually managed to calm the old healer down just enough that she could stand again. Even then, the tears kept streaming down her sunken cheeks, so in a final effort, the blacksmith suggested I take her to see our sky elf.

I furrowed my brow at the idea, and the blacksmith shrugged.

"Why not? Eleni said she can read your fate," Brokkr reminded me, and he gently patted Amaeda on the shoulder with a callused hand. "Have a talk with her about it, yeah? Then you'll see there's nothing to worry about."

I wasn't too sure about this, but it did seem to make Amaeda a little less riled up.

"Th-Thank you," the healer sniffed. "I would like that very much. A sky elf would ease my terror for you, my chief."

"Then we'll go straight there," I decided.

I helped the old healer hobble through the lanes while she clutched my arm with her frail hands, and the warriors I passed along the way looked with alarm at the state of Amaeda. More than ten of them stopped me to ask if she was okay, and I kept assuring everyone I had this all under control as the elf's eyes streamed on and on.

At least I wasn't the only one in the village these days who couldn't stand seeing Amaeda so upset. It made me feel like seeking out a fortune-telling elf on her behalf was a little less ridiculous.

When we finally reached the slave houses, I requested a private counsel with the sky elf, and every slave in the longhouse vacated the premises like a tidal wave. Then the door shut behind the last of them, and only Eleni remained with Amaeda and I.

The aged sky elf's crystal blue eyes were even more vibrant than yesterday, and this time, I was positive her cheeks emitted their own glow. Her pale face was like a pool of hazy light in the dim longhouse, and she gestured for us to be seated near her bed of grass.

"I saw last night that you would visit today, my chief," the sky elf murmured in a dreamy tone. "I have freshened my grasses for the occasion. Come, make yourselves comfortable."

"Thank you," I muttered in some confusion. "That was thoughtful."

Then I helped Amaeda get settled across from Eleni, and I joined the two elves on the grass-covered floor.

Once I was seated, the sky elf slid the raggedy hood from her head, and I marveled at the long, delicate strands of her silvery hair. They didn't sparkle, but they seemed to have a strange sheen to them that glistened when she turned to look at me, and I tried to focus on the task at hand despite the shimmering, glowing, vibrancy of the old sky elf beside me.

"We came to see if you could tell me anything about my fate in a journey I'll be taking soon," I said. "I plan on departing tomorrow--"

"I know, my chief," Eleni replied with a glistening nod.

I furrowed my brow. “Did the stars already tell you about all this?”

“The stars do not tell me anything,” the sky elf explained. “To tell suggests certainty. The magnetism of the stars simply reveals the threads of destiny, and I read the map placed before me. This map is winding and ever-changing, but you have approached our Amaeda about your journey, and so, your path led you here to me, my chief. As I saw it might be.”

I stared at Eleni’s sage-like smile as her eyelids fell shut, and once I realized she was going into some sort of meditation now, I reminded myself to stay open minded.

Even though this was all starting to feel like some metaphysical shit I rarely went in for.

At least Amaeda looked much calmer in the sky elf’s presence, and just seeing her glowing yellow eyes reminded me I’d already experienced magic firsthand in this world. Whether or not I knew everything about sky elves, I knew magic beyond my comprehension existed here, and I pushed my misgivings aside while Eleni hummed to herself for a minute.

“Your fate is vast, my chief,” the sky elf whispered, and her eyes remained closed. “Quick to end in some paths, but boundless in others. Too boundless to know all. This upcoming journey alone will determine much, but you must first resist all eastern paths. I see enslavement there for you.”

“Svelgard’s territory is east of the range we’ll be crossing through,” I replied. “We already plan to spend as little time as possible in their land.”

“The western path promises to expand your destiny,” the sky elf assured me, “but the blue might kill you there.”

“The blue might what?” I sobered at once. “What blue? The ocean? Are you saying I might drown?”

“Some paths will drag you into the sea,” Eleni answered. “Others will not. The blue I speak of is not icy, but deep, and soft. This blue is all warmth, and it can kill you. Choose carefully when

you reach the ice, my chief. The blue is waiting there, and it has taken the lives of over a hundred men.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Okay... duly noted. What else is there?”

“Snow and cold,” the sky elf continued, and she knitted her silver eyebrows. “More snow is coming, but the ice may melt. I have seen orange melting it away, and the flash of your flame. Do not flee the cave, my chief. If you live to enter it, you must travel deeper, for this is where the thread of your destiny scatters into thousands of paths. These paths are more boundless and amazing than any I can read for you. But should the orange begin to flood, your time on that path has ended.”

“My time?” I clarified. “As in my life? This flood of orange is gonna kill me if it shows up?”

“I cannot say, my chief. You must choose the paths that diverge if the orange begins to flood. Some lead to freedom, others to death, but let your master act as he must.”

“I don’t have a master,” I said as my confusion tripled. “I’m my own man.”

Eleni was quiet for a moment. “Ahh... He is the wise one who carries the staff. An old man whose spirit has crossed with yours, and he will act as he must. Trust his choices, for the stars favor his path.”

I stared in bewilderment while I tried to dissect the fortune Eleni gave me. I could make sense of virtually none of it. What the “warm blue” or the “flood of orange” were, I had no idea, but at least some of her words registered more clearly. The enslavement on the eastern path made sense given the location of Svelgard’s territory, and the flash of my flame seemed to allude to the runed weapon I’d have with me. How ice melted during a snowstorm was beyond me, but referring to Vegvisir as my master could mean several things. Maybe he possessed the power to control me, or maybe he’d agree to teach me his craft.

Overall, my fate didn't sound nearly concrete enough for my liking, but I had to acknowledge... this sky elf wasn't some kooky fortune teller from a fair.

Eleni had to possess some truly magical foresight. Otherwise, she couldn't have known about the cave at all. I never mentioned where I was going when I sat down, or who I'd be there with, but somehow, the sky elf knew the wanderling and I were heading to a cave near Svelgard.

I tried to commit everything she said to memory despite how convoluted it all was, and I risked a glance at Amaeda to see how she was taking this.

The old healer looked even sadder than before, but she wasn't crying anymore, and she drew a steadying breath.

"Must he go?" Amaeda asked the sky elf in a trembling tone.

"He must." Eleni opened her crystal eyes. "Should the chieftain remain here, the paths before him are too bloody to be read at this time. His destiny is not boundless in the Red Forest. That much the stars have seen beyond the blood."

"Very well," Amaeda whimpered, and she sent me a small nod. "I will prepare all you may need in this journey, my chief. But please... be mindful of the dangers Eleni has foretold."

"I will," I promised point-blank. "The blue and the orange. I'll keep them at the front of my mind and stay away from the eastern paths."

"I must warn you," Eleni added, and I looked her way. "The magnetism of the stars is always changing, my chief. I have read the map of your destiny, but no other. Remember the beasts you travel with or encounter in your journey, and the Farthegns both here and across the border, as well as the wanderling and your cherished wife... all are entangled in the threads of your fate. You are entangled in their own. All will influence what is to come, so you must act within each moment as your spirit advises. Do not live by the stars alone, for they read through you. I only advise that you recognize when a path that has been foreshadowed appears. Then

choose wisely, my chief. Choose with clear intentions and know that every thread will shift as a matter of course.”

I took a deep breath to digest this, and then I offered the sky elf a grateful smile.

“Thank you, Eleni,” I said. “I’ll remember that, and I appreciate you taking the trouble to look into my fate like this. It sounds mentally exhausting.”

“On the contrary, my chief.” The sky elf smiled back, and her crystal blue eyes twinkled. “The threads of your fate have given me hope. The stars resonate with such energy around you, and despite your ferocity, I feel as if the world will be blessed by your life here. So I am blessed to guide you anyway I can.”

“Oh.” I nodded, but I couldn’t help wondering what ferocity she was referencing. Present or future? “Likewise. You have an incredible power, Eleni. I’m grateful to have found you in Illska.”

Eleni gasped lightly at the praise, and she made a strange, diagonal, twisting motion in the air between us before she bowed low and wished me a safe crossing to the cave in the north. Then the sky elf walked Amaeda and I to the slave house door, and she assured me she’d seek the counsel of the stars every night to keep an eye on my fate.

I couldn’t imagine what good this would do me way out in the mountains, but her offer made Amaeda relax by another few degrees.

During our walk back to the healing hut, the old elf asked me about every detail she could think of in order to ensure I had all the remedies I could possibly need. The healer even wanted to know what beasts we’d be riding on, or if Eir was likely to blister from the heat of her heillhaust, and I answered her questions to the best of my knowledge. Then I left Amaeda at her door, and the old elf was too busy muttering a list of herbs to herself to remember her usual bow or smile.

I chuckled and shook my head as she hobbled into the hut. Now that this task had been completed, I hurried to handle the rest

of my preparations. There were hides and armor to gather, paired saddlebags for our mounts, spare reins, and sturdy lengths of rope. Bowls, cutlery, and small pots would be needed for cooking our millet too, and by the time I finished gathering everything I could, I was still technically traveling light.

The three beasts we'd be riding on were as strong as three bulls, if not stronger, but I didn't see any sense in overdoing it just because I could.

While I ran around the village juggling everything, I tried not to overthink my conversation with the sky elf, but I found this harder than I expected. I'd never been the type to think about fate or the paths I chose too much. I just lived my life and kept on doing so regardless of what came my way, but now my mind felt fragmented on the subject. I became too conscious of how one action might influence hundreds ahead of me, and when I considered the threads of destiny Eleni talked about, I couldn't help applying this to the hundreds of people who looked to me as their leader now.

I was a direct and constant influence on their threads, and this meant it was the same on my end. One warrior could derail everything, or one slave for that matter, but I wasn't sure the concept of a derailment even existed. If I gained more paths for every decision made, what was there to miss out on in any circumstances?

That was the point in my existential crisis where I shut it all down.

Not because I didn't believe what the sky elf said had some truth in it, but because I knew it ultimately didn't matter. Like Eleni mentioned, I couldn't live my life based on this information alone. I had to continue from one minute to the next and remain aware of my own decisions, and that was easy enough.

I'd been approaching things from that perspective my whole life.

Hearing some potential paths were too bloody to read while others left me "boundless" was definitely intriguing, but I figured this was the same for anyone in this world, so I shook off the strange feeling Eleni's counsel left me with. Then I found myself immediately

thinking about Eir like I'd lost a limb, and I forced my mind to regroup once again.

It would be dusk soon, and Eir wouldn't stay away two nights in a row.

Neither of us could physically handle it.

I just needed to make it another couple hours, so I decided it was time to focus on my travel-sized armory for a while. Once I finished that, Eir would probably be back and already stripping down in our hut.

I was two lanes from the blacksmith's shop when I heard steel clattering around and shouting up ahead. I walked faster as I recognized Igrid's voice among the shouters, but then I realized it was coming directly from Brokkr's shop, and I broke into a run.

A small crowd had gathered in the nearest lanes to eavesdrop, and I slammed through the back door to find Bragi, Igrid, and Brokkr inside. Westin must have taken off when the commotion started because he wasn't on his usual stool, and Bragi sent me a loaded look while he balanced between his crutches near the back worktable.

"What the fuck is going on?" I growled.

"Ahh..." Bragi muttered, and Brokkr narrowly dodged a forging hammer Igrid chucked his way. "Igrid is not pleased. She learned of your journey, and since Brokkr is your advisor... well, she does not agree with his advice in this case."

"He didn't advise me about it," I groaned. "This was my own decision."

The warrior shrugged. "Yes, I said this, but according to Igrid, Brokkr's place in this clan is to speak in your best interest. She knows you value his word, and not speaking is therefore a failure to serve you well. In some ways, this is a very good sign, my chief."

I stared at Bragi, but he nodded reassuringly as Igrid tipped a two-hundred-pound anvil off its stand. The stonework of the floor

cracked from the impact, and Brokkur unleashed a torrent of curses from behind a grinding stone.

“Igrid clearly accepts that Brokkur is a part of Dalir,” Bragi translated. “Look at how determined she is to have it out. This is how Igrid fights with her clansmen. If she considered Brokkur a slave, she would not waste time trying to make him fight her over a disagreement. She would beat him, humiliate him, and starve him for a month. This is less tiring.”

I scoffed and tore my hand through my hair as I considered the enraged woman, and I was honestly impressed Brokkur had held his own for this long.

Granted, his primary defense was trying to stay on the opposite side of the shop from Igrid, but his reflexes were admittedly on point. The blacksmith didn’t shy away from throwing anything he could in Igrid’s path no matter how many times she lunged, jumped, or crawled under tables to get at him, and for the most part, this tactic kept her at bay.

The whole time Brokkur evaded Igrid, she screeched accusations at him about how disgraceful an advisor he was, but then she tried to shovel burning coals from the forge to hurl at him.

“Igrid!” I bellowed.

Before I could storm over and stop her, Brokkur threw a stool in the woman’s path, and Igrid toppled forward with a shovel full of embers. Then she slammed her face into an anvil, and I cringed as a stream of blood spilled from her lips.

“Control your fuckin’ warlord!” Brokkur roared at me while he had the chance. “I was just sittin’ here doin’ my job, and this crazy bitch shows up--”

“Your job is to advise the chieftain!” Igrid shrieked, and she spat blood with every word. “No chieftain leaves his territory without a band of guards, and yet, here you are! Packing up swords and all else for him like it’s no concern to you if he dies up there!”

“I am concerned, damn it!” Brokkur screamed.

Then he dove under the next workbench to dodge another hammer, and I lurched forward in time to catch Igrid mid-leap.

“Igrid, calm down,” I growled as I grappled with her flailing fists. “I never asked Brokkr for advice on this, and he’s doing everything he can--”

“This is not everything!” Igrid raged. “This is complacency, and I will not tolerate any such weakness! He does not do you justice!”

“Fuck you,” Brokkr shot back. “At least I can keep my head on straight. You’re a damn lunatic! Comin’ in here and trashin’ my shop. Meanwhile, you’re beating your own ass in the process when ye’ know damn well I appreciate our chieftain a hell of a lot more than you ever could.”

“Prove it!” Igrid shrieked, and she bucked so high that her ass knocked the wind out of me.

I stumbled backward as Igrid managed to break free of my hold, and Brokkr didn’t bother telling her off anymore. The blacksmith scrambled to get out of range, but he was too late, and Igrid planted her fist between his shoulder blades the moment she caught up.

Then Brokkr turned around and took another punch to the ribs.

“If you’re so grateful, act like it!” the pierced warrior commanded. “Now! Your warlord demands it of you!”

Once again, Brokkr took the hit and stepped several paces back, but Igrid came after him. She must have thrown six more punches while he glared down at her, and it didn’t matter if she struck out at his arms, gut, or chest. The most Brokkr would do was block the hit.

He was decent at this part at least, and it spared him a lot of her wrath, but I was starting to get as pissed as she was with the man after watching him do absolutely nothing to stop her. Brokkr was two feet taller and looked like he could easily out-bench Igrid, but none of that muscle was put to use, and I began to worry Igrid may have been right.

If Brokkr wouldn't fight his clansmen, he'd always be treated like a slave no matter what promotions I gave him. And at this point, me stepping in wouldn't do him any favors.

Several clansmen were gathered in the dim clearing to watch through the front of the shop, but even when Igrid goaded Brokkr and told him he was pathetic, he just blocked her next three punches without a word.

I resisted the urge to order the blacksmith to kick her ass outright, though. From where I stood, it was pretty fucking clear that now was the time for him to do it on his own terms, and he looked more pissed than I'd ever seen him before.

I knew he had to be near a breaking point because a jagged, pulsing vein appeared on his temple. I kept thinking any second, he'd flatten her ass. Maybe he'd at least get her in a hold or stop letting her box him into the corner, but before the blacksmith got to any of that, a loud voice rang out behind me.

"What is the meaning of this?" Anakol demanded.

I turned to see the braided warlord towering in the back doorway, and Igrid abruptly let up as he strolled into the shop.

Anakol's dark eyes didn't gloss over any of the mess in the room, or the blood spilling down Igrid's chin. He didn't even look my way as he walked over spilled embers to pass me up.

The blacksmith was rigid as a rail and backed into a corner when he locked eyes with Anakol, and I made to intercede between the two men, but Bragi locked his iron grip on my wrist.

"Speak now, and he will be dead by morning," the warrior muttered under his breath so softly that I almost didn't hear him.

Then Igrid gestured to Brokkr with an exhausted shrug. "I'm teaching the blacksmith to take his job seriously, Anakol. He has failed to--"

"Why bother?" Anakol interrupted, and he crossed his arms over his brawny chest.

Igrid cocked a freshly split eyebrow at the braided man, and she clearly picked up on his meaning. I had a feeling everyone watching from the dim clearing outside knew exactly what Anakol meant by the question too, but I was impressed Igrid didn't bother playing into this.

"I have bothered because it's my responsibility," the woman answered upfront. "I am this man's warlord now, and if I decide he has failed to do his chieftain justice, then I will teach him better."

"You cannot teach him anything," the braided man countered in a patronizing tone. "Even you could not beat his weakness out of him, Igrid. Treatment like this is what he was born to endure, and he knows this. Don't you, slave? A part of you feels this is what you truly deserve. This is why you cannot raise a fist against her. You know what happens to a slave who beats his superiors, but come on. Let's see you try anyway."

I ground my jaw as I silently willed Brokkr to do something more than stand there this time.

The vein on the blacksmith's temple stayed etched in place, but his breathing slowed to an eerie calm. He didn't move a single muscle aside from blinking.

After a moment of this, Igrid decided to take a step back from the pair of men and glanced my way. I expected her to look sorry that everything escalated to this, but I wondered if she was actually smiling under all her blood. I could have sworn one corner of her mouth twitched the slightest bit before she looked toward the crowd of onlookers, and I followed her gaze.

The silence in the dim clearing could have been cut with a knife, and the number of weighted stares made my hackles rise. Half the fucking clan was out there now, and still, Bragi sent me a subtle shake of his head when I moved half an inch.

Then Brokkr finally responded, and I furrowed my brow because his voice was so low and steady that I hardly recognized it. An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of my stomach as I reconsidered the blacksmith's lean, callused, and chiseled build.

“Say whatever you like, Anakol,” Brokkr said just loud enough for the warlord to hear. “I’m not gonna hit Igrid, and it doesn’t make me inferior.”

“Correct,” Anakol promptly agreed. “Your inferiority is actually rooted in your bloodline. We forbid your kind from mating for this very reason. Because it can only spawn beings like you. No amount of leather armor or special treatment changes who you really are, and it does not matter how much muscle mass you gain. You will never gain the strength to act based on your own will. This is why it doesn’t make you inferior to not fight back. It simply proves you have no choice.”

That’s when Brokkr snapped.

In the blink of an eye, the blacksmith moved to close the gap between him and Anakol, and I instinctively lurched forward as the warlord tore his tomahawk from his belt. He had the spiked end lifted to drop down on the blacksmith’s skull, but Brokkr caught his arm, and in one swift motion, he snapped Anakol’s wrist backward.

The warlord didn’t even have time to counter the move. Brokkr had already yanked him forward and raised his own fist, and this was all it took for the blacksmith to drop Anakol.

One punch.

Half the women in the clearing rushed forward before Anakol even hit the ground, but I could tell the warlord was already unconscious before then. His dark eyes rolled up into his skull the second his head snapped back, and by the time a line of women warriors were hanging over the table to get a look, Anakol was strewn on the shop floor.

The men who shoved in between them clearly didn’t know how to react. Most of them stared down at their unconscious warlord like they couldn’t believe their eyes. A handful of them eyed Brokkr with a mixture of fury and awe, and when Igrid finally burst out laughing, these same men couldn’t help snickering along with her.

“Fucking hell!” the pierced woman croaked. “I’ve never taken Anakol out with one hit!”

“Me, neither,” Bragi said from the back of the shop. “Is... he still alive?”

Igrid sobered a little, and she quickly knelt to check Anakol’s pulse. “Yeah, he’s fine.”

Now Bragi chuckled a bit, and I heard a similar reaction spreading in the clearing outside. I glanced over my shoulder to exchange a grin with the amputee, and he shrugged while he dusted some metal shavings off his black tunic.

“Igrid, please remove my unconscious brother from the floor,” Bragi requested. “Brokkr and I still have to finish the day’s work, and you have made quite a mess for us this evening.”

“Sure, Bragi,” Igrid chuckled. “The rest of you, get started on the feast! I’m sure our chieftain is disappointed in all of you for allowing so much to be delayed!”

I rolled my eyes at the woman’s bloody smile, but then I joined her near Anakol’s body to help her drag him away.

Most of the crowd heeded Igrid’s order at once, but a good amount of the women casually lingered around the front table. They muttered to one another in their language while I checked on Anakol’s dislocated wrist, but when I eyed the group, I was pleased to see a few were looking Brokkr’s way for once.

The blacksmith didn’t notice. He actually hadn’t done much of anything after knocking Anakol out. Brokkr stayed posted with his back against the front table as he kneaded his sore hand, and Igrid stopped her work to consider him for a second.

“I knew you would come around with some persistence,” Igrid told the blacksmith. “I’m not sure if you realized you were the ‘silent and snap’ type when it comes to beating, so you’re welcome for the lesson. As your warlord, I’m pleased with your progress. But don’t ever punch me like you did Anakol. That’s not what I was looking for.”

“Igrid...” Brokkr sighed, and his face was completely expressionless when he met the woman’s gaze. “I don’t give a fuck what your title is, you’re cleanin’ up everything you threw around my

shop tonight. When that's done, you're gonna walk out that door, and I'd better never find ye' in here again."

"That's fair," the woman chuckled, and I couldn't help but notice her cheeks were almost pink under all that blood when she turned away.



Chapter 9

I woke up in my chilly hut without a warm body curled up against my side, but I could hear Eir muttering to herself in Farthegn somewhere close by.

After my winged wife returned to Dalir last night, I ended up all-out ravaging her, and I lost track of how long it was before either of us had gotten enough. We didn't even talk or check how each other's days went before I got her stripped down and on all fours. Now, my eyelids refused to open, and I felt like I'd only slept two hours. There was a good chance this was the case because I heard a patrol heading out right before I fell asleep, and that meant it was only a couple hours before dawn.

Still, Eir was up earlier than me for once. When I finally pried an eyelid open, it looked like my winged wife hadn't slept at all. She was fully dressed in her base layer wools with winter armor overtop, and her long blonde braids were in a tousled sex nest. The blonde beauty had already removed the black markings of Dalir from her face, and she seemed to be taking stock of our provisions, because all my neatly organized supplies were strewn around the hut.

Eir tiptoed around everything with her black wings half-unfurled in a tense sprawl, and I chuckled as I considered her anxious muttering, tight shoulders, and the way she wrung her hands over and over again.

The pre-trip angst was palpable.

"Don't worry," I yawned. "Everything we need is there."

"This is not everything we need," Eir argued and rifled through the pile of weapons on the table. "My knives are gone, and I refuse to leave the forest without them. We will simply have to postpone our trip until--"

"Your knives are waiting at Brokkr's shop," I mumbled. "The varnish just needed to set overnight."

Eir glanced my way. “What about bowstrings? Cold weather is hard on my bowstrings, and we cannot leave until I have more waxed--”

“Check the right-side pouch of the saddlebag near your boot,” I suggested.

Then I dragged my ass out of bed despite my protesting muscles, and I shuffled over to my wife while she dug through the pouch.

Her rigid wings smacked me in the thighs when she abruptly stood up again, but she held a satchel of bowstrings in a tight grip, and she managed a less than enthusiastic nod about it.

“Here they are,” Eir muttered.

“We’re not postponing our trip for anything,” I said and stroked my palms along her tensed wings.

The black feathers immediately rippled against my touch, and I could feel Eir shivering through them as the wings slowly shifted to a more natural position. Then I pulled her into my arms from behind, and I left a few kisses on the slope of her neck so she’d relax a little more.

“I do not feel at all prepared for this,” my wife mumbled.

“I know,” I replied. “But it’s time. Everything’s been arranged, everything we need is gathered, and Vegvisir will be at the gates soon. You should be getting Dyggur ready to go instead of undoing all my fine work in here.”

Eir sighed and slumped in my arms. “If you insist.”

“That’s the spirit,” I chuckled, and I gave her ass a sound smack for good measure.

Eir finally got on board with the schedule once I started reminding her of all the perks to this journey, and she helped me repack everything she’d unpacked. Then she helped remove my own black markings so I’d be unidentifiable in the north, and after we ate our morning meal, we finished getting dressed, hauled everything out onto the porch, and left to get our mounts ready.

Dyggur was wandering around the eastern grounds like usual, so Eir left a kiss on my cheek before heading in that direction. I hitched two hefty, paired saddlebags over my shoulders as I turned toward the north side of the village instead.

Even though it was just past dawn, most of Dalir was up and about, and my clansmen's hard frowns made me realize they were well-aware of my plans by now. But none of them clamored around me to protest, so I figured my warlords must have come around to the idea for the sake of morale.

Arriving at the corral confirmed this.

Igrid had actually made it there first, along with a handful of my huntresses, and she'd gotten two of the largest drekkadyr already bridled and tethered to a post. The four-horned beasts were eight feet tall at the withers, and they had thicker ruffs of brown hair around their shoulders than any other beast I'd seen so far. Judging by the length of their curved horns, they had to be over fifteen years old, and I was relieved to see them munching through heaping piles of fresh grass. A drekkadyr could easily survive days without sustenance so long as they got plenty of grass in their gullets to start out with, and it looked like this was their second helping of the morning.

The two drekkadyr were so content with their meals that they didn't pay any attention to the women warriors checking their sturdy legs, and they let the women work in pairs to lift their hooves and manipulate their hocks.

Igrid slung sheepskin over their backs to cushion the ride a bit, and she added a smaller brown hide over this before the huntresses tied it all down with long leather straps. Then they started rigging the same primitive packsaddle we used for transferring smaller loads between my clans.

"Thanks for the help," I called out as I strolled over, and I slid the saddlebags to the ground.

"I can add more sheepskin if you prefer it, my chief," Igrid replied. "Six days of riding won't do your ass any favors."

“This is fine for me,” I said, and I helped steady the wooden rods of the packsaddle while the huntresses tightened their straps. “Add another skin to the old man’s mount, though. Has he arrived yet?”

“No, but I’ve got the guards keeping a watch,” the pierced warlord answered.

“Great.” I nodded and grabbed a saddlebag from the ground. “I just need to get the last of my things from the hut, and then--”

“Already done, chief,” Igrid told me.

The warlord pointed beyond my shoulder, and I turned around to see six of my clansmen filing in with everything I’d left outside my private quarters. They started loading it up for me the moment they arrived, and one man took the saddlebag from my hands to drape it over my mount’s withers.

“Damn,” I chuckled. “Thank you. I guess I’ll go gather the food, but--”

“Do not waste your energy, my chief,” Anakol interrupted. “You have a long journey ahead.”

I swiveled back around, and the braided warlord sent me a nod while he hauled three sacks of supplies in his arms. The women warriors behind him had the rest of the provisions gathered up as well, but once Anakol dropped his wares near the drekkadyr for loading, I didn’t register much beyond the state of his face.

“Shhhit,” I muttered, and my eyebrows shot up into my hairline.

Anakol’s right eye socket was so swollen that I couldn’t tell where his forehead stopped and his cheek began. Most of his face on this side was mottled by a huge greenish-black bruise, and the skin over his brow bone was split wide open in three spots where Brokkr’s knuckles had struck him. White pus seeped from each gash, and it was obvious the bones were fractured underneath.

Luckily, the blacksmith’s hit missed Anakol’s nose. Two inches to the right, and the whole damn thing would’ve caved in from an impact like that.

I tried my best not to openly stare at the rivulets of pus leaking down my warlord's puffy eyelid, but after really looking close at his warped browline, my concern mounted.

If Anakol didn't heal properly, he could end up blind in one eye.

But the braided man didn't seem too concerned about the fact his face looked like it had a rotten cantaloupe growing out of it today. He kept his posture strict and the rest of his expression unfazed while he offered me a respectful bow.

"Have you gone to see Amaeda about that eye?" I asked.

Anakol waved the topic off. "Yes, it is fine."

The hand he did this with was bandaged in miles of linen wrappings to hold his wrist in place, and I could tell by the stiffness of the warlord's fingers that his sword arm was useless for the time being.

"There's no way Amaeda said that eye is fine," I countered. "If you want to be able to see with it in the future, you'll get your ass back to her hut. Can you even feel the right side of your face?"

Anakol shifted his weight, and when he blinked his good eye, an extra drip of pus seeped from the other.

"No," the warlord admitted.

"Go see Amaeda," I ordered.

"I will," Anakol curtly replied, and he motioned for the clansmen to start stringing the satchels of food to the packsaddles. "For now, I am perfectly capable of performing my duties. All you need has been brought out, my chief, and an extra satchel was filled with boar jerky just this morning. I received word from Thyrrri that Illska gave her only a little trouble in the night, and your shipment of metal and quenching oil will arrive sometime this afternoon. All patrols in the east came back without any issues to report, and ten of your huntresses are in the grounds at this moment. The two barrels of eldradyr jerky will be ready to ship south tomorrow morning, and several of your slaves have been wandering around for hours doing

many tasks I never approved. I have refrained from reprimanding them.”

“Perfect,” I replied. “While you’re at Amaeda’s hut, find out what she thinks about the Illskan warrior’s injuries. If she gives the all-clear, send him back to the southern clan when you ship the jerky down, but let him find his drekkadyr in the corral first. She’ll still be in rough shape, but not too bad to make the trip.”

“Certainly, my chief,” Anakol agreed.

Then his good eye flicked away from mine, and he gave the slightest nod of his head in greeting.

I turned as Anakol’s brother arrived with the blacksmith, and Bragi looked like a smug dad crutching his way over beside Brokkr. The blacksmith had fresh wrappings on his swollen right hand but wore a broad grin on his unmarred face.

As disappointed as I was to see he’d busted his forging hand, I didn’t mind too much. Watching him knock Anakol out was worth some delays at the shop.

“Mornin’, chief,” Brokkr chimed. “Anakol... ye’ look like rotted shit.”

Anakol fought against a smirk, but he chose not to respond. The braided man shifted his attention back to me instead so he could continue his updates, and Brokkr came to a stop on the warlord’s right side.

Then the blacksmith moved in for a close-up of his handiwork, and the whole time Anakol delivered his morning report, the blacksmith squinted and hovered within a foot of his face. Bragi joined him without hesitation, and the pair seemed torn between amusement and concern while my braided warlord stubbornly ignored their presence.

I just did my best to keep a straight face as I listened to Anakol’s itemized list.

“...other than this, the morning patrol surveyed the far north of our territory not one hour ago,” Anakol continued. “Your path should

be clear, but I would recommend allowing the guards to escort you as far as our border. Once the forest ends, you'll have very little cover, and with bows on hand, they can remain concealed while assisting you to some degree during the crossing to the mountains."

"That won't be necessary," I said. "Vegvisir says the crossing is rarely occupied by Svelgard's patrol, and I'd rather everyone stay consolidated from the moment we leave."

"Is it congealing?" the blacksmith whispered to Bragi.

Then he poked Anakol's swollen cheek, and the warlord flung his elbow out to nail Brokkr in the gut for it. The blacksmith chortled and stumbled into Bragi, but neither of the men seemed fazed in the slightest.

"I will leave it up to your own judgement, my chief," Anakol said in a stiff tone. "If you will excuse me, I should discuss safety precautions with your wife before your departure."

I nodded and dismissed the warlord, and Bragi sobered at once as he quickly followed after his brother.

Eir had only just arrived near the corral with Dyggur's reins in hand, but the two men both began speaking to her before she even dismounted. Based on their gestures, I guessed they were listing off every expectation they had for my wife, and Eir matched their determination.

She listened closely to the men with a warrior's scowl on her face, and she spoke rapidly to add her two cents while the three discussed my security for the long journey. I couldn't help chuckling when she pulled out her new Bowie knife and offered a casual shrug, and the condescending look she sent toward Anakol and Bragi's daggers brought a giant grin to my face.

"That design went straight to her head," Brokkr snorted.

"Yeah, it did," I snickered. "Looks good on her, too."

"It suits her," Brokkr agreed. "Got all your weapons and such?"

"I do," I confirmed, and we headed over to my drekkadyr. "Vegvisir's mount should be set by now with the blades you sent for

him, but I really don't need a Khopesh sword, a cutlass, and the jagged broadsword on hand. I've already got five tomahawks. Just one sword would have been plenty."

"Yeah, well." Brokkr shrugged. "I know you're itchin' to get that runed cutlass working, but in case the old man's got his eye on ye', you're better off having a couple more discreet options."

"Good point," I muttered. "He'll probably leave my ass stranded in those mountains if he finds out I weaponized his fire rune."

"Speaking of which..." Brokkr led.

I furrowed my brow as the blacksmith checked to see if anyone was watching, and he discreetly slipped a shank of metal into my palm. The second I looked down, I recognized the chisel engraver in my hand, and I swiftly pocketed it.

"In case you do learn a new rune or two on your way up there," Brokkr said.

"Thanks," I replied. "I didn't even think of it."

"Think of what?" Igrid asked as she strolled up. "If anything is amiss--"

"Everything's fine," I quickly assured her.

The pierced woman nodded. "The old man has arrived, my chief, and we're only waiting for the last of your healing kit. Amaeda insisted on adding a couple more tonics at the last minute, but you should be set to leave real soon."

"Alright, Brokkr, help Vegvisir get up on his saddle, and give him a quick overview of the blades he's carrying," I said. "Igrid, you can load the healing kit on Eir's heillhaust. The drekkadyr are weighed down enough."

The two agreed and promptly left to see the work done, and I did a final once-over of my mount and its packsaddle. All the rigging straps were securely tied, and the goods were firmly tied down so they wouldn't be rattling all over when things got bumpy. The drekkadyr was almost done munching through his third helping of grass too, and my huntresses had wrapped his hocks and ankles, so

he'd have some protection against the cold and the rugged landscape. My winter furs were even bundled within reach for me on the beast's rump, and the two swords I wasn't wearing on my belt were sheathed against either of his shaggy shoulders for easy access.

Around the same time I finished checking my setup, the healing kit arrived, and it looked like Amaeda had gone above and beyond. Three sacks were practically bursting at the seams with remedies and supplies, and it took some adjustments to fit it all on Dyggur's packsaddle. His was much less accommodating since heillhausts emitted too much heat for most of our provisions to stand, but once Eir finished her huddle with Anakol and Bragi, she worked it out.

In the end, our spare furs for sleeping lined her packsaddle on both sides, along with her bow and a staggering amount of carrying cases filled with arrows. The healing equipment fit neatly behind her back.

"All is in order, my chief," Anakol announced.

"Your wife is prepared to do anything necessary to ensure your return," Bragi added. "She is also very proud of the knives you gave her."

"Yeah, she is," I chuckled. "Both of you have your orders, so stick with the protocol. If I'm not back by the end of the week, send a search party up the western coast, but no one is to venture near Svelgard's stronghold. No matter what happens, Hylmrek is the bigger concern."

"Very well, my chief," Anakol agreed.

"Is it gonna be an issue leaving you and Brokkr here together unsupervised?" I asked.

"Not at all, my chief," Anakol said, and he lowered his voice. "I certainly have no reason to cause discourse within your village. I cannot speak for the blacksmith, but I will not disappoint you."

"The what?" Brokkr clarified, and he popped up out of absolutely nowhere. "Sorry... I didn't catch what ye' said. You can't

speak for..."

Anakol's jaw twitched. "The blacksmith."

"Well, isn't that somethin'," Brokkr hummed. "Using my proper title for once, eh? Don't tell me you're starting to respect me. Or did that punch rattle your tiny brain around? Do you remember your wife's name? How many brothers have ye' got?"

I shot Brokkr a warning glance as I realized he was gonna use up all his luck here, and Anakol ground his jaw for a moment longer.

"Brokkr," he eventually muttered through gritted teeth. "I will double your rations of ale for the week if you stop mentioning this."

"Better triple it, brother," Bragi countered. "He has certainly earned the right to gloat."

I nodded my approval. "More than earned it."

"Fine," Anakol growled. "Triple rations while the chieftain is away, and Brokkr says not a word about--"

"Flattenin' your warlord ass with one hit," the blacksmith finished with a shit-eating grin. "I'll take that deal, Anakol. But only 'cause you learned how to say my fuckin' name."

Then Brokkr extended a hand to shake on it, and Anakol did the same before he realized both their right hands were too bandaged to use. The way the blacksmith snickered at the sight made a few nearby warriors choke on their laughter, but Anakol just sighed, clapped Brokkr hard on the shoulder, and walked away.

"Have a safe trip, chief," the blacksmith chuckled. "Do us a favor though, and try not to conquer another clan while you're up there."

"Yes, and stealing any of Svelgard's women would not be convenient at this time," Bragi added.

"I'll try not to," I said. "Brokkr, since your hand's out of commission anyways, I don't expect many more blades to be finished, but it should be easy enough to finalize all those cutlasses by the time I get back. Distribute what you've done of the new

tomahawks, and get Westin started on reserve scales for future projects.”

Brokkr nodded. “Consider it done.”

I climbed up onto my drekkadyr, and Eir led Dyggur over while a collection of women warriors walked alongside her.

They were all anxiously whispering to my wife, and she heard them out as she checked Dyggur’s packsaddle one more time. Once she mounted up, the women finally abandoned their posts, but even though the gates of the village were parting behind us, Eir kept Dyggur reined in near me. Then my wife let out a wistful sigh and sent Brokkr an admiring smile.

The blacksmith immediately furrowed his brow. “Why the hell are ye’ smiling like that?”

“I must smile at you, Brokkr,” Eir preened. “Aaron Briggs told me of your feat last night, and I am so proud of you. I feel as if I have birthed a vicious man-child.”

“Birthed?” the blacksmith scoffed.

“Yes, Bragi and I have made you,” my wife informed him. “Look at how fierce and strong you have become--”

“Nope,” the blacksmith cut in. “Stop talkin’.”

“But I take great pride in molding both your form and spirit into that of a beast--”

“Safe travels,” Brokkr loudly interrupted.

“Yeah, Eir... we gotta get going,” I said.

My winged wife snickered, but she gave up on her speech and steered Dyggur toward the gates.

Vegvisir was already waiting on his drekkadyr, and he stood at the threshold of the village with his back turned to us all. It was probably for the best, since every clansman in the area was glaring at him.

The women warriors looked especially pissed as they gathered in a tight clump near the gates, and it was clear they blamed the old

wanderling for my decision to embark on this journey at all. Now they stood like silent, judgmental statues along with the men at the entrance, and the silence hung heavy in the morning air.

Anakol and Bragi took their places beside Igrid, and Brokkr brought himself to the pierced woman's other side. Even though the line of them held my gaze without speaking, the weight of their stony expressions said plenty.

I cleared my throat and nodded my understanding.

Then I brought my drekkadyr toward the gates, but when I risked a glance over my shoulder, Anakol and Brokkr were already exchanging an unreadable glance over Igrid's head. Bragi had a sharp eye on them while he muttered too quietly for me to hear, and since the pierced warlord thought my back was turned, she faked a punch in Brokkr's direction.

The blacksmith didn't even flinch. He looked down at Igrid with a steady, warning glare, and I could have sworn I saw her cheeks blush the tiniest bit again as she smirked up at him.

"None of you better kill each other while I'm gone," I called over to the group, and they promptly returned to their stony frowns. "I mean it. Anakol, go see the damn healer. Bragi, you're in charge of keeping the peace, and Igrid... you have one hour to return to Illska."

The line mumbled a chorus of "yes, my chief," and I sighed as I joined Eir and Vegvisir.

The old man kept his gaze on the red trees ahead of us like he was already tired of being this close to the Farthegns, but he mumbled a greeting to me all the same. From what I could tell, he had everything he needed secured to his packsaddle. His worn-out wool garments were in place, and one inconspicuous staff of gnarled wood was sheathed along his drekkadyr's right side.

Once I felt everything was accounted for, I didn't wait another second before I kicked my mount into a gallop. Then I didn't look back once as the three of us charged into the ashen woods beyond Dalir's northern walls, and I decided right then that any strife between my warriors in my absence was out of my hands.

I'd done all I could to get them settled, and they knew what I expected of them. Now I was finally on my way to the edge of the Red Forest, and that's all I had the headspace for.

I urged my drekkadyr to gallop faster while Eir's heillhaust took up the rear, and Vegvisir looked as eager as I felt when he passed me up. The old guy was hunched low against his mount's thick fur with a greedy grin on his weathered face, and his thin gray hair blew straight up from his skull as he picked up the pace a little more. Then the wanderling took the lead to guide us along a northwestern route, and none of us slowed down until a revolting stench started permeating the woods.

It came along all at once without any warning, and even breathing through my mouth didn't improve anything, but then the gaping dugout of an underground cave came into view.

"Better quiet that heillhaust," Vegvisir warned as he slowed his mount to a walk. "The nóttmal will be sleeping, but they get even more ornery than usual if you wake 'em up in the daytime."

Eir quickly obeyed the wanderling and brought Dyggur to a soft walk. We steered our mounts clear of the next four dugouts, and I discovered that all of them smelled as rank as the first. The land surrounding them was turned up for dozens of feet around, but I couldn't decide if the predominant stench was feces, urine, or rotting corpses.

It was probably a nice mix of all of the above.

Once we were out of range of the nóttmal dens, we were off at a gallop again, and miles and hours blurred past while we traveled farther into my northern grounds. For a while, I was confused why the landscape only got denser as the temperature dropped, but we steadily gained in elevation until I recognized the smell of snow in the air.

A couple miles beyond this point, a cold wind kicked up and blew in from the north, and dustings of snow could be seen on the tops of thick hedges and the northern sides of trunks. This was the first reassuring sign that promised the foothills weren't too far off now, but still, the landscape became more overrun with hedges and

vines. Our mounts struggled through the brambles while I wondered if I'd underestimated the extent of my territory, but then the edge of the forest came into view.

I furrowed my brow at the sight, and I brought my drekkadyr to a quick stop beside Vegvisir.

As it turned out, the Red Forest didn't give way gradually like most forests, where the trees become sparser and the flora slowly changes. The large ashen trunks and dense foliage abruptly ended like someone drew a line in the dirt, and beyond the edge of the tree line, nothing but barren tundra and winding tributaries stretched for miles.

There were no trees, or even hardy shrubs out there. The cold wind howled across the open landscape as sheets of snow blew down from the north. The spiraling gusts never seemed to stick to the cold, hard land, but they clung to the shards of ice that were already forming along the banks of the raging rivers. These were the waters that fed into the Red Forest and provided all our fresh water, fish, and game who frequented their banks.

But no beasts were lingering around them this far north, and only the mountains jutted up where the rivers faded into walls of falling snow in the distance.

I could hardly make out the full extent of the range on account of the winter storm swallowing it up, but I could see the highest peaks reaching into the blanket of dark gray clouds. All of them looked whited-out with snow for the most part, and I turned to see this same whirling, snowy view stretching farther to the east than the eye could see.

"This is mountains?" Eir breathed, and I looked over to find her expression was slack.

"This is tundra," I clarified. "Way out there where you see the shadows hitting the clouds... those are the tops of the mountains."

"This is your Alaska?" Eir demanded in disbelief. "This frozen wasteland with the wind and the snow?"

“Not exactly,” I said. “This is what a lot of Alaska looks like for about six months of the year, but when it all thaws, the land becomes surprisingly lush. Portions of Alaska are actually a rainforest. That’s part of what makes it so incredible. You really can’t judge a place based on the extremities alone.”

I nodded in approval as I scanned the sheets of snow billowing across the icy rivers, but then I realized Eir had her gaze locked on me.

“Aaron Briggs, this is not mild,” my wife informed me.

“I know,” I chuckled. “When I said that, I only meant Alaska was mild in some ways, not all. For example, no one tries to decapitate anyone there, the apex predators are smaller, nobody’s enslaved... that kinda thing. But the weather and the terrain are a real bitch. Makes for some good times.”

My winged wife stared at me like I was crazy, and Vegvisir chuckled from my other side. When I glanced over, he was already half-finished with bundling himself up in his fur coat and hood, and I followed his lead now that the bite of the north was blowing past at about twenty-five miles per hour.

Eir stayed frozen on Dyggur’s back, and her wide-open eyes roved over what lay ahead while the cold air made them water incessantly.

“Don’t tell me you’re not up to the challenge, girl,” the wanderling goaded. “I thought you Farthegns were devoid of weakness.”

Eir bristled at the man’s taunting, and she tried to force her shivers to stop, but it didn’t work. I wasn’t sure if it was the cold getting to her, or if her nerves were spiked, but my wife ended up twitching against the wind while she clutched her reins in a vise grip.

I did my best not to laugh at the stubborn look of her.

“She’s got this,” I assured Vegvisir.

The old man snorted and kicked his mount into a trot, and as soon as he was headed into the icy wind, my wife quickly bundled up

as well.

Eir looked fucking adorable while she wrestled with yards of brown fur, and she cursed a few times during the process on account of her wings getting in the way. Her sword belt gave her the most trouble, since she was trying so hard not to drop her knives, but once this was cinched around her waist, she folded her wings tight against her back to keep the wind from ripping through them even more.

When all was said and done, my winged wife looked rugged and fine as hell in her winter getup. The way she scowled as she pulled on her mittens made me smile from ear to ear, and with her thick hood wrapped up, only her sea green eyes were visible.

“You good?” I asked, and she sent me a stiff nod as she took hold of her reins again.

“I would follow you to the ends of the world,” my wife mumbled through her hood. “But I dislike this tundra. It looks terrible. And boring. And I already hate it.”

“I know,” I chuckled and reached over to grab her mittened hand.

Then I left a kiss on it before securing my own hood, and I kicked my mount into a trot.

Dyggur didn’t follow at first, but it only took Eir a few beats to follow me out of the forest, and I sent her a reassuring grin as she took a position at my right flank.

I couldn’t tell if my wife smiled back at me under all that fur, but she looked so disgruntled with snow flying into her eyes that I couldn’t help snickering at the sight.

This was going to be a fun journey.



Chapter 10

The crossing from the forest to the foothills was an arduous one, and the arctic winds came at us stronger once we reached the very center of the frozen wasteland. After that, a constant blast of ice and snow pelted us head-on, and we were engulfed in the winter storm.

I kept my head down as much as possible, but my eyes still started to freeze shut from squinting against the wind. We had to push through the second stretch at a slow walk since the cold was too much to take at top speed, but luckily, our beasts didn't seem to have much trouble with the low temperature. They trudged ahead at a steady pace with their horns dipped low, and for Eir's sake, I was beyond grateful Dyggur gave off his own heat. He also brought up the rear for this leg of the journey, so we had him to thank for keeping the two drekkadyr moving into the storm.

It felt like hours passed while we pressed onward across frigid, raging rivers and howling tundra, but my mood only improved with each blast of icy wind.

Not that life in the Red Forest was a cakewalk, but I'd been missing the grueling challenges of an arctic winter, and the north seemed more than ready to deliver.

Piles of snowflakes freezing on my furs was a welcome sight, and I embraced the stinging of my lungs like a polar cleanse. For once, something about this world was a hundred percent familiar to me, and as a thousand frigid memories from Alaska bloomed in my mind, I eased into the chill with a masochistic kind of relief.

The Red Forest already seemed like a hazy memory to me, and the drastic change in scenery was exactly what I needed.

Then the wind let up by a few degrees, and the tundra gave way to the foothills.

The climb was gradual over shards of barren rock and snow drifts that piled several feet above our heads in some areas. The

wind kept a few paths clear enough to pass through though, and I turned my face into the blasting snow to find the mountains finally looming above us.

The sheerness of the cliffs resembled the Swiss Alps more than the Alaska Range, but even in books and online, I'd never seen anything quite like this. Every jagged shaft of stone looked like it'd been carved from a single slab with no imperfections left behind. Hundreds of massive ridges stood side by side along the range like needle-like teeth in a jaw, and this perpendicular design made the barren peaks seem even more inaccessible.

The glimmers of ice I saw higher up concerned me more than anything. Any one of these ridges could be hiding thousands of pounds of ice under their snowy surfaces, and fucking around at those elevations was the last thing I wanted to do.

At least Vegvisir seemed to have another plan. As I kept close to his drekkadyr, I realized he was bringing us to one of several slim breaks in the sheer cliffs. Most of the passageways into the mountains were gorges with icy water spilling out, but after we crossed through one last river, I saw a single pass up ahead.

Eir must have caught on to the plan as well, because she got Dyggur moving faster, and the heillhaust herded the two drekkadyr into the pass and out of the wind. The howling continued high above us, but the constant onslaught of icy snow and wind immediately died down. I lowered my hood to take stock of what we were up against, and a wash of white surrounded us between two steep cliff faces now.

It looked like no one had crossed through this area recently. The rocky sides of the pass were completely perpendicular and covered in snow, and a purely untouched blanket wound its way through the slim pass ahead of Vegvisir. Fat flakes continued drifting down from the clouds that swallowed the tops of the cliffs, but without so much wind, the stillness in here was almost eerie.

Still, the sudden calm brought a grin to my face while I watched the snowflakes drift in. The long, frozen hall was so quiet that it felt like we'd entered a snowy cathedral.

“That wasn’t too bad,” Vegvisir grunted, and he shook the pellets of ice from his furs while I did the same. “Hell of a lot easier with someone else’s legs under you.”

“Wait, you made this journey on foot last time?” I asked.

The old man’s weathered lips twisted into a smirk. “Anywhere worth getting to is worth the effort, boy. Besides, these beasts we’re riding attract more attention from predators. I’m better off hoofin’ it on my own if I wanna live.”

“I could agree with that,” I agreed.

“Now, this pass we’re in will take us too deep into the mountains if we follow it far enough,” Vegvisir told me. “There’s four other options we’ll run across, and the easiest route will bring us along the east side of this cluster of peaks for about twenty miles.”

“Why would we travel east to go west?” Eir shivered.

“The peaks on this side are taller, and they’ll give a little cover from the snowfall,” the wanderling answered. “Beasts are less numerous in the east too, on account of the hunting done by Svelgard. You head west, and you’re taking the coastal trek for longer. Lots of ice, lots of beasts, deeper snow. It’s your call, boy.”

I considered this, but the warning the sky elf had given me about eastern paths immediately rang in my mind.

“We’ll stick to the westernmost path,” I decided. “I don’t mind some ice, and beasts are Eir’s specialty.”

Vegvisir nodded. “Fine by me.”

Then he continued through the pass, and my wife sent me a proud smile as she kept Dyggur in step with my mount. My wife’s sea green eyes blazed bright against the white cliffs, and her cheeks stayed bright red from the cold, but the ice coating her black wings worried me for a second.

“Doing alright?” I checked.

“Yes, my love,” Eir murmured. “You look incredibly handsome in the snow. Did you know that?”

“Thanks,” I chuckled. “We shouldn’t be up against winds like that again for a while. The tundra can be a frigid bitch, but all these ridges in the mountains will do us a lot of favors.”

“Does this mean we can travel at a more sufficient pace?” my wife asked. “Dyggur does not enjoy walking for long stretches of time.”

“Gotta take it real careful through this pass,” Vegvisir answered for me, and he shifted in his saddle to look back at Eir. “Too much runnin’, and this snow will shake loose from the walls. Too slow, and that heillhaust will melt the lower pileup. Either one leaves us getting buried in here, so you just stick with the pace I’m keepin’ for now.”

“Is this the avalanche you spoke of?” Eir eagerly asked me.

“Yes, and it would not be fun in this scenario,” I said right off the bat. “You see those blankets of snow on the ridges above us?”

Eir nodded. “Yes, they look wonderfully soft.”

“Well, they could weigh thousands of pounds,” I explained. “More, if enough of them fall, and all it takes is one slab breaking loose. The rest will drop all along the cliff, and under that snow, there could be ice, too. If that breaks loose from the rock, we’ll have an icefall on our hands, and there’s just no living through that.”

“Fascinating...” Eir smiled lightly.

I watched her with some concern while she eyed the clifftops. I could tell she still wasn’t taking the risks seriously enough, and the threat of colossal destruction only seemed to intrigue her. But she obediently kept Dyggur padding through the snow as carefully as possible.

“What’s this range called?” I asked after a while. “I’ve never seen mountains quite like this.”

“Depends who you’re talking to,” Vegvisir snorted.

“Farthegns have always called this land Svelgard,” Eir told me. “But the inhabitants of the range farther to the east are so insolent, they have named their lands something quite similar. It is a hideous

insult, given our kind are clearly their superiors, so we refuse to acknowledge them as anything but the eastern mountains.”

“Yeah, that’s not why the east is called Skelg Tho,” Vegvisir chuckled, and Eir narrowed her eyes skeptically.

“Skelg Tho?” I repeated. “It does sound similar to Svelgard, but what’s the real reason for the name?”

“How much you know about these mountains, boy?” the wanderling asked.

“Nothing,” I admitted.

“Well, the Farthegns came up expanding their territory beyond the Red Forest about two hundred years ago,” Vegvisir explained. “All this land belonged to the dwarves back then, and the war for this territory was a brutal one. Went on for nearly thirty years until the dwarves finally struck a deal.”

“Surrendered,” Eir corrected.

“Not quite how it went,” Vegvisir countered. “Dwarven generals are some hard-ass fighters, girl. They wiped out as many of your kind as they lost on the battlefield. Problem was, too many innocent villages were being plundered over this shit with the Farthegns, so they made a deal. Called a temporary truce and met on the field to divvy up their mountains. The dwarves were feeling amicable and offered to give the western third of the range to the Farthegns. This way, the dwarves would keep most of it, but the land where the heaviest fightin’ took place would technically be earned by the Farthegns.”

“Not a bad deal,” I allowed, and the old man’s hood nodded in agreement.

“Except the Farthegns agreed to the truce, showed up en masse, and slaughtered the dwarves during the meeting,” he said. “Forty of the top generals were cut down in a matter of minutes, and only five of them made it out of there alive. The whole time they were fighting off the Farthegns, they kept screamin’ ‘Skelg tho! Skelg tho!’ Those Farthegns thought it was funny. Figured the dwarves were begging for mercy and all that.”

“Which they were doing,” Eir informed me. “Like all inferiors, they knew they had no choice but to concede.”

“Farthegns took what they wanted of the mountains after that,” Vegvisir continued. “Just about everything north of the Red Forest went to them, which is a big-ass chunk of land. They thought they’d brag about it, so they named this clan up here Svelgard.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “How is that bragging?”

“It’s not,” the wanderling snorted. “They got the damn words wrong. Farthegns don’t give a shit about anyone’s language but their own. The dwarves said ‘skelg tho’ at the ambush, but the Farthegns heard ‘svelgard.’ Thing is, ‘skelg tho’ isn’t beggin’, it means ‘fuck you’ in Dwarvish. So... now you’ve got the Farthegns being jackasses in the west with their Svelgard shit, and the dwarves are sayin’ ‘fuck you’ in the east. Named themselves Skelg Tho.”

“Holy shit,” I laughed. “That’s awesome.”

“Yeah, it’s funny,” Vegvisir chuckled. “The dwarves are alright. They’ve made sure no one in the world recognizes the western range as Svelgard, too. Gave it their own name instead, and it’s the one you’ll find on all the maps. Every damn one of ‘em.”

“What?” Eir gasped in disgust. “How dare anyone misname Farthegn territory. What do they call it?”

“Krugg Mond,” the wanderling said. “Means ‘Bastard Land’ in Dwarvish.”

Eir clicked her tongue, but I laughed in full support of the idea.

“I’ve gotta meet these dwarves,” I decided. “They sound like good people.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it, boy.”

I smirked. “Why not? I hear they’re the guys to see about the metal supply.”

“They’re the ones the Farthegns are robbing of it,” Vegvisir clarified. “And the dwarves can tell a Farthegn the second they look at you. You may not carry their blood, but you sure as hell reek of the bastards.”

“My husband could never reek,” Eir scoffed, and she looked personally insulted. “Aaron Briggs smells of virile might and unyielding strength. He carries the scent of carnal lust and the promise of pleasure, and he is the very image of superiority.”

“Exactly,” Vegvisir chuckled. “Farthegn might, Farthegn strength, Farthegn sex drive... and a Farthegn woman singin’ his praises. The dwarves won’t fuck around with a guy like him. They’d rather throw him down one of their mines.”

“I would like to see them try,” my winged wife growled. “Perhaps we will travel to this ridiculous Skelg Tho to teach them who they are insulting with their threats.”

“Eir, they’re not insulting anyone,” I pointed out. “This is a hypothetical threat, and either way, it sounds like your kind screwed them over horribly in the past. I’m honestly not surprised to hear it. Farthegns probably have a lot to answer for outside their borders, and the dwarves having issue with that is warranted.”

The Nordic beauty pursed her lips, and she promptly repositioned Dyggur so she was behind me instead. My wife didn’t speak to me or Vegvisir for a while after that, but I let her brood back there since Farthegn pride was something I’d gotten used to by now.

The three of us proceeded at a steady walk through the long, winding pass while the same quiet and pristine whiteness surrounded us. Not one creature crossed our path, and hours went on like this before the first branch in the mountain passes came along, but we passed it up since it headed straight west.

Dyggur snarled in immediate protest, and he gave a few low growls so we’d all know he was over this slower leg of the trip.

“Not much farther,” Vegvisir called back to the beast.

Then the heillhaust snorted his hot breath against my mount’s backend, and the drekkadyr reared up as it brayed in panic. Things got more difficult from there thanks to the pissed off beast behind me, but I did feel bad for Dyggur. A species like him was made for high-energy gallops over long distances, and given how intelligent he was, I couldn’t blame him for getting bored and impatient.

Eir continued talking Dyggur down and murmured to him in Farthegn until he stopped tossing his scaly head. Then she started giving him handfuls of jerky to keep him busy, and this finally distracted his mind enough.

The survivalist in me cringed a little more every time another helping of jerky disappeared down the heillhaust's gullet, but I let Eir do whatever she had to for the beast. We had plenty of food on us for the time being anyways, and the important part was that we made it out of this incredibly slim pass.

Vegvisir ignored the next two stark white gorges we came across, but when we finally turned down a wider ravine, the view drastically changed. This area was just as uninhabited and blanketed with snow, but the ridges on either side came in at a much gentler slope, and they were lined with tall trees that looked almost identical to Sitka spruces.

Except these trees were coal black from top to bottom, and for a second, I thought this area had burned up over the last season.

All along the ravine walls, trees as tall as a hundred feet or more blotted out the snowscape. They grew perfectly straight without a single crooked trunk in sight, and the tops of the trees pierced the low, gray clouds like spearheads while snow piled up on the boughs. Aside from this, every bit of them from the trunks to the needles were a charred-looking black.

The bark was peeling apart in scraggly flakes like burned paper, but somehow, none of the charred needles or delicate wood blanketed the snow below. Even with a strong wind blowing through the tops of the black trees, they held steady without rustling beyond a fraction of a degree.

I brought my drekkadyr over to the nearest one so I could get a better look. Then I pulled a low-lying branch closer, and Eir joined me with her eyebrows studiously pinched together.

"What peculiar trees," my wife mused. "Aaron Briggs, have you ever seen such a thing?"

"Never," I said.

The black tree had long, thick needles that refused to break loose from their fronds, and instead of cones, grape-sized pods grew in clusters between the needles. Each pod was covered in tiny black prongs with mean, hooked tips, and when I gave the branch a good shake, none of them dropped to the snow.

Then Eir pinched at the flaky black bark only to find it wasn't nearly so delicate as it looked. Each torn-up furl was as stiff as metal, and my wife cut her finger open from just one swipe.

"Interesting..." Eir muttered as she stuck her finger in her mouth and sucked. "I like these trees. They are rather foreboding."

"Hardy as hell, too," I added.

"Gotta be," Vegvisir said from up ahead, and I brought my mount back to the path he was on. "It's harsh land in Krugg Mond. Won't find much else growin' in this range for most of the year."

"Do the trees stay this black all year-round?" I asked.

"Get a bit blacker in the warmer months." The wanderling shrugged. "That's the rainy season."

"Blacker?" Eir asked in confusion. "They are as black as my wings already. How could they become blacker?"

"They can get a few shades darker," he assured her. "Better keep movin'. We're still in Svelgard's territory, and they hunt in these parts later in the day. We wanna be through this ravine and at least seven miles over the fifth rise before dark if we can manage it."

"Easy," my wife decided. Then Dyggur practically trampled me as he shoved his way through. "Pardon us, but we will have to meet you both farther along."

"Alright, just keep an eye out for..." I trailed off as Dyggur lurched into a gallop and kicked a wall of snow up at us.

Then he and Eir dashed onward into the black and white wilderness, and I was left with Vegvisir shaking his head beside me.

We followed the trail of melted hoofprints the heillhaust left behind through the base of the ravine. I finally let myself crack into a satchel of boar jerky for an afternoon snack, but I didn't indulge

nearly as much as Dyggur had. I only ate enough to keep my hunger at bay, and I kept a constant scan on the strange forest while we steadily gained in elevation.

The path grew rockier under the snow, but the black trees stayed just as evenly spaced and straight no matter the grade they grew on. The ravine opened up wider the higher we climbed, and every embankment we scaled brought us a few hundred feet closer to the nearest peaks. Eir and Dyggur were long gone, but Vegvisir assured me they were on the right course, so I didn't let myself overthink it.

I just focused on enjoying the ride in another new land, and I marveled at the hardy black trees closing in around us.

It wasn't until an hour later that I realized we weren't alone out here anymore, and by then, I wasn't sure how long we'd been followed for.



Chapter 11

At first, only a flicker of movement caught my attention from the corner of my eye, but no matter how many times I swiveled my head around, there was never anything between the black trunks. This kept happening for several minutes until I wondered if the stark color scheme was driving me mad, but then I heard a distinct chattering sound in the black boughs near my head.

And it moved with me while my drekkadyr trotted at a clipped pace.

“Vegvisir,” I said as quietly as possible. “Something’s following us.”

“They sure are,” the wanderling confirmed. “Don’t pay ‘em no mind, boy. Koldegin don’t attack unless you look them in the eye. Focus on the snow for a while, and they’ll lose interest.”

“Alright,” I agreed. “Can I ask what a koldegin is?”

“Look a bit like a fizik, but they got longer fangs, and pointier ears,” Vegvisir answered. “Tails are tipped with a poisonous spike that’ll kill you in about five minutes, give or take.”

I had no idea what a fizik was, but the image of a fox with a scorpion’s tail came to mind, and I kept my head facing forward and my eyes strictly on the snow from there on out.

I didn’t like the idea of being stalked by a predator I couldn’t even risk taking a look at, especially now that the chattering was multiplying around us, but the wanderling ended up being right. Within a half-hour, the chattering died away again, and I was able to take my hand off my cutlass for the first time in as long.

“How many times have you traveled through this area?” I asked the old man. “You made it sound like you’ve taken all the routes from that first pass we started out in.”

“Sure have,” Vegvisir drawled. “First time I came to Krugg Mond, I was younger than you. Heard the gremlins lived up near the

pole. Took about four moons to reach ‘em, but I made it alright.”

“On foot?” I clarified.

“Always on foot.” The wanderling nodded. “The predators try your nerves a bit more, but they’re not so concerning as the Farthegns in this area. If you wanna draw less attention, you gotta make yourself invisible in this range. Once I got better at covering up my tracks, traveling in the Red Forest and beyond it wasn’t too difficult. Just takes some patience and know-how. The next three times I came up here, I never had no trouble, but the last time I was here, I went to the cave. Met a wanderling in Tuvrah who told me about it, and I couldn’t get the place out of my mind. Wolves are a hell of a thing, though. I ain’t bothered coming this far north since then. Figured I’d seen enough of the place.”

“Where did you go instead?” I asked.

“South,” Vegvisir answered. “I took a boat to the Aberrant Falls and ended up getting snatched by the furies halfway there. Met with their duchess, and the woman told me she’d pay me all the riches I desired if I told her everything I knew about the beast-kin who lurk at the tidal inlet of the Aberrant Falls. The furies wanted to know how to drain them of the power they leeches from the place, and I’d been through there plenty of times, so I happened to know how.”

I raised an eyebrow. “This duchess would pay that much just for a few answers to her questions?”

“Knowledge is a valuable thing in a world as big as this,” the man said. “Most kinds won’t risk traveling too far from their homelands, so it’s pretty common getting snatched as a wanderling. Thing is, no one treats a wanderling well unless they want something. I learned that early on. Once I tell them what they want to know, I’m just the scary old bastard without a home to call his own again, and that ain’t a situation to get into. Especially with the furies. I told their duchess to kiss my ass.”

“What’d she do?” I snorted.

“Threw me to the necromancers. Their coven always needs bodies for cuttin’ up.”

I stared at the man as he slowed his drekkadyr to climb up and over a more rugged embankment, and he sent me a shrug from the other side.

“Don’t look so surprised, boy,” Vegvisir drawled. “I told you, knowledge is what’s valuable. Not the man carrying it. Take this cave, for example. You wanna know what’s in it, I offered to take you on up, and your Farthegns haven’t killed me yet. But as soon as you got what you came here for... Well, I’m not so necessary anymore, am I? Just the crazy-eyed wanderling who knew which direction to head. You’ll go your way, and if I live to make it, I’ll go mine. No saying I’ll make it out of Krugg Mond, and no saying whether your Farthegns will let me pass south again. Things change once people get what they came for.”

“I wouldn’t stab you in the back like that,” I scoffed. “I’ll make sure you get south, and then on to wherever you want after that.”

Vegvisir cackled at my words, and I had a feeling there wasn’t much I could say to convince him otherwise. The man had his own experiences to base things on, but he didn’t seem to be implying anything about me specifically. It was the nature of this world he was talking about, and that was something he knew more about than me.

“Out of curiosity,” I said to lighten the mood, “how did you get away from the necromancers?”

“Same way I always do,” Vegvisir sighed. “Everyone wants somethin’, and the necromancers wanted to know where the nearest skulraeth could be found. They thought the Red Forest was their only chance, but I told ‘em the westernmost spot in the Oegyrian Fields would be ripe with skulraeth, because I knew what was coming next. Sure enough, they decided I was the one who had to go there for them. They got some séance they’ve been waiting a decade to enact, but they need the heart of a skulraeth to do it. Going to the Red Forest is too much of a pain in the ass, though.”

“Why?” I asked.

“The Farthegns, of course,” the old man laughed. “They don’t have any natural magic, but they’re known for being broke, violent savages who aren’t worth warring with because of the ‘no magic,’

‘violent,’ and ‘broke’ part, so most of the other and more powerful races and kingdoms would rather avoid gettin’ involved with them.”

“Hmmm... interesting,” I said as I considered that the Red Forest might have actually been what my brother would call the “starting zone” in a video game, where players got to learn the controls and beat some low-level monsters.

This just made me realize the world I was in now was beyond brutal.

“Anyhow,” he continued. “The necromancers were more than eager to get this damn heart, especially if it could be got outside the Red Forest. They told me to get the heart or die trying.”

“Did you take care of that? Or...”

“Hell no,” the wanderling chuckled, and I blinked as I wondered what the repercussions might be for pissing off a coven of necromancers. “I told you I knew what they were gonna ask me, that’s why I insisted it was the Oegyrian Fields I should head to. The western side of those fields would lead me to the damn ocean. I headed north through the swamplands until the wayward reapers left me at the Oegyrian Fields. Then I kept on walkin’. I was gonna stow away on a ship and hop on over to Aushnaes across the sea.”

“Hold on,” I cut in. “Are you talking about the land of the sky elves? You’ve been there?”

“Sure, it’s been about twelve years since I last passed through Aushnaes,” Vegvisir replied. “You know it, huh?”

“Not from experience,” I admitted. “I’ve got a sky elf in Dalir who keeps an eye on the stars for me. She told me about the place, but why were you heading there?”

“Don’t matter,” Vegvisir sighed. “Illska got on my ass before I reached the coast, and well... you know how the rest went.”

“You aren’t worried the necromancers might be after you?” I checked.

“They probably will be soon enough, but fuck ‘em. Just because someone wants something from ye’ don’t mean you owe it

to them, boy. That much I know for damn sure.”

I let out a low whistle, and my mind struggled to process the old man’s wild tales. I couldn’t imagine half the places he mentioned, but I already wanted to see them all, and his talk of gremlins in the north and furies in the south left me torn on where to start after this journey. This world really did sound enormous when Vegvisir laid it out, but as intriguing as his travels sounded, his words struck a chord in me.

The truth was, I wanted to gain knowledge from him just like everyone else. But that didn’t mean I thought of him as dispensable. I appreciated how long he’d traveled around the world to get the answers he was after, and making it through every kind of beast and being imaginable to do it made him a hell of a man in my mind.

The way I saw it, there wasn’t any separation between his knowledge and who he was, but it sounded like the rest of the world operated like the Farthegns in some ways. They valued what they could gain, not who they could gain it from, which meant the wanderling had spent his life getting roped into situations he couldn’t possibly come out on top of.

Now, this old guy was bringing me through Krugg Mond, but while I stood to gain a lot from the excursion, I couldn’t see much he’d get out of it.

I thought about this for a while as Vegvisir and I continued up into the slopes of the mountains, and I didn’t keep questioning him. The two of us continued on in silence while snowflakes billowed down on us both, but after another half-hour, the ground began to tremble underhoof.

Then Dyggur’s scaly snout appeared at the top of the ridge we were climbing, and Eir looked elated as the pair came barreling down the mountainside. Snow and slush sprayed up behind them as my wife’s long blonde braids and dreadlocks flowed in the wind, and I chuckled at her gaping smile and glistening eyes.

“Aaron Briggs!” Eir sang. “Hurry, it is beautiful! You have never seen such a thing!”

“Alright, I’m coming!” I called back.

But my wife still galloped in for a drive-by, just to get our drekkadyr hauling ass. I nearly lost hold of my reins while Dyggur herded me up the last stretch of the ridge, but then we finally rose up above the pass, and I got my first genuine glimpse of the Krugg Mond range.

From this mountainside, I could see for miles across snowy peaks, and the black trees covered all of them like a sea of wrought-iron spikes. The stark abyss rose and fell under a dense gray sky in all directions, but far off in the distance, there was a hint of slate gray water stretching along the horizon.

“Isn’t it so beautiful?” Eir sighed. “Compared to red trees, these black ones are like a new world to me... and look! You can see everything from up here! Everything in the world is all over wherever you turn!”

“It is,” I chuckled. “Gotta love a view like this.”

“I do love it,” my wife gushed. “This is more than I could have imagined the mountains to be.”

I grinned as I watched Eir’s sea green eyes trace every peak, and I was glad to see her glowing with excitement now. Nothing about the stark and frigid landscape seemed to concern her, and she kept an eager hold on her reins like she couldn’t wait to sprint down the next rise. Then the beautiful blonde turned a glittering smile my way, and my heart did a flip-flop at the sight of the snowflakes piled on her lashes.

“I have tasted the snow as well,” Eir proudly informed me. “I find it’s more delicious in the mountains than in the forest. Crisper and more refreshing, but also satisfying in a way I did not expect. I wonder why that is...”

I smirked. “I guess everything’s just better in the mountains.”

“I would not go that far,” my wife laughed. “The weather is certainly better in the forest, but I will admit, I find this landscape invigorating. As does Dyggur, isn’t that right?”

My wife lovingly patted the heillhaust's brown scales, and the beast let out a soft nicker of approval. He was infinitely calmer than he had been all morning, and the heat he radiated after his run melted the snow in a wide circle around him. Underneath his hooves, the bare soil was exposed and black like the trees, and I was about to climb down to study it a bit when Eir suddenly went rigid.

"Don't move," the Nordic beauty hissed.

Vegvisir and I stayed stock-still while Eir tipped her head ever so slightly to the right, and I recognized the way her nose twitched.

All I could smell was snow and the sweat of our mounts, but something else must've been in the area that was beyond my registry. Part of me hoped it was only the koldegin with the poisonous tails because anything else could only get deadlier, but then Eir's eyes snapped to mine, and I knew it had to be the worse option.

"Svelgard," my winged wife breathed. "They are north of us."

"How far?" I demanded.

"Less than thirty yards," Eir answered.

"Down this rise," Vegvisir growled.

The three of us took off down the slope at mach speed, but it didn't matter to me how fast we fled. Every pounding hoof assured me of one thing: there was no way we'd be able to cover up our tracks in all this snow.

The wanderling kept his mount galloping into the ravine below, and as we slid and swerved around black trees, I kept my eyes scanning for any possibility of cover. Unfortunately, we were on huge brown beasts in a black and white world, and even our furs stood out in this place. Then Vegvisir yanked his reins back and forced his drekkadyr to take off up the side of the ravine.

"Spread out and hop along the rocks!" the old man hissed.

Eir and I promptly followed his advice. Once I galloped another twenty yards through the ravine, I quickly pulled the same maneuver the wanderling had. My wife passed me up as I tried to guide my

drekkadyr through a less direct path, and each sharp kick to its side sent the beast leaping to another ledge of stone. It wasn't a foolproof plan, but it was probably our only option at this point, and the higher I climbed, the less clear my tracks became. They disappeared in rocky outcroppings or behind black trunks, and when I found a jutting ledge about two hundred feet up, I guided my mount behind the rock.

Ice coated the stones under his hooves, but we were mostly concealed here, and I slid off his back to push him farther from view.

Then I crouched down low and shifted so I could keep an eye on the ravine below.

The black trees were thick enough that I was sure I wouldn't be seen, but through the inky needles, I could make out patches of the path we'd been on. Dyggur's hoofprints were clear as day in several spots where snow had melted around them, but other than this, I didn't see anything that stood out to me.

Minutes passed while the wind howled against the ledge I hid on. I waited so long in this spot that an inch of snow piled up on my furs. I wondered more than once if we'd somehow managed to evade the warriors Eir sensed in the north, but then something moved below.

At least, I thought something moved.

When my eyes zeroed in on the spot, only a blanket of snow was waiting, and I squinted through the falling flakes as I kept my gaze locked. It was another full minute before anything moved again, but this time, I was sure it wasn't snow I had my eyes on. It was a snow-white creature who kept perfectly still, and the twitching of its white reins was what caught my eye.

Which meant there was a rider in the area.

One by one, I picked up on the flicking of reins through the black trees, and I counted six snow-white beasts in the ravine. None of them were moving more than one slow step at a time though, and they were tall enough that I couldn't get a clear view of their riders yet.

Whoever was on their backs stayed as quiet as their mounts. I waited while my limbs started freezing up in this crouched position, but I didn't move a muscle, and after a painfully long amount of time, my patience paid off.

One rider slid from their mount, and they were dressed in hides as white as the beasts they rode in on. The fur must have been from a different creature because it was much shaggier, and it looked like someone had marked it up with black soot. The effect left the wearer camouflaged in the stark terrain, and I could hardly track their movements through the trees.

Then they strolled ahead of their group, and I caught a glimpse of their profile.

It was a woman warrior dressed from head to toe in the marked fur, and only a few strands of dreadlocked black hair fell loose from her thick hood. She moved as stealthily as her mount while she slowly scanned the area around her, and then she crouched in the snow to study one of Dyggur's hoofprints.

That's when I got a clear view of the weapon on her back, and I grimaced at the sight.

Just like Bragi once told me, the warriors of Svelgard carried scythes as their "weapon of prominence," and the three-foot-long, crooked blade was serrated. This particular scythe was so clean, the gray daylight glistened off every jagged tooth, but the stock was black like the trees around me, and it must have been about five feet long.

None of the weapons I carried now had a range like that, but I tried not to focus on this detail while I watched the woman scoop up some melted snow and taste it. She looked ahead of her down the stretch of ravine a moment later, and my heart stuttered as I wondered if Eir had managed to conceal her tracks further along.

Then the woman from Svelgard turned her head toward me.

I forced myself not to move as my heart slammed into my ribcage. The chance of her seeing me way up here was slim to none, but if I ducked back, she'd be able to catch the movement as easily

as I'd seen her reins. I took slow, steady breaths while she looked into the black trees between us, and I tried to focus on her eyes.

The markings she wore on her face were distinct compared to the clans I'd seen so far. Instead of deliberate lines and dots, this woman had her eyes and brow smudged out in black all the way from one temple to the other, and the mask made it hard to tell where she was looking through the black boughs. She stayed crouched exactly as she was for what felt like ages before she slowly rose to her feet, and then she returned to her white mount without pause.

From up here, I couldn't tell if she said anything to her companions, but the white beasts didn't continue down the ravine. Instead of following Dyggur's trail, they turned around, and in a blink, the white animals took off the way we'd come to get here.

I waited about ten minutes more before I risked coming out further from the ledge. When I craned my neck, I couldn't see anything waiting below, but this didn't mean the same stealthy white beasts weren't still down there. I was still trying to decide my next move when I saw Vegvisir coming my way.

The old wanderling was up even higher than I was on this slope, but he had his drekkadyr stumbling along the incline as quickly as possible.

I waved an arm out to him until he saw me, but once he did, he didn't come down to meet me.

"Get on, boy!" Vegvisir called. "Get movin', we gotta hightail it out of here!"

I nodded, ducked back near my mount, and was up on my saddle in a matter of seconds. Then I tried to get the drekkadyr climbing higher on the steep slope, and his hooves slipping on the ice almost sent us rolling down the ravine, but the horned beast steadied himself well enough. After several harried minutes like this, I finally met up with Vegvisir, and the old man was more wild-eyed than ever.

"You're sure they're gone?" I asked.

“They scaled the rise, but they ain’t gone for good,” he said. “Svelgard won’t leave trespassers to the beasts. Thanks to these fuckin’ hooves, they know there’s three of us out here, and they know we can travel with some speed. If we stay within five miles of this spot, they’ll sure as hell catch us.”

“What were those beasts they were riding?” I asked. “They seemed faster than our drekkadyr when they took off.”

“That’s because they are,” Vegvisir muttered as he squinted over his shoulder to check the area. “The íssdyr can outrun and outflank us. And they won’t make a damn sound while they do it, either. Go on, find your wife. We gotta get gone.”

I nodded as I took the lead, and the two of us made our way along the rocky incline. The snow was still coming down heavily, so I couldn’t see for shit, but I frantically scanned the black and white wilderness for any sign of Eir. The thought of passing her up, or her doubling back to find me, made my chest tighten with fear, but I tried to keep a level head even though it was taking too long to find her.

If I let Eir get lost out here, I’d never forgive myself. I’d probably end up getting my ass caught by Svelgard just to meet up with her back at their stronghold as a damn prisoner. Based on what the sky elf foretold, I knew this would most likely mean enslavement for the both of us, but a dozen other scenarios sprang to my mind while my chest ached worse and worse.

Then I saw brown scales through the black trees.

Dyggur was a hundred feet below and behind us, but he was coming straight to me now, and my knees went numb with relief as Eir’s green eyes met mine.

“Fucking hell,” I croaked. “There she is, she’s behind us.”

“Come on, girl!” Vegvisir hollered down the slope. “Hurry up, we’re crossing over this ridge!”

“But it’s south!” she yelled back.

“That’s right, let’s go!” Vegvisir passed me up before Eir even reached us, and he kicked his drekkadyr hard to make him gallop at

a diagonal along the slope. He was headed for the upper ridge of this ravine, but I waited behind until Eir was close enough for me to keep sanity, and then the two of us galloped after him together.

The moment we crested the ridge, another vast glimpse of the Krugg Mond range sprawled out before us, and Vegvisir barreled straight down into the abyss.

He didn't stick to any path I could discern, and he didn't slow down for anything. Eir and I kept up with the old man's route as he kept us heading southeast, and we zigzagged down slopes and up over a dozen ridges.

My mount's ribs swelled against my calves from the effort, and the drekkadyr was breathing hard and snorting ice from his nostrils while Dyggur galloped directly behind. Eir could've outstripped us all easily, but she kept her position to make sure neither of our mounts slowed down, no matter how worn-out they were.

The idea of how lost we were getting weighed heavily on my mind the farther Vegvisir took us, but when our mounts couldn't run any further, he finally reined it in.

We must have been at least ten miles from the ravine by now, and way off course, but the terrain was exactly the same. Piles of untouched snow clung to everything while strict black trees jutted toward the sky, and Vegvisir looked back to make sure we'd kept up.

"We can't run these drekkadyr any more today," I told him as my mount wheezed against the cold. "They won't hold up without some rest, and we've got days of travel ahead of us."

"Aye," he agreed. "We should be alright walkin' from here."

"But we are miles to the south of where we should be," Eir said.

Dyggur trotted up to join us, and the heat rays billowing from his scales were enough to melt the snow on the black boughs above our heads. Droplets of water started streaming down onto Eir while she looked between the two of us, but Vegvisir waved her concerns off.

“Better to be south of our trail than right on theirs,” he assured her. “Those warriors are gonna follow our hooves back to the east for a ways, and when they do, they’ll see we’re working our way north. So that’s where they’ll likely be lookin’. We’re good and lost now, but we’ll head straight west from here.”

“Yes, this does sound best,” my wife agreed. “I would do the same if this were my clan’s territory. Well... unless I thought my quarry was very intelligent. Then I would split my patrol and head both north and south, survey both areas, and if nothing came up, I’d stay in waiting until dark. Follow the smoke and the flames.”

The old man furrowed his ice-cruled brow. “Yeah, well, I can’t do much about any of that. We’ll try and get about fifteen miles west before dark, though. That should put us pretty damn close to the crossing none of the Farthegns wanna take. It’s our best bet for tonight.”

I nodded my approval, and the old man promptly got his drekkadyr moving west again. We took it at an easy pace to cool the beasts down slowly, but we didn’t let them rest even though their hooves shuffled heavily through the snow. The clouds in the sky grew denser as the snow fell more rapidly, but the wind died down a little over the next half-hour. This gave our eyes a break from squinting for the first time in a while, and I kept a close watch on our surroundings as we followed one ravine after the other.

Eir positioned Dyggur at the rear, but she stayed just off to the side where I could easily see her. Every time I checked on her, the green-eyed beauty had a calculating look on her face. She was constantly scanning the wilderness, but I could tell she was getting worn out, and I was right there with her.

The sky was getting dimmer, and both of us hadn’t slept nearly enough last night. None of us had eaten a full meal since this morning, either, and the lower temperatures were burning up our energy faster than they would have otherwise.

Still, Eir stayed dedicated and alert, and I was about to thank her for it when I glanced back and found her much closer than I expected.

With her mittens off and bow in hand.

“Aaron...” my winged wife murmured, and her green eyes were as hard as slate. “They’re already waiting for us.”

I locked my jaw. “What do you mean?”

“Svelgard,” she breathed. “I found them. Some are ahead of this turn, but others are behind us. I can smell them. We’re surrounded.”

I whipped my head to the front again, and beyond Vegvisir’s mount, a blind turn was coming up in the ravine. There were no signs of movement, and not a sound above the crunching of snow under our hooves. But Eir was never wrong, and as I looked around the area, I realized this was the perfect spot for an ambush.

The walls of the pass were too high to scale quickly, and the upcoming turn was sharp.

Then I looked behind us, and three fur-cloaked warriors were stalking their way through the black woods on lean, white beasts.

And they already had their serrated scythes drawn.



Chapter 12

Svelgard's mounts stood only a foot shorter than my drekkadyr, and they moved like ghosts as they silently trailed us through the trees of the ravine.

The beasts' blank white eyes blended in seamlessly with their sleek fur and the frozen wilderness, and now that we were closer, I could see that the íssdyr looked like a cross between a deer and a white wolf with long, spry legs. Sprawling, translucent antlers stretched up from their slender heads, and the bluing light of the evening made the antlers glisten like icicles. I could see their shaggy tails swaying slowly behind them while their paws barely disturbed the snow, and they moved without any haste, like it hadn't cost them anything to trail us this far.

Then the three íssdyr emerged from the cover of the black trees, and behind the icy veil of their antlers, I could see the hooded faces of Svelgard's warriors.

The men looked as calm as their mounts while they bared their teeth in predatory sneers. Clouds of condensation billowed from their mouths, and they kept their eyes locked on us beneath a wash of black smudging. The three of them held their scythes in one hand as they brought the íssdyr to a stop, and when they began to dismount, Eir and I quickly turned our mounts around.

Then I heard Vegvisir curse under his breath behind us, and I glanced back to see five more íssdyr coming around the bend beyond the wanderling.

The old man quickly backed his drekkadyr closer to ours. "They got us, boy."

"Eir... now," I muttered, but my wife didn't loose her arrow.

"We need them off those beasts," she whispered. "Let them come."

My heartbeat kicked up to galloping speed as I sized up the builds of our eight opponents.

The bearded men had to be as burly as Hylmrek warriors under their shaggy white and black furs. They were grislier in appearance, probably on account of the harsher elements they lived in, but they didn't have the same maniacal, scalping energy I'd seen among Hylmrek's warriors. These men kept their teeth bared in a natural sneer, and there was something deadened about the look in their smudged-out eyes.

Only two women were among the six men, but this made me realize there was a serious issue with this arrangement from where I stood right now.

We were the trespassers in their territory, and this wasn't a battlefield. According to the codes of the Red Forest, killing a Farthegn woman outside a battlefield was an act of war... but we weren't technically in the Red Forest anymore. We were in the middle of Krugg Mond. Still, I doubted this one clan didn't follow the same rules, but it wasn't the time or the place to ask my wife for a crash course in Farthegn codes of conduct.

To be honest, I wasn't sure I'd have much of a choice when it came to fighting for my life against these women either way. Farthegn women were known to be more skilled in combat than their beefier counterparts, and these two seemed to be the heads of this patrol.

The women warriors rode side by side as they led the second group from around the bend, and they bore identically pale and stoic faces. Their matching black dreadlocks stuck out from their white fur hoods while they clutched their scythes in opposite hands, and I tried to find any differences between the two, but the only variance I saw was in their eye colors.

One of the women warriors had soulless black irises that were hardly discernible with her skin smudged out around them. I decided she must have been the tracker I'd seen between the trees before. She was almost as pale as the íssdyr she rode, but while her twin was just as porcelain in complexion, this second woman's eyes were

an arctic, icy blue. The color blazed almost as bright as Eir's eyes did in the dim blue light, but they were mesmerizing in a much less alluring way.

Both women watched us like a pair of wolves closing in to toy with their prey, and the moment I picked up on this energy, I knew I'd end up fighting these bitches to the death.

Codes or no codes, it would come down to me or them.

Then the group of five dismounted from the íssdyr, and they spread out to encircle us with the others.

None of the warriors attacked yet. The eight of them just kept us blocked in with their scythes poised across their chests, and the three men directly in front of me sneered a little more while they sized us up.

Vegvisir seemed to amuse them the most, but I didn't miss the way their hungry eyes lingered on Eir's cinched waist. A flicker of unease came to their faces when they considered my wife's black wings, but they masked it well by the time they got to glaring at me.

Then one of the bearded men growled something I couldn't understand. The only word that translated was "Hylmrek."

Whatever Eir spat back at him sounded like pure venom as her native language trilled across her tongue, and the two women were the only warriors who didn't chuckle mirthlessly in response.

The one with the arctic eyes was quick to silence the whole group. Her grating command split the snowy air like a whip, and once the men's grins dropped, the woman warrior settled her icy gaze on my wife. I watched as a conniving smile curled at one corner of her pale lips, and the longer she looked Eir over, the louder Dyggur's low growl became.

But still, no one moved.

We remained locked at the center of a ring of scythes, and my mind began to churn a mile a minute. A familiar heat had started building in my chest the moment the first group of men dismounted,

but it was searing by now, and my awareness sharpened with each passing second.

The first issue we had was how to spare our mounts in this fight, because those scythes could take their legs out in one swipe. Eir had been right about keeping these assholes off their íssdyr, though. If their beasts were faster than ours, they could outmaneuver and outfight us no matter what we tried, but the next issue was how to save our own asses.

The trees grew tight along the slim ravine we stood in, and any attempt to flee would just send the warriors of Svelgard right back to their white mounts. Our only option was to hold our ground on foot and slaughter their asses as quickly as possible, and I'd already begun tallying the positions of all eight warriors along with the placement of the five tomahawks on my belt.

Then I took note of my wife's open case of arrows near her calf, and I knew our opponents couldn't see it since she was so close to my side. From where they all stood, Eir only had one arrow and two knives within reach, but all she needed was a matter of seconds to take out at least three of these hooded bastards.

If we could buy that much time, at least.

I let the mark on my chest blaze through my core without moving an inch, and I focused all my attention on who my first two kills would be while I gauged Eir's most likely choices.

My calculating was interrupted when the identical women exchanged a cunning glance between themselves. I narrowed my eyes on the swift exchange, but then the next statement the blue-eyed warrior made caused Eir to bristle on the spot.

My wife's wings rose back as she pulled the string on her bow taut, and a split second later, my hand locked on the handle of a tomahawk.

Just like that, the battle had begun.

The two men directly ahead of us died within milliseconds of each other, and the last six warriors lunged by the time the dead men hit the snow. My wife managed to take out a third warrior in

front of us while I hurled another tomahawk into the skull of the man on my left, but then the scythe blades struck out as I kicked my mount hard in the side.

Eir had the same idea. As my drekkadyr reared up and lunged out of range, we both spared our beasts' legs just in time. Then I tore a jagged sword from the sheath near my right knee, and when I wove around a tree to double back around, it looked like Vegvisir had taken our cue.

Unfortunately, the old man didn't draw any weapons when he had the chance. He was unarmed and galloping headlong down the ravine instead, and I was pissed for about two seconds before I realized he wasn't fleeing.

He was fucking over our opponents.

Five of the waiting íssdyr scattered into the black woods as Vegvisir charged at them, but I didn't have time to keep an eye on the wanderling after that. I was busy jumping from my mount's saddle, and I let the drekkadyr barrel after the old man as I hit the ground.

Then I dodged an incoming scythe blade, slashed my attacker's shins, and dove out of range before he brought his three-foot blade chopping down into the snow where I'd been. There were only two men and the twins left to take on, and the hulking warrior I was up against struck out relentlessly as the woman with the blue eyes closed in on me, too.

Both of them were wild-eyed with their teeth bared, and they launched a harried and truly terrifying attack. I found myself ducking and dodging their scythes while they forced me toward the steep walls of the ravine, but their maneuvers were too quick and close for me to risk countering any of them with only a sword. Instead, I hurled a tomahawk at the woman warrior the first chance I got, but she blocked the strike with the stock of her scythe, and I narrowly escaped the lower cut she took at my leg in the same maneuver.

Then I dove behind a tree, wove between two more, and circled back to slash out at the man's side. My jagged sword broke through his shaggy hides and took a chunk of his flesh off like a

Christmas ham just before I had to dodge another scythe, but the man just kept coming at me. He had blood pouring down his leg and blooming on his left side, but he didn't even miss a beat.

The way the two warriors double-teamed their attack left me stuck on the defensive, and all I could do was evade their incoming strikes as well as I could while I stumbled and side-stepped deeper into the snowy woods. But nothing seemed to slow them down. They moved through feet of snow with the ease of a lynx as they took turns dropping, chopping, and swiping at me from two sides, and I was only feet away from getting pinned at the base of the ravine walls.

My chest burned on as I kept my mind as blank as possible to ward off the panic, and for every scythe I dodged, I took note of their repeated maneuvers. There was some method to their crazed, serrated attacks, and I'd just found enough of a pattern to spare myself from getting too boxed in when I caught sight of Eir beyond their shaggy forms.

My winged wife was just as trapped as me.

Her two opponents didn't have her at the wall yet, but it looked like she'd lost her bow at some point, and the man she fought with had an arrow buried in the back of his thigh. This did nothing to slow him down though, and Eir was armed with only her Bowie knife against him and the black-eyed bitch.

My vision tunneled at the sight as I lunged aside and chucked another tomahawk at my attackers, and this time, the bit struck true.

The bearded warrior took the tomahawk directly in the pit of his shoulder, and he roared in pain as he lost hold of his scythe. The woman with the blue eyes nearly took my arm off when I tried to finish him off with my sword, but I sliced her across the thigh for it, and her stumbling gave me the opening I'd been waiting for.

In one, unforgiving swipe, I slashed the roaring man across the throat, and as blood spurted from the gash, I dropped to my knees and snatched the tomahawk I'd lost before.

Then I sprinted back to the center of the ravine to help Eir. I could hear the blue-eyed woman panting behind me, but I didn't slow my pace. I kept my eyes locked on my wife as I realized she had blood oozing down her left arm, and the world seemed to fade around me as my heart pounded heavy in my ears.

Then Eir got an opening, and a gurgling yowl echoed through the woods.

I was halfway to my wife when her Bowie knife impaled the man's eye socket, but even this didn't derail my path.

Because the black-eyed warrior twin was right at Eir's back. She had her scythe raised high with a ruthless grin on her pale face, and I raised my tomahawk as fast as I could.

I never got to throw it, though.

A serrated blade hooked my shin from behind, and pain seared through my leg as I crashed down hard in the snow. My veins surged with fury as the image of Eir with a scythe above her head blazed in my mind, but then I felt Dyggur's hooves shaking the ground, and I rolled with my fall to swing my boot into my attacker's face.

The blue-eyed woman cried out as my heel struck her cheek. The force sent a spray of blood from her mouth as she was knocked several feet away, and she lost her scythe in the process. But I didn't have any time to give a shit right now.

I looked back toward Eir just in time to see Dyggur almost flatten the black-eyed woman for me, and while the warrior managed to escape his bite, she took a giant hoof to the gut.

The sound of her slamming into a stout black tree echoed around the dimming ravine, and Dyggur was so pissed that he ended up knocking Eir aside while he charged after his prey. The black-eyed woman was still gasping for breath as she dropped through the branches and scrambled to get out of range, but I didn't see what happened next.

A knee drove itself into my spine at full force, and the air rushed out of me as a grating war cry pierced my ears.

The blue-eyed woman was on me now with her arm locked around my neck to strangle me. I rolled so I could crush her under my back, but the warrior didn't let up. She tightened her crippling hold and tore at my skull to try and gouge out my eyes, and I wheezed for any sliver of air as my back seared from the pain of her diving knee drop.

Then I heard Eir's blistering shriek nearby, and the next thing I saw was the eyes of my winged wife as she raised a bloody Bowie knife above me.

My soul just about left my body.

Eir's sea green eyes were inked out entirely in black for the first time since I'd conquered Illska, and I really wasn't sure if she was about to kill my ass right now or not. She looked like a gorgeous, raging hellion bearing down on me with her black wings splayed and her black eyes boring into me, but then she let out another blistering shriek. Next thing I knew, she'd sliced my attacker's forearm rather than my own neck, and warm blood oozed onto me while another, less demonic scream shattered my eardrum.

I gasped to fill my lungs as I rolled away, and I left the screaming woman there so Eir could finish her off. But when the blue-eyed woman got a close-up of my hellion wife, she went into overdrive. With blood streaming from her arm, thigh, and mouth, she knocked Eir's legs out from under her, flipped away, and shot to her feet.

Eir and I moved at once to grab the bitch before she could get away, but I took a fur boot to the temple for it that sent my head spinning into oblivion. I could hear my winged wife taking off after her like a bat out of hell, but then everything seemed to happen all at once after that. My head was reeling from the kick and from the shock of seeing my wife in demon mode again, and all I could register was the sound of women screeching, Dyggur roaring, and Vegvisir hollering in the distance.

By the time I could see straight again, the wanderling was barreling back through the ravine in the opposite direction than before. Eir was on the ground and tearing at her quarry's black

dreadlocks as she let loose a stream of Farthegn threats, and the Svelgard woman screamed like a banshee in response. Then the twin managed to make it out of my wife's clutches, and this was around the time I finally got back up to speed on the situation.

Dyggur hadn't killed the black-eyed twin yet. His snout was sliced open from her scythe blade, so he was rearing up and slamming into trees from the pain. The black-eyed warrior took this chance to make a break for it, but now both of the twins were bloody all over as they ran through the snowy forest.

Vegvisir was already ahead of them, and he had his drekkadyr poised to chase off the last of the íssdyr.

My leg was shot to shit now that my shin was sliced open, but I ran my ass off anyway and caught up with Eir as she recovered from the kick she'd taken to the gut. We were both armed and several paces behind while we tried to catch up to the fleeing twins, but neither of us made it before the warrior with the black eyes whipped her scythe around her head and flung it straight at the wanderling.

"Vegvisir, jump!" I bellowed.

The old man yanked up on his reins, but he didn't jump. Instead, he derailed his path at the last second, and the scythe blade impaled a blackened tree right beyond him. Then Vegvisir watched as the women ran right past him toward the last of the íssdyr.

I threw my last tomahawk just before the women reached their mounts, and the blue-eyed warrior took the bit of my weapon to her upper arm, but she only cried out and kept on running. I was out of tomahawks too, so she lunged up onto a white beast a few seconds later, and her twin made it to an íssdyr shortly after.

Then the two bloody warriors looked back in terror at my wife, and in a blink, both of their mounts galloped into the snowy woods.

"Son of a bitch!" I growled as I came to a limping stop.

"How dare you let them get away!" my wife seethed and turned on Vegvisir.

The old man jumped in his saddle when he saw her spooky black stare.

“Woah, calm down,” I muttered, and I caught her arm to make sure she didn’t get much closer to the old guy.

“They were right in front of you, and you did nothing to stop them!” Eir growled.

“Why the hell are you blaming me?” Vegvisir demanded.

“Because your carelessness could cost my husband his life!” Eir hissed, and she bit out every word.

“Eir, I’m fine,” I firmly cut in, and I kneaded her arm to see if it would calm her down a bit.

But Eir’s eyes stayed just as spooky and black, and I began to worry she’d end up summoning the dead any second now. She was shaking with fury while her black wings stayed in a menacing spread at her back, and for all I knew, she’d vanish all over again in the middle of Svelgard.

That was the last thing we needed right now, but as concerning as all this was, I knew better than to mention how she looked when she was this pissed off.

“Look, I know shit got out of hand back there,” I told my fuming wife, “but we’re all alive, and we took down six of those bastards. It’s probably better we didn’t kill two women of Svelgard in the process. We’ve got enough enemies as it is, right? So let’s focus on--”

“Those warriors will alert Svelgard to all that has happened here,” Eir said through gritted teeth. “When they do, half their clan could come upon us in the night.”

“Those women don’t have any reason to bring half their damn clan after three people,” Vegvisir countered.

“Of course, they do!” Eir snapped. “They know who I am! The women recognized me from our last battle in Hylmrek, and they will think Aaron Briggs is born of Hylmrek as well because he is with me. Two warriors of Hylmrek trespassing in Svelgard is a threat they

won't allow to go unchecked. Those women will hunt us all throughout these mountains now."

"Alright... that could be bad," I sighed. "Especially if word of this somehow gets back around to Hylmrek, but to be honest... you scared the living shit out of that chick with the blue eyes. You scared the shit out of me, even. I don't think running into you again is something they're gonna want to do real soon, no matter where you're from."

Eir's brow knitted in confusion. "Aaron Briggs, this is Svelgard. Nothing scares them. Those foolish women were trying to make a scene to bring their other patrols to this area."

I glanced at Vegvisir, and while I wasn't so sure this was the case, the old man seemed a little more concerned now. Then he scruffed his stubbly chin and nodded.

"Better get out of this territory tonight, then," he muttered. "Svelgard's stronghold is probably around forty miles to the east, and I'd wager we got another seven miles ahead of us before we reach the Verolkki crossing. Should take about an hour if we're lucky. That river will put us within reach of the wolves, and Svelgard won't touch us out there. None of them cross Verolkki. But night's fallin', so we gotta be quick about it. I got your drekkadyr just beyond that bend, I'll bring him back for you."

"I appreciate it," I said with a nod, and I turned to my spooky-eyed wife. "Eir, I want you to focus on finding your bow out here and checking on Dyggur, but nothing else. Please just... ignore all the bodies, do not fly off, and I'm gonna go find my tomahawks. I'm bringing the scythes these guys dropped, too. In case something else does come up with Svelgard, at least we'll be on a more even footing."

"Yes, my chief," Eir promptly agreed. "I promise I have no intention of summoning any souls from Svelgard. I feel perfectly fine, and I don't want these souls."

I forced a smile despite the black abyss of her eyes. "Great."

“But I must clean my new knife,” my wife added. “There is blood all over it, and I promised you I would care for it properly. Hurry with your work. We should leave this place within the next two minutes.”

Eir crouched down in the snow, and I smirked with pride as she started rubbing her Bowie knife clean in the stuff with her jaw set firm in dedication. I still didn't feel alright about leaving her in such a soul-raising state, but I tried to trust she had some control over all this shit, and I left to revisit the men I'd killed.

I pulled my tomahawks out of their bodies one by one, and after I found the one I'd dropped when the scythe caught my leg, I wiped the bits clean and hitched my four remaining tomahawks on my belt. I started securing the serrated scythes to my packsaddle next, and I added a couple to Eir's saddle, too. Vegvisir declined the offer, but he gladly took some of the white furs I harvested from the bodies, and the old guy threw one on for added warmth while I rolled the rest up in case we needed them later.

The whole time I worked, I checked the slim ravine every few seconds to make sure my winged wife was still around, but once I saw her eyes had suddenly shifted back to green again, I was finally able to relax.

A little bit, anyways.

She still looked beyond pissed about the women who'd gotten away. More than once, she sent a livid glance toward Vegvisir as she worked to calm Dyggur down, but the old man didn't seem too bothered by her. He just waited with my drekkadyr's reins in hand while he kept an eye on our surroundings.

“I am ready,” Eir announced as she led Dyggur over.

“Is he alright?” I reached out to pat the heillhaust, but he tried to take a bite out of me, so I ended up jumping back instead.

Eir shushed the beast and calmed him down again, and then my wife sent me a pointed look as Dyggur snorted in my direction.

“He is perfectly fine, don't make a show of it,” Eir scolded. “Heillhausts are incredibly proud creatures. The proudest you will

ever meet. An injury isn't something they take well, and pointing it out will only entice their fury."

I nodded as I instinctively glanced at the scaly brown snout, but when I found Dyggur's eyes burning through me, I swiftly averted my gaze.

"Let's get going, then," I said and mounted up. "We've stayed here five minutes too long already."

Vegvisir didn't hesitate to start back along the ravine, and we left the bodies of Svelgard's clansmen in the snow behind us as we rounded the sharp bend. Then we rode onward as the last light of the day began to fade, and even though our mounts were worn through, we kept them moving at a clipped pace. The steady trot was enough to keep their heat up, but not enough to make them start wheezing again, and Vegvisir did his best to take us along the least challenging path. Our route ranged all over the mountains while the dusky blue got more muted around us, and eventually, the black trees blended into the night.

The snow gave off just enough of a glow that we could see where we were going, but I lost track of the terrain while one slope after another passed by. My eyes burned from exhaustion, and my torn shin throbbed worse now that my adrenaline had leveled off, but I tried to stay alert enough to scan the shadows around us. I knew the íssdyr were probably even more difficult to spot at night, but Eir stayed alert too, and she didn't pick up the scent of any warriors trailing us.

My wife did tell me whenever she sensed another beast, and I was impressed Vegvisir could identify most of them based on sound alone. Usually, whatever they sensed out there wasn't anything we had to worry much about, but even when the wanderling seemed unnerved by the presence of a certain predator, he stayed his course.

The molten moon was high in the sky and filtering through the black trees before we reached a break in the terrain. Then Vegvisir finally reined in his drekkadyr on the banks of a broad, frozen river.

“This here’s the Verolkki crossing,” the wanderling said, and he didn’t need to speak much louder than a whisper for us to hear him.

The night was deadly quiet now that the wind was still. I could hear the flakes piling up around us, and nothing but smooth snow stretched before us. The molten moon turned the scenery an eerie orange, but on the other side of the frozen river, more mountains loomed in the darkness. They weren’t as tall as the ones we just crossed through, but I could tell the same strict, black trees covered the full expanse of the peaks, and it struck me as odd that someone as greedy as the Farthegns could be kept away from this westernmost portion of the range.

Sure, wolves were a pain in the ass sometimes, but in my opinion, Farthegns were worse.

“Do we rest here, or keep going for a ways?” I asked as I looked up and down the frozen river.

“Best to get another few miles into those mountains,” Vegvisir replied. “All this snowfall will help cover our tracks, but we’ll find us a place to rest up once we’re farther from Krugg Mond.”

I nodded in agreement, and the old man nudged the side of his drekkadyr to keep him moving.

Then we crossed Verolkki, and since our horned beasts were dead tired, it was another thirty or so minutes of dark, snowy woods before we were able to start looking for a place we could hold up tonight. Eir ended up locating a cave for us high up on the side of a nearby peak, and after a precarious climb up the shadowy slope, we finally made it.

The wind was colder on this western side of the mountain. It looked like the place had its fair share of wintry storms, and even the hardy black trees were battered up here. But this meant there were enough fallen branches to use for firewood, and we were also facing away from Svelgard, so we could risk a few flames to warm us up tonight.

I made quick work of checking the area for any signs of creatures who might have made a den in the cave. It was a decent

size, but not too deep, and I could tell by the frigid breeze seeping through the wide mouth that not many beasts would be drawn to the place. It did have a clear view of the ocean beyond the nearest peaks though, and there was enough level ground outside for our beasts to rest for the night.

Vegvisir and I got to work gathering wood and removing all the packsaddles, and Eir collected every two-inch-thick stick she could find for her own project. Once she pulled out her Bowie knife and started sharpening them all at both ends, I realized she was devising a trap, and she worked non-stop until she had enough to stretch across the entire width of the cave entrance. Then she used the head of a tomahawk to hammer the spikes into the frozen ground, and I helped her out as I caught on to what she had in mind.

In the end, a strip of angry spikes lined the mouth of our cave for the night, but they were concealed just below the line of snow so no one who came prowling around would know to step over them. The idea was a simple one, but I was glad Eir had thought about it.

I still arranged my weapons near the fire just in case, where I'd be able to grab them easily if anyone yelped in pain during the night. Then I started rolling out some of the hides we brought along to make a bed and sitting area for us, and while we got some snow boiling and a simple stew cooking on the fire, I dug into Amaeda's remedies.

The old elf had labeled every vial, pouch, jar, canister, and bundle of herbs with instructions and their intended uses, and I chuckled a bit as I read through her spiraling handwriting. There were so many remedies in the satchels that I probably could have traveled for five months rather than five days before I used up even half of it, but I was grateful she'd gone above and beyond on this.

Eir and I were able to get all our injuries tended to and wrapped up by the time we finished preparing our dinner, and Vegvisir discussed the next leg of our trip throughout our meal, but Eir remained completely silent. She hadn't said a word to the old man since we left the crime scene back in Svelgard, and when he

asked her if she'd ever dipped a toe in the ocean before, my wife ignored him.

"You're not gonna give him the silent treatment all night over this, are you?" I sighed.

"No, I will gladly talk to him if you like." Eir turned her frigid glare toward Vegvisir. "You are a lying old man. I have seen sorcerers tear the ground open with their staves before. You could have used that staff to help us, so I say you have let those warriors get away on purpose."

"Eir..." I warned.

"It's alright," the old man said with a tired sigh. "I know it looked that way. Truth is, it ain't that kinda staff, girl. Sorcerers use their staves to channel their natural born powers in a more direct way, and if a sorcerer has the power to control the dirt or the stones, then that's an option. And that's the only option. If a Farthegn grabs their staff, it won't do nothing for them. I'm not a sorcerer, and this ain't a sorcerer's staff. It's more powerful than the others, and it could be wielded by the wrong hands. That's why I never use the thing around the Farthegns. If I did, and they lived to tell their clan about it, we'd all be in a hell of a lot more trouble."

"Then kill them swiftly with it," my wife said in an icy tone.

"You think that's what I learned all this shit for?" Vegvisir shot back. "I don't bust my ass traveling through hell and back just to kill some assholes. That's what you're all here to do, and this staff ain't a weapon, girl. It's my life's work."

"He's right," I muttered, and the Nordic beauty glared at me now.

"He is not," Eir scoffed. "I don't care what he says about his staff, he should have assisted our efforts. He has magic, and yet he will not use it to protect his superiors. How are we to trust him?"

"We're not his superiors," I said. "Vegvisir offered to help us find some answers, and the agreement was that I get him to the cave and back alive. He doesn't owe us his magic in return, so how he uses his staff is up to him. That being said, neither of us caught

those women, either, and Vegvisir's done all he can to get us to safety tonight. That should count for a lot."

Vegvisir nodded his thanks when I finished talking, but my wife let out a tense sigh. She still didn't say another word to the wanderling, and when she got up to sit on the opposite side of the fire from him, the old man smirked.

"That's alright," he drawled. "I'm heading off to bed, anyway. You can go on and sulk for the night. Think it over a bit."

Vegvisir winced as he got back up off his knobby knees, but then he headed toward the mouth of the cave, and I got up.

"Wait, where are you going?" I asked. "There's plenty of room for all of us in here."

"No, thanks," he muttered. "I don't sleep in caves. Too confined. I'm a tree man."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Right... Well, it's about ten degrees out there, and we still might have Svelgard to worry about. It's safer if we stick together with some coverage from the cold."

"Think it's my first time in these mountains, boy?" the old man snorted, and he rolled up his ragged sleeves like it was a balmy afternoon. "Cold won't get ye' if you keep your mind in the right place. Same goes for Farthegns. I've slept in worse conditions, and I'll tell you what... I've never gotten snatched out of a tree before. Caves, though? That's too confined. But you'll probably be alright in here. That wife's got a mood on her that'd scare a skulraeth off."

Eir's tongue click echoed behind us, and I bit my cheek to keep from laughing as Vegvisir sent me a wry look.

Then the old man pulled up his hood, grabbed his staff, and propped a bundle of furs under his arm before he shuffled out into the snow.

I waited there while I scanned the dim mountainside. Once I was sure I knew which direction I could find him in, I headed back into the cave. Then I laid out on my side near the fire with a tired groan and propped my head up with my hand. For a few quiet

minutes, I stared at the flames through heavy eyelids, and I tried not to worry about the old guy freezing to death tonight.

In some ways, he reminded me of my grandfather, and he'd lived this long, so one more night in the cold-ass mountains probably wouldn't kill him.

I looked over my shoulder at my wife, and I found Eir still glaring at the wall of the cave. The flames crackled on while she stubbornly sat about fifteen feet away, and I could tell she was in a deep brooding session because her black wings shifted in a slow and moody way.

"You gonna give me the silent treatment, too?" I asked with a grin.

Eir smirked at the wall. "Of course not, my love. I am not at all angry with you. I am frustrated with our circumstances, and I feel I have no way to remedy them."

"Then let it go," I suggested. "There's nothing else we can do about those Svelgard women, and there's more important things to think about."

"Like what?" she grumbled.

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, this is the end of your very first day outside the Red Forest," I reminded her. "It's also your first night sleeping anywhere without red trees. How's it feel?"

Eir smiled a little more, and her green eyes were glittering when she finally looked my way.

"Aaron Briggs, this day has been one of my favorites," my wife admitted. "I crossed a tundra today. A freezing cold one."

"You did do that," I agreed.

"And I saw trees that aren't red, and creatures that move like the snow," Eir continued, and she crawled closer so she could sit with me on the furs. "I even got to slaughter the warriors of Svelgard on their own land! I also love the way the mountains look when I am up high and they are everywhere I can see."

"Me too." I smiled. "It's one of my all-time favorite views."

“Don’t you think it’s invigorating the way the air challenges the lungs here?” she asked as she started toying with the metal studs on my armor. “Did you feel this? I felt it when I fought with those warriors in the ravine, and it was incredibly energizing. It made me feel as if I was fighting four warriors at once when I was only fighting two.”

“Yeah, the air thins out at higher elevations,” I explained. “Makes your lungs work harder, but you’ll get used to it.”

My wife offered a thoughtful nod, but then she sent me a dreamy smile. “I wish you could have seen the way my beautiful knife pierced the skull of our enemy today. It was the most satisfying moment. The blade impaled his eyeball with the greatest ease, and as I forced the entire length into his brain, I felt like the luckiest woman in the world to have such an effective knife. I think that may have been the best part of the entire day. I would repeat it for you to see if I could.”

“Don’t worry, I saw that and much more,” I snorted.

Eir furrowed her brow. “What do you mean by that?”

I scruffed my beard a bit while I gauged my wife’s mood. She seemed much calmer now that it was just the two of us, so I decided it’d be safe to bring up what really happened back in that ravine.

From my viewpoint.

“You uh... got a little worked up out there tonight,” I carefully led.

“Of course, I did,” Eir huffed. “Aaron Briggs, that blue-eyed bitch could have killed you!”

“She could have,” I agreed. “I’m not saying your reaction was a negative thing. You saved my ass, and I love your dedication. It’s only that your approach was a little more extreme than you might have noticed. Your eyes did the, uh... the creepy blackout thing.”

Eir paled by a few degrees. “They did? You are certain?”

“Yeah, I’m positive,” I said. “It was the same as what happened in Illska, and you kind of had a bit of a... demon voice?”

“Did I?” The Nordic beauty shifted uncomfortably on her knees. “I did not realize...”

“I figured you didn’t,” I muttered. “It’s fine, though. It seemed to scare the shit out of those twins, and you didn’t vanish this time, so that’s good.”

“And confusing,” Eir said. “Why did I not vanish?”

“Good question,” I sighed. “You didn’t raise any souls from those dead warriors, either, but maybe it’s a circumstantial thing. Did you feel different?”

My wife furrowed her brow at the fire while she thought back, but then she shrugged.

“I suppose I did,” she said. “I saw the blue-eyed bitch suffocating you, and the blood on your fur, and I became furious. But not the usual kind of furious. I felt as if I would tear that woman into pieces with my bare hands and teeth if I had to, and the woods became darker around me. The fury was so overwhelming, but I don’t really know what came after that. Now that I think about it... I felt out of my own control, but very determined to save you.”

I nodded. “Something similar happened to me. The twin with the black eyes was about to get you, and I just... snapped, I guess. I remember killing the big guy, then I think I cut the chick with the blue eyes. It’s all kind of hazy, but I took off, and after I caught that scythe to the shin, shit got weirder from there. I didn’t kill the woman when I had the chance. I could have, but I had to check on you first.”

A teasing grin curled at one corner of my wife’s mouth. “It is because you love me so very much...”

“Maybe,” I chuckled. “I’m just glad it all worked out. All things considered, I’d say it’s been a pretty good trip so far. Thanks for coming out here with me.”

“Thank you for bringing me,” Eir said, and her smile was so sweet as she tugged on my beard that my heart actually skipped a beat. “I could never have left the forest without you beside me to make me braver.”

“I’m sure you could have,” I countered, “but I’ll still take the credit.”

My wife chuckled as she reached for another log of wood, and I gladly admired the feline curve of her while she stoked the fire to a dull roar for us. Even under layers of wool and leather, Eir’s sculpted backend was an outstanding sight, but having the backdrop of a dark cave with snow falling outside and piling up in the entrance hit me on another level.

A dozen unfulfilled fantasies from my teen years popped into my mind. I couldn’t help wishing I could somehow travel back and assure that kid with a patchy beard that I would actually achieve his wildest, ruggedest dreams one day.

Bowhunting woman with great tits included.

Then a gust of frigid air blew into the cave, and Eir’s shiver made her ass shimmy right in my face.

“Is this what the honeymoon is supposed to be like?” Eir asked through chattering teeth.

A lewd grin hitched on my mouth. “I’d say so, but we haven’t checked all the boxes yet. Get over here.”

I caught hold of Eir’s ankle to drag her back onto the fur, and she gasped the moment she caught the look in my eyes.

“Now? In here?” Eir shivered. “But isn’t it too cold to think of pleasure?”

“Not at all,” I said. “Besides, I’ve got something new I wanna show you. It’ll help warm you up.”

“New?” My wife stared at me in utter confusion as I started slowly undoing the ties on her leather pants. “There cannot possibly be more to learn about intimacy.”

“Oh, there is,” I assured her.

“No, I have learned it all,” Eir insisted. “You know I have. I pay the utmost attention to your lessons. Ask me about a sexy thing, and I assure you, I know of it.”

“Oh.” I nodded and left her pants halfway untied. “Well, if you’re sure. I could have sworn I had a couple tricks stored away for special occasions, but maybe you do know everything. It’s probably better we just get to bed, anyways. Been a long day, night’s getting colder, and whether or not you know about this trick that you’ll definitely love isn’t a top priority.”

Eir was still shivering, but I could tell I’d fully piqued her interest now. Her sea green eyes flared in panic as I got up and started getting ready for bed instead. And when I sent her a casual smile and a shrug, Eir abruptly decided she didn’t know everything after all.

My beautiful, blonde, warrior wife jumped up and tore her leather armor off despite her injured arm, and I could honestly say I’d never seen a woman wrestle so desperately with a pair of pants before.



Chapter 13

Eir's black wings shivered with anticipation as she laid herself out on the hides by the fire, and aside from the linen wrapping on her arm, her lithe body was entirely exposed.

The mountain air blew through the cave along with a few snowflakes, and goosebumps dotted my wife's creamy figure as I raked my eyes over her and stripped down as well. Then I brought myself on top of her so she could curl up against me for some heat, and I started blazing a trail of kisses down her slender neck, her supple breasts, and the toned slope of her belly.

Eir sighed with relief as she let my lips roam wherever I wanted, and I licked and nipped at all of her tucks and curves. I teased her taut pink nipples a few times too, but I made sure to stroke her black feathers every now and then, and each touch gradually lulled her into an erotic daze.

The Nordic beauty wore a sultry smile while she basked in the attention, but when I brushed my lips across the soft blonde curls at the apex of her thighs, my wife suddenly gasped and sat up.

"Aaron Briggs?" Eir hissed.

"Just lie back and relax," I ordered, and I locked her hips in place before she could squirm away. "And don't moan too loud. You'd be the loudest thing out here tonight, and the last thing we need is to draw every predator in the area to us."

Eir opened her mouth to argue, but she didn't get a word out.

The moment she felt my warm breath between her thighs, her protest caught in her throat, and I grinned up at her as I laid a light kiss on her clit.

The way Eir's lashes fluttered in response assured me she was already on board with this. One more kiss was all it took for her to collapse back across the hides, and I slowly slid my tongue along

her sleek pussy lips until my wife let out a long moan and arched her back.

“Shh,” I murmured.

Eir slapped her hand over her mouth, but as I started swirling my tongue across her clit, she writhed and whimpered with pleasure. I told myself I'd take my time building her up from there, but she smelled so sweet that I was already salivating for a full taste of her. I'd waited over a month for this moment, and the way Eir rolled her clit against my lips made it harder and harder to drag this out.

“Hmmm,” I moaned and tightened my grip on her toned thighs to keep myself in check.

The winged woman was quivering in under a minute as her breathless whimpers mingled with the crackling flames. I could see her breasts heaving as her pink nipples pinched into painfully taut buds, and she was becoming more undone by the second as I suckled at her clit a little harder.

Then Eir's fingers instinctively latched onto the roots of my hair, and I couldn't wait a minute longer. I plunged my tongue into Eir's tight pink entrance, and the moment I did, a grating moan tore from her throat.

I couldn't have stopped to silence her if I tried.

My wife tasted sweeter than anything or anyone I'd ever experienced, and having discovered this, I could've wept right then. But I didn't. I kept it together and fucking devoured her pussy instead, and Eir nearly tore my hair out over it.

My fingers dug into my wife's plush ass as I held her in place, and I didn't ease up on her no matter how much she bucked and panted in response. Finally tasting Eir's delicious pussy overran all my senses and made my cock ache for more of her, and I ate her out like a starving man as her legs splayed further and further apart.

The winged woman was dripping wet against my lips and clawing at my scalp for more, and every time I delved my tongue into her, she only got wetter and wetter until she couldn't contain her moans anymore.

Eir had given up covering her mouth, and she kept one hand knotted in her blonde braids while the other refused to release me. Cold wind and smoke blew around the cave as the sound of my wife's pleasure echoed off the rocks, but then the taut walls of her tunnel started convulsing around my tongue.

I pinned her hips down hard as I flicked my thumb across her clit to push her over the edge, and the dark angel lost all restraint as she arched and shrieked my name.

A river of her climax splashed across my tongue, and I fiendishly lapped up every mouthwatering drop while my wife desperately panted my name over and over again. My loins ached with a vengeance, but I didn't stop. Not until Eir's legs were trembling in my hold, and she finally dragged me up to her by my hair.

Eir's cheeks were flushed with arousal when she grabbed hold of my beard and tried for a kiss, but I clamped a stern hand over her panting mouth first.

"Woman, I thought I told you to be quiet," I growled. "I think I'm gonna have to punish you with my cock for that."

Eir nodded vigorously as her sea green eyes burned into mine. Her body kept writhing against her will, and my cock twitched hungrily as I realized I was a few seconds away from slamming it deep into her. But still, I waited and really reveled in the moment. My deadly wife clung to my forearms as her pleading eyes begged for more, and there was something incredibly servile in her expression. Like she'd do literally anything for me after a treat like that, and I took a long minute to enjoy the view before I sent Eir a warning look.

"This time, you better keep it down," I murmured and finally released her mouth.

The second I dropped my hand, Eir caught my lips in hers, shoved me back, and climbed onto my lap.

The woman was so desperate to fuck me now that she almost toppled me into the fire, but I barely noticed my arm hair singeing away. Eir already had the tip of my cock poised at her sopping wet

entrance as she straddled me, and she kept me sitting upright so she could cling to me for warmth.

“I’ll be quiet, Aaron,” my wife promised through grating breaths. “Anything you want. Just let me show you how much I love you.”

Then she let her hips sink down onto mine, and it was my turn to try and hold my tongue.

Eir wasn’t at all shy about forcing my full length inside her, and she was so tight that I almost came before she got there. Every rough thrust brought my dick deeper into her velvety tunnel as I shook from the effort to contain myself, and her fervent kisses made it damn near impossible to hold out. My wife’s breasts heaved against my chest, and her kisses became hungrier the deeper I penetrated her, but when she finally took my entire girth, she had to bite down hard on my shoulder to keep from moaning.

The pain and the sound of her soft whimpers made my blood ignite with pure lust, and I clamped one hand on the crook of my wife’s wing as the other latched onto her slender hip. Eir started mewling in my ear as I forced her to keep my cock scraping deep inside her pussy, and every inch of her trembled while she rolled her hips in mind-numbing circles.

That was when I noticed a distinct difference in the way my wife moved with me tonight.

Eir wasn’t completely unbridled or caught up in her carnal side for once, but she was more focused on me than ever before. She started kissing me slow and deep while her hands roamed across my shoulders, and whenever her fingertips grazed the mark on my chest, she left them there long enough to make my body vibrate with pleasure. Then she’d stroke her fingers through my hair and clutch me by the neck so I couldn’t stop kissing her, and every silky touch made my spine tingle while the Nordic beauty kept her body flush and writhing against me.

The heat between us built up even more as I sensed how in sync we were. The longer I reveled in Eir’s tender kisses, the more passionate she became, and every rolling thrust forced my dick even deeper into her body. Her velvety walls cinched tighter around my

shaft as my mind disconnected from my body, and I was suddenly aware of how secluded we were.

For once, there were no slaves or Farthegns within miles of us. My wife had me all to herself in the snowy mountains, and she seemed to understand this, too. She couldn't stop doting on me with every perfect curve of her body, and all of my combined senses were focused solely on her.

I still had the sweet taste of her pussy on my tongue, and her long blonde braids smelled like woodsmoke while they fell around her face and creamy breasts. Her soft moans seeped into my mouth as her tongue tangled seamlessly with mine, and when she pulled away to look into my eyes, her adoration sliced straight through me.

"I love you, Aaron," my wife whimpered.

Eir's tone was so soft and genuine when she said this that my lungs suddenly forgot how to breathe or speak. But it didn't matter. Somewhere deep in my bones, I knew exactly how to respond, and I swiftly rolled Eir under me as another blast of cold air brought snow scattering into the cave.

The second I had her pinned on the hides, I started taking her with deep, powerful thrusts, and my wife couldn't help shrieking as my cock bottomed out in her repeatedly.

But I still didn't stop.

I just clamped my hand over her mouth to muffle her moans, and I bit into her neck while I fucked her harder and harder. The whole time I did so, Eir's loving gaze blazed in my mind as her wings started glistening in the firelight, and her nails clawed into my forearms until she broke through the skin.

Eir was frothing wet for me when I finally let myself cum deep inside of her, and an almost endless torrent of semen sprayed into her womb as her pussy tightened like a vise around my shaft.

"Yesssss..." I growled like a tiger as our shared climaxes sent a wave of blazing heat shooting through my body, and my wife spread her legs even wider to take every inch of me.

“Hmrrrrrr! Mooorrrre!” I could hear the blonde beauty moaning under the muzzle of my palm, and I made sure she got all she wanted.

Each heavy throb of my dick filled my wife’s quaking tunnel with another creamy wave of my cum, and it felt like it was never going to end. Just like the first time I’d fucked her, both of us were lost in wave after wave of climaxes, and each jolt of pleasure made me bury myself even deeper with another forceful thrust.

I tried to keep her quiet through her unbridled orgasms, but she was still loud enough to spook our mounts. I could hear the drekkadyr braying anxiously from the dark as Dyggur let out an irritated snarl, and I smirked to hear it while I glanced up at the shadowy mouth of the cave.

Then my smirk dropped, and I thought I saw something move out there.

I immediately slowed my thrusts as I squinted toward the darkness, but I couldn’t decide if I’d imagined it or not.

My eyes were burning from exhaustion, and the firelight beside me made it harder to see beyond the snowy entrance. I hadn’t remotely come down from my latest climax, either, so I was fighting through a heady brain fog, and the snowfall didn’t make it any easier to decipher what I was seeing.

The beasts settled down though, as Eir finally fell into ragged breaths instead of moans, and I was almost convinced my tired eyes were just playing tricks on me.

Then I saw a shadow shift beyond the spikes, and for a millisecond, the farthest halo of our firelight illuminated what looked like a woman’s face.

Just as quickly, it was gone.

“Get your bow,” I muttered under my breath, and I abruptly pulled out of my wife as I grabbed a cutlass from beside the fire.

“Wh-What?” Eir asked in a daze.

I didn’t stick around long enough to respond.

I stormed straight to the mouth of the cave and into the snow with my runed cutlass at the ready, but when I looked around at the moonlit woods, there were no signs of anyone. Beyond the concealed spikes we'd lined the entrance with, the snow was untouched, and I was alone aside from our three beasts to my right.

The two drekkadyr looked at me with startled eyes as the snow continued piling up on their dense fur. Dyggur didn't even bother getting up from his melted puddle, and the scaly beast only stared at me like I'd insulted him by standing here.

To be fair, I had shown up buck naked out of nowhere, but I didn't care about the lack of attire at the moment.

I was half-sure I'd seen someone watching me and Eir from outside, and I strained my ears to listen for a sign of any movement while the icy wind howled in from the distant ocean. A molten, crescent moon was high in the sky, so it wasn't even close to complete darkness, but I still couldn't make out much on account of how black the trees were.

Then Eir came to my side, and my wife was as bare-assed as me with her bow in hand and poised to fire. Both of us waited in silence for a long moment, but after a minute passed, Eir sent me a questioning look.

"What is it?" she murmured.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Maybe nothing. I thought I saw a face out here. A woman's face."

The muscles in my wife's jaw twitched as her gaze shot toward the blackened trees. She promptly stepped over the spiky divide in her bare feet, and then she prowled forward as the orange moonlight glistened on her creamy figure.

I followed after her.

The two of us checked the shadows of the nearest trees and the area near our mounts before we came back to scout the rocky slope outside the cave. But Eir didn't sense anyone in the area, and I didn't find any tracks in the snow aside from ours. Eventually, I

crouched down near the only disturbed snow I could find, and I gestured to the clumpier bits of white.

“What about this?” I asked.

Eir shook her head. “I did that when I laid the traps. See? All along the entrance is the same.”

“True,” I agreed. “You’re sure you don’t smell anything that stands out?”

“Nothing.” My wife shivered. “Only the cold, the snow, and the trees. I don’t sense any beasts aside from our own, and the wanderling isn’t out here. Other than the salt water coming in on the breeze, I smell nothing else. You are certain you saw a woman’s face?”

“No, I’m not certain,” I admitted. “The firelight and all this snow made it hard to see, I’m dead tired, and I was in the middle of pumping you full of my seed.”

“Yessss... you were,” she sighed.

“I thought I saw a glimpse of a woman’s face, but there weren’t any markings of a clan on it, so I must have imagined it.” I rubbed my burning eyes as a yawn slipped out, and my wife lowered her bow before she came over to curl up in my arms.

“Come to bed, my love,” Eir purred. “Dyggur can stand guard for us, but there would be no women in these mountains who aren’t Farhegn. I think it’s most likely you have outdone yourself today, and you need to rest.”

“Probably,” I sighed, and I rubbed my wife’s shivering arms.

“Besides,” Eir continued, “if I stay out here much longer, my feet will freeze into ice. You may even have to start all over with warming me up again.”

I grinned at her seductive smile. “Don’t tempt me. You know I’ll stay up all night just to keep you satisfied.”

I stooped and caught Eir’s legs, and she giggled as I scooped her up into my arms to spare her bare feet. Then she called Dyggur

over, and once the heillhaust shuffled closer to the mouth of the cave, she gave him his orders in her trilling language.

Dyggur let out a low grunt in response, and he slowly lowered himself down to rest near the cave entrance instead. I thanked the beast for his help, but he kept his sliced snout turned away from me when I did, and I couldn't tell if his pride was still ruffled over his injury, or if he really was insulted by my bare ass.

Either way, I shrugged him off and carried my wife to our bed like a naked princess.

Then we laid our weapons within reach just in case, and after we put on some wool layers and tossed a couple more logs onto the fire, I joined Eir on our pile of fur.

My body practically melted into the hides as Eir nestled in tight against my chest. I pulled two thick, brown hides up and over us, and we both drifted off to the sound of howling wind and the crackling fire. I needed the rest so badly that I felt sure I'd sleep like the dead, but somewhere in the early hours of the morning, I ended up having the weirdest dreams.

Most of them were cold and snowy, with the battle cries of warriors echoing around me, but the imagery was hazy to me. Only glimpses of Farthegn faces and bloody blades were discernible, but one theme repeated itself throughout.

Every warrior I came up against, man or woman, had arctic-blue eyes and the smudged markings of Svelgard on their faces. They wore the same predatory stares as the twin I'd fought in the ravine, but eventually, the strange images faded away, and I woke up to the smell of roasting meat.

I felt disoriented, like my mind was half-stuck in a dreamworld, but the warmth of the fire gradually brought me back to reality. Then I realized I was alone in the bed, and I shot up to a sitting position.

Eir smiled as she looked my way from the cave entrance. "Good morning, my love."

"Morning," I mumbled, and a lopsided grin came to my face.

I'd never woken up to the sight of a woman butchering my breakfast for me, but today, my winged wife was kneeling at the mouth of the cave and peeling the skin off a soft gray bird. It looked about the size of a quail, and three others were gutted and laying in a neat line in the snow. I realized the delicious smell was coming from four roasting birds that were already on the fire, and they were seasoned and nearly done cooking.

I took a deep, satisfied breath as I watched Eir pull her hunting knife out to cut the head off her last kill.

"You're one hell of a woman," I informed her. "You didn't have to go to all this trouble."

"Perhaps, but I consider myself a very fortunate woman," Eir replied. "I like to show that I appreciate my husband."

I chuckled as she sent me an extremely blushy smile, and I knew exactly where her mind was at.

"You really liked that trick with my mouth, huh?" I asked.

Eir blushed even more, and she had to fight against a giggle while she nodded.

"Yes, please do it all the time," my wife mumbled. "I liked it quite a lot."

She seemed determined to keep her cool, but then she fumbled with cleaning her hunting knife, and my grin widened as I considered how clumsy she'd suddenly gotten. The Nordic beauty did her best to compose herself though, and she stoically cleared her throat as she brought the rest of the birds to the fire.

"It's a beautiful morning," Eir said lightly. "You should see the way the mountains look at this time of day."

"Did you see the sunrise?" I asked.

"I did." Eir smiled. "You were talking so much I could not sleep, but I am glad you woke me up. Otherwise, I would have missed it."

I furrowed my brow. "I was talking in my sleep again?"

“You are always talking in your sleep,” Eir chuckled. “Normally, I don’t mind because you are clearly dreaming about me, but not today. You kept muttering about colors and the coast. It made no sense whatsoever.”

“Colors?” I repeated.

“Yes, you said something about blue and orange. Then you mumbled a bit about the coast being in the middle of the mountains? I am not sure exactly.”

I nodded without much surprise, but as the strange feeling of my dream came back to me, I realized why I’d been having it.

“Probably that sky elf,” I muttered as I scruffed my shaggy hair back into place.

“Sky elf?” Eir asked, and she paused before retrieving a cooked bird from the fire. “You have not been wasting your time speaking with sky elves, have you? Everything they say is nonsense.”

“It does sound a bit nonsensical,” I allowed, “but the elf I talked to seemed to know what she was about. I’m not too clear on how all this star magic stuff works, but she told me something about blue and orange before we left Dalir. I’m still trying to work it all out.”

“Hmm...” My wife arched an eyebrow. “Well, do what you like, but I have never found the sky elves useful. It doesn’t matter what they say, I cannot make sense of it. It’s the same with this wanderling. I think they all speak strangely to confuse us on purpose.”

I smirked and shook my head, but then I looked around at the cave. It was well into the morning hours, and the wanderling still wasn’t around.

My pulse quickened. “Where is Vegvisir?”

“I haven’t seen him,” she said with a shrug.

“Shit,” I growled, and I jumped up from the bed.

Then I jogged out of the cave in just my wool layers, and Dyggur wasn’t standing guard anymore. But he’d left a huge, melted

patch outside the cave, so I knew he must have only abandoned his post recently, and I picked up the pace as I headed in the direction Vegvisir went last night.

Thanks to Amaeda's remedies, I hardly noticed the ache in my sliced shin today, but the cold bit at the bottoms of my bare feet as I ran along the steep mountainside. So much snow had fallen overnight that there weren't any tracks to follow, and my veins slowly turned to ice as I got farther and farther from the cave.

The confusion with the face in the shadows last night came rushing back to me as I worried there really had been someone out here. I craned my neck and looked up through the dense black branches of every tree I passed, but there didn't seem to be any sign of the wanderling anywhere. I was on the verge of a cold sweat when Vegvisir called out from nowhere.

"Watch your step, boy!" the old man warned, and I abruptly stopped in my tracks.

"Jesus Christ," I sighed as I braced my hands on my knees. "I thought you fucking died out here."

A few branches rustled nearby. Then I looked around to locate where the sound was coming from, and Vegvisir's wiry eyebrows emerged between the stout black needles four trees away.

"No use getting yourself worked up on my account," the old man chuckled. "There's worse ways to die than sittin' in a tree. I wouldn't mind it."

"I'll remember that," I snorted. "Are you hungry? Eir's got breakfast cooking up."

"Sure, I'll head over," Vegvisir drawled. "So long as she didn't poison it. Better not turn too quick when you head back. There's a whole mess of spikes under that snow to your left."

I nodded in understanding and took the man's advice, and when I got back to the cave, Eir sent me a mildly concerned frown.

"The wanderling is alive?" she checked.

“Yeah, he’s on his way over,” I replied, and I grabbed my boots and armor to finish getting dressed. “You’re gonna play nice today, right?”

Eir didn’t respond, and she made a point of focusing on her roasting birds instead.

“Eir, we’ve made it this far thanks to Vegvisir,” I reminded her. “If all goes well, he’ll be getting us to our destination by tonight, too. That’s all that matters. Not whether Svelgard ends up having an issue with us. Besides, you said they think we’re from Hylmrek. Let Hylmrek worry about it.”

“That is why I cannot let go of my concerns,” my wife said. “If they didn’t recognize me, it would be different. Even knowing we are of Dalir would be better than this. The hatred between Svelgard and Hylmrek runs deep, and this puts us at a greater risk, but I suppose you are right. Nothing has come of the women who fled yesterday. Perhaps the wanderling was correct, and we are safe on this side of the crossing.”

“You should give Vegvisir a chance,” I suggested. “Get to know him. He’s a really interesting guy, and he’s seen more of the world than either of us have.”

“I am sorry to speak coarsely about him,” Eir sighed. “I know you enjoy his company, but I cannot trust those who speak so openly against my people. It’s a violation of our codes to allow such insults to go unpunished.”

I smirked a bit while I checked the wrappings on my leg. “I’m sure there are plenty of others who speak against your kind. You all thrive on violence and enslavement. I’d like to point out though, that Vegvisir hasn’t spoken against you specifically. He’s actually told me before that you have better sense than any of the other Farthegns he’s met before.”

“Well, he is right to acknowledge it,” Eir curtly agreed. “I do have excellent sense, but this is obvious.”

I chuckled and settled in beside her near the fire, and I decided to let the subject rest for now. Farthegn pride wasn’t something I’d be

able to tackle in only a couple days, and I knew my wife really was more fair-minded than my other clansmen. She'd made tons of effort to treat my slaves well too, and I knew she'd come around to Vegvisir soon enough.

To her credit, Eir greeted the wanderling with actual words when he arrived, and she didn't skimp on his serving of roasted bird and millet, either. She even fetched extra snow to boil so there'd be plenty of water for the three of us to drink, and the old man looked amused by the shift in her attitude toward him.

He didn't prod at the subject, and once we all started in on breakfast, I decided to pick the old man's brain about the fortune I'd gotten from the sky elf.

My strange dream was still lingering in the back of my mind, and I knew it was because I had Eleni's words stuck in my head. What I couldn't decide was whether our meeting with the Svelgard patrol was purely coincidental, and if a random new path had appeared before me, or if I'd already met with the "blue" Eleni warned me about.

So I told Vegvisir about seeking counsel with the sky elf while I ate three helpings of Eir's cooking. The old man listened intently from his spot near the fire, but he didn't say much, and Eir arched an eyebrow at most of what she heard. I was relieved to see that Vegvisir at least took the convoluted advice more seriously. The old man nodded along here and there as I explained my confusion about the blue-eyed warrior, and in the end, he did have some input to offer.

"You sure the elf said the blue was waiting at the coast?" he asked.

"Positive." I nodded. "Eleni told me this blue was soft, that it could kill me, and it was waiting at the coast. She also said it had already killed a lot of men. That warrior with the light-blue eyes had soft fur on, and she's clearly killed her fair share, too. Maybe she showed up earlier than the stars expected, and the coast is clear now?"

“Could be,” Vegvisir allowed. “Stars are always shifting, so you can’t live by them too strictly. Sometimes you run up on your fate sooner than you expected, or not at all. But either way, I’d say the Svelgard warrior wasn’t what the sky elf saw coming. There ain’t no reason a Farthegn would be expected beyond the Verolkki crossing. They don’t bother with the western coast. So stay on your guard once we get there. I’d reckon whatever the elf said would be waiting there is waiting there still.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “What about the orange flood she mentioned? Could be the moonlight, right?”

“Nah, that part’s easy to understand.” The old man waved a dismissive hand. “She was talking about the lava. It’s good advice, too. I’ll remember it. Could save our asses.”

“Did you say lava?” I blurted out, and I turned toward my wife with a blank stare.

To my surprise, Eir didn’t seem caught off-guard, and she looked back at me with some confusion as she licked a bit of greasy bird meat off her fingertip.

“What is wrong?” Eir asked.

“Lava,” I repeated. “You heard that, yeah?”

“Yes, of course,” she said without concern. “Don’t worry, Aaron Briggs. This part of our journey I am quite excited about. I know you have worked to manage the wolves for many years, but I have only heard tales of them. It will be interesting to see their lava for myself, and to see all you have learned about controlling them.”

“What?” I scoffed. “What the hell kind of wolves do you have here?”

“The regular kind,” Eir assured me. “With the lava.”

Now, I turned my wide-eyed stare toward Vegvisir, and the old man snickered into his water cup.

“So, we’ve been talking about two different things,” he realized. “You said you had experience with wolves...”

“I do,” I said. “Regular ones. No lava. Just fucking fangs and pack hunting and shit. Are the wolves here swimming in lava? Are they made of lava? What are we walking into?”

Vegvisir snickered even more, and Eir joined him as she chuckled at the look on my face. But neither of them elaborated, and I ground my jaw as I realized I might have actually under-prepared for this journey.

Which was a first for me.

“Don’t worry about it, boy,” the old man chortled. “Not much point this late in the game. We’re in wolf country now, and you’ll see ‘em soon enough. We better get on our way, too. It’s another twelve or so miles to the coast, and then it’s us against the beasts and the ice for about forty miles, depending how far south we’ve gotten. If we’re lucky, and we can keep a steady pace, we’ll reach the cave by nightfall.”

With that, Vegvisir hauled himself up off the cave floor, and he shuffled to the entrance so he could wash his cutlery off. Eir promptly began packing our things up too, and I helped her out even though I was still in a slight state of shock.

I was also intrigued, though. I hadn’t met a beast in this world yet that didn’t blow my mind, and so far, I’d lived through all of them. I did come up here looking for a decent adventure as well, and Eir’s eagerness to see these lava wolves made me a little less worried and a little more excited at the prospect.

For all I knew, taking on the wolves of this world could end up being a hell of a lot of fun.

Or the way I’d end up dying.

Either way, I focused on the more immediate concerns for now. We got our packsaddles reloaded in under ten minutes, and our beasts were still waiting outside the cave when I brought our supplies out to load up. The two drekkadyr shook the snow from their fur as I checked their nostrils and breathing rate for any signs of exhaustion, but they looked pretty well rested after the long night. Their thick coats seemed to be doing them a lot of good up here, too.

Both of the horned beasts lazily chomped on the snow while I secured our riding and packsaddles on their backs, and once Dyggur came wandering back up the slope, I tried to check on his snout next.

The giant gash from the scythe blade had grown magenta boils overnight, and I could smell their pungent odor from several feet away.

Unfortunately, the heillhaust wouldn't let me get much closer than that, and even after I talked to him as respectfully as possible, he threatened to eat my arm.

"Alright, be a stubborn ass about it," I muttered.

"Careful, Aaron Briggs," Eir sighed, and she nuzzled her cheek against Dyggur's scaly shoulder. "Dyggur tolerates you well, but his pride isn't something to test."

"He tolerates me?" I clarified with a cocked eyebrow.

Eir smiled and nodded. "Yes, and you should be grateful. Dyggur rarely tolerates men. In Hylmrek, only the chieftain could speak to him without being growled at, but I think Dyggur is very close to liking you. He lets you hold his reins, and ride him, and on occasion, he greets you with a very respectful bow. So you must be respectful in return. His snout will heal in time, but his pride... this does not recover so easily. Not for a heillhaust."

"If you say so," I chuckled.

Then I pretended I couldn't see the angry magenta boils, and I assured the heillhaust he was looking great today.

Eir offered a solemn nod of approval, and then she secured her own packsaddle and our healing supplies to her mount. Once our weapons were sheathed, and our new scythes tethered to the beasts, we were mostly set to go, but we all put on the furs of Svelgard for today's trek rather than our brown ones.

"This is so degrading," my wife grumbled as she wrestled to get the shaggy white fur in place despite her wings.

“We’ll blend in better, though,” I pointed out. “And these hides are warmer than ours were.”

“They’ll serve us well on the coast,” Vegvisir agreed. “The wind bites something fierce out there.”

Eir didn’t look convinced. “To wear the hides of an enemy clan is one of the most humiliating punishments a Farthegn can endure.”

“Don’t think of it as a punishment,” I said while I mounted up. “Think of it as a trophy you earned off the backs of our slaughtered enemies.”

My wife raised her brow at the notion, and it seemed to ease her conscience a little. She looked less disgusted by her shaggy white coat as she climbed up onto Dyggur’s back, and the effect of the blotched fur was instantaneous. Our brown beasts still stood out, but the change in furs did a lot to make us less immediately visible.

We left our campsite behind and descended the slope, and we were able to keep up a steady canter through the mountains from there on out. It was another frigid day, but the snowfall had let up for now, and working our way through the ravines gave us some cover from the chilling wind. I could already smell the brine in the air, and the dampness of the cold felt so familiar that my veins buzzed impatiently as we neared the western coast.

I focused on studying the changing scenery as we went, and it was pretty early into the trek that I realized why Vegvisir wanted us to travel along the coast for the next leg of this trip. For starters, the snow at lower elevations was littered with more animal tracks than I could keep tabs on, and I noted several bloody carcasses that looked like they’d been hunted just last night. The carrion was being picked over now by scabby, hairless badgers who hissed every time we passed, but these were only one of the new species I got a glimpse of.

The animals that concerned me more seemed to make up a larger percent of the population in this range. We passed over three dozen of their dens and burrows within only a few miles, and all of them were occupied by droves of pissed off porcupine-looking guys, but this comparison only worked because they had quills.

Beyond that, the similarities ended.

These creatures were as black as the trees, and while their quills covered the entire expanse of their pelty bodies, they were forward-facing and tipped with poison. They were also ornery as shit, and every den we passed brought a flock of the prickly bastards rolling down the sides of the ravines like growling wrecking balls. This would've been less startling if they were smaller, but the creatures were as tall as my legs were long.

According to Vegvisir, they were called athrada, and they were delicious if you could kill them before their quills killed you.

We ended up taking our route in galloping bursts whenever another drove of athrada came rolling through the black woods, but it wasn't long before seabirds of all kinds started crossing through the treetops on silent wings.

Their feathers were similar to seagulls' coloring, but they were three times the size, and it looked like their stark orange beaks were chiseled all around the edges. Some of the species had talons larger than a bald eagle while others had spikes at the ends of their wings, but for the most part, they looked like the kinds of birds I wouldn't trust if my dog was wandering around the yard. A couple of them were probably large enough to drag a small child off with them, and more than a handful of times, I looked up to see the massive birds soaring in ominous circles above the black trees.

Then Vegvisir started heading up a steep ridge, and I could hear waves crashing not far away.

The wind chill had dropped the temperature about ten degrees by now, and the crazy porcupine guys became nonexistent in the last quarter-mile. There weren't any tracks in the snow out here, either, and from what I could tell, only the seabirds ventured through these parts. They perched like vultures all over the stout black boughs while their sharp eyes tracked our progress, but I didn't pay them any attention. I was too eager to crest this last ridge, and I ended up passing Vegvisir up in my haste.

My drekkadyr nickered as I quickly steered him around steep embankments and patches of ice, and the moment I reached the top

of the ridge, a blast of polar wind hit me like a tidal wave.

And a huge grin spread across my face.

The whole western coast was made of ragged blue ice that had to be several feet thick, and the slate-gray waves didn't just lap at the icy shore. They crashed in and sprayed up with the biting wind, and jagged, frozen pillars built themselves all along the water's edge.

Wherever the constant rocking of the ocean split the shore open or drove the ice into itself, the sheets just reformed and froze over again, and the thundering of the waves continued relentlessly building the coast up into an even more ragged icescape.

Beyond there, nothing but the frigid ocean stretched out toward the gray horizon, and as I watched the massive seabirds swarm in the cloudy skies, I felt the marking on my chest begin to warm up.

It wasn't the same kind of heat that took over when I faced off with enemy clans, but it burned in a steady and reassuring way that made me feel almost greedy for this place.

And I knew without a doubt I was meant to come north.

Why? I had no idea yet, but it was exactly what I needed.



Chapter 14

Eir's green eyes lit up as she and Vegvisir scaled the last ridge to join me, and she was so stunned by the view that an ecstatic laugh burst from her gaping lips. Then the wind blew her white hood back and sent her long braids whipping behind her, but my wife didn't seem to notice or care about the cold right now.

She had the same adventurous glint in her eyes that she'd had when we free-soloed our way into Illska's stronghold, and her enthusiasm only fed into my own as a rush of dopamine flooded my system.

Vegvisir chuckled heartily when he saw how stoked we both were up here. Then the old man nodded his approval as he looked out across the icescape far below.

"Been a long time since I crossed Verolkki," he hollered above the wind. "Always worth the trek."

"Hell yeah, it is," I agreed. "Is this the path you took when you went to the cave?"

"No, wouldn't risk the coast on my own," he explained. "But I've been on this ridge a dozen times or more. Just for the view, ye' know. Hell of a thing, ain't it?"

"It's fantastic," I laughed.

Eir nodded in thorough agreement when I looked her way. "My teeth are so cold, but I cannot stop smiling!"

"Wanna go for a swim?" I asked with a broad grin.

"Swim?" My wife burst out laughing as she eyed the wild waves. "That sounds even too bold for you!"

"Nah, it's invigorating," I assured her. "We call it a polar bear plunge where I'm from. Really gets the blood going."

"Well, I can think of many more pleasurable ways of getting the blood going," Eir chided. "Is this coast as magnificent as your

Alaska?”

I thought about this for a second, but as much as I loved the view, there was a striking difference between this and my homeland.

“Not quite!” I yelled through another gust of wind. “The ocean’s wilder here, but it smells the same! The sky and the mountains are just right, too!”

My wife smiled even more to hear it, and she let her green eyes drink in everything ahead of us while she bounced in her saddle. Even Dyggur looked undone by the view, and he held his boil-ridden snout high in the air with his eyes closed. The heillhaust’s scaly nostrils flared repeatedly while he reveled in the polar breeze, and I could have sworn he was smiling.

Maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me again, though.

“See how a shelf of ice forms where the mountain hits the shore down there?” Vegvisir hollered, and I craned my neck to look.

“I do,” I confirmed.

“We’re pretty far south, but once we get a little farther along, those are where the golthr dig out their nests,” he warned.

“Are the golthr big?” Eir gasped. “Can I hunt them?”

“A woman like you could probably hunt ‘em,” the wanderling answered. “But it’d be better not to try. Their shoulders are about as high as your heillhaust’s head, and they’re all bulk and brawn. For the most part, you can walk on by without trouble, but one wrong move around those nests, and you become their next meal.”

“Fantastic,” Eir breathed. “How do we get down there?”

“Slow and steady,” Vegvisir cautioned. “We’ll head north along this ridge for a ways, and once the slope’s not so steep, we’ll work our way down. It’s all ice under that snow, so watch out.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to stick on the east side of this ridge instead?” I asked, and I looked back the way we’d come. “There weren’t any athrada this close to the coast.”

“That’s true, but you see those big-ass birds?”

I smirked at the flocks that were silently watching from the trees. “Yeah, I noticed a few of them.”

“They’re staying calm for now, but come mid-day, they start feeding,” Vegvisir explained. “When they do, they make the athrada look as docile as these drekkadyr. That goes on until a few hours before sundown, so this is what we’re working with now. If we stay on the shoreside, we’ve got the golthr to worry about. Farther north, the vanahrut will join the mix for about five or ten miles. But these beasts could let us pass. The birds won’t. Not for nothin’. Only thing that keeps them away is the golthr. The golthr feed on the birds if they come anywhere near them, so...”

“So, we’re taking the shore,” I concluded. “Fair enough.”

Vegvisir nodded, and the three of us fell in line with the wanderling at the lead and me bringing up the rear.

At first, my drekkadyr wasn’t eager to follow the heillhaust, but I refused to switch places with Eir. From back here, I could see the many ecstatic smiles my wife sent toward the crashing waves, and watching her bounce in her saddle when she got impatient made me chuckle every time.

The blonde warrior still followed Vegvisir’s instructions, and she kept Dyggur properly reined in while the old man led us along the windy ridge. The heillhaust wasn’t half as antsy on this terrain as he’d been when we first crossed the tundra, and he seemed even more intrigued by the icy coast than Eir was.

Dyggur’s boil-ridden snout stayed turned toward the water almost every step of the way, and the deep red spines that lined his neck rippled every time his nostrils flared in the breeze. Studying him from this side ended up being as entertaining as watching Eir, and the more I considered the heillhaust’s keen eyes and patient stride, the more his demeanor intrigued me.

He really was a shockingly alert and intelligent creature, even if he was a bit touchy.

Then we started descending the slope to the shore, and as soon as I got a look at the grade Vegvisir was heading along, I

quickly redirected my attention.

We were about five thousand feet above sea level, and I could see why he'd chosen this spot since the ridge was less steep and fell away at a forty-five degree angle. But the snowpack out here had probably built up over months, and the icy wind left the slope's face smooth and sleek with untouched snow. I watched the way the surface broke under the weight of our mounts' hooves, and after only a moment of surveying the situation, I knew this was a prime spot for an avalanche.

"We better spread out on this!" I called out.

Vegvisir turned in his saddle, but I could tell he was having trouble hearing me. His thick white hood was bundled tight around his head, and he squinted against the arctic wind while he tried to make out what I was saying.

I repeated myself twice, but he didn't seem to hear me, and Eir brought her heillhaust back behind me so I could reach the guy.

"We have to spread out on this slope!" I hollered above the wind.

"Why?" he yelled back.

"This grade's at a hundred percent!" I answered. "Our beasts weigh enough to break this shit loose, especially if we're all close together like this!"

Vegvisir nodded. "Do what you have to, boy! I'll meet you down there!"

The old man continued on a steady course along the slope face, and I held back until he was about a hundred yards ahead. I explained the issue with the grade to Eir while we waited, and even though she looked giddy at the news, she nodded obediently when I laid out what our approach would be.

Then I headed onward to follow Vegvisir, and when I checked over my shoulder a couple minutes later, Eir was diligently following over a hundred yards behind me. We continued on like this as we

gradually descended toward the icy shore, and I kept my eyes on the snow surrounding Vegvisir the whole way.

The surface seemed to be holding pretty well for a while, but once I was only fifteen hundred feet above the shore, I heard something other than wind.

It was distinct and low, but it wasn't coming from anywhere near me, and I looked all over the mountainside before I realized the rumbling sound was coming from behind me. Then I whipped my head around, and my stomach plummeted.

Dyggur was more than two hundred yards behind me now, but Eir had him moving too slowly on the slope. His heated hooves had melted too much of the snow, and now a full sheet had broken loose above her.

And the rumbling tide of snow was sliding straight toward her.

"Eir, get out of there!" I roared, but it was too late.

Eir couldn't hear me, and she saw the problem only a split second before the sheet reached her. Then Dyggur let out a snarling roar as he reared up, and the pair were caught up in the slide.

"Shit!" I gasped as my limbs went numb.

There was nothing I could do. Sheets of snowpack were breaking loose all over the slope face, and the breakage was rapidly spreading this way. Every fiber of my being knew I had to get the hell out of here, but I couldn't bring myself to leave Eir behind, and I was seconds from getting buried over this dilemma when I caught another glimpse of my wife in the slide.

And she actually hadn't panicked at all.

The winged woman yanked the reins of her mount with a fierce scowl on her face, and she turned him straight down the slope while they rolled with the falling snow. Then the huge heillhaust fought his way up onto his hooves as clouds of white billowed up around them, and they took off at a gallop through the rumbling tide.

"Son of a bitch," I growled, but I knew I had to go.

Eir wasn't buried yet, and Dyggur was the fastest beast I'd ever met, so I dug my heels into my mount's side and took off after Vegvisir. More sheets of snowpack were breaking away, but I let my drekkadyr's instincts take over, and he galloped at full speed while his hooves threw snow up around us.

The wanderling had already seen what was happening, and his own galloping mount was at the shore by now, but he only reined the drekkadyr in a little. The old man made sure he was at a safer range before he turned back around, and the hooves of my beast struck the ice a moment after.

The rumbling of the snow hadn't stopped all this time, but I forced my drekkadyr to halt and turn back, and the sight waiting for me took the breath out of my lungs.

All along the mountain slope, a deluge of snow and ice had fallen away, and while the upper ridge settled, the full weight of the avalanche was spilling onto the shore.

The slabs of ice broke under the weight, and clouds of snow and spraying water exploded from the impact. Still, more snow kept spilling into the sea and onto the ice that held out, and only a glimpse of black wings assured me Eir had made it this far.

Then the wings were gone, and I willed my wife to fucking fly.

I'd seen her do it for a matter of seconds before, but not once since then, and I hoped her will to live would kick in enough to send her into the sky. But part of me worried this wouldn't be enough. She loved her heillhaust as much as she loved me, and flying meant leaving him behind.

"Come on, get the fuck out of there," I muttered as more snow piled onto the shore, but my wife didn't re-emerge.

I had to pull my drekkadyr back as the last of the slide crashed just ahead of me, but I didn't go a foot farther than I had to. I stayed right at the edge of the aftermath as the whipping wind scattered the blow off all over the place, and Vegvisir appeared at my side after a long moment passed.

Both of us stared at the mound of shattered snow and ice without saying a word. My chest felt hollower as the seconds passed, and I was just about to run up there and start searching for my wife when I heard her voice through the clouds of snow.

Then Vegvisir chuckled because the woman was fucking laughing right now.

When Eir and Dyggur came up over the mounds, my wife had a giant smile on her flushed face, and she was laughing so hard that she could hardly draw a breath. Meanwhile, I couldn't feel a damn limb on my body, and the combination of crippling fear colliding with relief left me on the verge of fainting.

I mechanically dismounted, and as Eir guffawed her way down to the shore, I walked toward the nearest lump of ice on wobbly legs. Then I dropped onto my ass before I could pass out.

"Aaron Briggs, I avalanched!" my wife preened. "Did you see me? It was so invigorating!"

"Uh-huh," I muttered. "I saw."

Eir squealed with excitement as she jumped down from Dyggur's back, and she left several ecstatic kisses on the heillhaust's shoulder while he tossed his head with pride. Then my wife trotted over to me like her life hadn't just flashed before my eyes, and she dropped down next to me, threw her arms around my neck, and laughed some more.

I would've hugged her back, but I still couldn't feel my arms yet.

Vegvisir let out a heavy sigh and dismounted to join us, and my wife just kept panting through her adrenaline high as she shook me hard by the shoulders.

"That is the most fun I have ever had!" Eir exclaimed. "Have you ever seen such might in nature? I could feel the world shaking around me, and all was chaotic and cold... and the way the ice broke apart and the snow kept falling... it was fantastic!"

“Totally,” I mumbled with a harried nod. “Let’s not do that again, though.”

“But I loved it!” Eir laughed.

“Fucking hell, woman,” I groaned and dropped my head into my hands.

A moment later, Vegvisir nudged my shoulder, and I looked up to see him holding out a small round flask in a leather pouch.

“Here ye’ go, boy,” he chuckled. “Better drink up.”

I snatched the flask without caring what was inside, and I gulped a third of the contents down while Eir gushed some more about what a fantastic day this was. Whatever I was drinking burned its way into my gullet and forced some feeling back into my limbs, and I shuddered through it as I handed the flask back to the old man.

“Thanks,” I wheezed.

“No problem,” Vegvisir snorted.

“Let us go!” Eir urged, and she dragged me up onto my feet. “This seems like a wonderful place to explore, and I want to see the large beasts that live here!”

“Sure, uh... let’s go,” I agreed.

My wife covered me in a few more giddy kisses before she trotted back to Dyggur, and I followed her with my legs still wobbling underneath me. Vegvisir clapped me on the shoulder when he realized I was still stumbling a bit, and he offered me a toothy grin.

“This is why you’ll never meet a wanderling who’s got a woman around,” the old man snickered. “Ain’t worth the heart attack that comes with ‘em.”

I managed half a chuckle while we watched Eir bounce eagerly in her saddle, but seeing her so jacked up from her near-death trip down the mountainside made it a little easier to recover. On the bright side, if she could live through a fucking avalanche... I could probably afford to worry a little less about her.

I leaned into the subtle buzz from the wanderling's alcohol, and after a few steadying breaths, I remounted my drekkadyr. When Eir sent me a huge grin, I managed to grin back, and then we followed Vegvisir across the ice and left my wife's colossal destruction zone behind us.

The top layer of the ice was coarse and crunchy enough to travel at a trot without our mounts' hooves slipping after that. The strange pillars of the icescape were even more amazing up close, and there seemed to always be something interesting to look at whether it was a massive crack that had resealed itself, or curved pillars that looked like something out of a Tim Burton movie.

The trek north was cold as hell at the seaside, but the fresh breeze was rejuvenating in its own way, and the wind blowing through the jagged shards at the water's edge made all different pitches. The result sent an eerie harmony echoing around the blue and white shore, but after we'd traveled north for about an hour, the flocks of enormous birds started coming in from the sea.

Their squawks were louder than the wind as thousands of them coursed overhead, but none of them landed on the ice. They made their way into the mountains to feed instead, and I kept a close eye on their chiseled, orange beaks while they squawked down at us. After about twenty minutes, the last of the flocks passed, and the cloudy sky was finally clear of their massive wings.

Then we saw dozens of hulking beasts lumbering in the distance, and Vegvisir waved his arm for me to come and join him.

"This up here is one of the golthr nesting grounds," the wanderling explained as I brought my drekkadyr beside his. "It's the biggest one, so move real careful around 'em, and stay closer to the water than the ridge. We're safest if we avoid the nests."

"Deal," I agreed, and Eir sent me an eager grin.

Once we got closer, Vegvisir reined in his mount, and I could see the golthr weren't densely furred like I'd expect of an arctic species, but they were fucking huge.

These creatures looked like goliaths with their heads a good fifteen feet above mine, and they had thick, callused skin with stripes of blue and black over their backs. Their underbellies probably would've been white if they weren't stained from age, and the young of the herd were mostly white all over and just as tall as Dyggur.

Eir's lips parted in awe while her eyes darted all over the place to study the creatures' builds. I did the same, but there were so many around that I couldn't keep my eyes on just one.

The golthr walked on feet similar to the near-ungulates on Earth, but unlike an elephant, these guys didn't have any toenails. They probably weighed more than elephants, and they were longer with a more muscular build, and their hindquarters dropped lower than their shoulders did. In terms of facial structure though, the golthr reminded me of wild boars with four tusks protruding from their faces. Two grew straight out above their lips while two curved forward from their cheeks, and their wide mouths were lined with the same blue as the stripes on their backs.

"You're sure we can pass by these guys?" I muttered as I eyed the bloodstains on the boar-elephant creatures' tusks.

"So long as we don't piss 'em off," Vegvisir sighed. "Come on. Those nests are full this year, so we'd better keep moving."

I nodded in agreement as I eyed the ice dens lining the base of the mountains, but there were too many golthr in the way to get a clear view of the insides. All I could tell was that the shelf of ice was hacked away along the bottom, so the dens were low to the ground, and dozens of the largest beasts roamed around the entrances like they were standing guard.

We proceeded at a walk through the herd, and for the most part, the golthr didn't seem to mind that we were out here. They lumbered to and from the shoreline without doing much more than look our way, and their huge round eyes only passed over us for a moment before they continued on their way.

I marveled at their gaping mouths as they dipped their heads to drink from the ocean, and their adaptations to the harsh habitat were just incredible. Not only had they evolved to consume salt water, but

their legs were set wide to distribute their weight more evenly on the ice. I could tell by their stocky builds that they didn't have to worry about their legs slipping out from under them. The golthr didn't have any trouble climbing over jagged fissures where the ice had resealed itself, either, and if the pillars on the shore were in their way, they flung their heads around and broke the ice apart with their tusks.

I chuckled as chunks of blue ice scattered into the sea whenever they did this, and Eir craned her neck back every time so she wouldn't miss the show.

Once we passed the main nesting grounds, the herd thinned out a bit, and we were able to pick up the pace. But the golthr still had a few nests here and there, and they really didn't like us barreling past too quickly. Each time we passed another smaller herd, all the golthr let out thundering bellows that made the ice vibrate under us, but they didn't charge.

We kept heading north like this for a couple hours while we filled up on jerky to hold us over, and the farther we got, the bluer the ice became. The shards along the water's edge became more numerous too, and at one point, we were surrounded by a crop of them that must have formed after a massive breakage in the past. Now, a maze of shards and pillars covered the full expanse of the shore, and weaving through them was like being in a frozen forest.

Eir took her mittens off to drag her fingertips over each pillar she passed, and she sent me a glittering smile over her shoulder.

"We have never had an adventure like this before," my wife said. "It's our first time exploring the ice together."

"Not bad, right?" I asked, and I looked around at the walls of frozen blue.

"I love it here," Eir purred. "You look very handsome on the ice."

I laughed at her matter-of-fact tone, and the sound reverberated around the pillars. Then Eir started throwing her voice around the place to try it out too, but Vegvisir sent a warning back to us.

“Better keep it down back there,” the wanderling drawled. “The vanahrut are coming up, and they’re not as calm as the golthr. We’ll have to take it real easy around ‘em, and if they start following us, don’t look back.”

Eir bounced a bit, but she quieted down, and once we passed through to the other side of the frozen maze, the shore opened up again. The wind picked up here now that we didn’t have any cover, and I tied my hood tighter as I scanned our surroundings. The same blue and black golthr lumbered around the ice, but they were joined by another beast who was much lower to the ground.

The vanahrut were furless as well, but they looked reptilian with dragon-like heads, and their feet had eight taloned toes sprawling all around them. They were a yellowish-white color with spindly spines sticking up all down their backs, and their faces were covered with similar spikes around their yellow eyes.

These beasts were probably no taller than my waist, but they were about twenty feet long from their noses to the tips of their reptilian tails, and when they moved, their spines slithered back and forth like a snake.

Most of them were lounging on the ice, but some of them were prowling around near the golthr nests. My eyebrows shot into my hairline when a golthr reared up at one, and the ice shook from the impact when he landed again. Luckily, it didn’t break, and the vanahrut held its ground while it snapped its yellow fangs at the golthr’s tusks.

“Look at the spines,” Eir whispered. “They are hooked. I wonder if this is to protect them from the birds.”

“I’d say so,” I muttered. “Their teeth are long enough to tear through the skin on these golthr, too.”

“And through us,” Eir added.

Vegvisir nodded. “They feed in the early morning, so as long as their bellies are full enough, we should be alright. Just remember what I said. If they start following, don’t look back. If they come after us, well... there’s worse places to die. This shore ain’t so bad.”

“For you, perhaps,” Eir stiffly replied. “But my husband will not perish in the jaws of a beast. Not while I am here to protect him.”

Vegvisir sent me a pointed look, and as I eyed the dozens of huge creatures we had to pass through, I could guess his meaning. One woman against all these vanahrut wasn't likely to come out the victor, but it wasn't only Eir out here. I certainly didn't have any intention of dying on this shore, either, and the only way through this leg of the journey was onward.

I checked to make sure we all had a scythe within reach before I motioned for the wanderling to lead the way.

Then we continued along the icy shore, and I immediately felt the weight of a dozen yellow eyes tracking our progress. The vanahrut who'd been lounging around raised their spiny heads as we passed, and my pulse kicked up a notch as a few of them rose to their taloned feet.

I just kept my eyes strictly ahead, and for now, I didn't hear any beasts prowling along after us.

Vegvisir nudged his drekkadyr into a trot once we were in the thick of the swarm, and Eir did the same with Dyggur. I followed their lead, but as a few sharp hisses echoed across the shore, my mount started getting shifty.

The drekkadyr brayed anxiously, and this only drew more attention from the vanahrut. I tried to calm my beast down as I rubbed his neck and spoke to him in a low and gentle voice, and this worked well enough to keep him trotting after the others. But it wasn't long before my mount's movements became jerkier. He stomped his hooves and shifted from side to side, and my nerves piqued when I saw Vegvisir's drekkadyr behaving the same way. Everything about their body language screamed “prey.”

Then ten more vanahrut rose to their feet, Dyggur let out an ominous growl, and every yellow beast in the area hissed back.

Eir pulled her bow out and strung an arrow. Vegvisir let his drekkadyr pick up the pace a little more, and I could hear talons striking the ice behind me now, but I didn't look back.

Judging by the number of hisses I heard, this was a wise decision.

The sound was enough to make the hair on the back of my neck stand up, but it pissed off the golthr, too. The blue and black giants started bellowing at the vanahrut, and the ice vibrated from the noise. Then the vanahrut furiously hissed back, and when I risked a glance to the side of me, I saw the creatures beginning to attack one another.

Before I knew it, every beast on the ice was in motion. The golthr swung their tusks into the yellow lizards as the vanahrut slithered under the blue-striped giants.

“Vegvisir,” I called out as the gnashing of teeth grew louder. “How far until we’re through these assholes?”

“Over five miles,” the wanderling growled.

“Fuck,” I sighed.

There was no way we’d make it that far if this kept up.

Dyggur was baring his teeth and snarling without reserve, and the drekkadyr began bucking until I could hardly keep my seat. The next moment, I heard a pair of jaws clamp shut just inches behind me, and my mount jumped forward as it let out a long, panicked bray.

That was all it took to seal our fate.

We were immediately surrounded by the vanahrut.

I tore a scythe from my packsaddle as Eir took aim, and the hissing jaws of the lizards lashed out at us from all sides while my wife loosed one arrow after another into their skulls. Dyggur snapped his teeth at any vanahrut he could without throwing Eir’s aim off, and I sliced my scythe through the throng as I struggled to keep control over my own mount.

The drekkadyr bucked and whipped around while I hacked at every yellow face that tried to get him, and the technique wasn’t too difficult thanks to the jakyl hunts I’d been going on. I didn’t have any spears with me this time, so the fangs came too close for my liking,

but I kept up the work as one vanahrut after another took a three-foot blade to the face.

Vegvisir did his best to stay on his saddle while he held a scythe as well, but the old man wasn't strong enough to do much damage. He still prodded the beasts away as well as he could, but when I realized he was getting outnumbered, I called out to my wife.

"Eir, get our left side!" I bellowed.

My wife swiftly loosed a volley of arrows into the throng near the old man, but there were too many coming now.

I could hear the carnage taking place all over the shore, too. Bellows and hisses rang out while the ice shook from the combined weight of all the beasts, and even though we were holding out, there were just too many of these bastards out here.

And we were being forced toward the water's edge.

The ocean was close enough now that the frigid spray of the waves crashed over us. The drenched ice quickly became too slippery for our mounts, and my drekkadyr twisted and collapsed against a pillar while I fought to keep him upright. But his braying only enticed the vanahrut more.

"We need to get back to the ridge!" I yelled as another frigid wave doused us. "There's too many of them!"

I sliced my scythe through the gaping maws of a vanahrut, and the lizard let out a vicious screech as blood spewed from his face.

"The birds!" Vegvisir roared, and he almost fell off his stumbling mount.

Eir covered him with her bow as he tried to right himself, and I could tell it was costing her three arrows just to take down one beast.

"I will handle the birds!" Eir shrieked. "We must leave the shore!"

Then a golthr crashed to the ground near us, and I felt the ice crack under me. The thick sheets held out, but the breakage spread under the pressure, and the fallen golthr let out a thundering bellow as a swarm of nearly twenty vanahrut attacked.

The golthr didn't stand a chance.

Its bellows reached ear-splitting heights as the vanahrut tore into the black and blue flesh, but the sound of his distress drew half our attackers away.

"Go! Now!" I roared.

Eir steered Dyggur straight toward Vegvisir, and she forced his drekkadyr to move inland. The horned beasts bucked and jumped as more vanahrut slithered past, and the moment of hesitation cost us our opening. We only made it thirty feet before another swarm of lizards surrounded us, and we lost our lead in under a minute as we were driven back to the water.

Then Eir's green eyes locked on mine.

I could tell she was thinking the same thing as me, but I didn't stop hacking into the beasts with my scythe no matter the odds. Giving up just wasn't an option, and my chest ignited while my blade chopped through taloned feet, gaping jaws, and the necks of the vanahrut. The whole time, my mount bucked and stumbled over the bodies, and my wife carried on burning through her arrows, but then Vegvisir threw his scythe down and tore his staff from his packsaddle.

I did a double-take as I wondered if the old guy might save our asses, but I never got to find out.

Right before Vegvisir raised the wooden staff, a sound unlike any I'd heard out here rent the air, and Eir shrieked my name.

A split second later, a wall of water crashed over me, and a seal the size of my fucking truck landed on the shore, took three vanahrut in its jaws, and snapped their bodies in half with one bite.

Then the ice gave way.



Chapter 15

Everything happened in a blur, and I couldn't keep track from one moment to the next.

Buckets of blood slickened the ice while the shore shattered around us, and the sounds of the beasts shook through my skull as my chest burned with a vengeance. My mount slipped and slid as seawater poured over his hooves, but I kicked his sides until he got me away from the flooding shoreline.

Then I kept him running, and Vegvisir and Eir took off the moment I reached them.

“Get to the ridge!” I belted.

We were all drenched in freezing seawater as Eir took the lead, and Vegvisir clung to his staff and his reins for dear life.

The golthr stampeded past while we fought to escape the carnage, and they flung their four tusks around as they fled right along with us. Vanahrut were caught by the giants and thrown through the air, but some of them were trampled under the golthr's massive feet, and I just focused on not getting caught in the crosshairs while we zigzagged through the mayhem. It looked like all the beasts were fleeing up and down the coast now, but the sound of tearing flesh and dying bellows only got louder.

When I risked a look behind me, I could see why.

The huge seal that had shown up brought more than twenty of his friends with him, and all of them were hungry.

Now the entire shoreline was covered in blood, and one massive seal after another crashed through the waves to grab a meal. Their heads whipped back and forth as they shredded the vanahrut in their jaws, and three of them caught hold of a golthr who came too close to the water. Then they dragged the bellowing giant under the waves as more of the ice broke loose, and I kicked my mount to gallop faster.

Half the shore was falling to shit now, and we weren't to the mountains yet. I knew all the beasts running around would finish the ice off soon enough, so if we didn't get the hell out of here, we'd be drowned in the arctic sea. But our path kept getting intersected by stampeding golthr. Over and over again, we had to rein in our mounts at a moment's notice, and to make it all even shittier, the vanahrut were mauling each other now.

Then Eir got caught in the fray.

A tangle of mauling vanahrut crashed into Dyggur, and my heart stopped as I saw her get thrown from his back.

This time though, she tried to use her wings. The black feathers unfurled just in time to slow her fall, but my wife still landed hard among the frantic beasts, and Dyggur roared as he was dragged into the mass of vanahrut.

"Eir, fly to me!" I bellowed as I halted my mount.

I tried to steer him closer to her, but the drekkadyr was too riled up to do much more than buck. Vegvisir waited for us while his own beast threatened to throw him, and I realized all of us could be trampled any second if we stayed here much longer.

But Eir heard my order. She stumbled out of the way of a slithering vanahrut as her wings unfurled again.

"Vegvisir, go!" I yelled to the old man. "Get to the ridge!"

The old man didn't hesitate to obey, and he barreled onward while my beast tried to follow his. I wrestled with the reins to keep him in place, and my eyes stayed locked on Eir some thirty feet away.

She was trying to take flight, but more vanahrut kept slamming into her, and a golthr trudged past just as she got an opening. She dodged its path, but its leg caught her left wing, and the last I saw of Eir was her being thrown to the ground at full force.

Her pained shriek rang out as another swarm of beasts thundered past, and my vision went red.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard Dyggur roaring with fury, and my veins burned as my mark seared through my chest. The ice was shaking more and more, and our time was running out, but my focus stayed on the exact place where Eir had disappeared.

Without thinking, I ripped my cutlass from its sheath, lunged off my bucking mount, and tore through the mass of beasts with a scythe in one hand and a runed blade in the other.

I knew my mount took off like a shot, but I didn't give a shit. I let my mark take over, and I lost track of how many times I struck out at the giant animals around me. Every creature that intercepted my path was met with one of my blades. Some of their flesh ignited in the process, but others lost their limbs from the force of the scythe, and the ones I didn't kill dropped to the ice and were trampled shortly after.

Then I finally made it to Eir, and my wife had her Bowie knife in hand. She was fending off a vanahrut while her left wing stayed crooked at her back, and the dark-winged warrior woman bared her teeth with every strike. But the beast refused to back down, and the second I reached her side, I chopped my scythe through her attacker's neck.

The yellow body writhed all over the ice as blood spilled from its severed head, and another two vanahrut met the same fate when they came within two feet of my wife.

"Aaron Briggs!" Eir gasped with relief.

"Follow me!" I yelled, and I shoved the scythe into her free hand.

Then the two of us turned toward the mountains, and even though we were a couple hundred yards from the base of the slope, we dodged the golthr and fought like hell. The beasts were thinning out as the ice continued shattering behind us, and Eir screamed for Dyggur every chance she got.

I didn't have the heart to stop her. I was pretty sure the heillhaust was lost, but I needed Eir to keep fighting no matter what

the fuck happened next, and I knew it would tear her heart open to know Dyggur had gone down in this shitstorm on the ice.

But then I heard his roar close by, and I whipped around.

The shore was disappearing not fifty yards behind us, and Dyggur was covered in bites as his jaw locked around another vanahrut. He ripped its shoulder apart before he threw it aside, and then his bloody snout turned toward Eir as the ice under him shuddered.

“Dyggur, over here!” I bellowed, and my blade left another flaming slice on a vanahrut. “Come on, this way! Run!”

My wife called out again while she cut a beast down, and the heillhaust struggled to reach us, but he was determined as hell. The ice snapped under him, but he still limped over trampled bodies to get back to Eir, and when he finally made it over, I could tell his rear leg was badly injured.

Then the winged woman climbed up onto his back just as the cracks in the ice finally reached us.

“Give me your hand!” Eir ordered.

I grabbed hold of my wife and climbed up behind her, and Dyggur lurched forward before we’d even finished sheathing our weapons in his tattered saddle.

The heillhaust wasn’t half as fast as usual, but he gave it everything he had to make it off the ice. The sounds of drowning beasts gurgled behind us, but we only had another hundred yards to go, and I could see Vegvisir on the slope ahead. The old man was standing in the snow with his staff clutched in his grip, and the reins of his drekkadyr and mine were in his other hand as his gaze stayed on us.

He looked almost blue from the cold as he hollered across the last stretch of ice, I didn’t need to be able to hear him to understand what he was saying.

The shore under Dyggur’s hooves was flooding with water, and Vegvisir kept hollering for us to hurry as the injured heillhaust limped

worse and worse. With fifty yards left, I felt the ice sinking under us, but still, the heillhaust lunged and fought to stay ahead of the sea.

I held Eir's waist in a vise grip as I braced myself for the inevitable, and we made it within twenty yards of the mountain slope before the last of the ice gave way.

Then Eir shrieked as Dyggur dropped below the water.

Bitter cold seeped straight to my bones as the ocean consumed us. But I was ready for the shock, and I refused to let my muscles lock up. I kept Eir in my hold and kicked with everything I had to reach the surface, but our furs weighed us down along with Eir's wings.

Finally, panic crept into my veins as I realized we were still sinking. I tore at Eir's furs to free her from the extra weight, and then I shoved her upward while she thrashed and tried to swim, but I should've known she wouldn't really go. Her hand latched onto my wrist as I sank deeper, and I wrestled with my own furs as I saw Dyggur's shadow disappear under me.

Then, out of nowhere, a rush of water shot up from below, and I couldn't tell what was happening. We were being pushed in a violent current, and Eir dropped her hold on my arm, but just as I thought I'd lost her, we crashed against something hard, and I could finally draw a breath.

Polar wind coursed over me as my limbs locked up, but somehow, I was out of the water. And Eir was spluttering next to me with Dyggur roaring nearby as well.

"F-F-Fuck," I spluttered.

I heard the distant braying of the drekkadyr, and I focused on this scrap of good news rather than the crippling cold.

"Come on, boy, we gotta get outta this wind!" Vegvisir yelled in my ear. "Get up! Move!"

I shook through a nod as I forced my limbs to move. Then I drew deep and steady breaths to keep my head on straight, got up on my knees, and braced my weight on the wanderling to stand

again. He was just as drenched as me, and his lips were turning blue, but he still had his staff in his hand and a determined glower on his face.

The two of us got Eir on her feet next, but she was shivering violently. I could feel how stiff her limbs were getting as the old man shoved us further up the slope.

“We can’t stay down here!” he warned. “The seals are still in the area, and the wolves are bound to show up with this much blood in the air!”

I looked out at the ocean.

A chunk half the size of a city block was missing from the shore, and the ice to the north and south was still teeming with beasts who’d made it out alive. Some of them were mauling each other, but others were getting preyed on by the giant seals, and I tightened my grip on Eir’s stiff arm as I saw more of the seals gathering near the water’s edge.

“Take deep breaths, and walk,” I ordered. “Breathe as deep as you can, and focus on moving. We’ll make a fire soon.”

“Y-Y-Yes, my ch-chief,” Eir stammered.

“Get her to the drekkadyr,” Vegvisir said. “I know where we can go, but we gotta move.”

I nodded and helped Eir start scaling the slope. We took it one step at a time while her boots dragged through the snow, and the old man was having as much trouble as her keeping his legs working. I caught his hide so he’d stay upright, and the three of us trudged up the mountainside like this as the wind threatened to shatter my frozen skin.

The drekkadyr were several feet higher than they had been before, but we made it to them, and I forced my muscles to keep working while I hoisted Eir up onto one of the beasts.

“D-Dyggur,” my wife gasped. “W-We cannot leave him!”

I nodded and looked back down the slope, but the heillhaust was already limping after us.

“He’s coming,” I said. “Hang onto the reins and focus on breathing. Vegvisir, where are we going?”

“We’re not taking it s-slow this time,” he shivered. “The birds are hunting. H-Hold onto her and keep your face covered. There’s a cave not far from here.”

“L-Lead the way,” I managed, and I helped the old man get on his mount since he was in even worse shape than Eir. As soon as he was in place, I grabbed Dyggur’s reins, climbed up behind my wife, and sent up a few silent prayers that all my appendages would make it out of this alive.

Then I held her tight against me, and Vegvisir ordered his drekkadyr to get going.

I cursed through gritted teeth as my drenched furs started icing over during the ride, but I kept my attention on not losing hold of Eir and Dyggur since my hands were completely numb.

I was so fucking cold.

I couldn’t keep track of much else, and I only vaguely noticed when we crested the ridge. Then the sound of squawking birds filled the air, and my drekkadyr took off at a gallop after Vegvisir.

I couldn’t believe how many talons lashed at our heads, and I winced as chiseled beaks pecked and tore at our bodies non-stop. They were as strong as I’d guessed too, and twice as determined. More than once, a massive bird landed on my back and started tearing at my skull, and I just hoped my hood would hold out against the thrashing beaks. I made sure Eir stayed curled forward while I shielded her body as much as I could, but that ride was like a Hitchcockian hellscape I wasn’t prepared for. I honestly thought we’d end up pecked to death before we ever made it to cover, but then the onslaught eased up as my mount slowed, and I heard his hooves clomping over stone.

I raised my head just as we crossed into a cave. The entrance was slim, but the choppy ceiling inside vaulted thirty feet above our heads. The nightmarish squawking of the birds continued outside,

but only ten or so followed us in, and I ignored all their pecking as I dragged Eir's stiff body off our drekkadyr.

She collapsed onto the ground in a heap rather than stand though, and I checked to make sure she could still keep her eyes open.

"Eir, stay awake," I demanded.

My wife shook and flinched as a bird dove at us, but she was conscious despite how purple her lips had gotten.

"Y-Yes, m-my chief," Eir stuttered.

I left a kiss on her frozen forehead before pulling my icy hides off, and I draped it over her so the fucking birds wouldn't get her.

"Help me down, boy!" Vegvisir hollered.

I stumbled over and smacked an incoming bird with a firm arm. Then I caught the old man to drag him to the ground. He kept a shaky hold on my arm while he struggled to stand, but then he slammed the base of his staff against the stone, and I jumped a foot as a blast of air billowed around us.

Our mounts reared up in fright as Dyggur snarled his protests, but every bird in the cave was thrown around in the sudden whirlwind. In a matter of seconds, they were forced out of the place, and then Vegvisir pounded his staff down once more.

A deep cracking sound echoed through the cave this time, and I whipped around full circle to see what the hell had happened.

My jaw unhinged as I watched the stone at the slim entrance begin to shift, and just like that, the rock sealed us inside the pitch-black cave. Suddenly, the world was calm and quiet, and I could barely make out the squawking of the birds outside anymore.

"Holy fucking shit," I breathed.

Vegvisir snorted beside me, and his staff struck stone once more to start a blaze of enchanted flames in front of us.

"G-Get your wife warm," the old man shivered. "W-We gotta get these w-wet clothes off."

“Can you make us a larger fire?” I asked.

The old man nodded, and once he braced his weight on his staff instead of me, I quickly headed back to my wife. Her eyes were still open when I pulled my icy fur coat off her, and she actually managed a chattering smile.

“I-I listened,” she assured me.

“I’m so fucking sorry about all this,” I groaned, but Eir shook her head.

“N-Not a problem, my chief,” the Nordic beauty stammered. “Th-This was... inv-v-vigorating.”

I let out a harried sigh as I dragged her into my arms, but as soon as I covered her icy braids in kisses, I immediately started peeling off her drenched leather armor and boots. She was shaking too much to help, so I got her wool off too, and Vegvisir sent his flames around the entire perimeter of the cave to heat the place up.

“I’ll take a look at your wing as soon as you’re warm,” I promised. “That golthr must have snapped something--”

“N-No, it’s fine,” Eir assured me, and she shifted her trembling wings for good measure. “My wing doesn’t hurt at all, please t-take care of yourself now.”

I furrowed my brow and eyed her black feathers more closely, but from what I could tell, Eir was telling the truth. The wing that was crooked earlier moved fluidly with the other, and I nodded my consent before I carried my naked wife over to Dyggur.

The injured heillhaust was laying down near the entrance with his scaly back to us all. I caught him licking his bloody hind leg as I came closer, but he snarled at me just for looking. I didn’t bother reacting to him. I just tucked Eir against his shoulder so his scales could warm her up faster, and the heillhaust stopped snarling as soon as I backed away again. Then he curled his head around Eir so she’d be wrapped in his neck, and I smirked at the gesture.

“Thanks, buddy,” I muttered. “You’re a good guy.”

I left Eir to check on Vegvisir next, since I knew the cold had gotten to him bad. He was already buck naked and trying to get some wool out of his packsaddle, but his knobby hands were shaking like crazy as he struggled to stay standing, so I unloaded everything for him instead. As soon as he had fresh wool layers and a dry set of hides to put on, I grabbed all his wet things, gathered them up with Eir's, and started laying everything out near the ring of fire to dry.

The cave was as warm as a furnace now, so my skin was starting to burn as it came back to life. I kept moving to get my blood flowing quicker, and I checked on the two drekkadyr the second the clothes were set to dry. Our mounts were wild-eyed and picked over by the birds, but they were mostly holding it together. I patted both of them down and checked their legs for any torn flesh, and by the time I had both of their packsaddles removed, their frantic breathing had evened out.

"That's better, right?" I asked as I rubbed the strap marks near my mount's shoulders.

"Better take care of yourself, boy," Vegvisir said.

"I will." I smirked. "I'm warming up already, and I'm gonna get some food cooking first. Eir needs something to eat, and you'll both feel better after you get some stew in you, but we should make sure there's some air holes in this cave, and the healing supplies are probably drench--"

"Aaron Briggs, get out of your wet clothes right this moment," my wife ordered, and her voice was ominously low.

I stopped tending to the drekkadyr and slowly looked over my shoulder, and I recognized the unyielding look on Eir's face.

"If you cook even one morsel of food for me before you are dry and warm, I will never speak to you again," the winged woman growled.

"Yeah, okay," I promptly agreed. "I'm going. Let me just get you some dry wool so you're--"

“No,” Eir refused. Then her green eyes flashed with that same Farthegn stubbornness I often saw in my women guards’ eyes.

I nodded and immediately started unclasping my drenched armor, and I could hear the old man chuckling in the far corner. I had Eir’s threatening gaze on me though, so I hustled to do her bidding as quickly as humanly possible.

My wife didn’t stop tracking my progress until I was stripped down from head to toe, and then she sent an appreciative glance toward my dick before she nodded her approval.

“Thank you,” Eir said. “Now, get dressed in warm clothes and bring me my own. I will assist you in the cooking.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I mumbled.

“And don’t worry about those air holes,” Vegvisir added as he rubbed his hands together over the flames. “I made sure we got some air circulation. There’s a few vents way up at the top, and four at the base of the entrance where I sealed it off.”

“Damn,” I said and dug through my pack for some dry clothes. “You can use those runes with that kind of detail?”

“Some of ‘em,” the old man answered. “Depends on the element I’m influencing.”

I considered this as I brought Eir her spare wool layers, and she nodded her thanks, but she seemed vaguely confused while she looked between Vegvisir and me. I’d never told her anything about rune magic before, so I could understand why she was lost, but I started getting dressed without elaborating. Then I pulled a few sacks of food to the center of the cave, and I grabbed the pot we’d been using for cooking.

“Is there only one rune for each element?” I asked Vegvisir.

When I glanced over at his back, he shrugged.

“Nah, it’s not so simple as that,” he drawled. “Be less interesting if it was. I used only one rune to alter this cave, but I used two to get you outta that water.”

“You did that?” Eir asked at once.

“Of course,” Vegvisir snorted. “What did you think happened? Sea just spit you out ‘cause it don’t like Farthegns?”

I chuckled as I started filling the pot with greens and wild onions, but Eir looked like she didn’t know what to say.

“It took one rune to churn the water up,” the old man continued. “And one rune to direct it where I wanted you to fall. I’ve found about ten others that have different influences on water, but it’s not so easy combining them at once like that. Some work, some don’t.”

“Forgive me but... what is a rune?” my wife asked as she rose from behind Dyggur in her wool clothes.

Vegvisir glanced over his shoulder at me. “You didn’t tell her?”

“No,” I replied. “I wasn’t sure whether or not you’d have an issue with it.”

“Huh,” the old man muttered with some surprise.

Then he went back to warming his hands over the fire by the wall, and he didn’t answer Eir’s question until she was already seated beside me and working through the satchel of greens. Then he told her the truth.

“Runes are old lost magic, girl,” Vegvisir explained. “They’re the ancient symbols that give my staff power. Some of them can be channeled through an object, others influence the object itself.”

Eir nodded slowly, and her gaze flicked up to me. “I see...”

I paused my work as my wife’s eyes stayed on mine, and I furrowed my brow.

Eir took a moment to study my face. For a second, I thought she was mad I didn’t tell her about the old man’s powers, but then her gaze drifted to the flames encircling us. She followed the ring of fire all the way over to Dyggur and then looked directly at the cutlass I’d sheathed on his back.

My eyes snapped back to hers.

That’s when I realized I’d whipped out my flaming sword in front of my wife today without thinking twice.

And now she knew I'd been up to some secret projects lately.

The question was, would she point this out right now, in this cave, in front of the man I'd gained the knowledge from... who was strictly against weaponizing rune magic.

Eir turned toward the old man across the cave. "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Vegvisir muttered.

"Why am I only now hearing of this magical power?" Eir inquired. "I have met with every kind of slave, and none of them have wielded symbols that create magic."

I discreetly let out the breath I'd been holding and slowly continued working on the food.

"Because rune magic isn't something you can be born with," Vegvisir said. "Runes gotta be sought out and practiced, but they're too old and hard as hell to find for anyone to just up and learn about them. Also too powerful to risk teaching, so you won't find many people using rune magic. As it should be."

Eir nodded. "Well... thank you for using it to save me and my husband. I am honored you chose to act as you did."

Vegvisir looked over his shoulder at Eir with his eyebrows raised, and he smirked when he saw my wife was in earnest. Then he nodded his acknowledgment and turned back to the flames.

"Likewise," the old man muttered. "Can't believe we made it off that ice alive, tell ye' the truth."

"No shit," I snorted. "Where are we now?"

"About a mile and a half north of where we were. Just over the ridge. I camped up here when I traveled to the cave. Took me weeks to reach the place since I had to hide out when the birds were hunting, and I couldn't travel more than three hours in the morning and another few hours before the night."

"Damn," I sighed. "I take it that means we can't move on until the birds leave?"

“Be better to stay the night in here,” Vegvisir said as he shifted to warm up his other side.

“All night?” I stared at the old man. “But there’s plenty of daylight left. You said the birds leave a few hours before sundown anyways. We don’t need to lose half a day of travel over what happened on the ice.”

“True, but it’s our safest option now,” he explained. “We’re still about thirty miles from the cave. The ice won’t be passable once the wolves come out, and we’ll be easy pickings camping too close to the den. If we hold up here, we can make it there with better timing tomorrow, and hopefully get our asses out of that den before it’s too late.”

“Shit,” I sighed. “You’re sure we can’t slip by them real quick tonight? I don’t want to leave my clans for an extra day if it’s not absolutely necessary.”

“I agree it is best we stay for the night,” Eir suddenly announced, and she lowered her voice until I could hardly make out her words. “There is a small issue.”

I furrowed my brow. “What is it?”

My wife tilted her head toward her heillhaust, and then she mouthed the words, “You have to heal Dyggur.”

“Me?” I hissed.

“Yes, he would never let me do it,” Eir admitted.

I blinked as I realized my wife wasn’t fucking with me right now, and when I glanced at Dyggur’s back, the injured heillhaust started snarling.

And he wasn’t even facing me. He just knew.

Well, this should be fun.



Chapter 16

It was another few hours before the throng of ravenous birds started to clear from outside the walls of our cave. Other than a quick trip out to get snow for our stew once they left, we stayed locked inside.

Eir got Dyggur's packsaddle removed early on, but we gave him plenty of space for now since he was officially mad at all of us. Even my wife got snarled at for untethering the straps on his saddle, but it needed to be done. The heillhaust was carrying all the healing supplies, canisters of arrows, and our hides for sleeping when he got into a fight with the vanahrut. Now, two canisters of arrows, half the hides, and a whole satchel of remedies had gotten lost, and the rest were soaking wet.

We laid the hides around the heated cave to dry with our armor and clothes, and while Eir took care of her drenched arrows, Vegvisir helped me salvage what we could of the last two healing bags.

Unfortunately, any remedies stored in leather pouches were useless now, but most of the bundled herbs only needed drying out. Only a few of the vials and jars broke open during the attack on the shore, so our main problem was that the instructions Amaeda wrote for each remedy were blotched out from being submerged in seawater.

Luckily, Vegvisir knew a thing or two about healing.

Once we all got some piping-hot stew in us, the old man sniffed, tasted, and skin-tested every remaining remedy. I worked on laying the bundles of herbs and satchels out to dry, and when Vegvisir finished going through our options, he handed me three jars of dense green oil.

"He won't like this one, but it's what he needs," Vegvisir muttered under his breath, and he tilted his chin toward the heillhaust in the far corner. "Can't use the same remedy you put on your own leg because his body heat will burn it away too quickly.

This oil's from the nagish root, so the heat will help it absorb more quickly, and the only way to get rid of it is with a salt bath. As long as he doesn't go swimming, it'll stick. Just make sure you get all that on there, and you shouldn't have to reapply it again."

"Excellent," I said as I took the jars. "I don't want to have to do this shit more than once."

"Aaron Briggs, watch your tone," Eir warned, and I caught her disapproving frown. "If you behave as if this is an inconvenience, it will only injure Dyggur's pride more."

"Yeah, well, his pride could cost me a limb or two," I pointed out. "If he wasn't so sensitive, this would be an easy fix."

My wife silently scoffed at the statement, and she got up to work on her arrows somewhere else.

Vegvisir smirked. "Might as well get on with it, boy. Time's ticking now, and we only have three hours of daylight left."

"I don't suppose your staff has any runes on it that could help me out here," I asked.

"Not without riling him up worse," the old man answered. "I could trap his hooves in the stone, but he'll break his bones trying to get free. Best to tie his reins to a tree and stay light on your feet. That wife of yours is right, though. You gotta take it easy on a beast like him, or it won't just be a limb you lose."

"Are all heillhausts like this?" I asked as I side-eyed the scaly creature.

"Sure are," Vegvisir said. "It's what keeps them alive more than anything. They're too prideful to let a beast get a bite, but that's the trouble with taming them like Hylmrek's done. You won't find a creature as loyal as a heillhaust anywhere else, and the only thing that'll push their pride aside is if their rider's in danger. You saw that out there today."

I nodded in understanding. "Yeah, Dyggur fought like hell to get us off that ice."

“He knew it’d break, too,” the old man assured me. “Saw it clear as day in his eyes. Dedication like that serves the Farthegns well, but the problem is, it makes a tricky situation when the heillhaust gets injured. Most of their riders let ‘em wander off, and either they’ll die of infection or get eaten. It’s less dangerous than trying to heal them.”

I furrowed my brow, and when I glanced at Eir on the other side of the cave, she was shuffling and reshuffling her arrows around for no real reason. Her wings shifted anxiously while she gnawed on her bottom lip, and I let out a sigh as I grasped how upset she really was.

The truth was, Eir needed me to help Dyggur, and I couldn’t let her lose her heillhaust over this trip.

So I pocketed the three jars of green oil. “Alright, let’s do this.”

“We’ll take him outside,” Vegvisir said. “Less chance of maulin’ if you’re out in the open.”

I snorted at the sentiment, but the old man’s straightforward expression assured me he wasn’t kidding.

Then Eir tentatively joined us.

“I’m ready,” I said with a reassuring grin. “Can you get him tied to something for me?”

“Yes, of course,” my wife whispered. “But I must stay hidden while you work. I don’t want him to feel ashamed knowing I am watching all of this. Dyggur would be mortified.”

“Right.” I fought the urge to smirk. “Well, whatever you think is best.”

“Be careful around his scales, too,” Eir continued, and she lowered her voice even more. “When a heillhaust is angry, they become as hot as they wish, and I have known Dyggur to melt the flesh of a Farthegn for trying his patience.”

“Seriously?” I asked, and this time, I did smirk. “Anyone I know?”

“Stranholf, actually,” she snickered. “He came over to wish me luck on my hunt shortly after he began trying to meet my price. When he placed his palm on Dyggur’s shoulder, Dyggur burned his hand into a bubbling mess. The scars are hideous, and Stranholf has never been able to sense things with his left hand ever since.”

I looked over at the heillhaust and nodded my approval. “Okay, that earns a lot of points from me.”

“Just remember, Dyggur is a loyal and wonderful creature,” Eir pressed, and she clung nervously to my arm. “Whatever happens today, he does not despise you, and this is what matters most. I know he has sensed the good in you, and I know you love me enough to help him. But still... please be cautious, because he might try to kill you for this, and I would not like that at all.”

With that, Eir promptly strolled over to her heillhaust, and I sobered on the spot.

Then Vegvisir tapped his staff on the floor of the cave, and the creaking of rocks echoed through the place as the entrance began unsealing itself. The murderous squawking of the birds was gone by now, but I could still hear the faint bellowing of the beasts near the coast, and as fresh air sifted into the heated cave, our mounts all turned their noses toward the breeze.

“Come on, handsome!” Eir sang, and she offered Dyggur a glowing smile. “Let us get some fresh air, and stretch those powerful muscles--”

Dyggur growled and peeled his lip back. Then my wife dropped her gaze as she shamefully clasped her hands.

“Yes, I am sorry,” Eir mumbled. “That was a terrible ruse. You know I harbor the utmost respect for you, and I promise I will not watch. It’s only, your wound is quite serious, and--”

The heillhaust growled a little louder, and Eir didn’t try making her case again. She just took the very end of his reins and shuffled out of the cave, and Vegvisir clapped me on the shoulder before he followed the pair out.

I lingered behind long enough to get the reins of our drekkadyr. I figured they could use some fresh snow to rehydrate, but I also thought Dyggur might like to see me taking care of someone other than him first. Once we were outside, I took my time patting the drekkadyr down, and when one of the mounts nuzzled his huge furry snout against my armpit, I stuck around a while longer.

Only until it became obvious that I was stalling, though.

Then I moseyed over to the others, and Eir was still trying to get Dyggur tied to a tree. She was balanced at the edge of a drop-off that led to a long slope and a ravine below, but I hoped this would help keep the heillhaust in check for me. He only had a half-moon shape of mobility on this side of the tree, or at least, he would if Eir could secure him.

Dyggur kept yanking his snout away, and the winged woman's hands were shaking with nerves while she sent him several forced smiles. I could tell she felt incredibly guilty about tethering her mount for this, and the look of contempt on Dyggur's face was undeniable.

Eventually, Vegvisir sighed and let his staff strike the ground. In under five seconds, the stout reins tied themselves with triple-knots around the black tree trunk, and the old man sent me a shrug.

Then Eir scurried away from her snarling beast, and she pecked a quick kiss on my cheek before she climbed up the stones beside the cave's entrance. I waited until my wife was tucked behind a large boulder out of view, and then I drew a steadying breath as I slowly approached Dyggur.

"Heyyy, buddy," I tried, and I offered him my most casual half-grin. "I know you know what's up, so let's be calm about this, yeah? No pressure. Just a couple of guys and that leg..."

I trailed off as I risked a closer look at his injury. Now that we were in broad daylight, I saw how bad it was.

A chunk of muscle was hanging loose, so his patella was fully exposed. His scales were torn apart all above his tibia too, and more magenta boils had already started forming deep inside the wound. But unlike on his snout, they were secreting a bright orange pus that

smelled twice as bad. Dyggur's entire left hind leg shook involuntarily while he held his hoof a couple inches off the ground, but more concerning than all of this was the constant stream of blood trickling down his brown scales.

"Daaamn," I mumbled, and the heillhaust let out a grating snarl. "Damn good boy... is what I was about to say. Seriously, you saved our asses out there today. I've never known a beast as resilient or intelligent as you. You protect Eir like she's family too, and that means a lot to me, so I can't let you sit around with your bones hanging out, and boils--"

It happened so fast, I didn't have time to react. All of a sudden, pain shot through my right forearm, and Dyggur was licking his maw.

I looked down and realized he'd torn the outer layer of flesh off my arm in one nip.

"You touchy son of a bitch," I growled and clutched my bloody arm. "The fuck was that for?"

"Aaron Briggs!" my wife scolded from up above. "Your tone!"

"No, he needs to hear this," I clarified. "Dyggur, there's a time and a place to set your pride aside, and this is it, buddy. There's no shame in taking a bad hit for the greater good. Shit happens. Now, neither of us want to do this, but Eir loves you, and I love her, so it's happening. Pipe down and man the fuck up. It's just a leg injury, and you're not the first cranky bastard to ever get one."

Dyggur's blazing hot roar almost singed the beard off my face, and I stumbled back as I noticed he still had my skin stuck between his teeth.

"Aaron Briggs, you are not speaking in a respectful manner," Eir informed me.

"He tore my skin off!" I shot back.

"He is being gentle!" my wife scoffed.

"Do you want to do this?" I asked.

Eir ducked a little lower behind the rock she was hiding on.

“That’s what I thought,” I muttered, and I slipped my hand in my pocket to pull out the first jar of oil. “Dyggur... that was an asshole move on your part, but I’m gonna let it slide. From here on out, the rules are I won’t kill you if you don’t kill me.”

Then I faked a lunge to the left, and as soon as the heillhaust dove for a bite, I leapt right and jumped.

In two steps, I was up on the beast’s scaly back, and I struggled to get turned around so I could reach his hind leg. At first, I thought this might go a lot easier than I expected, but then I noticed how flaming hot my ass was getting, and everything shifted up a gear from there.

Dyggur bucked wildly as he wrenched at his reins, and the sharp red spines on his neck almost sliced my rectum open. Still, I stayed latched onto his back no matter how hot his scales got, and I forced the cork of the jar off with my thumb.

The scales got hotter and hotter while Dyggur whipped his rear end around and bit at my leg, and I kicked back just in time to spare my calf. Then I dumped the contents of the glass jar onto his leg, but the last of it went flying when Dyggur crushed my bloody arm against the tree.

“Fuck!” I growled through gritted teeth, and I tumbled off the beast.

But I was a third of the way done now, and I scurried out of the way before the heillhaust’s hooves could pound my head in.

Vegvisir caught my arm when I made it to the mouth of the cave, and he dragged me up onto my feet again.

“Better hurry, those reins won’t hold out,” the old man warned. “My runes won’t fix a break in ‘em, either.”

I nodded and gauged my next move as I pulled the second jar out, but Dyggur was royally pissed now. He bucked one second and reared up the next, so I timed my maneuver accordingly, and as soon as the heillhaust reared up a fourth time, I dove under him, circled back, and jumped on his back again.

The heillhaust anticipated the move, and he hip-checked me twenty feet into the air. Then I was flying.

“Shiiiiit!” I bellowed as black trees flashed by on either side, but at least I didn’t snap my bones on any of them.

Instead, I crash-landed on a rocky embankment and wheezed on impact. The muscles in my back spasmed as my spine threatened to seize up, and I let myself slide back down to the ground with a bone-crunching thunk.

“Fucking shit,” I groaned against the snow.

“I love you both!” Eir desperately called out. “Be friendly together!”

“Uh-huh,” I called back as I hauled my ass back up.

My vision only spun a little, and I still had the second jar clutched in my fist, but Dyggur snorted smoke from his nostrils as we stared each other down.

“Alright, buddy,” I growled. “Enough dicking around. Let’s finish this.”

I stumbled forward for another go, and I dodged Dyggur’s next two bites no problem. It was on my third side-step that the heillhaust outsmarted me, and he headbutted me so hard that the world went black for a second.

I let out a stream of curses while I staggered backward, but the second I had some blurry vision back, I lunged forward and planted my fist in the heillhaust’s boil-ridden snout. Then orange puss exploded on both of us, and Dyggur let out a shrieking roar.

“I’m sorry!” I roared back. “I wouldn’t have... fuck!”

I dropped flat on my stomach just in time to spare my face, and I rolled for several feet while Dyggur stomped his massive hooves after me. Then I flipped my legs over my head, got up into a crouch, and jumped.

I landed halfway on the heillhaust’s back, but this was close enough. I clawed his scales to keep my hold and tore the cork off the

jar with my teeth. Then I doused his leg in the entire contents, and Dyggur dropped his rear end so I'd end up crushed for my efforts.

The blinding pain only lasted a few seconds before the beast got up and turned on me, and he spewed spit and smoke in my face as his jaw parted within inches of me.

"Dyggur!" Eir gasped in shocked. "How dare--"

The breaking of Dyggur's reins cut her off, but then the ground under me bucked on its own.

I tumbled back toward the cave just as the heillhaust reared up to a terrifying twenty feet, and when Vegvisir pulled me upright, I realized he'd used his staff to get my ass out of there.

"Thanks," I panted.

"Better leave him be, boy!" the old man hollered, but the heillhaust was charging the both of us now.

His leg was still limping badly, but his rage was fully intact. As I looked into his narrowed black eyes, I felt the full weight of the heillhaust's fury.

And it honestly pissed me off even more.

"You ungrateful shit," I growled. "You're taking your fucking medicine!"

Dyggur's red spines billowed with smoke as he kept on running straight at me, and I shoved the wanderling into the mouth of the cave before I jumped up to the rocks beside me.

Then I climbed like hell, and as Dyggur came to a sliding stop, I let him try and bite my boots. The second he did, I kicked another of his boils, and his pained roar gave me just enough time to pounce.

I landed within inches of his sharp red spines, but I made it to my target position, and I wasn't letting go for anything this time.

My body ached, and Dyggur's scales scalded me through my clothes, but I already had the third jar uncorked. The heillhaust bucked twice, slammed me into a tree, and almost tore my foot off

before I managed to empty the contents onto his wound, and I let out a whoop of victory as I chucked the final jar into the snow.

Then Dyggur's hoof slipped off the edge of the slope.

"Shit!" I yelled, and we tumbled down the embankment.

I clung to Dyggur's scales while he rolled and roared his way into the ravine far below. We took all the snow and half the boulders with us as the heillhaust smacked into black tree trunks along the way. This sent a cascade of spiked pine cones down to douse us like pissed-off confetti, and when we finally came crashing into the bottom of the ravine, I ended up getting pinned between him and a tree.

Dyggur was so flaming pissed that he dragged himself off me in seconds flat, and then I saw his uninjured hind leg preparing for a lethal kick.

"Truce!" I belted, but it was too late.

I crumpled into a ball and buried my head in the snow, and I heard Eir shriek just before Dyggur's hoof struck the tree trunk directly above me. The next thing I registered was the ground shaking under me as the heillhaust took off running, and I whipped my head around just as the tree started to keel over.

It was leaning in the opposite direction though, so I had that going for me. I let myself collapse on my back in relief, and I just listened to the snapping and cracking of the massive black tree taking two others down with it.

As soon as the debris settled, Dyggur snarled from the hillside, and I nodded toward the gray sky above me.

"Fuck you, too," I sighed.

I had taken a worse beating from Eir's heillhaust than I had during the entire debacle on the icy shore. My ribs ached in too many places to count. My arms were bruised and bitten, and half my face was burned from clinging to Dyggur's scaly back, but still... I felt like a fucking badass for being alive right now.

My flesh wasn't even melted off, so technically, I got off easier than Stranholf had.

Whether Dyggur would maul me to a pulp the next time I walked by, I didn't know. But I'd done what needed to be accomplished, and hearing Eir's boots pounding down the embankment improved my mood a little bit.

My beautiful wife had grateful tears welling in her sea green eyes when she dropped into the snow beside me, and she immediately started fretting over all my injuries.

"You are the bravest and most wonderful man," Eir whimpered as she patted snow on my burns. "I never imagined I would have a husband as fierce as you. No Farthegn man could have accomplished as much. I will never for all of my life forget what you have done today."

I smirked. "Dyggur won't forget it, either."

"Dyggur will trust you as much as I do," she assured me. "You will see. Look at how mild your injuries are! He was so gentle with you, and I don't even think these burns will scar. The flesh on your arm will certainly grow back too, and Dyggur has to see that you are the one man who is worthy of meeting him at his worst. Plus... you told him you loved me. I heard it for myself, and it was very sweet and sincere of you. He will respect you for this."

"I won't hold my breath," I snorted. "Did he take off?"

"No, he is being a very good heillhaust." Eir glanced up the hill. "He is baring his teeth quite a lot, but if we let him rest outside, and don't disturb him, I am sure he will come around. It is only that Dyggur won't want to see you for a little while. He needs some space."

"Fuck his space," I muttered, and my lungs stabbed in pain as I drew a deeper breath. "I need some space. This day was already taking a bullshit turn before I had to wrestle a heillhaust."

My wife grimaced as she added more snow to my burned cheek.

“Come with me to hunt, my love,” she said. “You will feel better with some fresh game in your stomach, and there is plenty of time before nightfall. I will do all of the killing, and you can rest and enjoy the view. How does that sound? By the time we are done, you will see we have only been getting in the hiccups today. It’s not as bad as it seems.”

I chuckled heartily at her adorable phrasing, but I nodded in agreement and strained to get my aching limbs up out of the snow. Then I brushed the melted snow off my face, and Eir hooked my arm over her shoulder to help me walk.

“Did I use the hiccups right this time?” my wife asked.

“You’re perfect,” I said with a grin. “Use it any way you want, but you’re right. Things really aren’t too bad. One day of delays is a lot better than it could be, and Dyggur didn’t burn me too bad. We did some epic shit on this leg of the trip, too.”

“I avalanched!” Eir gushed.

My smile faltered a little. “Uh-huh... that, too.”

Dyggur was thirty feet along the embankment when we reached the top of the hill. He kept his scaly ass to us as he let out a low snarl with every exhale, and angry heat rays billowed off his brown scales. The exposed tissue on his left hind leg was covered in oil and blood, but he was already able to put his weight on it. The heillhaust didn’t turn on me yet, either, so I counted this as a win.

I kept my distance on my way to the cave, and we decided to leave Dyggur just fuming by himself while the snow melted around his hooves.

Vegvisir was waiting at the entrance with three different tonics in hand, and he offered me an appreciative grin as I grabbed the vials.

“Not bad, boy,” Vegvisir said. “I would’ve let him die after that second throw.”

“Then this is precisely why you do not have a woman as remarkable as myself to love you,” Eir stiffly replied.

“Yeah, no shit,” the wanderling laughed. “You’re a fuckin’ headache, girl. Look what this man goes through for ye’.”

“I really don’t mind,” I chuckled. “She’s worth it.”

“See?” My wife smiled smugly at Vegvisir. “He is a better man than you.”

“No doubt about it,” the old man snorted.

I drank a bit of each tonic while the wanderling looked over the bite on my arm. By the time he finished applying a poultice to the torn flesh, most of my aches were nonexistent. My burned face was cooling off already, but my ribs still protested to deep breaths, and my back refused to bend properly, so I took it easy getting my dried armor and hides back on.

As beat up as I was, hunting with my wife was actually all I wanted to do right now, so I focused on the perks of our arrangement rather than how crazy the day had been.

After all, it wasn’t every day I got to watch my bowhunting woman stalk prey through the mountains.

Eir grabbed her bow and a handful of arrows once she finished suiting up as well, and then we headed out to the two drekkadyr with a sheath of sheep’s wool under our arms.

“We’ll be back soon,” I assured the wanderling as I strapped the wool on my mount’s back. “Any requests for dinner?”

“Yeah, get me one of them athrada if you think you can,” Vegvisir said with a toothy grin.

“Absolutely not,” I sighed.

Then I carefully mounted up, and Eir let Dyggur know how fantastic she thought he was before we steered our drekkadyr in the opposite direction.

After the hectic afternoon, the quiet of that ride did a world of good for my sanity. Without murderous birds diving at me, I could appreciate this part of the range a lot more. The slopes were less rigid than they had been in the west, and the trees grew closer together. The temperatures were lower, but the wind was calm this

evening, and there were buckets of blood all over the place from the feeding that had gone down for the past several hours. The red ended up being a nice break from the black and white scenery, and it gave us a good idea of where to look for more concentrated prey, too.

My wife and I meandered through the slopes to the north while we worked our way to a lower elevation, and we were about twenty minutes from our campsite when I noticed Eir was watching me instead of looking for game.

“So...” my wife casually led. “You have been creating new weapons.”

“Uh... yeah.” I looked forward and continued steering my mount toward the ravine. “I’m sorry I didn’t mention it earlier.”

“There is no need to apologize, my chief,” Eir replied without concern. “What you choose to share with me is your decision. I am only curious about this blade, and why the wanderling doesn’t know about it. He has clearly taught you of his craft, yes?”

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “But how did you know I’ve kept it from Vegvisir?”

“Aaron Briggs, I am your wife,” Eir sighed. “I can tell when you want me to hold my tongue.”

I leveled the woman with a pointed look. “Unless it has to do with our sex life.”

“Obviously,” Eir chuckled. “Being your wife also means I have every right to brag about you and make the other women terribly jealous of me.”

“Sure,” I laughed. “Well, I appreciate you holding your tongue back there. The truth is, Vegvisir showed me the fire rune to prove he wasn’t lying to me about his staff. It was the night we conquered Illska, and he probably never imagined I’d actually try using it. But I obviously have, and I’ve kept it from him because he made it clear weaponizing rune magic isn’t something he supports.”

“Then why have you done just that?” Eir asked as we turned down another pass. “You seem to respect the wanderling’s stance on most other things.”

“Honestly?” I muttered. “I did it for you.”

“I don’t understand,” my wife said. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve broken multiple codes to be with me, and we’re getting pretty bold about the power I gain among the Farthegns,” I replied. “Hylmrek is coming for us, and after that, who knows what could happen? Maybe we’ll defeat them, maybe not, but if we do... where does that leave us?”

“You would be the chieftain of three clans,” Eir answered.

“Which is a huge fucking threat to the others,” I concluded. “It’s the kind of threat that made us take Illska to begin with, and the rest of the clans will have issues with it. Either way, we’re not exactly set up for a safe lifestyle, and there’s no way in hell I’m gonna lose you over any of this. So, in my opinion, training our clansmen well isn’t good enough. We need unparalleled defenses.”

My wife slowed her mount to a stop, and I did the same while she studied my gaze for a long moment. Her expression was a mixture of confusion and surprise, but I could tell she was gradually catching my meaning.

“You plan to give flaming blades to our clansmen,” Eir realized.

I nodded. “Brokk’s been forging them for weeks. We’re distributing runed cutlasses to every member of Dalir as soon as we return.”

“What of Illska?” Eir asked.

“Once their loyalty is definite, they’ll be carrying runed blades as well,” I assured her. “I know our clansmen are strong and fast fighters, and I don’t doubt their abilities, but every battle we fight will inevitably cost us some warriors. Those warriors are my best means of keeping you alive though, and with our numbers against all of Hylmrek, I can’t afford to lose any of them. They need weapons that won’t just maim our enemies. They need to force them to falter.”

“These new blades will ignite anything they strike?” my wife asked, and when I nodded again, her eyes glinted with intrigue. “But that means any limb, or hand, or even their armor would catch fire. The stocks of their battle axes would ignite, the land we battle upon would burn if we wished it... Our chances of a swift victory would be definite with such power.”

“That’s what I’m aiming for,” I said. “Swift and unparalleled attacks. Dalir’s made us proud on that front so far, but imagine what they could be with weapons like this in hand.”

“They would be unconquerable.” A murderous grin hitched on Eir’s lips. “You would be unconquerable.”

“We,” I corrected, but my wife’s gaze became hooded as she slowly shook her head.

“No, my love,” Eir murmured. “You. All who serve you, and all who pledge their loyalty to you now would be powerful enough to enact any will you commanded of them. All others would cower to hear your name, and when Hylmrek is won, Svelgard will be the next to fall.”

I blinked. “Wait, what?”

“You will bring your army north and conquer these mountains, and after that, Óhreinn will be forced to grovel at your feet,” my wife purred, and her cheeks flushed with greed. “All of the west will belong to Aaron Briggs, and then you will travel beyond Hylmrek to take on the south and the east. You will be the sole chieftain of all the Farthegn clans, and when all is done, you will possess the strongest army in the world. With that army, you could--”

“Hooold on,” I chuckled, and I shifted in my saddle as I considered her cryptic expression. “I never said any of that. I was only talking about defeating Hylmrek, and anyone who might cause shit afterwards. Conquering all the Farthegn clans is not something I’m looking to do.”

“But you will do it,” Eir said as she bit her lip and admired my form. “A man as superior as yourself is meant for more in this life. With this weapon in hand, and hundreds of loyal and bloodthirsty

warriors at your command, you can take anything you want. The world will be yours, my love. Your clansmen will make sure of it.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay, so... this is why Vegvisir doesn’t want Farthegns knowing about rune magic. This right here. You’re taking this idea miles farther than I intended. I’m only arming Dalir with the runed cutlasses to defeat Hylmrek, alright? After that... we’re on the defensive. We put our efforts toward defending our small corner of the world, not conquering the rest of it.”

Eir let out a sultry chuckle as her hooded eyes continued sizing me up, and her tongue slid across her plump bottom lip when she met my gaze. Then her black wings shuddered lightly, and as I registered how hot and bothered she was, a peculiar feeling sifted through my bloodstream and straight to my cock.

And for a moment, I was surprisingly turned on by the prospect of world domination.

I’d never been that kind of guy before, but Eir clearly got off on the idea, and if she was really so into it.

Well...

But this was a dangerous train of thought to get lost on. I’d do anything to satisfy my lethal wife, and it would probably be better if I didn’t consider how much she’d like to see me conquering one clan after another.

That was the opposite of living a relatively safe life on the defensive.

“Hunting,” I abruptly announced. “We’re out here to hunt, so let’s, uh... let’s forget about the new weapons, and focus on hunting.”

“As you wish, my chief,” Eir purred.

My wife’s seductive smile stayed right where it was, and she deftly strung an arrow while she glanced down at my dick. I knew my erection was straining against my pants no matter how much I tried to shut down Eir’s devious plans for my future, and I was still warring

against my libido when my wife raised her bow, took aim, and loosed her arrow.

A second later, a death-squawk echoed through the ravine.

I stared at the massive bird carcass that fell from forty feet up, but Eir just sighed longingly as she took a last admiring look at me. Then she led her drekkadyr over to her kill, and I swallowed hard when she dismounted and slid into a splayed-leg squat.

The whole time she bled the beast in the snow, my wife made sure to do it in as sexy a way as possible. She even cleaned her hunting knife off with long, slow strokes while her hooded gaze drifted to mine, and all I could do was let her torture me like this until she finally remounted her drekkadyr.

Then the Nordic beauty took the lead through the ravine, and I stared as her leather-clad ass ticked back and forth in her saddle.

“Shhhhit,” I muttered to myself. “I’m gonna fucking conquer the world over this woman.”

“What was that?” Eir asked over her shoulder.

“Nothing,” I quickly replied.

After that, I did my best to focus on stalking prey, but for once, I couldn’t. Eir had given me too much to think about. I couldn’t help imagining fucking her at every stronghold in the Red Forest after conquering them one after another, and I knew my Farthegn wife well enough by now to know she’d only get kinkier the more power I gained.

But I was only now realizing I had a bit of a thing for power as well.

At least, I did when my wife was carrying on and on about it with such a wanton look on her face...

Needless to say, I didn’t talk much more during the rest of that hunting trip, and Eir made sure to draw all of my attention whenever she caught another plump bird lounging in the treetops. I ended up dragging her mount closer to mine every time she remounted so I

could kiss her a bit before we continued, and I was thinking about turning in early for the night when howling broke through the woods.

Eir and I halted our mounts.

The sound was coming from miles away, but it resonated clear through the arctic air and made the hair on my arms stand on end.

I hadn't heard a wolf's howl in a long-ass time. It instantly brought my life in Alaska rushing back to me, but it also assured me once again that I was a long, long way from home.

Because this howl was like nothing I'd heard from the timber wolves, and it was joined by dozens more within a minute.



Chapter 17

Eir and I exchanged a glance, but we didn't need to say a word. Both of us kicked our mounts at the same time, and the howling of the wolves rang out as we galloped through ravines and up over the snowy rises. When we reached the ridge near the coast, the sound of snarling and fighting joined the mix, and we didn't turn toward our campsite.

This was something both of us were just too eager to see.

Instead, we carefully scaled the slope instead as I gauged how far off the wolf attack might be, and once we were a little ways north and nearing the crest, we silently dismounted.

Eir sent me a wide-eyed look as she waited for me to take the lead, but I gestured for her to tether her drekkadyr first. Our mounts were getting skittish with all the howling going on, and we couldn't risk having them take off this late in the day. There was probably only another hour or so of daylight left, and searching for the drekkadyr while the beasties were out wasn't how I wanted to end this day.

After the drekkadyr were secured, we left them nickering quietly behind us, and Eir clamped her hand on my arm as we scaled the last fifteen feet of the slope. We crouched down and crept along the upper ridge for a ways, but we stopped when we had a clear view of the icy shore below.

Then I swiftly pulled Eir behind a thick, black trunk.

"Hooly shit," I breathed as my limbs went numb.

"I want to see, too," Eir hissed and tugged on my arm.

I drew a few deep breaths before I nodded my consent, and then we peered around the flaking bark together.

My wife let out a long and awestruck sigh, but neither of us could do much more than that. We were too astounded by what was taking place on the shoreline.

Wolves the size of lions were mauling the vanahrut and the golthr below, but more prowled down the coast from the north, and their pack numbered over forty. Their dense, black coats were thicker and ragged around their necks and past their withers, but despite their size, they didn't look bulky. These wolves had slightly longer necks and more angular muzzles than a timber wolf, and their forelegs were lean as well. Still, they had powerful builds and thick, bushy black tails swaying behind them, and even though the incoming pack slowly prowled around the ice, they looked like they'd run faster than the wolves I was used to.

Which made sense on account of the lava.

I stared in bewilderment as thin streams of molten rock trickled from the glowing orange eyes of the wolves. The constant stream dripped down their shaggy chests as it clung to black fur, and the flow was steady enough that the incoming pack left a trail of steam and ice melt behind them. This drizzle wasn't enough to burn all the way through the thick sheets of ice, but the wolves who were already feasting were a different story.

Every parting jaw brought another stream of lava spilling from the wolves' fanged mouths, and their victims squealed and thrashed in pain as the molten rock poured over them. Vanahrut and golthr were brought down in droves once the rest of the pack joined in on the hunt, and my pulse slowly increased as I watched lava splatter through the air with every violent shake.

"Aaron Briggs..." my wife breathed. "Have you ever seen such magnificent beasts?"

"Never."

And I meant it.

These creatures had all the cunning and grace of the wolves I'd admired, managed, and studied for years, but with an extra element of badassery that made it impossible to look away. Their snarls gurgled with lava while their howls were laced with burning undertones, and they created a steaming, molten chaos as they closed in on their prey en masse.

They were brutally fucking awesome.

“These wolves are even more glorious than the stories make them out to be,” Eir moaned.

“What stories?” I asked as I watched three lava wolves pounce on a golthr.

The tusked giant was ten times their size, but they took it down in seconds. Their molten fangs tore through the striped flesh, and the ice around them steamed and started to melt from the streams of lava.

“In the Red Forest, the wolves are known as the helgrind,” Eir explained. “This means they are the gates of hell, and they are said to be some of the oldest creatures in our world. They live in the place between our present and the most distant past, and when they prowl the land, they bring the past with them.”

I knitted my eyebrows. “What do you mean ‘bring the past with them?’”

“It’s only what the tales say,” my wife said with a shrug. “The first slaves of the Farthegns brought strange stories to the Red Forest, and these were passed down through our generations. They are obviously made up, but I loved to hear about the helgrind when I was a little girl. The slaves say our past was a fiery one, and this is why our moon is molten. It was broken from the land by fire demons, which is a very silly story. How could the land end up in the sky?”

“If enough force is applied,” I answered. “It’s not unheard of. The moon where I’m from was created from a massive collision our world suffered. It’s part of the debris that broke loose.”

“Is it really?” Eir frowned. “Then I suppose it could be true, but fire demons don’t exist, of course, so that part of the story is still silly. Either way, the tales say the helgrind were born at the time when the fiery world began to cool again, and they carry the molten past inside their bones. This is why their eyes and fangs run with the stuff. It’s to remind the world that the fire of the past could always return one day and consume us all.”

“That’s some story…” I grinned a little as I watched the sheets of ice begin to split from the tides of lava running over them.

“In the tales, the helgrind are not nearly so beautiful, though,” my wife sighed. “They are made to sound too hideous for our eyes to even look upon. The Farthegns believe they’re an omen of inescapable death, but I think they look wonderful. They move so gracefully with their muzzles low to the ground, and you can tell their pack possesses the strength to hunt any beast. Are they anything like the wolves in your world?”

“In a lot of ways, yes,” I said as ten of the wolves circled a golthr. “They use the same hunting tactics, and they’re similarly built. I’d say they’re a hundred or so pounds heavier, and the lava is obviously a difference, but they’re just as impressive. More so, actually.”

“Look at the way their fangs spill the lava into their prey,” Eir whispered with a devious smile. “The way the boiling makes them squirm in agony. These wolves are like you with your flaming blade, my love. This is the might you will unleash on the Red Forest one day.”

I raised my eyebrows, but as I watched the molten carnage taking place far below, I couldn’t argue with the sentiment. The screeches of the vanahrut as the wolves’ fangs tore through their flesh was the same sound they’d made when my runed cutlass sliced through their limbs today. The only difference was in the intensity of the burning.

Still, as merciless as the wolves were, their attack was incredible to witness, and my chest rippled with a satisfying heat.

The thought of Dalir bringing this kind of attack on Hylmrek was intriguing to say the least. But I tried not to let myself get too carried away with my lethal wife’s daydreams. There were plenty of hurdles to get over between now and the moment my clansmen delivered the ultimate massacre.

Plus, the shore was melting to hell right now, and as the last of the wolves feverishly devoured all they could until the final moment, the rest of the pack ran to the north.

None of the vanahrut or the golthr were left alive, and several of the fleeing wolves dragged some of their kills behind them. The remaining, smoking carcasses were left to sink into the frigid sea as the lava melted the last of the ice, and just like that, the frozen coast was obliterated.

The helgrind continued spewing lava from their eyes and gaping mouths while they panted and barked with feral energy, and I could tell they'd melt more of the shore tonight. Steam billowed around the pack as an orange glow followed them into the distance, and I eyed the heavy gray clouds hanging over the sea and the mountains.

"We better get back to Vegvisir," I decided. "This ice melt could throw off our travel plans, and it looks like another snowstorm is coming in."

"Yes, my chief," Eir mumbled distractedly.

The winged woman kept her eyes on the pack until their black figures were too far away to make out anymore, and then the two of us took a last look at the melted coastline before we returned to our drekkadyr.

The ride back to our campsite was a silent one. I was stuck in a bewildered state while Eir wore a dreamy smile on her soft pink lips. I couldn't tell if she was caught up in how fantastic the helgrind were, or whether she was comparing me to them right now, but my mind kept replaying the molten scene we'd just witnessed. I couldn't get over how strikingly similar and wildly different the wolves of this world were to my own, but when we returned to our camp, I immediately noticed something was off.

"Where's Dyggur?" I asked as I scanned the sloping terrain.

Eir blinked herself out of her reverie, and her pallor went as pale as the snow.

The scaly beast wasn't brooding where we'd left him, but the snow around the cave entrance was melted like he'd trampled the whole place. Then Vegvisir shuffled his way out into the puddles.

“That stubborn heillhaust of yours took off,” the wanderling growled. “I tried to contain him, but he’s a real piece of work. Damn near broke my staff, the scaly bastard.”

“Oh, dear...” my wife muttered.

“He’ll be back like usual, right?” I asked, and Eir’s brow crinkled as she shook her head. “Eir, it’s gonna be dark in an hour, and Dyggur’s our most effective guard.”

“Yes, I will fix this,” Eir said. “Take my quarry and start preparing for the evening. He cannot have gone far.”

“You’re not wandering around these mountains alone,” I countered. “I’ll find Dyggur, and you stay here with--”

“Aaron Briggs, Dyggur will not come to you after what you have done to him today.”

“What I’ve done to him?” I scoffed. “You begged me to heal--”

“What you have so heroically done for me,” Eir hastily corrected. “I am beyond grateful for your efforts, of course, but Dyggur does not know to be grateful yet. He is badly injured, and his pride is in tatters. If you go looking for him, he will only flee farther to spare himself the embarrassment. I promise to be careful, but I must find him by myself.”

I nodded reluctantly. “Be back at this cave by dark. Not a minute later, or I’m coming to track you down.”

“Yes, my chief,” Eir agreed.

The winged woman untied three birds from her belt and handed them over as quickly as possible. After that, Eir didn’t waste a moment before ordering her drekkadyr to get moving, and she only lingered on the slope long enough to track Dyggur’s hoofprints. Then the pair took off at a gallop to the south, and I tried not to worry too much about her while I dismounted.

I’d give her one hour before I lost my mind about her safety.

I got to work field dressing the three birds right away, and while I knelt at the mouth of the cave, I told the old man about the wolves we’d seen along the coast. But his first question wasn’t whether the

ice melted and ruined our path to the north. Vegvisir wanted to know what I thought of the beasts, and he chuckled his appreciation when I told him they were incredible. Apparently, he was a fan as well, and like I expected, he knew more than Eir did when it came to the helgrind.

“The slaves aren’t the only ones telling those stories,” Vegvisir said, and I glanced over at him as I tore the head off a bird. “You can travel as far as the southern pole, and the wolves ye’ find there have the same tales being told about them.”

“Wait, there’s wolves in the south, too?” I asked. “The same ones?”

“That’s right.” The wanderling nodded. “Now, tell me... why would that be? How’s a beast like that thriving on multiple continents, always the same, and prowling around in the bowels of the old world?”

I had a bird half-skinned when my hands slowed to a stop, and I stared at the sharp look in Vegvisir’s eyes. Then my veins started to prickle as I considered the weight of his words. Because as far-fetched as Eir’s stories sounded before, I suddenly wondered if there was actually some truth in them.

“You mentioned the old world the night I conquered Illska,” I reminded the old man. “What did you mean by that? What old world?”

“One of many,” Vegvisir muttered, and he started gnawing on a small sheath of wood. “Under the surface of this one, you’ll find the remnants of times long past. Some of it’s so old, it’s been buried far beyond our reach, but not all of it. There’s caves, tunnels, caverns... hundreds of places I’ve journeyed to over the years, and plenty of wanderlings before me have found them, too. If you travel far enough under the ground, you start to find things the surface beings never dreamed of.”

“Like what you’ve found in this cave we’re heading to now?” I asked as I slowly finished skinning the last bird.

“Very much like that, yeah,” the old man confirmed.

“And all these ancient places are guarded by the helgrind?”

“Not all...” Vegvisir shook his head. “But most. And it don’t matter what part of the world you’re in. The inhabitants of that region will warn you about the wolves from the gates of hell, and they’ll whisper now and then about the fires of the past coming back to take us all with ‘em.”

“Then... you believe the stories.” I punctured the bird with my hunting knife just below the breast, pulled the guts out, and tossed them far over the slope. “That these wolves are some link to the old world, and that we could all burn up from fire demons or whatever it was.”

“Not sure what I believe anymore,” Vegvisir sighed, and when I glanced up, he seemed exhausted as he stared into the enchanted flames.

The lines on the wanderling’s weathered face were deeply creased, and his gaze was distant while he stopped chewing his wood. For a minute, he looked even older than he usually did, and he struck me as a man who’d seen way too much in his lifetime, but still couldn’t sort any of it out.

“Thirty years ago, I would’ve said the stories are just talk,” the old man admitted. “Hell, five years ago, I would’ve said it. Tales like the ones about the wolves spread, and sometimes, there’s no rhyme or reason to it. I used to figure there’s not much sense getting caught up in it all. Life comes and goes, worlds burn up, or they don’t. Beings tell each other stories to try and make sense of it all... but then the stories started sounding familiar. I started hearing things I’d already seen, and the more caverns and murals I looked at, the more I started to wonder if there wasn’t something to all this. I tell ye’, beyond the Red Forest, the world’s falling out of balance. The wars are getting to where they don’t make no sense, and the migrations are becoming dangerous. Species are colliding, and havoc’s breaking out, but no one knows what the hell they’re doing it all for. It’s just... fear. I been watching all this and thinkin’ on it for the past few years trying to make sense of it. Then I met you. And I don’t know what to think anymore.”

I narrowed my eyes a little. “Because of my mark?”

“Yeah, your mark, your woman with the wings, the way you handle yourself,” Vegvisir sighed, and he started chewing once more. “Suppose we’ll find out soon enough what all this is about, but we got these wolves to worry about first.”

“And the ice,” I pointed out, and I grabbed the three birds and brought them over to the fire. “Are we gonna have to trek through the mountains to reach the cave instead?”

“Nah, we’ll take the shore,” Vegvisir replied. “The land curves to the west up north, and the helgrind’s den is on the opposite side of the ice. Storm’s brewin’ now, so all that ice will freeze pretty good by tomorrow morning.”

I nodded while I shifted a few stones into the enchanted flames, and the wanderling let the fire die down enough so I could lay the birds out on the rocks. Then the flames billowed up once more, and I sat back with a heavy sigh.

“I think we can time our arrival pretty well,” I told the old man. “Those wolves could have come to the shore anytime during that fiasco, but they didn’t show up until an hour before dark. This is pretty standard hunting behavior for wolves, and based on the size of the pack I saw, we’re gonna need everything working to our advantage to pull this off.”

“That’s why I told ye’, we don’t want to be in there when it gets real late,” Vegvisir confirmed. “The helgrind go out, and they come back by the time the moon’s up. They’ll melt that ice all to shit on their way back from the hunt too, and it’ll strand us there.”

“So, we arrive before sunset,” I decided. “Let the pack move out, get our asses down in that cave, and book it out of there before moonrise. Packs rarely send all their members out at once, though. The head breeding pair will lead the warriors out, but plenty of others will remain behind. We’ll still be up against some wolves in that den, so that’s our main issue.”

“It is,” Vegvisir agreed, and he reached behind him to grab his staff. “Take a look at this, boy.”

I shifted closer to his side of the fire, and the gnarled bark on his staff began altering itself. My heart pounded in my chest as I realized the wanderling was gonna let me see all the runes he'd collected again, but I tried to appear completely calm about this.

Even though I'd been waiting to get another look at this staff for weeks.

Now, the knots on the twisted wood slowly vanished as the patches of frayed bark smoothed out, and one by one, tiny etched symbols began to appear. They multiplied by the dozens as the staff continued reforming, and when the magic settled, I found myself looking at over a hundred runes.

Then Vegvisir turned the staff in his palms while he squinted down at it, and it took him a full minute to find what he was looking for among the various symbols.

"There," the wanderling muttered, and he pointed to a mark that was larger than the ones around it.

It looked like he'd retraced the symbol enough times to carve it deep into the surface, and I instantly committed the four lines and their intersections to memory.

"What does it do?" I asked.

"This rune creates ice," the old man explained, and my eyes widened.

"From nothing?" I clarified.

"That's right," he said. "Trouble is, this staff don't work unless I strike it and set my intent accordingly. When we get into that den, shit's gonna get real crazy real fast, and I can't do much to fight all these wolves myself. Damn near died the last time I tried, and I'm a hell of a lot older now than I was then."

I nodded in understanding, and I tried to keep my tone casual. "You want me to use this rune?"

"I do," Vegvisir admitted. "But it ain't easy work. Bringing the power of a rune out isn't so simple a thing, even if it sounds like it should be. Take that wife of yours, for example. She's a Farthegn,

and they're natural instincts are toward brute force. You can't force a rune to work. You gotta tap into the power from another frame of mind, and if your will ain't strong enough, or your intentions aren't clear, it won't work. I know wanderlings who gave up after decades of trying to wield runes 'cause it just wasn't something they could tap into. Didn't have it in 'em."

"Really?" I asked, and my stomach clenched as I considered the cutlasses Brokkr was forging for my warriors. "It can't be learned with some practice?"

"Sometimes," the old man allowed. "Not always. Like I told you before, those Farthegns in Illska could've figured a thing or two out about my staff if they tried hard enough, but you seem like a more rational man. You think things through like these Farthegns don't. So, give it a go, and see if we can't make this work."

"Okay," I quickly agreed, and Vegvisir hesitated for a moment before he finally handed the staff over to me.

Then the two of us stood up, and I could hardly fucking believe this was happening. Without any prompting or trying to swindle the knowledge out of him, the wanderling was teaching me about his magic.

And I had full permission to utilize it myself.

I was grinning like a schoolboy as I shifted my weight and looked at the runed staff in my hand, and the sheer weight of the magic it possessed made my veins tingle in anticipation. Hundreds of magical possibilities were sitting in the palm of my hand, and no chieftain had ever possessed so much power.

Then I caught Vegvisir's dour expression.

"Don't let it go to your head, boy," the wanderling warned.

"Sorry," I muttered, and I forced a focused frown.

"Just take it real easy," the old man snorted, "and be careful where your mind's at because I got a lot of runes on this staff. We only want to use one of 'em. Take a minute to clear your head, and I want you to focus on the feeling of the wood in your hand."

I closed my eyes and did as he instructed even though I secretly knew a thing or two about this process already.

“There’s a separation between you and this staff right now,” Vegvisir continued. “You want to erase that separation from your mind. Focus on melding the two together, so there’s no difference between where your hand ends and the staff begins.”

I hadn’t intentionally gotten into this frame of mind before, but now that I tried, I understood this was what I’d been doing all along with my runed cutlass. I’d channeled my intentions so directly into the hilt of the sword that I didn’t even think of myself as separate from it, and as I did the same now, the mark carved into my chest began to warm up.

“Got it,” I muttered with my eyes still closed.

“Alright, now the ice you’re conjuring isn’t any old kind of ice,” the wanderling said. “Think of it as a spear. You’re not covering the world in ice, you’re throwing a dose of it out, and where that ice goes depends on you. Be careful on this. Imagine directing that spear straight ahead, and nowhere else. Once you think you got your intentions clear, strike the staff on the ground, but do not lose sight of that connection in your palm. There’s no separation between you and the staff.”

I nodded as I heard the old man backing away to get behind me, and then I focused like I’d learned to do with my runed cutlass. Except this time, I didn’t let enchanted flames fill my mind. I envisioned ice instead, and the longer I concentrated, the heavier the staff felt in my hand. My core radiated with a pleasant heat as I realized I was already prepared to wield the rune, and I didn’t hesitate to put it to use.

I struck the staff against the ground less than a minute after Vegvisir stepped back, and I opened my eyes just in time to see a five-foot-long, frozen lance shoot from the head of the staff.

It was pure white with ten razor-sharp ridges spiraling down it and a perilous point at both ends. The icy shank flashed through the air in a heartbeat before it collided with the wall of the cave, and then it shattered into millions of needle-like pieces.

“Woah!” I gasped and jumped as the force of the impact gave off an ear-piercing pop.

The pure white shards scattered across the cave floor a second later, and I stared at the aftermath as Vegvisir shuffled to my side.

“What in the hell?” the wanderling muttered under his breath.

I turned to find him dumbstruck and slack-jawed, and I could’ve sworn he was a few shades closer to gray than usual.

“Did I do it right?” I checked.

The wanderling turned and stared at me for a full minute, but then he recovered from his shock enough to snatch the staff out of my hand.

“Yeah, you did it right,” Vegvisir said through a harried sigh, and he clutched his staff closer to himself. “Boy, I ain’t never had a rune work that well on the first try.”

I couldn’t help grinning as I thought back to the first time I tried the fire rune in Illska. Brokkr couldn’t get the runed skinning knife to work, but on the first try... I’d ignited the wooden post.

“Never?” I asked. “Not even once?”

“Shit, no!” the wanderling chuckled. “And this ice rune doesn’t behave like that when I use it. The spears are smaller, and they fly slower. Don’t look so damn fancy, either.”

“Well, damn,” I snickered, and I scuffed my beard as I considered this. “That’s fucking cool.”

“It’s somethin’,” Vegvisir muttered. “I suppose this works out, though. If you can wield that rune, we might come out of the cave alright.”

“Hold on...” I turned to face him. “You’re not giving me that staff to go in there, are you?”

Vegvisir looked uneasy, but he nodded. “Like I said, I can’t wield it fast enough, and you got good instincts when it comes to trouble. Our chance of making it through those wolves is better if

you've got all the power you need to get it done, but just... be careful with it, alright? This staff's taken me over forty years to work out, and all that lava--"

"Nope," I abruptly refused, and I took a step back. "I'm not taking your staff in there. I can't promise you nothing will happen to it, and the number of runes you've collected isn't worth the risk. If something happened to your staff, I'd feel like such an asshole. Plus, that's the only way you know how to protect yourself. You need to carry the staff."

Vegvisir looked at me like he couldn't understand a word I was saying, and his eyes glazed over as I shook my head. Then he opened his mouth to argue, but Eir's voice echoed through the ravine outside, and both of us almost leapt out of our skin.

The wanderling's staff reformed itself in seconds flat as he promptly dropped onto his ass beside the fire. I instinctively did the same like no rune magic had just gone down here, and both of us slouched as naturally as possible while I got busy checking on the cooking birds.

Eir continued calling my name until her drekkadyr came to a snorting stop, but she didn't sound upset, so I remained in a forced casual state. When the winged woman sprinted into the cave, she was hyperventilating and sent me an ecstatic smile.

"Aaron Briggs!" my wife panted with bright pink cheeks. "Aaron Briggs, you will not believe this! You will simply die over this! Look what I have found!"

I furrowed my brow in utter confusion, but then my wife threw a hefty hide on the cave floor in front of me, and her toothy smile managed to widen even further as she gave a giddy jump.

"Can you believe it?" Eir gasped. "You have to keep it! This is too spectacular!"

I glanced down, and at first, I couldn't tell what the big deal was. Clearly, my wife skinned some beast on her way back to the campsite, but she was an incredibly skilled hunter, so it wasn't much of a shock.

The longer I studied the speckled hide though, the more familiar it became, and eventually, my jaw unhinged.



Chapter 18

It seemed impossible even for my badass Farthegn wife, but somehow, I was looking at the fur of one of the massive seals who'd shown up and wreaked absolute, bloody havoc on the shore today.

"Did you skin a whole ass monster seal?" I blurted out. "How the--"

"Even better!" Eir squealed, and she dropped down onto her knees to spread the hide out across the ground. "Look closer! It's not so large as the seals we saw, and--"

"It's still pretty big for a seal," I cut in. "Where the hell did you get this?"

"I found it beside the water," Eir panted, and she looked at Vegvisir. "You know what this is, yes? Surely, I am not mistaken."

I was completely lost by now, but the wanderling had a curious smile on his face as he leaned in closer for a look.

The seal hide was a deep navy blue with dark brown speckles flecking the short fur, and it was a million times softer than velvet to the touch. I'd never felt anything like it, and I ran my fingers over the patches of brown and blue as I marveled at the texture. The three of us turned the seal hide over several times to study it, but I couldn't find any seams where its hunter would have removed the pelt from the beast. Around the time my confusion peaked, Vegvisir let out a low whistle.

"Well, I'll be damned..." the old man muttered. "You found a Selkie, girl."

"I knew it!" Eir nearly exploded with excitement at the news.

"A what?" I asked.

Both of them dragged their eyes off the speckled fur, and they looked at me like I was from another planet.

Which technically... I was.

“Aaron Briggs, a Selkie!” Eir repeated as if this would clear the situation up.

“Yeah, I have no idea what that means,” I said. “Is it a breed of seal?”

“Yes and no,” Vegvisir answered. “A Selkie’s a sea-born woman, and a hell of a rare find these days. She shifts between the form of a seal and the form of a human. Hundreds of years ago, they were more common, but most of ‘em were taken by sailors and kept out of the sea until their kind started dying off. Some don’t believe there’s a Selkie left in the whole damn ocean.”

“But there is at least one,” Eir eagerly added, “and I have found her for you!”

“For me?” I straightened up. “What am I gonna do with a Selkie?”

“Keep her for your own!” my wife purred with a devious grin. “My chief, a sea-born woman must stay with the man who steals her fur. We already have the Selkie’s fur here, and she will be bound to you for life now!”

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

“I am not!” Eir squealed. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Hold on, back up,” I said, and I stood up and started pacing while I tried to wrap my head around this. “You’re telling me this seal fur belongs to a woman?”

“A sea-born woman,” my wife corrected. “Incredibly rare.”

“Why isn’t she in the fur?” I checked. “Where is she?”

“Wandering the land somewhere,” Vegvisir said with a shrug. “Selkies can remove their fur to come ashore and take their human form. They’re still half-beast though, so they’re more resilient than you or me. Cold won’t get to ‘em, the beasts fear ‘em, and they can travel for miles without any trouble.”

I stopped pacing. “Did you say the beasts fear them?”

“Sure did,” the wanderling chuckled. “Hell, men fear ‘em. A Selkie’s not such a sweet creature. From what I’ve heard, they’re the most vicious beasts in the sea, and that don’t change just because they’re in a human form.”

“Then why were the sailors stealing their fur all those years?” I asked.

“Why do you think?” Vegvisir snorted. “Nothin’ like taming the wildest woman in the sea. The sailors only had to get their hands on that fur and hide it where the Selkie would never be able to find it again.”

“Why wouldn’t the woman just kill the guy who took it?” I pointed out. “Problem solved.”

“Because he’s the only one who knows where the fur’s at,” the wanderling said. “That fur is everything to a Selkie. It’s a part of her, and she can’t go nowhere without it. Sure is a shame. The stories you hear about ‘em aren’t pretty ones. Sea-born women weren’t meant to be kept from the water like that. It’s torture to ‘em. They’d waste away over the years, chained to the bastard who hid their furs, and those sailors would parade them around like kings.”

My stomach churned as I imagined what the Selkies had to endure, but when I turned toward Eir, she was busy fawning over the soft, speckled fur. My Farhegn wife still had a giddy little smile on her full lips, and as soon as she noticed me watching her, her black wings fluttered with excitement.

“I can hardly believe you will have a Selkie for a wife,” Eir purred with pride. “What wonderful fortune.”

“What?” I scoffed, and the issue of the Selkie immediately got shoved aside for a way more important one. “Eir, I already have a wife! Didn’t we just establish that I... well... you know.”

The winged woman sent me a sultry smile. “That you love me so much you can hardly stand it?”

“Yes, that,” I muttered. “So, why the hell are you talking about me getting another wife?”

“Because you should have this wife!” Eir insisted, and I threw my hands up in complete confusion. “Aaron Briggs, you are the boldest and most honorable chieftain in the Red Forest, and you preside over two Farthegn clans. This has never been done before! Now, you have the opportunity to steal a powerful and savage Selkie for your own, which is an opportunity that you may never have again in all your life! Not to mention, have you ever heard of a chieftain who claimed two wives for himself?”

“Of course, I haven’t,” I said. “I don’t know shit about Farthegns.”

“Well, then I will tell you that no chieftain has ever had more than one wife at the same time,” Eir haughtily continued, and she sent me the most know-it-all look I’d ever seen. “Most don’t even bother claiming a wife at all since there are plenty of married women around for them to enjoy. But you, Aaron Briggs, have claimed me for your wife... Eir of Dalir, most remarkable huntress and herald of three thousand skulls! Do you not feel you are destined to possess the most magnificent women? Women like myself and this Selkie?”

I couldn’t decide whether to laugh or collapse after a speech like that, but Vegvisir seemed to be enjoying the conversation a lot.

“Puttin’ yourself on par with a Selkie, eh?” the wanderling chuckled. “You sure that’s fair, girl?”

Eir’s expression turned to ice, and she slowly raised a slim eyebrow at the man. “I am quite certain it is fair. My husband can vouch for what an utterly rare and life-altering woman I am.”

Vegvisir snickered even more and shook his head, but he decided not to comment on my Farthegn wife’s opinion.

Meanwhile, I was pacing again while my mind ran circles around itself.

The fact was, I really hadn’t imagined life with more than one woman on my arm. Even though I was supposedly expected to have sex with my warriors’ wives, I’d never partaken in the custom. Eir really was all I needed in terms of women, but hearing her talk so openly about the idea was admittedly hot as fuck.

I thought she couldn't get any more perfect, but she just continued to outdo herself.

And when I thought about it, I'd been up to a lot of shit in this world that I never would have imagined doing. Some of it was awesome, some of it was a little questionable and violent, but overall... bedding multiple wives each night was probably one of the more positive changes I could make in my life.

Eir was still waiting for me to respond when I finally stopped pacing, but as her loving gaze sliced through me, all I could do was sigh and rake a hand through my hair.

"Aaron Briggs, answer me," my wife insisted. "Do you not feel you are destined to have all of the most magnificent women?"

"I don't know," I sighed. "I'm not saying the idea isn't an intriguing one. I just never saw myself as a man who needed more than one wife. Especially after meeting you. You're fucking perfect. What do I need another wife for?"

"For honor!" Eir scoffed. "For the sake of your superior nature, for breeding, and perhaps, even for fun! Imagine it... I am here to be penetrated, but there is also another woman for you to penetrate beside me. Two of us, equally matched in rarity, and belonging to no man but yourself. Together, we will worship you for all of our days because you have deemed us worthy to share this life with you."

"That's the problem, though," I firmly countered. "A Selkie wouldn't feel like that. Regardless of honor, or fun, or anything else... right now, you're talking about forcing this woman to be with me by taking away something that means everything to her. I'm not doing that. It's too messed up, and I'd never feel okay about it. I can guarantee this Selkie wouldn't, either."

"But she might?" Eir tried. "Once she knows you, she will. I know this."

I cocked an eyebrow at my wife, and I could tell she knew I was right, even if she didn't want to admit it. Eir bit her bottom lip while she crinkled her brow at me as a desperate Hail Mary, but

when I remained completely straight-faced, she finally scowled in defeat.

“Fine,” the green-eyed beauty grumbled, and she huffily rolled up the seal fur. “We will not steal the Selkie. Even though you are so deserving of her, and she is so rare and beautiful.”

“You don’t know she’s beautiful,” I said.

“Of course, she is beautiful!” Eir snapped and shook the speckled skin in her fist. “Look at this hide! It is glorious!”

With that, my wife stormed out of the cave and into the snow, and I couldn’t believe how pissed she looked.

You think you’re doing everything right as a husband, and then one day, your wife’s livid you won’t abduct another woman to share your bed...

“God damn it,” I muttered as I dropped onto my ass beside the fire.

“Fartheqns,” Vegvisir snorted. “Can’t stand leaving something valuable laying around.”

“It’s a woman, not a chest of gold!” I said. “A living, breathing woman!”

“A rare one, too,” Vegvisir muttered, and I shot him a pointed look.

“You can’t possibly be on Eir’s side in this.”

“Never sided with a Fartheqgn before in my life,” the wanderling drawled. “Only sayin’ is all. I’ve seen a lot in this world, but I’ve only come across two Selkies in over fifty years of traveling around it. This one’s the second.”

“Then you keep her,” I suggested.

“No use.” Vegvisir shrugged. “Nowhere to hide her fur, and I can’t fight her off, either. She’d kill me before I ever got close enough to claim her. A man with your build, though? You could probably keep a Selkie in hand. You’d have to tie her up for a while until you find a good hiding spot for that fur. She’ll maul your ass otherwise,

but once she stops biting... and starts enjoying your cock... it might work out.”

“Unbelievable,” I sighed and shook my head. “You’re as bad as my wife, you know that?”

“Nah, just not used to decency,” Vegvisir chuckled. “You’re doing the right thing, boy. Don’t let no one tell ye’ otherwise. Even that pretty wife of yours... you know she loves you for being a man of integrity. Just can’t help the Farthegn blood in her. Makes her kind want to take everything there is to be taken, especially if no one else in the forest has it.”

I smirked as I acknowledged how accurate this was. By the time I finished getting our birds off the fire and onto a few clay plates, I decided I wasn’t at all surprised by Eir’s reaction.

My winged wife was a Farthegn to her bones, and she really did think the world of me. I knew I came first in her mind above all else, including morals, but knowing she wanted me to have all the best women the world could offer was pretty fucking cute.

And sexy as hell.

I decided we could compromise on this one, but I gave her some time to cool off first. The snowy slopes outside the cave turned a dusky blue as I finished preparing dinner, and once our birds and millet were ready, I got up and went to join her.

I found Eir sitting in the snow and glaring at the mountainside across the ravine. She had the Selkie fur clutched in her crossed arms as fat flakes started to fall from the sky. My wife clearly hadn’t let go of her temper just yet, but I sat down in the snow beside her anyways. Then I nudged her leg with my knee, and the woman offered a curt nod in greeting.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said with a grin. “If you really think I should have some more fantastic wives, then I don’t mind. Just not this one, alright? It’s not okay with me.”

Eir slumped a little, and her scowl faded. “I know. I would not be very proud to have a Selkie if you felt bad about stealing her.”

“Good,” I said. “Then that settles it. Did you find Dyggur?”

“Yes, but he would not come to me,” she sighed sadly. “I saw him looking so majestic on the top of the ridge, and when I called to him, he turned away. I know he only needs time to recover his pride. Today was so hard for him.”

“You left him out there?” I asked. “But you saw those wolves, what if--”

“Dyggur is certainly too mighty to be bested by silly wolves,” Eir mumbled while she looked down at the Selkie fur. “He will be just fine, and when he returns, he will prove to you precisely how strong he is.”

“When he returns...” I glanced at our two snow-covered drekkadyr. “When do you think that will be?”

“Who knows?” Eir sighed. “The last time Dyggur refused to come to me, he was gone for a month. I suggest we continue our journey without him for the time being. He is just so torn apart over this embarrassment with his leg, and I don’t want to injure his pride any further by forcing him to return.”

“Shit... This puts us at a bit of a disadvantage with the wolves. I was hoping Dyggur could fight beside us in the cave, but we’ll work it out. You can ride with me for the rest of the trip. Let’s get some food for now, and then we’ll take the Selkie fur back to the coast before bed.”

“Umm, let’s not,” Eir hummed.

I blinked as she swiftly got up and headed inside, and I lunged to follow her.

“Eir...” I said in a warning tone. “I thought we were on the same page about this.”

“We are,” my wife assured me. “We can return the Selkie’s fur, but not tonight. It’s too soft and lovely, and since we will never be so close to such a rare hide for the rest of our entire lives, I think it’s only fair we admire it while we have it. The Selkie can go without her fur for one evening.”

Vegvisir chuckled at my stunned expression. “We ain’t fools, girl. You’re hoping the woman comes around looking for it.”

“So?” Eir tersely replied. “I want to know how beautiful she is.”

With that, Eir sat on the rolled-up seal fur so neither of us could get it from her, and she started on her dinner like nothing was out of the ordinary.

I didn’t feel right about making the Selkie worry all night long about her missing hide, but I figured this was better than stealing it forever and forcing her to stay by my side, so I let my wife have her way just this once. If anything, I could sneak the hide back to the shore before Eir woke up to stop me. Hopefully, the seal-shifter woman was as resilient against the cold as Vegvisir said she was.

The three of us discussed our plans for tomorrow while we ate and cleaned up for the night, but the wanderling didn’t seem to want to talk about the ice rune he’d shown me earlier. Now that Eir was in the cave, he tiptoed right past the subject of me using his staff, and I purposely didn’t bring it up, either.

Not because Eir was here, but because there was no way I’d take the wanderling’s staff from him with lava-spewing wolves around.

Disarming the old man like that was out of the question.

Plus... I already had my own solution.

I waited until Vegvisir was heading out to sleep in a tree for the night, and as soon as I saw him disappear in the shadows beyond the drekkadyr, I promptly returned to the light of the enchanted fire he left behind.

Then I pulled Brokkr’s jagged sword from its sheath, and I dug a engraver out of my saddlebag.

“What are you doing?” Eir asked as she unrolled the Selkie hide.

“Just handling some preparations for tomorrow,” I said.

I wasn’t sure how complex it might be to utilize multiple runes on one sword, but having two separate blades with their own powers

sounded easier in theory. Then I could channel my intention for fire with one hand, and ice with the other, and Vegvisir could do whatever he could with the staff.

This way, we'd be waltzing into the helgrind's den with triple the rune power.

I focused on the ice rune I'd memorized from the wanderling's lesson this evening, and I started etching the symbol into the steel of my jagged sword.

My wife was so enraptured with the seal fur that she didn't bother coming over to see what I was up to, and I chuckled every time I heard her sighing in admiration. Eir couldn't stop tracing her fingers over the wash of speckles, and she told me about a dozen times how glorious and soft the blue and brown fur was.

The sounds of the night beasts prowling through the ravines drifted into the cave as the snowfall thickened outside the entrance, and Eir went on and on about the Selkie stories she'd heard when she was little.

I listened and nodded along as I checked my work and dusted off the steel shavings, but I didn't want to test out the runed blade just yet. I knew I'd have time in the morning to head into the woods for a private trial, but I was pretty sure I nailed the engraving. Just focusing on my connection to the hilt of the jagged sword made the steel feel heavier, and I smirked to myself as I stowed it in its sheath.

Now all I had to do was brooch the subject tomorrow with Vegvisir, and hopefully, he'd understand.

My wife was lounging on the Selkie hide with a dreamy look on her face when I started laying out what was left of our furs for sleeping on. She was still dressed in her winter armor, but she sent me a dirty grin as she traced a few coy circles across the hide.

I immediately recognized the look.

"No way," I refused as I started pulling my leather armor off. "We're not fucking on some poor woman's stolen hide."

"Why not?" Eir groaned. "It would feel quite lovely..."

“If you want any attention from me, you’ll have to get your ass off that Selkie fur, and over here instead,” I said. “Otherwise, I’m going to sleep.”

My wife pouted as she snuggled her cheek against the speckled fur one last time, but then she obeyed and rolled it up for the night. She still buried it under all our food and saddlebags just in case the Selkie showed up to find it though, and I rolled my eyes as she nodded happily to herself.

She even took the opposite side of our bed so she could keep an eye on the pile of provisions more easily, and the only thing that finally distracted her was me pulling her ass flush against my groin.

Eir chuckled and rolled her hips in invitation. Then I tugged at her armor as I nipped lightly at her ear, and I was just starting to tease the feathers on her wings when the drekkadyr brayed outside.

I froze and listened carefully for a second. Our mounts were nickering in panic and stomping their hooves now.

“The Selkie!” Eir hissed and shot up. “She’s here!”

“Eir, wait,” I ordered, but my wife leapt clear over me, and I tore my cutlass from the pile of saddlebags before I ran after her.

The drekkadyr were getting louder, but I doubted the Selkie had somehow tracked us down in all these mountains. It was more likely that the predators were onto them, and I closed the gap between me and Eir as quickly as I could.

Just as we reached the mouth of the cave, I heard a distinct whooshing sound. Then I snatched Eir and yanked her back with me, and a three-foot-long serrated scythe swiped within a foot of us.



Chapter 19

We had to be at least a hundred miles from Svelgard's stronghold, and we were well beyond the crossing at Verolkki. But I'd recognize that serrated blade anywhere.

Some of Svelgard's warriors had managed to track us all the way into wolf territory, and my chest ignited as I realized we were being ambushed by our northern enemies.

Again.

I silently shoved Eir deeper into the cave so she could arm herself, and I raised my cutlass as the scythe struck out from the snowy darkness again. The second my runed blade clashed with the stock, the black wood ignited, and my attacker jumped back with a stunned yelp.

Before he knew what hit him, I lunged out of the cave and into the dark. Then I slashed the hulking man's thigh and arm in two merciless strikes, and his bellowing wails broke through the cold air as he collapsed in the snow. I could see the amber flames burning through his gaping wounds as the man continued shrieking and flailing around, but none of the snow doused the enchanted flames no matter what he tried.

They were fucking embedded in him now.

I chuckled without remorse while I watched the huge Fartheagn writhe uselessly across the ground. I'd never struck a man with my runed cutlass yet, but the effect was exactly what I imagined it'd be.

The Svelgard warrior was incapacitated and locked in agony. He couldn't even remember to pick up his charring scythe again, and satisfaction surged through my veins just before I looked up to find a whole troop of warriors emerging from the shadows.

They climbed up from the ravine below and jumped down from the ridge behind me, and it was too dark to make out much more than their shaggy outlines and scythes.

Svelgard didn't hold out on this one, and I realized Eir was right about their hatred for Hylmrek.

More than twenty hulking bastards showed up to take us down, and I turned full circle to size up my opponents. Any moonlight would've helped, but the sky was shrouded in the dense clouds of a winter storm, and I couldn't make out much beyond the heavy snowflakes falling around me. I braced myself for the worst anyways, but not one of these bastards came closer than about ten feet.

They stopped short in a ring around me while the wailing man's shrieks grew louder, and after a moment, I understood why.

Beneath my woolen tunic, a blazing orange mark glowed bright enough to make out in the darkness, and I grinned like a heathen as I felt the blaze building in my core.

Then I turned, planted my boot on the wailing man's chest, and put him out of his misery with a fiery slash to his throat.

The shadowy figures around me jumped at the sight, but I was still grinning as I looked up at them all.

"Come on, then," I growled. "You came all this way for a fight... let's fight."

Just hearing what language I spoke seemed to spur some of the warriors' fury. Five of them lunged at me as their battle cries rang out, but only two of them made it.

Three of my wife's arrows impaled three skulls before they could reach me, and the warriors who lived missed their mark as I dove aside. I slashed the back of a man's knee in the process and took out another warrior's shin in passing, and the way they wailed assured me my runed blade was doing its job well.

The rest of the warriors broke into action after that, and every one of the hulking bastards came after me with their scythes at the ready.

Eir killed another four men with her bow before they figured out where she was, and the second a group lunged toward the cave, she emerged with a blade in each hand. The first thing my wife did was

hook a warrior's ankle with her scythe to topple him, and she buried her Bowie knife in the bastard's throat without missing a beat. Then she whipped around and impaled a three-foot scythe blade in a fucker's gut, and the two of us went into battle mode as we ducked, rolled, and lunged out of the line of fire.

I only had one blade on me, but the fire rune was serving me well, and I didn't mind staying on the defensive since any opening I got was a perilous one. I ignited my attacker's forearms, shoulders, and ankles every chance I got, and the flames I embedded in their wounds grew bigger with each strike.

One man's entire shin billowed with fire from just one slice, and his shriek of pain cost him his neck as I brought my cutlass back around.

Then I circled back to take out my previous victims, and now that they couldn't function enough to fight, I easily trailed their staggering paths and left them dead in the snow.

My mark blazed beneath my tunic through it all, and the dim glow illuminated the warriors' horrified faces as I bared down on every one of them. I'd never seen a Farthegn so terrified before that night, but every strike assured me I finally found a means of securing my future in this world. And I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel good.

Power surged through my core and into my veins as I delivered one death blow after another with my runed blade, and my beautiful wife who'd almost lost her head over this ambush was just as unforgiving as me.

She fell into a lethal rhythm with her two-blade combo and left her attackers bleeding out in the snow. Their eyes were missing and their hearts were gouged to a pulp, and the murderous shrieks Eir let out brought a deadly grin to my face.

Together, we slaughtered nearly every hulking bastard Svelgard sent for us in under five minutes, but then two figures appeared on the ridge above us, and I didn't see them in time.

A woman let out a grating war cry as she landed on my back, and she crushed me under her as my cutlass was thrown into the

bloody snow. Then I had a dagger pressed firmly against my throat, and while I rolled and dug my elbow hard into my attacker's ribs, I heard Eir hitting the ground as well.

And I knew who'd gotten us.

The twins let out identical shrieks as Eir and I wrestled to break free of their holds. There were five men left standing too, and they all surrounded us and kicked into our ribs and legs to help the women keep us down. Every grunt Eir let out made my blood boil with rage, but I managed to twist my attacker's wrist and force her to drop the dagger. Then I went into overdrive, but nothing I did helped.

The twins and their cronies had both of us caged under them, and they weren't about to give up this time. They also weren't trying to kill us just yet, and I held onto this scrap of hope.

If these fuckers really wanted to try and subdue us and drag us to Svelgard, then there was still a chance to survive. That much hope was all I needed. I was even about to fake a concussion to speed up the process, but then a low growl rippled through the woods.

The woman on my back froze as she kept my neck in a dangerously twisted hold, and I didn't move a damn muscle. One wrong move, and my spine would snap, but Eir wasn't making a sound anymore, and my heart slammed in my chest while the snow stung my buried face.

I forced myself not to all-out panic even though my neck pinched worse with every passing second, and I just hoped Eir wasn't in as dangerous of a hold right now.

Still, the growling continued. My first thought was that all the wailing my rune had caused might have drawn the pack of helgrind this way, but this growl wasn't smoky enough. It was low, smooth, and rumbling like a panther, and just as it got louder, Eir let out a furious grunt.

She must have managed to throw off her attacker, because a body crashed to the ground beside me, and a moment later, one of the men yowled in pain.

Then my attacker screeched and released my neck, and I didn't even get a chance to throw her off me.

Someone else got to her first.

I dragged my face out of the snow while the warrior's screech turned into a blood-curdling scream. The first thing I saw when I got my eyes clear was a woman's naked ass two feet away from me, but the main reason I did a double-take was because the rumbling growl came from her.

It was too dark to tell who or what she was, but she had the blue-eyed twin pinned under her, and she sank her teeth into the warrior's forehead while I gaped in horror.

Then the naked woman tore the bitch's flesh right off her face.

"What the fuck!" I belted and scrambled to my feet.

Eir caught my shoulders as I backed into her, but the blue-eyed warrior's screams were so piercing that we couldn't even flee. All we could do was clutch each other and stare at this buck naked lady in a snowstorm, but she didn't stop there. She chewed through her victim's throat to end her agony in the most brutal way possible, and I gagged at the gurgling screams of my attacker until she was dead and partially eaten in the snow.

Then the growling woman whipped around to face us, and her bloody lips parted in a warning snarl.

My wife's grip tightened on my arms as both of us gasped. I could have sworn this chick had jagged fangs instead of teeth, but it was hard to tell because parts of the blue-eyed bitch's tissue was still dangling from her mouth. Luckily, she pounced on her next victim before I could overthink this.

And it actually wasn't me.

The black-eyed twin was the next to go, and she shrieked and crawled for her life while the naked woman clawed her way up her back. Then she sank her fangs into the warrior's neck, and she tore her jugular out in one bite like a fucking savage.

Blood sprayed across the snow as I staggered backward with my wife, but that was about the time one of the standing men got his ass in gear. There were still four hulking warriors on their feet, and one of them had the balls to lash out at the fanged woman with his scythe.

“Help her, my chief!” Eir gasped, and she shoved me forward.

“Fucking what?” I demanded, but it was too late to back out.

Two of the men decided to go after me instead, and their two comrades doubled-up against the savage woman.

But everyone was just distracted enough by the naked, berserker chick, and I managed to evade my opponents long enough to find my cutlass in the bloody snow. Then I ignited one of their forearms, dodged a scythe, struck out at an ankle, and set a scythe stock on fire.

I could hear Eir trying to help the savage woman fight off the other two men, but I didn't have any time to risk a glance in their direction. My attackers were determined to kill my ass this time, and they seethed through gritted teeth while they tried to keep fighting despite their burning wounds. Finally, I managed to hack one of their legs open, and I drove my cutlass into his back as soon as he dropped to one knee.

The scream he let out was almost as shrill as the ones the mauled warriors made, but before I could try the same maneuver on my last opponent, I heard the savage woman shriek.

It wasn't a vicious shriek this time. It was a pained one, and my head snapped to the side in time to see the naked woman drop onto the ground. Eir murdered the man who'd struck her a split second later, but when I whipped back around, I took a firm kick to the diaphragm.

My lungs heaved as I flew backward onto my ass, and my opponent raised his scythe above my aching body.

Then a rumbling growl split the air, and the savage woman pounced, pinned, and mauled my attacker in seconds flat.

The hulking man twitched and wailed in the snow beside me as her shadowy figure tore into his throat repeatedly, and when the last warrior was finally dead, an eerie silence fell in the mountains.

I stayed on the ground, and Eir stood stock-still in a sea of dead bodies. Snowflakes continued cascading down all around us while even the night beasts stayed silent, and the savage woman slowly wiped her bloody mouth on her arm.

She had her back to me as she straddled her last victim, and I was afraid to move or speak in case she wanted to eat my jugular next. I was also still reeling from the shock of this growling, fanged chick showing up naked in the snow to maul some Farthegns, so when she suddenly shifted to stand up, I instinctively flinched.

Then her gaze whipped over her shoulder, and I stared at her shadowy, bloody face.

And her bare tits, because they were smeared with the blood of my enemies and just... right there.

The savage didn't speak or move for a long, heart-stopping minute. I did my best to remain calm when she started to rise to her feet, but then the woman jolted and almost fell, and I realized the blood all over her leg was actually her blood.

The warrior Eir killed for her must have caught her calf with his scythe, and the naked woman limped a little as she looked down at it.

"Shit," I muttered and sat up. "Do you need--"

I didn't even get to offer my assistance.

The savage woman jumped back the second I moved toward her. Before I could blink, she took off running, and I stared at her naked backend until the snowfall blurred out her figure.

"Get up!" Eir rushed to my side to haul me onto my feet. "Go get her! Help her! Don't lose her!"

"Wh-What?" I stammered. "She's brutal as fuck! She killed those assholes with her teeth! Just her teeth!"

“She is the Selkie!” Eir gasped as she dragged me over a couple dead bodies. “I am certain that was her. She assisted us, my chief, and she is injured. It is your duty to help her. You owe her this! Go!”

“Okay, but where’s Vegvisir?” I asked. “I need to find him first. Those warriors could have caught him before they ambushed us.”

“I’m here,” the wanderling said from the darkness, and I quickly turned around. “Got the drekkadyr before they could run off in the commotion.”

“Thank god,” I sighed with relief. “I thought--”

“Thought I’d miss the show?” Vegvisir cut in, and his voice was low and accusing.

I sobered as I slowly approached the shadows, and when I got closer, the wanderling’s hardened expression confirmed my suspicion. His eyes were dark and piercing as he held my gaze with a loaded glare, and I knew I was in deep shit.

I didn’t know how much he’d seen of that fight, but he’d seen enough. And now Vegvisir knew I’d weaponized the very first rune he showed me.

“Aaron Briggs!” my wife hissed anxiously. “Go! The wanderling is alive, and you will lose the Selkie if you don’t hurry!”

Vegvisir shoved the reins of a drekkadyr into my hand without blinking, and he was still leveling me with the same hard glare when I swiftly mounted up.

Then I kicked the beast into a gallop and took off up the slope, and I tried not to register the knot growing in my gut. I’d been ready to tell Vegvisir everything tomorrow morning, but he found out about my runed weapons in the worst way possible. I had a sinking feeling I’d never learn another rune from him after this.

On the other hand, I had an injured woman to track down, and knowing she’d taken a bad hit on my account made me determined to find her before I worried about anything else.

Even if she was fanged and fucking terrifying to see in action.

The Selkie was also naked, stranded on land, and bleeding all over the snow, and the winter storm was picking up by the minute. Polar wind blew straight through my wool and froze me to my bones as I made my drekkadyr scale the ridge faster, and the snowflakes clung to my beard and eyebrows until they started caking into ice.

Still, I didn't slow down until I reached the top of the ridge. When I squinted through the blizzard, I saw one figure crossing the expanse of ice below.

The savage woman was running faster than I could have even without an injured leg, and she didn't seem to be limping at all. Her long hair flew behind her naked frame as she ran at an all-out sprint toward the blackened ocean, and as she reached the edge of the icy shore, she dove straight into the crashing waves.

"Fucking shittttt," I muttered as my muscles started locking up from the wind.

I stayed there on the ridge for several minutes and waited for the woman to resurface. From what I could tell, she never did. The Selkie had been swallowed up by the frozen water, and I cursed under my breath before I steered my drekkadyr back toward the campsite.

When I returned, the stench of burned flesh permeated the area, and nothing remained of Svelgard's warriors. My wife assured me Vegvisir had burned them up with his staff and let the blood boil away, but now he was nowhere to be found. Apparently, he'd taken the other drekkadyr without any explanation to Eir.

In the meantime, my wife was bouncing around the entrance of the cave waiting for me, and she was bitterly disappointed the Selkie got away.

"But she was injured!" my wife scoffed. "How can we leave her in such a state?"

"It's not like I could have swam after her," I said. "But she didn't seem too hurt. She was hauling ass when I saw her, and I don't think she wanted our help either way. You saw how she took off when I barely even moved toward her."

“But she was so glorious,” Eir groaned and trudged into the cave. “The screams of her prey... the spewing of their blood... the unbridled ferocity of her attack... I will never forget this for all of my life. I will be haunted by the Selkie’s wrath both day and night. It was so jarring and beautiful to witness. Aaron Briggs, won’t you please reconsider making her your wife?”

I sighed and shook my head at her sad little frown, but I did agree with her on some counts. I’d probably be haunted by that brutal, face-ripping maneuver for at least a couple weeks.

“Let me see your injuries,” I said as I sat down beside the fire. “I know those motherfuckers got a few kicks in. Are you alright?”

Eir smirked at my tense tone. “I could be much worse, my love. It’s only a bit of bruising.”

“Well, let me see, anyway,” I countered. “It’s been a hell of a day, and tomorrow won’t be any easier. I want you in prime condition.”

I pulled my winged woman to my side, and I dug through our healing bags to find the remedies Vegvisir gave me earlier. They’d worked well enough after my tussle with Dyggur, so I figured they’d do the trick now, and I gave my wife a few doses of tonic. I put some poultice over the angrier, boot-shaped welts on her skin too, and the whole time I tended to her, Eir sighed and fawned over the fanged woman.

She bragged about our defeat of the Svelgard warriors as well, and then she started gushing about how terrifying I looked with my mark blazing and my cutlass burning our enemies.

“Do you think Svelgard will send out another troop when the last one doesn’t return?” I asked Eir as I finished tending to my own wounds.

“It is likely,” she said. “They would not have sent so many into these lands if the chieftain didn’t order the attack, and two of Svelgard’s women have died out here tonight.”

“Not to mention the thirty men we’ve slaughtered since we reached the mountains,” I muttered. “Speaking from experience

though, I'd bring a world of hurt on whoever killed my women warriors, no matter the circumstances. Those twins weren't just any warriors, either. They were strong, skilled, and unyielding. They also led their own patrols, tracked us down twice, and were permitted to cross their borders to do so. The chieftain of Svelgard would have valued them very highly."

"Yes, I think it is safe to say retaliation will be delivered," Eir sighed, but then she smirked a little. "I suppose it is fortunate Svelgard will blame Hylmrek for all of this."

"It's only fortunate if we make it south before their retaliation reaches us," I said.

"Then that is our only option," my wife decided. "We will go to the cave tomorrow, and then we will return to our homeland directly. At least our immediate plans have not been disrupted by all of this."

I nodded in agreement, but I knew this might not be the case.

There was still the issue of Vegvisir, and I honestly wasn't sure he'd let this rune situation go. For all I knew, he'd already taken off.

Both of us were now completely worn to the bone after the day we'd had, so we turned in for the night, and Eir let out a happy sigh against my chest as she curled up in my arms. Then she mumbled something about having the best day of her life, and I chuckled just before I drifted off to sleep.

It seemed like only five minutes had passed before I awoke, but the dim blue light outside the cave entrance assured me it was dawn.

Or rather, just before dawn.

It would probably be another hour before the sun reached the horizon, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get more sleep. I woke up with the same anxious knot in my gut that had been there when I went to bed, and there was just too much riding on today for me to sit still.

I carefully stretched my stiff muscles and tried not to wake up my wife. Eir was dozing heavily with her black wings tucked behind

her, and the bruises on her jaw had faded a lot overnight. Amaeda's magical remedies left me with only a couple sore ribs this morning, but it was nothing a bit of tonic wouldn't fix.

I got up and drank a few doses down before I silently suited up in my winter armor and boots. Once I strapped my brown hide around my torso, I checked to make sure Eir was still in a deep sleep. Then I crept over to her stockpile of saddlebags, and I quietly unearthed the Selkie's fur.

After all my wife's fawning last night, I knew she'd find some way to keep it as long as she possibly could. Eir loved vicious beasts as much as she loved vicious fighters, and the combo we'd witnessed last night with the savage woman just wasn't something she was capable of letting go of.

But I definitely was.

There was no way in hell I wanted to anger a creature that fucking vicious. And after seeing the way the Selkie ran away from me last night, I didn't want to try and steal her, either. I just wanted to keep my face attached to my skull, and returning the Selkie's fur before Eir could stop me was the best solution.

I made sure to leave the saddlebags and provisions neatly organized once I got the speckled hide, and I hoped this would keep Eir from worrying if she woke up before I returned. I didn't want it to look like I'd been dragged off by a savage or anything, and my wife would recognize my hyper-organized supply piles in one glance.

Then I shifted Eir's Bowie knife closer to the bed, secured my sword belt with the ice-runed sword in its sheath, and crept out of the cave.

The winter storm must have kept up all night, because an extra three feet of snow was waiting for me. My drekkadyr let out a soft nicker as he shook the stuff from his four horns, but Vegvisir still hadn't returned the other mount.

I looked around at the darkened snowscape while I weighed my options.

Talking to the wanderling wasn't exactly the first thing I wanted to tackle today, but I didn't want to leave Eir without a mount, either, so I gave the drekkadyr a few pats before I walked toward the slope. Then I hitched the rolled up Selkie fur under my arm, and I started the trek to the coast.

There was only one, lofty ridge to scale, and the vigorous hike did my mind a lot of good anyways. It gave me a chance to process how much shit we'd lived through yesterday, but it also left me with plenty of headspace for worrying about the future of my clans.

Pissing off Vegvisir couldn't have come at a worse time.

I had no idea why working with rune magic came naturally to me, but finding out this wasn't the case with most people threw a giant wrench in my plans. If I was the only one in Dalir who could get the runed cutlasses to work, then we weren't as set to take on Hylmrek as I thought.

Losing any chance of input from Vegvisir left me up shit creek without a paddle on this one, and if Svelgard somehow found out it wasn't Hylmrek who'd trespassed in these mountains, I'd be royally fucked. Both clans were larger than Dalir and Illska combined, so now I was potentially even worse off than I had been before I left the Red Forest.

I shoved my hair out of my eyes as I hiked at a more grueling pace, and the challenging grade made it easier to stay calm. By the time I reached the top of the ridge, I decided I'd just have to try and train as many clansmen as I could, and if only a handful could wield the fire rune, that was a starting point at least.

Then I looked out across the arctic coast. The icy shore was twenty different shades of blue in the dim morning light, and the frigid ocean looked almost black as the waves crashed against the jagged pillars. Blankets of white covered a lot, but the wind kicked the fresh snow all around, and I scanned the shifting banks as I looked to the north and south.

The spot where the wolves had hunted was almost too far away to make out in this light, but I could tell some ice had reformed already. To the south, the location of the massacre was resealed with

massive, overlapping shards of ice after the storm, and there were no beasts in sight.

It seemed like the golthr and the vanahrut were steering clear of this stretch of coast for now, but I surveyed the area for a few minutes longer before I started descending the slope.

I didn't know where the Selkie woman ended up after she vanished last night. I just figured if she could track us down in the mountains, then she could find her hide if I left it near the water's edge.

I took a last look around before I walked out onto the ice, and I kept a constant scan of the area as I started the crossing to the seaside. The shore was ominously deserted at this early hour, but this seemed logical after the violence the area had gone through yesterday. If I was a beast, I'd steer clear of this stretch for a week or two. Still, the expanse of icy pillars and banks of snow gave me an uneasy feeling as I continued trekking toward the crashing waves, and the dim blue clouds cast everything in a more unsettling light.

I quickened my pace as I looked back over my shoulder toward the ridge. Then as soon as I was close enough to the water, I started searching for a good spot to stow the speckled fur. I didn't want it to get caught in the crashing waves, so I took a minute to find somewhere safe that wasn't too difficult to locate, and I was about to stoop down near a crop of icy pillars when I heard a deep growl.

My gaze locked on a pair of big round eyes watching me from behind a low shard of ice, and I could tell they belonged to a woman.

She was crouched in hiding not eight feet away as she watched me intently, and her irises were a deep, midnight blue lined with a dense crop of feathery brown lashes.

I'd never seen blue eyes so dark and vibrant before, and they immediately drew me toward them like a beautiful void. I couldn't look away for anything even though her growl grew louder, and as the woman slowly rose from her hiding place, dawning realization smacked me over the head.

Here I was, looking into the deepest blue eyes I'd ever seen, and I knew without a doubt that this was the "blue" my sky elf warned me about.

The Selkie was the one waiting to kill me on the northern coast.



Chapter 20

The naked woman in front of me was every sailor's dream: soft, pale, and curvy all over. Her ample breasts hung heavy above her cinched waist and smooth belly, and her hips billowed out to her porcelain thighs. She had a body that was absolutely perfect for fucking and even better for making and nursing the babies who would come after, so the primitive monkey part of my brain that controlled all my urges started screaming.

But it wasn't just the woman's figure that looked enticing as hell.

The sea-born beauty had long, dark auburn hair that tumbled down to her breasts in loose waves, and her deep cherry-red lips looked plump enough to eat. The sides of her heart-shaped face were strangely speckled with brown, and the soft flecks that dusted the edges of her temples and cheeks also dotted her shoulders and upper arms. It took me a minute to realize the markings were the same as the fur I clutched in my sweaty palms.

I was lucky my brain could even function enough to work this much out, though.

Everything about the naked Selkie was impossible to resist, and still... there was no doubt in my mind that she could kill me at any second.

But her midnight blue eyes seemed to have me bewitched, and lead filled my feet while my head spun. I swallowed hard and licked my parched lips, but the icy breeze did nothing to cool me down. All I could do was stand there as I became more lost in the suppleness of her form, and I was completely dumbstruck by how badly I wanted to grope, kiss, and devour every luscious inch of her.

Meanwhile, a low growl reverberated in her slender throat, and only the vague memory of her attack last night made it possible to form words.

“I, umm... I just came to make sure you were alright,” I managed, but my eyes refused to stop wandering down her pillowy curves. “And to thank you. You didn’t have to help us last night, but you did. I know you got injured during the fight though, and I thought-”

The Selkie’s plump red lips peeled back as her growl turned into a snarl. As soon as my gaze snapped back to her heart-shaped face, my blood went cold.

I hadn’t imagined those fangs last night.

The Selkie’s front teeth were razor-sharp points, and all the rest were trident-shaped, like seal teeth. They had three curved prongs tipping every one of them, and they glinted a pearly white beneath blood-red lips.

“Okay, I’ll go,” I quickly decided, and my arms shot out to return the speckled fur. “I only wanted to give you this. My wife... she saw it and thought it was beautiful, but I know it’s yours, so... you can have it back. Just please don’t kill me over this. I’ve got a lot I need to live for, and it really wasn’t my intention to steal it from you. I wouldn’t have let my wife take it if I knew. She just thought it was beautiful and that you must be an amazing woman... and you know what? I’m gonna stop talking now because I’m like drooling all over the ice and... yeahhhh...”

The Selkie blinked her big midnight blue eyes, and her growl abruptly stopped as she stared at me. Then her gaze dropped to the hide in my hands, and I risked a careful step forward so she could reach it easier.

“Go on, take it,” I urged, but I wasn’t sure she could even understand my language.

The seal-woman looked confused as her plump red lips pursed and covered her fangs, and she recoiled from me like she had last night. She took only a few steps back, and it made her heavy breasts jostle just enough to draw my attention straight to them.

I had to get the hell out of here.

The Selkie looked way too fucking fine for me to spend another second near her, and I finally felt like I had a precarious hold on my resolve. I even felt like I could drag my eyes off her if I really tried, so I shoved the hide into her arms and turned away.

Then I kept on walking. I forced myself not to look back even though her fangs were as clear in my mind as her perfect hourglass body was. The chance of getting mauled before I reached the ridge was high, but if I turned back around, I'd be lost in her porcelain curves all over again, so I took one deep breath after another to keep my shit together. I vigorously scruffed my beard too, but I couldn't ignore the fact that I'd never been this shaken up over a woman before.

Eir was impossible to resist also, but with her, I knew exactly what I wanted and when and how. Right now, it was like my mind was torn in ten different erotic directions, and I only had control over a couple of them.

Which scared me as much as those trident-shaped fangs.

I was almost sure something about the Selkie took over my entire being back there, but the farther I got from her, the steadier my nerves became. I gradually felt like myself again as my head began to clear, and I even started to think I'd live to reach the ridge.

Until the sea-born woman caught my arm.

I was only a hundred yards from the snowy slope when the Selkie dragged me back around, and my first instinct was to swing a punch since she had my sword arm. I would have done it too, but just as I drew my fist back, the woman's plump lips met mine.

Then the Selkie was practically climbing me for more kisses. I stumbled to get away, but she wouldn't let go. Heat radiated from her lips as her salty tongue forced itself into my mouth, and I tried to pry her off, but this only backfired.

The second I grabbed her bare hips, more heat seeped through my grip, and I couldn't believe how warm she was.

It had to have been close to zero degrees on the coast this morning, and the wind was still blowing in off the water. She was

stark naked with her slender feet buried in piles of snow, but her skin felt like she'd just stepped out of a sauna, and it was as unbelievably soft and velvety as her fur.

Suddenly, my efforts to pry her off got derailed, and I found myself kissing her back while my hands roamed all over her pillowy curves. She was the perfect combination of fit and plush with a rounded ass and a tiny waist, and the passionate way she kissed me was just as impossible to resist as her body.

Then I remembered those fangs.

I managed to stop kissing her and forced her off me, and even though her deep red nipples were painfully taut, I kept her at an arm's length. The Selkie refused to let go of me and kept pining for my lips, and when she suddenly shoved her fur into my arms, I shoved it right back.

"Woman, I said I didn't want it," I growled.

It was no use.

The Selkie's tongue was in my mouth again, her ass was in my palms, and I groaned as the heat of her almost crippled my resolve. I didn't know what the hell this woman was on about, but she must not have understood a word I said. No matter how many times I tried to mumble in protest, she just kept kissing me without reserve, and she shoved her hide into my hands about ten times like it was already mine.

On the bright side, I knew I couldn't be in some Selkie trance anymore, because I had a very clear idea of where my mind was at now.

It was torn strictly between fuck or flight, but I was so confused that I knew I had to choose the latter. Whatever this woman was up to, she was either trying to trap me or had no clue what was going on, so I firmly shoved her off me one last time.

Then I turned away to make a break for it.

"Why won't you take me?" the Selkie called after me, and I froze mid-step.

The sea-born woman's accent was like an Irish girl's, and her voice was soft, low, and melodic. It matched her supple figure perfectly, but she sounded sweeter than I expected after seeing those fangs.

When I turned back around, I realized her teeth weren't chiseled anymore. They were completely normal while her plump red lips parted in a natural pout, and her midnight blue eyes looked at me like I'd hurt her feelings.

"Oh," I muttered blankly. "You, uh... you do understand me."

"Yes." The Selkie nodded with wide, sad eyes and clutched her hide against her porcelain breasts. "Why don't you want me?"

"I don't," I instantly replied. "I mean, I do! Of course, I want you, I'm not fucking blind. I just didn't know if you understood what I was saying, or got confused. You seemed like you wanted to kill me, so..."

"I don't want to kill you," the Selkie murmured softly. "I want you to take me like the woman with the wings."

"T-Take you?" I stammered as my blood traveled south against my will. "What are you talking--"

"I saw you mating with her in the cave," the woman said, and her brown lashes fluttered a little as her bare feet crossed the snow to come closer. "I heard her moaning. I want to feel how you make her feel."

"But I didn't make love to Eir last night."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized this woman had been following us for a few days at least.

The Selkie started stroking the fur on my torso as soon as she reached me, and her heavy breasts pressed against my ribs while she tilted her chin up to me. But she didn't jump all over me this time. The sea-born woman just stayed flush against me and let me look at her, and her midnight blue eyes burned with longing.

I was instantly overwhelmed by how beautiful she was. The little flecks of brown speckles framing her pale face were like nothing

I'd seen on a woman before. They made her look almost seal-like with her big round eyes peering up at me, and her feathery lashes were longer than seemed physically possible. I already knew how soft her lips were, so I couldn't resist eyeing them now that she was so close, but as the heat of her body started seeping through my hides, it occurred to me that she looked vaguely familiar.

Not from the fight last night, though.

I'd seen this exact face the night I went down on Eir, and while I had no idea how my winged wife failed to sense the Selkie's presence, I didn't particularly care right now.

Everything about her expression proved she was starving for a turn with me, and my hands were already roaming up her silky spine as she melted into my hold. Then she grabbed my beard and brought her juicy lips to mine, and just like that, she was all over me again.

The Selkie dragged me farther from the slope as I tripped over the snow and ice to keep up with her, and she never stopped kissing me for a moment. She was adamant about keeping my attention now that she had it, and the way her lips full-on devoured mine made my mind feel like it was floating ten feet above my skull.

I'd never been this turned on by anyone except my wife, but the second this occurred to me, I remembered my first time with Eir.

The night she'd miraculously grown wings.

"Shit, wait a minute," I mumbled against the Selkie's lips, and she growled lightly as I resurfaced from her kiss. "This isn't a good idea."

"You want me," the Selkie argued.

"I do, but it's about the woman with the wings," I clarified.

The sea-born woman immediately let go of me and took a few steps back. "You are only hers?"

"Oh, ummm, I don't know," I admitted. "She's my wife, but she also kind of said a thing about me having more wives, and I know for

a fact she has no problem with the idea of you and me, but that's not the--"

The seal-woman leapt into my arms and kissed me with twice as much zeal before I could finish. Still, I desperately tried to get my point across no matter how hard it was.

"Eir's not the problem, it's her wings," I gasped as the Selkie settled for kissing my neck instead. "Those wings didn't used to be there. We think I gave them to her, and I was fucking her when it happened, so I have no idea if that'll happen again, and you're... groping my dick..."

I trailed off as the heat of the woman's grip seeped through my pants and to my cock, and she got my belt undone while I was busy losing my mind over it. Then I felt the icy air on my rigid shaft, but just as quickly, the Selkie's heated hand was massaging me.

That's when my resistance crumbled.

She was probably even hotter on the inside.

"Son of a bitch," I growled, and I caught the Selkie under her cushy ass so she could wrap her thighs around me. Then I stumbled forward and pinned her against a pillar of ice. "What's your name?"

"Nora," the woman panted, and she dropped her fur in the snow before she devoured my tongue.

I already had the tip of my cock poised against her pussy, but it was fucking flaming hot, and I buried myself inside her wetness with one firm thrust.

"Yesssss!" Nora's shriek was laced with raw lust as she took in damn near all of my dick, and the Selkie's pussy felt like a scorching hot sheath.

"Fuuuuck..." I cried out as the sensation almost forced an orgasm out of me, but I refused to let myself release this soon.

I'd never been inside a woman this hot, and the Selkie was just as tight as Eir, so my carnal side immediately took over.

Before I knew it, I was pounding into Nora like a man possessed. Her sensual curves jolted against my thrusts as I held

her pinned against the wall of ice, and my fingers dug into her round ass as she clawed at my hides to brace herself.

At that moment, I had no capacity to start out slow with this woman. Especially after she'd told me she wanted what I gave Eir the other night.

Nora didn't seem to want me to take it easy on her, either, and she locked her thick thighs around me so I couldn't pull out. Her lusty shrieks never stopped while I pounded the fuck out of her, but when she started to whimper, I knew she couldn't take this kind of savage treatment much longer.

I finally eased up on her once the muscles in her thighs started to shake, but Nora clutched my hide in her hands as her deep blue eyes burned up at me.

"Don't stop," Nora gasped. "I like it. I want more. I promise I'll--"

"You're not ready for more of that," I growled against her lips. "You're shaking."

"Please, don't go," the Selkie begged, and I grinned as her voice grated with desperation.

Then I brought my mouth to her ear, and the sea-born woman leaned into my touch.

"Don't worry," I murmured. "I'm not even close to being done with you."

"Ohhhhhh..." Nora mewled with longing as I eased my cock out of her heated tunnel real slow. Then I firmly drove it back inside her, and the Selkie threw her head back and lost her breath. Each tantalizing thrust brought a velvety moan from the woman as she bit down on her plump bottom lip, and her supple, porcelain thighs clung to my hips. She rolled against me like she was riding a mechanical bull, and I gave Nora what she needed while I watched her luscious body writhe against the ice.

Now that she didn't need to cling to me, the luscious woman relaxed back against the frigid ice as I slowly scraped against every velvety surface of her tunnel. Then she started to pinch and tease

her own nipples in a way that nearly drove me out of my mind. All I wanted to do was suckle one of her deep red buds while she moaned like this for me, but right now, I was more than happy to admire every inch of her while she took my cock.

I didn't pretend I wasn't enjoying the show, either, and Nora clearly liked having my eyes on her. Her cheeks blushed as red as her lips while she tore her fingers from her breasts and ran them through her dark auburn roots, and whenever my gaze drifted to her ample breasts, the Selkie kneaded them exactly how I wanted to.

Nora seemed to know what I wanted to see next without me even having to say it, but there wasn't anything forced about the way she moved. I could tell the erotic woman was doing what came naturally to her, and she trembled with desire as she got wetter and wetter for me. Her moans got silkier too, and the soft little whimpers she let out heated my blood like nothing else.

It wasn't long before I was thrusting harder than ever into the Selkie's perfect body as the sweet sounds of her pleasure overran my mind. And I didn't ease up when she started shaking this time.

Nora's scorching hot tunnel started convulsing around my shaft while she clung to me again, and when her pleasure finally peaked, her pussy strangled my cock.

My willpower snapped on the spot. A shot of searing heat bloomed in my core as my climax erupted deep in the Selkie's tightness. The icy shore faded around me, and I sank my teeth into Nora's slender neck with a low growl. Her orgasm was rolling into another already as I kept my gushing dick buried in her perfect body, but I couldn't release her for anything.

She was mine now.

I pressed deeper and deeper as her moans turned into breathless shrieks, and the Selkie was quaking to her core and writhing in ecstasy as I flooded her with my sperm. The intensity of her pleasure kept me cumming in waves, and the desire to make Nora wail like this over and over again consumed me. My bite tightened on her neck as I clutched her supple ass in an iron grip,

and the way Nora's pussy clenched around me like a slippery vise in response brought another immediate orgasm out of me.

My next release sent white-hot lust shooting through my spine and limbs, and I poured another river of cum into the Selkie's accepting womb as she shrieked and arched against me.

Then a pair of midnight blue wings began sprouting from Nora's back.

"Shit!" I gasped, but I couldn't stop thrusting into her.

I couldn't stop cumming inside of her.

I couldn't stop changing her.

"Yessss! Mooore! Yessssss! Yessssssssss!" The Selkie's dark blue eyes rolled back into her skull, and her mouth hung open as she screamed with absolute ecstasy.

And I knew how good this felt for her.

Eir told anyone who would listen how fantastic this exact moment was when I gave her the black wings she wore, and now that I wasn't so completely shocked, I could feel what she was talking about.

It felt beyond amazing for me, too.

My dick spasmed and sprayed fiendishly inside Nora's achingly tight pussy as a possessive greed consumed my mind. The Selkie kept moaning and milking every drop of cum from me, and I watched the dark blue feathers continue to unfurl from her back like blooming flowers.

I only slowed my thrusts a few minutes later once semen was seeping out around my shaft and coating the insides of her smooth thighs. By then, Nora could hardly catch her breath, but her orgasms were finally waning to gentle aftershocks. She clung to me and trembled all over, and I just did my best not to collapse on the damn ice.

My legs were numb from the intensity of our climaxes, but my mark was cooling at last, and I focused on the icy sting of the air in my lungs while I gasped for breath.

Then I let myself look up at the glossy, midnight blue feathers in front of me, and I suddenly had a way clearer mindset than before.

“God damn it,” I panted. “I’m so fucking sorry... I couldn’t stop.”

“Why are you sorry?” Nora managed through a ragged gasp as I thrust into her deeply again and left my cock impaled in her. “I didn’t ask you to stop mating with me.”

“Uhhh...” I grimaced. “You grew wings. Did you not notice?”

“I noticed,” the Selkie said, and she spared the wings half a glance. “I’ve never experienced such pleasure in my life. If I didn’t feel how much of your hot seed is inside of me at the moment, I would think I dreamed this.”

My eyebrows shot up as I realized the Selkie didn’t give a shit about the wing situation. Instead, her full lips curled into a soft, sweet smile as her blue eyes met mine again.

“I didn’t catch your name before we mated,” Nora purred.

I chuckled through my heaving breaths, but then I finally eased my cock out of the woman’s heated tunnel. Nora whimpered with pleasure as a stream of my pearly cum spilled from inside her, and she kept her hands clutched around my back even after I let her porcelain legs slide back to the ground.

“I’m Aaron Briggs,” I told her.

“Aaron... Briggs...” the Selkie sighed. “I like that name. I like you. Very much. Your seed feels wonderful inside of my womb, Aaron.”

I’d never had a woman besides Eir tell me how good my cum felt in her after I fucked her, and the way my name sounded in Nora’s Irish accent brought a wolfish grin to my face. I felt like some filthy, pirate captain. Then my palms slid further down to the silky skin of her ass, and the Selkie pulled me closer by my beard for a kiss.

I let her slick tongue tangle with mine as much as she wanted. I left a few bites on her plump lips too, but then I had her pressed against the ice without even thinking as my erection found its way back between her heated thighs.

“Yessss. Aaron... Briggs...” Nora panted between passionate kisses, and she slid her dripping wet pussy lips against my shaft.

“Fuckkkkk...” I groaned as the hot and silky feel of her tempted me all over again.

Then she angled her hips down a bit while I moved my hips up to meet her, and just like that, I was deep inside of her again.

The seal-woman’s tunnel was absolutely soaked from all of our climaxes, but she was still somehow tighter than the eye of a needle, so I still spread her open as every single part of her tunnel scraped and hugged every part of my shaft.

I thrust up into her savagely once again, and I held her right leg in the crook of my left arm as my right hand gripped the meat of her ass. I kept her in place like this while I drilled into her, but we didn’t kiss while we fucked this time. We just stared deep into each other’s eyes as our bodies urgently struggled to become one, and we only spoke out to cry each other’s names when I sprayed another river of cum into her.

Her scorching hot tunnel spasmed and milked me again for nearly a full minute as I pushed deeper and deeper, and neither of us stopped moaning until I truly had nothing left in me.

Then I finally let her leg down, and my cock slid out of her along with a gush of my cream.

“Holy shit...” I gasped as my knees shook.

“Mmmm,” she moaned and leaned into my chest.

Letting go of the Selkie’s luscious curves was the last thing I wanted to do now that I’d gotten so many tastes of her, but my mind wasn’t so overwhelmed anymore. It was slowly getting its shit back together, and I was suddenly very aware that I had another irresistible woman to get back to.

It was past dawn by now, and I couldn’t let Eir end up scared about where I’d gone, so I only let myself enjoy Nora’s scorching kisses for a minute longer. Then I pulled away, sent her an apologetic look, and got my pants back in order.

“I have to go,” I admitted. “My wife’s waiting for me, and she’ll worry if I don’t get back soon.”

“What?” Nora gasped, and her midnight blue eyes went wide. “No, I want you to stay.”

“I can’t stay,” I sighed, and I pulled the Selkie into my arms. “We’re traveling farther north today. There is this cave we have to go to. Well... that’s the plan, at least. I’m not sure how things are gonna pan out, but--”

“Please, don’t leave me,” Nora whimpered, and I furrowed my brow as I realized how upset she was. Nora looked like the idea of me leaving this shore was enough to break her heart, and her midnight blue eyes searched my face like she was memorizing all my features.

Then I instinctively glanced at the dark navy plume of feathers behind her. Aside from the color, they were identical to Eir’s wings in both size and shape. Just looking at them kindled a familiar warmth in my core too, and it was the same kind of heat I felt when I was deeply in tune with my winged wife. The feeling built up more as I recalled the intensity of our climaxes, and when I met Nora’s gaze again, her feathers shimmered with a silver sheen.

“Come with me,” I said without even thinking. I knew this woman was bound to the sea, but I couldn’t stop the words from leaving my mouth. “Come back to our campsite.”

Nora immediately nodded with relief, and she only let go of me long enough to stoop down and grab her fur from the snow. Then she tried to push the seal hide into my arms, but I shook my head.

“No, that’s yours.” I gently pushed the fur back toward her. “You should keep it.”

“I want to go with you,” the Selkie murmured anxiously.

“I want you to come with me, too,” I assured her. “But that doesn’t mean you need to give me your hide. It’s a part of you, right? You should be the one to hold onto it. That way, if you feel at any time like you want to leave, you can.”

Nora looked at me for a long moment before she nodded in agreement, and I tried not to overthink any of this too much. The truth was, I couldn't bear to walk away from her after everything that had just transpired here on the shore. I wasn't the kind of guy to fuck a phenomenal woman and then just dip, but bringing her with me had major implications to it.

I knew from what little Vegvisir had told me about her kind that she was bound to the sea. The last thing I wanted to do was force her to leave it, and yet, I felt an iron-clad connection burning between us as her wings glistened once more. And I knew from experience how much it might destroy me to be away from her.

But maybe if she kept her hide, and she still had that freedom to leave, then everything would somehow work out.

Fuck, I hoped it would.

Then I offered Nora my hand, and the seal-woman didn't hesitate to take it. She walked along with me across the icy shore and back toward the slope, and when I started scaling the mountainside, she climbed up after me in her bare feet.

By the time the two of us crested the ridge, I still couldn't fucking believe I had a Selkie holding my hand, and the fact she'd come with me willingly was even more unbelievable. After the way she was growling before, I knew there were plenty of other ways this encounter could have gone.

And this was not an option I saw coming.

So I just tried to roll with the punches of my new life, but as I led Nora through the black and white forest, I noticed she kept looking up at me. Her midnight blue eyes were so mesmerizing, I nearly walked into every tree we passed, and her pale, naked body and massive blue wings only made it more difficult to keep my gaze straight ahead.

I couldn't decide why she was looking at me so intently, though. I definitely wasn't as drop-dead gorgeous as her.

"What is it?" I chuckled after a few minutes.

“I like to look at you, Aaron,” Nora murmured, and her Irish accent brought a smile to my face. “You’re nothing like other males.”

I sobered at once and came to a quick stop, and the stories Vegvisir told me about the fate of the Selkies flooded my mind. Then I considered how beautiful Nora was with her big blue eyes, sweet, heart-shaped face, and perfect body, and my insides clenched.

“I’m so sorry,” I said as I instinctively pulled her into my arms.

Nora tilted her head a little to the side. “Why?”

“Because I’ve heard about what the sailors have done to the Selkies,” I admitted. “Knowing you’ve been treated so--”

Nora pressed her fingertips to my lips. “Don’t worry, Aaron. My story’s not like those ones. Haven’t you ever heard what the Selkies do to the sailors who never catch them?”

I shook my head.

“We seduce them, drag them under the waves, and eat them for our supper,” Nora said with a sweet smile.

“Oh.” I blinked.

“Does that make you nervous?” she asked with a frown.

“Nope,” I promptly lied. “Not at all, I just don’t know a lot about Selkies. This is all news to me, but I’m sure the sailors probably deserve it. Maybe.”

Nora nodded. “They do.”

With that, the naked Selkie slipped her hand back into mine and continued through the black forest, and I tried to keep the conversation casual even though I felt miles out of my element right now.

“You know, I’ve heard stories of mermaids who do that,” I told her. “Do you... know any mermaids?”

I felt ridiculous asking the question, but this world seemed to have all kinds of crazy creatures in it. I figured Selkies and mermaids might get along. They could lure men to their watery graves together for a girls’ night, but when Nora looked up at me, she giggled a little.

“Yeah, never mind,” I chuckled. “That was a stupid question. Mermaids don’t exist, do they?”

“No, they exist,” the Selkie assured me. “I eat the mermaids, too.”

“Right.” I nodded awkwardly. “That’s cool.”

Nora smiled as if I’d praised her, and she cuddled her porcelain cheek against my arm like we were two lovers strolling down main street and heading to the movies. I didn’t bother making small talk anymore since I’d probably come off like an ass trying, but after I processed what little I’d learned about the Selkie so far, I decided I was into it.

Nora might have been a savage of a woman, but she’d already proven her animal side could come in handy, and just the thought of her mind-bendingly hot pussy made me feel weak at the knees. Then there were all her lavish curves to consider, her midnight blue eyes, and the fact I’d never felt skin as soft as hers rubbing up against me before. She seemed pretty snuggly too, and the cute little smiles she kept sending me made it easy to forget she even had a carnal side.

This was probably a big part of her species’ hunting tactics, but I didn’t mind that, either.

As far as I was concerned, Nora was one of the most phenomenal women I’d ever met, and she was just as deadly sexy and surprisingly cute as Eir, so I didn’t really care who the Selkie ate.

Just as long as they weren’t my clansmen.



Chapter 21

My stomach did a few backflips as I rounded the rocky edge of the cave, but I told myself over and over again that Eir probably wouldn't be upset. After all, my wife had practically ordered me to steal Nora yesterday and make her my wife, and I knew my warrior woman was somewhat obsessed with the rare Selkie.

Still... I'd never brought an extra woman home to my wife before, and this one happened to be naked with a bunch of my cum running down her inner thighs.

Lots of my cum.

Just a fucking river's worth of my cum still proudly gushing out of the seal-woman's tight pussy.

Nora and I found Eir skinning a large badger-looking creature in the snow outside the campsite, and the moment she saw the porcelain Selkie snuggled up against my arm, a lot of things happened all at once.

First, the Nordic beauty almost cut her damn finger off with the hunting knife I made her, but she was so busy ogling Nora's luscious figure that she didn't seem to notice. Eir still found time to quickly wipe the blade off in the snow though, and as soon as she sheathed it, my wife shot to her feet and tripped over her kill. Her wings did a strange spasm thing in the process, so she looked a bit like a frazzled raven falling off a roof, but at least she didn't seem upset.

Eir actually wore a wide-eyed, fixated expression as she came over to meet us, and she took tiny steps like she didn't want to scare Nora off.

"Ohhh, my..." Eir breathed and nervously fussed with her long braids and knots. "I was not prepared for the beauty, you... are glorious in the daylight."

I smirked. "Yeah, she is--"

“And at night!” my wife hastily added. “I don’t mean to imply you are less glorious at any particular time of day, of course. I knew for certain you would be this beautiful whether I could see your features through the blood last night or not, and I loved the blood on you, by the way, but my imagination did not do you justice. You are... so beautiful.”

Nora offered a shy wave in response, and I couldn’t help but notice Eir’s fingers were trembling with excitement.

“Eir, this is Nora,” I explained. “Nora, my wife Eir. She’s a Farthegn from--”

“You have wings like me,” Eir blurted out. “I am so relieved you had the good sense to let my husband claim you with his seed. I would have thought less of you otherwise.”

“Eir,” I muttered with a pointed look.

“What?” my wife asked. “It’s true. Wasn’t it divine when Aaron Briggs bestowed the wings on you? Did you scream? Did the world seem to fade as the pleasure built? Because that is what happened to me, right, my love?”

“The wing situation did sort of resemble what happened with us,” I confirmed. “But I think Nora’s a little less concerned than we’ve been about it.”

“I’ll help her,” Eir insisted as she turned back to Nora. “I know how difficult the wings can be, but once you develop a more intimate connection with them, they won’t stay in one place like that anymore. It takes diligence and presence of mind, and I will teach you everything I know about them. I am so pleased to have someone as rare and deserving as myself to discuss this all with.”

Nora smiled a little more, but before she could respond to everything my wife had prattled out so far, Eir started wringing her hands.

“Does she not understand me? Should I make more gestures when I talk? Did you enjoy my husband filling you with his seed?” Eir pointed to the pearly-white cum between Nora’s thighs, and then she

clutched her own breasts, threw her head back, and fluttered her wings. “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Nora said with a husky chuckle. “It was divine.”

“Oh, you do understand me!” Eir laughed. “That is wonderful because I have so many questions for you. Do you always walk around naked? Do you prefer to be fucked like a human or more like a beast? Have you accidentally raised any souls from the dead yet, and how did you find us last night? Are your senses more keen to smell, sight, sound, or--”

“Deep breaths,” I muttered, and my wife forced a shallow gasp that hardly counted. “Maybe we should take this one thing at a time. Nora’s a little more on the quiet side, and I don’t want to overwhelm her with all this. She’s used to living in the wild on her own, after all.”

“I am so sorry,” my wife breathed. “It’s only that I have never met a Selkie before, and I was so hoping my husband would take you. You are so beautiful and savage.”

“I don’t mind at all,” the Selkie murmured. “I like you.”

Then Nora released my arm so she could take Eir’s hands in both of hers, and my wife openly admired her deep red nipples and broad hips.

“If you were a Farthegn, you would sell for thousands of skulls,” Eir informed her. “I already adore you so much.”

“If you were a Selkie, you would drag thousands of men to the depths in a matter of weeks,” Nora complimented her. “My chest swells knowing we share the same mate.”

“Thank you.” Eir blushed and smiled. “You are so sweet. I wish I were a Selkie. To shred your victims in such a savage way must be incredible.”

“It is,” the Selkie said, “but I envy you. You’ve been able to give yourself over to passion with a man like your husband. When I heard your moans, I ran for miles to find you. I’ve never heard a woman so satisfied in these mountains.”

“Miles?” Eir gasped, and we exchanged a dumbfounded glance.

“Wait, you heard me and Eir from miles away that night?” I asked. “She wasn’t moaning that loud...”

“I’m an apex predator,” Nora explained. “I have quite advanced hearing.”

“Incredible,” Eir breathed.

“I can track the sound of my prey from miles off, and smell them for quite a ways as well,” the Selkie continued. “My eyes are strongest in the dark, though.”

“That makes sense.” I nodded. “You’re more accustomed to filtering light through dim water.”

“But if you witnessed my husband and I making love, why didn’t I smell you that night?” Eir cut in. Then she pulled Nora against her so she could bury her nose in the Selkie’s dark auburn hair.

My gaze dropped to the porcelain breasts pressing firmly against my wife’s armored ones, and I lost track of the conversation for a few moments.

Suddenly, I was struck by how stunning the two winged women were side by side, and it was too easy to imagine Eir stripped down with the Selkie. I had her lithe and flawless body memorized from multiple angles by now, so five different kinky scenarios snuck into my mind before I could think twice, and I was strewn under the two exotic beauties for every damn one of them.

“Isn’t this fascinating?” Eir asked me.

“Huh?” I mumbled.

“Come here,” my wife chuckled, and she dragged me so close that both women had to slip their arms around my waist. “She smells precisely like the sea air, doesn’t she?”

I looked down at Nora’s sweet face while she smiled up at me. Then she cozied up closer with her heavy breasts flush against my side, and I instinctively tucked a few kisses in her wavy hair. The Selkie only nuzzled in closer after that so I wouldn’t let her go yet,

and she was so cuddly about it that I couldn't help pulling both women tighter against me.

Eir started snickering when I forgot all about smelling the sea-born woman, but I figured it was understandable to be a little slow on the uptake right now. Having Eir and Nora tucked against me at the same time was throwing my head into a tailspin, and my wife didn't seem to mind letting me take a moment to enjoy myself.

The beautiful blonde hung on me and toyed with my belt while she asked Nora a dozen more questions, and the Selkie traced little circles in the small of my back as she kept her speckled cheek snuggled against my chest.

I just glanced between my winged lovers and let my palms wander down their frames at will, and I worked on trying to process my luck.

It only got harder to comprehend. Every time I kissed on my Nordic wife, she melted into me, and she'd slide her fingers along the space between my belt and my abdomen in the most suggestive way. If I turned my attention to Nora, the Selkie rolled her rounded ass into my palm, and I was inches from fingering her dripping slit every time she did it.

The way they both deftly responded to my touch was enough to add another five scenarios to my growing list of kinks. But seeing the way they interacted genuinely blew my mind.

There wasn't a scrap of hostility between the two, and somehow, I didn't feel torn between them in the slightest. I was madly in love with my wife, but I was also standing here with everything I could possibly want in both hands, and Nora seemed to blend seamlessly with our little family.

Then I realized the winged women were looking up at me with amused smiles and light-pink cheeks. The effect of their mesmerizing green and blue eyes hitting me at once made it impossible to move the muscles in my face, and I ended up just staring at the two for a solid minute.

"He is enraptured with us," Eir finally sighed.

“He’s cute like this,” Nora murmured with a curl of her lips. “Will he be able to talk soon?”

“Perhaps we should prepare some food,” the Nordic beauty said. “He must be famished after ravaging you and pouring so much of his sperm into you.”

“Yes,” Nora chuckled. “There is still a lot of his seed deep in me. Even after we walked.”

“Aaron Briggs is incredibly virile,” Eir sighed. “He often makes love to me all through the night. It will be good for him to have another woman around to pleasure him. Right, my love?”

“Food sounds good,” I mumbled through my daze.

The two beauties giggled and turned in unison to escort me into the cave. Their black and dark blue wings encased my back, and one hooked her fingers in my belt as the other steadily stroked my abs. Something about their feathers surrounding me sent a satisfied heat through my chest, and as I glanced over each shoulder, I saw the women’s wings shimmering with identical, silver sheens.

It was like my mark knew how fucking right it felt to have both of them under my arms.

“I’ve already dressed our morning meal, and it won’t take me long to cook it up,” Eir assured the Selkie.

“Don’t trouble yourself with my share,” Nora replied. “I only eat my kill raw.”

That snapped me out of my daze.

“Even in human form?” I asked as I sat down on the hides by the fire.

Then Nora tucked her legs under her bare ass to join me, and Eir trotted back outside to get her skinned kill from the snow.

“I’m still a Selkie,” Nora explained. “No matter what form I take, I’m never fully human or beast. My kind are where both worlds meet, and this doesn’t change.”

“That’s incredible,” I muttered. “I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“Likewise, Aaron.” The Selkie inched a little closer so her bare thigh pressed against my knee. “I’d like to hear more about you. You seem more fascinating to me.”

“I’m more fascinating?” I snorted, but Eir wasn’t about to let me take the modest road.

As soon as my wife knelt beside the fire, she launched into a detailed explanation of everything I’d accomplished in the Red Forest, and she sounded as boastful as all my warlords combined. Eir elaborated at length about my bold nature, my honorable leadership, my vast knowledge, territories, reserves, armories, and numbers, and she spent about fifteen minutes on the topic of my loyal women warriors alone. By the time she finished, our meal was ready, and there was virtually nothing the Selkie didn’t know about me.

Well, almost.

Eir tactfully side-stepped the part about me being from an entirely different world, and I definitely appreciated the gesture.

That was a whole other can of worms.

Then we all dug in while I sat with Eir to my right and Nora to my left, and the Nordic beauty brought the Selkie up to speed on our confusion with her wings, my mark, and the old man we’d followed to the north.

The sea-born woman stayed quiet and attentive throughout the entire discussion, and she didn’t seem too shocked by much of what she heard. She just looked deeply interested, and I figured a worldly creature like her probably saw about as much crazy shit as Vegvisir had.

Hell, the woman grew wings and hardly batted a fucking eyelash.

So Nora’s big blue eyes stayed alert and fixed on Eir while she gnawed on her raw steak and listened to our tale, but the sight of her pronged fangs kept me mostly distracted.

They were back from the moment she sniffed her slab of fresh meat, and the close-up view was a jarring one. But on the other hand, there was something undeniably cute about the fanged little smiles Nora sent me whenever she caught me looking. She was the perfect cross between sweet and scary as fuck.

“Vegvisir’s magic is a topic I am unclear about,” Eir continued, and she drew a deep breath since she’d been talking non-stop for a while now. “But I know my husband admires the wanderling’s knowledge, and he is hoping to improve the strength of his clans with the little drawings the old man uses.”

“I really should go talk to Vegvisir,” I muttered as I scuffed a few knots out of my beard. “If he’s still out there, he’ll have something to say about last night.”

“I cannot imagine why,” Eir said. “Your efforts ensured our victory last night, and the old man is under our protection. He should be grateful.”

“Maybe so,” I said, “but I’ve got a feeling he won’t see things the same way as you.”

“Was it the mauling?” Nora asked, and she looked down at her lap. “I didn’t intend to cause any strife between you and your followers. I only wanted to help.”

“No, you’re fine,” I quickly assured her. “Vegvisir isn’t a follower of mine by any means. He’s more of a friend. Well, that’s where we were headed before last night, but the issue doesn’t have anything to do with you. I used some of his magic to make those flames last night, and he doesn’t support weaponizing powers like that.”

The Selkie tilted her head the slightest bit. “Why not? Plenty of beings in the world use their powers for defense. I do.”

“You have magic?” Eir gasped, and her sea green eyes glinted with intrigue. “I thought the only powers a Selkie had were changing her form.”

“Me too,” I added.

“Really?” Nora sent me a sweet smile. “Didn’t you wonder why you couldn’t take your eyes off me on the ice?”

I blinked at the statement, and a shiver started working its way up my spine as I remembered how entranced I’d felt looking over Nora’s body the first time. Even though she was honestly too alluring to not stare at her, I’d known something strange was happening to me. The moment Nora emerged from behind the ice, all my self-control and better judgement dissipated, and I was locked in my place.

“Then you did bewitch me,” I realized.

Nora nodded. “Selkies spellbind the men we meet. If we control them, we can be sure to escape from them.”

An uneasy brick settled in my gut at the words, and while the Selkie reached for another slab of meat, Eir lowered her next bite and locked eyes with me.

Then I caught Nora’s wrist before she could keep eating.

“Are you saying everything that happened on the shore was your doing?” I growled. “You used magic to make me fuck you?”

“Of course not,” Nora anxiously replied, and the instant worry in her big blue eyes eased my concerns a little.

The Selkie actually crawled closer to me instead of yanking her arm out of my hold, and her fangs vanished as she turned to face me directly so she could explain herself.

“When I first saw you, you had my fur in your hands,” Nora reminded me. “I thought... I thought you were like the other ones.”

“And you were going to kill me for it,” I concluded, but I already knew as much.

“I was willing to,” the Selkie answered honestly. “You hadn’t found a place to hide my fur yet, and--”

“Nora, I wasn’t trying to hide your fur from you,” I said. “I was looking for somewhere I could leave it where it wouldn’t get damaged before you found it again.”

“I realized that after you gave my fur back to me,” Nora admitted. “But I truly never imagined you’d do such a thing. No man can resist the chance to steal a Selkie. Not one, no matter what their kind are like.”

“Well, Aaron Briggs is superior to all men,” Eir said with a frank nod. “He is certainly too honorable to steal any woman. He would never entertain the idea. It’s deplorable.”

I cocked an amused eyebrow at my Farthegn wife, and the Nordic beauty blushed a little as she went back to eating.

“I was intrigued when I saw you both mating,” Nora continued. “The pleasure that Eir experienced excited me. I thought that even if you hid my fur, I would still have a good time mating with you and perhaps bearing your pups. When I saw you holding my fur, I hesitated and was torn between the decision to kill you or not. When you gave it back to me, I realized you were not a normal man, and I wanted to be yours.”

I looked back at the Selkie to find her midnight blue eyes regarding me with admiration, and she easily slid her wrist out of my slackened grip. Then her warm fingers tangled with mine, and she left a soft kiss on my cheek.

But my mind just kept echoing with those final words.

The Selkie said she wanted to be mine. But how long could that last for when her kind wasted away whenever they left the ocean?

“When you turned away from me, I wanted to make you stay,” Nora continued and snapped me out of my thoughts. “But not by spellbinding. I wanted you to hold me like you hold your wife, and for you to choose it. I’ve never felt that way before. It was a confusing emotion.”

I nodded in understanding. “Then all of what happened back there, and right now, has nothing to do with spells?”

“That I can’t say, Aaron.” Nora’s plump red lips curled into a small smile. “You’re the one who gave me wings. Now, I only want to

be beside you, and I've never had that, either. I think you're the one casting spells."

I grinned as her lilting Irish accent and sweet smile warmed me all over, and for a few seconds, I was lost in her eyes.

Then I sobered at the realization. "Wait, are you doing it now?"

"No," the Selkie laughed. "Would it make you feel better if I showed you the difference?"

"Probably," I said.

Nora dipped her head obligingly and sat up a little straighter, and the way her heavy breasts swelled in response instantly drew my attention.

"Fascinating..." Eir mused.

"I haven't done anything yet," the Selkie chuckled, and she gently nudged my chin up so I'd meet her gaze.

"Sorry," I muttered. "Please continue."

Nora looked at me straight on without changing a damn thing about herself, but suddenly, a heady heat poured through my skull.

It trickled down my spine and spread under my skin until every inch of me was low-key aroused, but I didn't mind in the slightest. It was kind of like the way my mark reacted to Eir's touch, except I could tell the magic was different. Instead of surging through me, it moved slow and sweet like Nora did, and being under the Selkie's spell sent her presence through my limbs and straight into my bones.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it. I could almost feel the heat of her tight pussy sliding around my cock all over again, but then the sensation intensified, and I was locked in place.

I raked my eyes over every smooth curve on Nora's porcelain figure like I'd done on the coast, but I didn't only admire the Selkie's body. I craved every inch of it. Even though we'd just fucked a bunch, my brain started offering up a dozen erotic suggestions that would make a pope weep, and as the seconds passed, things took a feverish turn for the worse.

Suddenly, my mind was a tempest of pornographic ideas, and most of them were honestly too filthy to even talk about. I felt like I was drowning under all the images flashing through my head at once, but they only got wilder, and I didn't just want to do this kind of shit.

I needed to.

My blood boiled like I'd combust if I didn't get my hands on the Selkie, and at some point, I started slipping into genuine madness over it. I was burning up and struggling to breathe, but I couldn't stop myself from reaching out for her, and I forgot my name, my life, everything.

Right before I could act on all this crazy shit, the spell abruptly lifted.

My hands froze within inches of Nora's narrow waist, and I broke out in a cold sweat as my fever rapidly cooled. For a second, I was confused to find myself in a cave beside a fire, but I was even more confused about my ragged breathing and painfully hard erection. I must have been about to stand up too, because I was up on my knees and bearing down on the naked Selkie in front of me. My head spun at the thought, and I clutched my skull to keep from pitching forward.

"Holy shit," I slurred and shakily sat back down. "What the fuck was that? You didn't do that to me before. That was..."

My blood pressure skyrocketed as all the things I'd been thinking came rushing back to me, but Nora stroked my arm before I could take too much of it to heart. Her soft smile eased my mind a bit.

"You're right," Nora replied. "When you found me on the shore, I only kept you in place in case you planned to use that sword against me. What I ended up doing just now was to show you what I'm capable of. It's how I torture the men I hunt in their final moments. I know it's not pleasant, but I didn't want you to wonder about it all, or feel I've kept things from you."

"I appreciate the honesty." I nodded as my heart rate leveled out again. "But... why do you do that?"

"Some beings deserve to be tortured and torn to shreds," Nora answered.

"True," I allowed.

"What do your powers do exactly?" Eir spoke up in a stiff tone, and I glanced over to make sure my wife wasn't upset.

This one glimpse assured me she was. The Nordic beauty had a tense, warrior's scowl on her face, and I knew watching me get locked in Nora's spell didn't sit too well with my wife. Whether she noticed it or not, her hand was clenched around the handle of the Bowie knife on her belt, and I reached out to beckon her closer to me.

"I'm fine, come here," I said.

Eir didn't hesitate to squeeze in close to my side, and her brow crinkled the slightest bit while she looked me over and locked her hand around the crook of my arm.

"You didn't look fine, my chief." Eir bit her lip. "You were not yourself, and I don't like to see you so out of control."

"I know," I gently replied. "But that was the point. We should know about the powers we come in contact with. It wasn't fun at the end, but I feel better already, and I'm not worried about it."

"You are certain?" Eir asked as she stroked my cheek.

"Positive," I promised. "It was just intense. I couldn't control any of it, but it wasn't actually me thinking all that shit. I could sort of feel what was happening to me, if that makes sense. I'm sure Nora can explain better how this works."

"Spellbinding can become a sickness if I want it to," Nora explained, and she spoke more to Eir than me while she sent my wife an apologetic look. "It's why the Selkies were born. There's no wrath in the ocean like ours, and we use this to rid our home of the vile ones who plague it. The men who try to catch us are the first to go, but sometimes, the rest need to be hunted down and drawn out.

This is why we cross between the land and the sea. My spells are strong enough to send men over cliffs or diving from their vessels in open water. They'll do anything just to have me, and by the time I break the spell, it's too late for them. I'm already tearing them to pieces."

"Woah," I muttered. "But you can control how intense it gets?"

"Always," the Selkie said. "That's why it felt a bit good for me to bind you at first. To a certain extent, the body likes being at the mercy of another... when it's done right. Do you agree, Aaron?"

A lewd grin hitched at one side of my mouth, and this time, my blood heated entirely of its own accord.

"I do agree," I admitted. "At first, I honestly liked it. This spellbinding stuff is... appealing, to say the least. As long as you lay off the manic side of it, I might even want to learn a little more about your magic."

"I'd love to teach you," Nora purred. "I enjoyed the way you responded to me at the beginning."

I took a deep, steadying breath as I considered the coy look on her heart-shaped face.

She might have been a vicious seductress, but I could appreciate the need for a species like hers, and she wasn't wrong. There were plenty of scenarios where I definitely wouldn't mind being at her mercy.

"Well," Eir curtly cut in. When I glanced over, she was tapping her chin as she narrowed her eyes on the Selkie. "I admire your cunning hunting tactics, Nora. You impress me, and I enjoy elaborate trapping techniques that instill both terror and panic into deserving prey, but I feel I must be blunt."

"Please do," Nora urged.

"If you ever use this power to try and cripple and kill my husband, rest assured, it will no longer matter how glorious you are. I will burn you alive and fuck my husband on your stolen fur for the rest of my life."

My eyebrows shot straight up as my wife's expression stayed as hard as slate. Her voice dripped with murderous resolve, and then an inky blackness started staining the whites of her eyes. Before I could calm her down, Nora offered an unaffected nod.

"I respect your dedication to your husband," the Selkie responded. "I would expect nothing less of a woman, but I give you my word. I wish no harm on Aaron, and only hope to please him and yourself. A man like this is a rare find in our world."

Eir's eyes slowly cleared as she thought this over. Eventually, she returned the Selkie's nod with a respectful bow of her head.

"Then I believe we could enjoy these spells of yours," my wife decided. "Not only in torturing our enemies, but to have a bit of our own fun as well."

I smirked. "You think?"

"Occasionally," Eir said. "Although, you are intoxicating enough without them. Nora, there are times when he penetrates me and holds me entirely at his mercy, and my body surrenders to his so willingly. In those moments, I don't care what he does with me so long as he doesn't stop, and the longer he takes me like this, the more complete I feel. Like I am eternally bound to him, and no other could own me so well."

I side-eyed my wife as I realized where this conversation could be headed, but I was glad to see she wasn't so concerned now that we understood things better. Then Nora joined in, and after that, I just did my best to eat my food like my libido wasn't the only topic on the table right now.

"I felt similar today," the Selkie mused. "Your husband's strength overwhelmed me in so many ways, and I enjoyed how commanding he was with me. He didn't mindlessly use my body, he shared his own with me, and feeling his muscles engulfing me was like nothing I've experienced. I felt so vulnerable but protected at the same time. Like I could trust him implicitly."

"Exactly," Eir gasped with a vigorous nod, and I awkwardly chewed through my next bite. "His virility is all-consuming in those

moments when he is tantalizingly deep inside my womanhood. Didn't you feel how much he deserved to do what he wanted with you? I feel that way all the time. Like his appetite for me is the highest honor I could ask for."

"I did feel this," the Selkie agreed. "No man deserves a Selkie, either. We're superior to all other creatures, but today, when Aaron ravaged me..."

I chewed a little faster while the winged women carried on like this, and I was surprised at how quickly they opened up to each other now that they realized how much they had in common. Nora spoke quieter and slower than Eir, but she was just as elaborate with her descriptions, and their accents bounced back and forth non-stop while I sat between the pair.

Within five minutes, they were finishing each other's sentences. Eir didn't even get a chance to explain the way her spine convulsed when I claimed her, because Nora filled in the blanks instead without batting an eyelash. But when the Selkie started describing the tremors shaking through her womb as my seed flooded her deepest parts, both women settled for moaning in unison rather than try putting it into words.

That was about the time they turned their thirsty glances in my direction, and I found myself on the business end of both my women's lusty stares.

Together, they were exponentially sexier than all the women I'd ever fucked combined. Even my loyal warrior women with their wildish dreadlocks and busty chests paled a few more degrees in comparison. The dense feathers pluming at their backs only made them more alluring too, but listening to women this gorgeous discuss how much they liked me dominating them was not something I'd mentally prepared myself for yet.

It was like eavesdropping on top-secret lady intel. And since the intel was strictly about me, there was pretty much nothing I could contribute except an appreciative nod.

"So... I'm gonna go," I decided, and I got up and headed for the cave entrance. "You ladies have some bonding to do, and I don't

want to interrupt or anything. I should go see Vegvisir, and..."

I was outside in a matter of seconds, so I didn't bother rambling on more than necessary. As soon as I was out of their line of sight, Eir eagerly continued the conversation anyways.

"I don't know how to tell you this, so I will simply come out and say it," the Nordic beauty announced. "Aaron Briggs has a secret trick he can do with his mouth and tongue that will change your entire life."

I had to bury my face in my arm to keep from laughing, but Nora giggled at my wife's declaration, and I could tell she wasn't shocked by the news. Then the Selkie politely asked Eir if she'd returned the favor yet, and I swiftly headed into the woods.

I ended up taking a brief detour to scrub my face with snow, and while this sort of helped bring my body temperature down, I wasn't sure I'd ever keep my blood flow straight again.

Not after seeing how Eir and Nora were together.

Between the Selkie's spellbinding offer and the tricks they were already swapping, there was a very real chance I'd be fucking myself into a coma from here on out.

With a sea-born seductress and a bowhunting goddess.

"Fuuucking hell, man," I mumbled to myself as I narrowly dodged a low branch in time. "Keep it together."

But this seemed impossible. Too much was on the table, and all of it had perfect breasts, sculpted asses, and deadly appetites. I was only a fucking mortal, and even though I usually prided myself on having a firm handle on my self-restraint, the game had suddenly changed on me all at once.

The notion was intimidating at first, but before I could overthink it all, I recalled how Jimmy looked the last time I saw him in Alaska.

Less than twenty-four hours before I showed up in the Red Forest, my hunting buddy nearly went catatonic at the idea of taking Shawna and Vicky home at the same time.

And the son of a bitch followed through like a champ.

For all I knew, he'd run the gamut with those women multiple times by now. The thought made a rush of homesickness wash over me, but it also made me grin. Here I was in another mountain range, in another world, with snow stretching for miles, and it was finally my turn to step up to the threesome plate.

Jimmy would be proud as hell right now.

I had a bit more of a bounce in my step as I continued hiking along the slope, and I decided I wasn't going to waste any energy on the catatonic approach. I was a chieftain of two Farthegn clans with a war on the horizon, and there were bigger issues at stake than keeping my shit together around two gorgeous, sultry, winged women with an obsession for my cock.

The obvious solution was to bang it out of my system until I didn't have a drop of semen left in me.

Then do it all over again.



Chapter 22

Vegvisir didn't bother speaking above a drawling mumble when I showed up near his booby trapped camp this time.

"On your right," the old man muttered in a low tone.

I came to a quick stop on the slope. I could already tell how truly pissed he was with me, so I waited where I stood for a couple minutes rather than play this off like it was any other day.

The old man's drekkadyr was tethered several feet away with its loaded packsaddle waiting in the snow. I took this to mean Vegvisir had already made his mind up about which direction he was heading today, and it probably wasn't the same one I was going in.

Eventually, the old man worked his way down from a fraying, black tree, and without a word, and he spat in the snow and sent me a deeply wrinkled scowl.

I nodded at the sentiment.

"Alright, I understand why you're mad," I began. "I was gonna tell you about the runed blades this morning, but--"

"Like hell, you were," Vegvisir cut in. "You thought you'd never get caught."

"Believe that if you want," I calmly replied. "But this doesn't change anything. I'm only trying to increase our chances of survival."

"Oh, it changes everything," the old man said, and his tone dropped to a gravelly and scolding timbre. "You turned my life's work into a lethal weapon just as soon as you could, and what I witnessed last night proves exactly why your kind can't handle this magic."

"My kind?" I cocked an eyebrow. "What the fuck kind do you think I am?"

"Not a clue," Vegvisir muttered through gritted teeth. "But I don't want to know. Fact is, you're a damn killing machine, and after watchin' you take out over thirty men in under ten minutes--"

“Don’t blow this out of proportion, I wasn’t working alone,” I interrupted. “Eir and the Selkie both did their share, and they saved my ass a couple times. You make it sound like I--”

“Horse shit!” he growled. “I’m tellin’ it how it is, and those girls don’t make no difference. I saw the look in your eyes out there, boy, and you were more than happy to leave those bastards flamin’ in the snow. You tore through every one of ‘em like it was no skin off your nose.”

“Yeah, and I’d do it again,” I shot back. “In case you didn’t notice, they fucking ambushed us. We were outnumbered fifteen to one last night, and my wife almost lost her head. If we didn’t kill all those bastards, they would’ve killed us, including you. It’s not like I walked up on some innocent people and slaughtered the shit out of them. These are Farthegns I’m dealing with. It’s kill or be killed. That’s why I runed the cutlass to begin with. You think I wanna die over these assholes?”

Vegvisir’s sharp eyes shot daggers at me. He shook his head with disdain, but I shrugged off his silence.

“I’m not dying in the Red Forest,” I told the old man flat-out. “And I didn’t come all this way to die in the mountains, either. Last night, I did what I had to do to survive, and you can be grateful you’re still alive because of me, or not. I came out here to tell you I engraved my other sword with the ice rune you showed me. Tonight, we’re going into that cave and finding out what the hell this mark is about, and I’ve got two runed swords ready for the fight. You’re carrying your own staff. Be as pissed as you want about the arrangement, but you’re smart enough to know this is our safest bet. If you don’t like it... I’ll go into that den without you.”

I left the old man glaring between the strict, black trees, and I raked a hand through my hair as I trudged down the slopes in a beeline for the campsite. But arguing with the old guy pissed me off more than I expected, and I had to stop halfway to the cave so I wouldn’t be so wound up when I rejoined the women.

Then I paced ten furious circles in the snow while I thought over my conversation with Vegvisir. As much as I didn’t want to

continue our journey without him, I knew there was a good chance I'd have to. Eir and I hadn't come this far just to turn back without any answers, and if the wanderling was stubborn enough to ditch us this late in the game, then so be it.

I did what I had to last night against Svelgard, and I was prepared to do the same with the helgrind.

My teeth were still grinding together when I reached the campsite, but I figured I could at least pull off a calm demeanor by now. I heard Eir and Nora talking together inside the cave, but their tones were more subdued. I took a steadying breath to ease the glower on my face, and then I headed inside.

The second I entered, the winged women went silent and turned to me.

Eir's green eyes searched mine with a wary look, and Nora's porcelain brow crinkled a little. At first, I was confused why they both looked equally concerned, but then I remembered how acute the Selkie's hearing was, and I let out a tense breath.

"You heard all of that, didn't you?" I asked.

"I did," Nora admitted.

"And you told Eir what you heard," I guessed, and my Nordic wife nodded. "Look, I didn't mean to insult your kind, Eir. You know I try my best to embrace all this shit. I was just trying to explain to Vegvisir that there's a pretty obvious protocol among--"

"It is no insult, my love," Eir said. "The Farthegns are ruthless adversaries, and I rather liked your 'kill or be killed' statement. It makes me proud to know our might cannot be misinterpreted. You do my people justice, and for once, I can say the wanderling has done you some justice in return."

"How do you figure?" I snorted.

"You are very good at killing, my chief," the Nordic beauty purred. "It's one of your most admirable traits."

"I like it, too," Nora murmured.

I chuckled a bit as I considered the Selkie's smirk and Eir's stoic pride, and I came over to sit on the hides between the pair.

"Do you think Vegvisir will really abandon this quest over the flaming sword?" Eir asked.

"Probably," I sighed. "I hope he won't, but he's pissed about these runes. It's bullshit because I really was going to tell him about it this morning, but I can't change the way things turned out."

"The old man's a fool to speak at all," Nora said in a somewhat threatening tone. "How a creature chooses to fight is irrelevant. All that matters is whether they survive to fight another day."

I smirked at the sentiment. "I don't disagree, but regardless, we need to get moving if we're gonna make it to the cave by sundown. If you don't want to risk the journey, I'll understand. I don't want to rope you into this."

"What cave are you searching for, exactly?" the Selkie asked and toyed with my leather vambrace.

"The den of the helgrind," Eir answered for me.

Nora's dark blue eyes shot to me. "You're going into that place? Just the two of you?"

"Looks that way," I said. "It's not the odds I had in mind, but we came here for answers, and we've gotta get down in that cave to find them."

"Then I'll go with you," Nora immediately decided.

"You don't have to." Eir frowned. "You are such a rare and beautiful creature, and I could not bear the idea of you perishing on our account."

"Then I won't perish," the Selkie remarked without a second thought. "And neither will you. The helgrind are fierce, but I've fought them before, and I can do it again."

I furrowed my brow. "You've taken on those wolves? In this form?"

“In both,” Nora assured me. “The helgrind are only wild things, Aaron. I’m not much different than they are, no matter the form I’m in.”

“Damn,” I muttered and nodded in approval. “That’s impressive. I guess we’re doing this, then. We’ve got some scythes you can use, and a couple sickle-swords, but I want Eir to have at least one of those on hand in case--”

“I don’t need your weapons,” the Selkie gently cut in. “I prefer to use my teeth. It’s more satisfying, and it comes natural to me.”

Eir and I both grinned at the words.

“I really, really enjoy you, Nora,” my wife laughed. “You are a remarkably savage woman.”

“I like both of you, as well,” the Selkie said with a husky chuckle. “But we’d best head north. It’s many miles before we reach the wolves’ den, and you’ll want to avoid the hunting party.”

“That’s our plan,” I agreed. “Eir, has there been any sign of Dyggur this morning?”

“None,” my wife sighed.

“What is a Dyggur?” Nora asked.

“He is my loyal heillhaust,” Eir replied. “You will enjoy his ferocity, but I am afraid we must make do without him for now. Don’t worry, my chief. Dyggur will return eventually, and when he does, he will be filled with respect and gratitude for you.”

“I still doubt that,” I snorted, “but as long as you’re okay with letting him roam around for a while, let’s pack up and move out. Vegvisir already took his packsaddle, and I can probably consolidate what Dyggur was carrying onto mine. We’ve eaten through enough food and lost enough healing supplies that it shouldn’t be too difficult.”

Eir arched a haughty eyebrow. “So the three of us have to make do with one mount while the rude old man keeps your clan’s drekkadyr for himself?”

“I’m not leaving him stranded in the mountains with nothing,” I told my wife.

“But he is so adamant about traveling on foot!” Eir scoffed. “Aaron Briggs, you are a chieftain of the Red Forest, and you owe no one your consideration. Particularly some wanderling whose life you have saved several times, and who has the audacity to complain about the way you slaughter your own enemies. He has disrespected you enough, and I refuse to stand aside and allow it any longer.”

Nora nodded in calm agreement, and I chuckled through a sigh as I got up from the hides. Then I pulled Eir up and wrapped my arms around her. She kept her lips pursed in stubborn disapproval, so I tucked a few teasing kisses in her blonde braids. By the time I’d slowly worked my way to her mouth, I found her smiling, and the Nordic beauty trailed her tongue across my lips just to prove it wasn’t me she was frustrated with.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “If you leave the old guy alone, I’ll let you ride up front the whole way north.”

“Very well,” Eir agreed. “I will leave the old man alone, but only if you stroke my feathers during the ride. Just a little bit...”

“I can probably work that out,” I chuckled.

Then I started gathering our supplies from the back of the cave, and while I brought everything outside so I could load it up, Eir addressed two other important details: Nora’s starkly naked body, and her newly acquired wings.

When Eir first got her wings, her forceful, Farthegn tendencies didn’t do her any favors. It took time and perseverance for her to develop a connection to her new appendages. Granted, incorporating her black feathers into our sex life made a world of difference, but I’d been proud of Eir for practicing as much as she needed to be able to manipulate the wings on her own.

It turned out, Nora didn’t need to do any of this.

The Selkie woman was an entirely different breed, and all it took was Eir explaining her lack of connection at the beginning. One

breath later, Nora nodded, closed her eyes, and rolled her shoulders, and the midnight blue feathers rippled like she was stretching stiff muscles. Then she tested their range of motion for a few minutes before she folded them neatly at her back, and she kissed Eir on the cheek to thank her for the lesson.

“Yes, that did not come so easily to me,” the blonde woman muttered. “But I am pleased you have adapted so soon.”

“They seem to behave like my fur,” Nora said. “I’m one with my seal skin, but I can choose how closely I wear it. This connection to the feathers feels more unshakable than the fur, but they respond to my will the same way.”

“What do you think will happen to your wings when you change back into a seal?” Eir asked with a concerned frown.

“I don’t know, but I’m not worried. My nature never changes no matter--”

“What form you take,” Eir chuckled and nodded. “Fascinating. Well, the only other thing I would like to address is the issue of your body being fully exposed for all the world to see.”

“I’m comfortable in the cold,” the Selkie assured her.

“And I admire this,” Eir allowed, “but you are in the company of a chieftain, and no woman who lays with a man of Aaron Briggs’ stature should allow all others to see her this way. Of course, my husband appreciates our forms, and having quite a lot on display pleases him, but your more intimate places belong solely to his eyes. This is fair, yes?”

I snuck a glance over my shoulder when I heard this. I did agree with the sentiment, but I wasn’t sure the sea-born woman would appreciate following strict codes on my account.

To my surprise, Nora nodded in understanding.

“I could cover up a bit,” the Selkie reasoned. “But I don’t need much. I’ll get too warm.”

“I have just the thing,” Eir said.

Then the pair of women started digging through our store of furs to put something together for the Selkie, and by the time I finished securing our packsaddle and provisions on the drekkadyr, Nora was in a pretty familiar outfit.

In fact, it was identical to something Eir loved to wear for me back home. This only made it harder to ignore how much I wanted to keep Nora around as long as possible.

The Selkie wore a single, slim strap of nóttmal fur across her ample tits, and the sparse getup emphasized how much cleavage she was working with. The bluish-black hide made her midnight blue eyes and wings more vibrant too, but her pale skin and red lips contrasted so much with the dark fur that I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Somehow, she looked even more enticing with clothes on, but this probably had to do with the black leather pants Eir lent her.

They were so snug on the Selkie's rounded ass that she left the front ties open so that the V ended just half an inch above where her vagina graced her body. The meat of her hips stayed exposed where she rolled the waist down, and she looked like a careless, arctic beach babe.

All I wanted to do was tear the undone pants off her and fuck her right in the snow. Probably on all fours, so I could get my hands on that juicy ass.

"For you, my chief," Eir purred as I stared from the entrance of the cave. "I thought you might like to see how well Nora wears the hides of your clan. Just look at how beautiful your new woman is. She honors Dalir, no?"

"That's an understatement," I mumbled, and I didn't bother dragging my eyes off the Selkie's pale and swelling cleavage.

The thin strip of nóttmal fur immediately brought out my Farthegn side, and I couldn't help wanting to draw the stripes of Dalir across her porcelain face just to complete the picture.

Nora blushed under my gaze while she waited for me to come to her. When I made it over, her bare hips and waist felt like a velvety

fire in my grip. Her juicy red lips were what warmed me to my core though, and I didn't know how long I stood there kissing her.

The Selkie's silky tongue kept me hypnotized as I kneaded her leather-clad ass, but I forced myself not to get too stuck on how fucking fantastic Nora looked and felt in Farthegn garb.

Even if leather and fur were all I wanted to tear off a woman these days.

"Is everything prepared for our departure?" Eir asked and grabbed her bow and two scythes off the cave floor.

I pulled back from Nora's kiss, but I kept her flush against me as I admired her creamy breasts straining against the nóttmal hide.

"Yeah, we're set to go," I muttered distractedly. "Just the weapons to pack up."

My words were almost muffled as my lips grazed Nora's collarbone, and I let them trail down so I could lay a few final kisses along the swell of her breasts. She shivered with every touch, and her chest was heaving against my mouth by the time I eased up on her.

"Don't forget my fur," the Selkie panted, and I resurfaced to find her pale cheeks as red as her lips.

"Right," I agreed. "You can tie it to the packsaddle. There's enough room for a few more things."

I made myself release Nora so she could gather up her seal fur, and once the three of us were weighed down with scythes and swords, we left the cave with only Vegvisir's enchanted flames burning at the center.

Then I led the two winged women around the side of the rocks, and I found the drekkadyr waiting where I'd left him munching on snow.

The second we came into view, the mount tossed its horned head and brayed in panic. I lunged just in time to catch its untethered reins, but he was spooked and bucking all over for some reason. I

tried talking him down, and then he nickered and flared his huge eyes in the direction of the cave.

“Take it easy,” I cooed, and the drekkadyr snorted anxiously. “What’s wrong, buddy?”

I could feel the muscles in his shoulders twitching like his nerves were wound taut, and when I looked over my shoulder, Nora and Eir were waiting patiently a good twenty feet away.

“I wonder what has got into him,” Eir mused, and she scanned the surrounding slopes. “He usually only behaves like this if Dyggur is feeling predatory.”

“Maybe he’s close by,” I said.

My wife raised her nose into the air. “He isn’t. I would sense him if he were.”

“The nearest being is the old man you argued with,” Nora confirmed. “But he’s not very close.”

I furrowed my brow and continued stroking the thick fur on the drekkadyr’s shoulder, and he stopped kicking his hooves after a minute or so of me muttering to him in a soothing tone. Still, his breathing rate stayed elevated, and I was about to send Eir to check the area when Nora came a few paces closer. Then the drekkadyr reared up all over again, and I realized the Selkie might be the problem.

“Shit,” I grunted as I wrestled with the reins. “Nora, would you mind staying where you are for a moment? I think he might be afraid of you.”

“Yes, Aaron,” the Selkie murmured. “But I don’t think he’ll take a liking to me. I’m a predator.”

“Yeah, I just caught on to that,” I said, and I started over trying to calm the drekkadyr down.

“I can walk for the journey,” the Selkie offered.

“No way,” I refused.

“Your feet will be worn through before we ever get there,” Eir added.

“I’ve journeyed farther,” Nora assured her.

“Perhaps, but we can make this work,” my wife said. “The drekkadyr have grown accustomed to having my heillhaust around them, and they can do the same for you. Give me your fur, and I will finish loading everything while the drekkadyr gets comfortable around you.”

Nora passed her Selkie hide over, and she stayed where she was while Eir came to join me. Then my wife draped the fur over my arm, and she started securing our weapons on the anxious mount. I continued my efforts to calm the beast as I beckoned Nora closer in intervals, and even though he didn’t take too well to her presence, he seemed to respond okay to my efforts.

Just like with Dyggur, the drekkadyr’s muscles stayed taut and twitchy no matter what, but it stopped bucking or trying to flee. Eventually, Nora was able to stand within a few feet of my mount.

“I think we can make this work,” I decided and stroked the drekkadyr’s neck a few more times, and I was finally able to tether him to a tree again. “You can sit behind me so you’re nowhere near his jugular.”

“That would be best,” Nora agreed.

I gave the beast a couple more pats, and Eir took over tending to him while I slid Nora’s hide off my arm. The softness of it still boggled my mind, and I grinned a little at the speckled blue and brown pattern while I worked on rolling it up.

Now that I knew Nora better, it was uncanny how much the fur resembled her. Not only were the markings identical to the softer brown flecks on her face and shoulders, but the blue complimented her eyes well, and the fur was every bit as soft as her skin. This made me acutely aware of the fact that I was handling something that was a genuine part of the woman, and I tried to be as gentle as possible with it as I neatly bundled it up. Then I grabbed one of my wool tunics and wrapped it around the fur a few times, and I tucked it

deep down in my saddlebag so nothing could catch on it or tear the fur during our journey.

I nodded to myself once the speckled hide was as secure as I could manage, but then I turned around and found Nora watching me with a strange look on her face.

The Selkie's midnight blue eyes were slightly hooded, and her plump lips parted in their natural pout. She looked distracted even though she was holding my gaze.

"Is everything alright?" I checked. "I'm not trying to hide the fur, I just wanted to make sure it can't get damaged during this next leg of the trip."

Nora blinked out of her daze and offered a small nod. "Yes, Aaron. It's quite alright."

"Good," I said with a grin. "Let me know if you need it, though. I put it in the front pouch so it'd be within reach while we're riding."

The Selkie smiled a little as she nodded once more, and she looked so sweet that I couldn't resist coming over for another quick kiss before we left. The second I took her in my arms, Nora let out a soft sigh, and she was about to offer her lips up to me when a low growl reverberated in her throat.

Then the Selkie turned her head to the side, and she bared her pronged fangs with a rippling snarl.

"What the..." I started to say, but then the drekkadyr reared up, and as it brayed, another beast echoed its call.

That was when I realized a second drekkadyr coming through the black and white landscape. I probably looked just as surprised as Vegvisir when we finally saw each other.

I genuinely didn't think the old guy would show up again.

But Nora's growl only grew louder, and as she pulled away from me to prowl forward, the old man stopped in his tracks. His drekkadyr reared up as bad as mine did, but the wanderling looked too confused to do much more than stare. He kept a tight grip on the reins while Eir struggled to calm my mount down as well.

Nora's posture was getting more predatory as she stalked closer to the man though, and I jumped forward to block her path with my whole body.

"No, no, no!" I hastily muttered. "I would really prefer it if you didn't maul this guy. He's with us. This is Vegvisir, the wanderling we told you about."

"The man who disrespects your right to kill?" Nora asked, and each word shook with a low, growling timbre.

The sound made my shoulders shiver as my blood instantly sank to my loins, but I tried not to dwell too much on how turned on her growling made me.

Because the whites of her eyes were starting to turn as blue as her irises.

I knew from experience with my Nordic wife how pissed off the Selkie must be. A deep, midnight blue blotted out her gaze entirely within seconds, and Nora looked as demonic as Eir did when her eyes turned black. Except the Selkie had her fangs bared while her blue feathers rose up in a threatening display, and the way her blood-red lips twitched reminded me of a hungry wolf.

Still, Nora let me hold her firmly in place by her rigid shoulders, and I leveled the Selkie with a stern look.

"Vegvisir's entitled to his own opinions," I said. "If they don't bother me, they shouldn't bother you, either."

Nora growled a little louder.

"Easy," I commanded in a low tone. "I'd be very disappointed if you hurt this man, Nora."

That seemed to work.

The Selkie's tensed muscles relaxed in my grip, and her lips stopped twitching. Then I rubbed her arms to help calm her down, and as her growling got quieter, the blue wings on her back slowly folded behind her.

I nodded my approval while Nora drew a deep breath and stopped growling altogether, and as I stroked my fingers through her

dark auburn hair, the Selkie nuzzled into my touch. By the time my hand cupped the back of her neck, Nora started curling up against my chest, and just like that, she was tame again.

Seeing how readily the savage woman obeyed my command did all kinds of things to the state of my dick, but I managed to keep my crotch from rubbing against her.

Then I let Nora snuggle up in my arms until I was sure she was completely subdued. When she looked up at me again, there was a hint of a soft smile on her face that pleased me even more, but her eyes were still stained midnight blue. I knew it would take a few minutes for it to fade at least, so I tucked the Selkie under one arm to help keep her calm before I turned around.

Vegvisir was just as bug-eyed as before. He stayed still like a statue between the trees thirty feet away.

“You can come over,” I assured him. “She’s alright now.”

Vegvisir shook his head and didn’t take a single step. Then he gestured to Nora’s blue wings with a shaky hand.

“You made another one?” the old man mumbled.

“Uh... yeah,” I said, and I couldn’t help the half-grin on my lips. “This is Nora. She’s the Selkie from last night, and she’ll be traveling with us to the den.”

“And she is not happy with you,” Eir curtly added from her place near the drekkadyr. “You have disrespected our chief one too many times, old man, and--”

“Everything’s fine,” I said. “Nora’s just a little--”

“It’s the right of any creature to kill the ones who seek to kill them,” the Selkie interrupted, and I looked down at her.

Nora’s stained blue eyes were narrowed on Vegvisir, and her hold on my waist tightened defensively as she exposed just the tips of her fangs.

“Any creature?” I clarified. “Don’t you cripple your victims so they can’t fight back?”

“It’s not my fault I’m a deadlier opponent than they are,” the Selkie growled. “If they wanted to live, they wouldn’t behave in a way that drew my appetite to them.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Well, Vegvisir isn’t doing anything wrong, so put the fangs away.”

“Yes, Aaron.” Nora obeyed the order, but she kept her lethal gaze on the wanderling. “Be grateful Aaron bothers to protect you at all, or next time, I’ll be the one ambushing you. And I won’t bother with spells. I’ll make sure you see every bite coming.”

“Nora...” I sighed, and Eir chuckled with pride. “Why don’t you and Eir go for a short walk? Take a breather, stretch your wings, calm down a bit, and then we’ll head out. I need to talk to Vegvisir alone.”

“If you insist,” the Selkie said.

“I do,” I snorted, and I left a kiss in her auburn hair.

Nora glared at the wanderling for a few seconds more, but then she slowly turned away, and I watched her tight, leather-clad ass saunter over to my wife. The two winged women linked arms before they shot identically bitchy looks toward Vegvisir, and the way their feathers bristled was enough to strike fear into my own heart. Then the deadly pair strolled arm in arm into the black trees, and I let out a low whistle at the sight.

They may have been a bit touchy when it came to me, but damn it... I was into it.

Vegvisir didn’t approach until the wings were well out of range. When I looked over, he was pale and clearly unnerved.

“Sorry about that,” I muttered. “Are you planning on coming with us, then?”

“S’pose I am,” the wanderling sighed without meeting my gaze. “Doesn’t mean I support this shit you’ve been up to with the runes.”

“I figured as much.”

“I’ve come this far, though,” Vegvisir continued, “and I’m not leaving until I find out what the hell this mark of yours is about. Have

you tested that ice rune out yet?”

“Not yet,” I said. “I was going to this morning, but other things came up.”

“Well, better get to it before we leave,” he grumbled. “Helgrind don’t burn, so the fire rune won’t do ye’ any good in there.”

“Shit, really?” I asked. “I figured their bodies might be normal since the lava’s only coming from their fangs and eyes.”

“They’ll cut and bleed like a beast,” Vegvisir acknowledged, “but heat of any kind won’t hurt ‘em. That’s why I used the ice spears on them last time I was up here. Regular ice would melt, of course, but like I said, this rune ain’t any old ice. It’s magic, and it behaves like the fire rune in some ways.”

“How’s that?” I asked, and I half-expected the old man to refuse to answer.

But he didn’t.

“You’ve seen me strike my staff and make the flames,” Vegvisir said, “but I don’t gotta keep striking it to make them spread, do I?”

I shook my head. “Not that I’ve noticed.”

“Well, that’s on account of intention,” he continued. “Those flames are under my control because I’m the one who conjured them. There’s a direct line of connection, and expanding the blaze costs me energy because of this. Wouldn’t want to light the whole damn mountain on fire, or I’d probably keel over dead. Same concept applies to a decent number of runes, and this ice rune is one of ‘em. So if I want these spears to expand inside the wound, they’ll do it.”

“Huh,” I mused as I furrowed my brow. “Is that why the flames kept building last night when I was fighting Svelgard’s warriors?”

This time, Vegvisir didn’t respond as quickly, and he offered a disappointed nod. “If you really wanna burn those bastards up, the flames will pick up on your intention and deliver.”

“Oh.” I shifted my weight. “That, uh... that makes sense.”

I awkwardly cleared my throat, and then I headed over to the nearest tree as I unsheathed my jagged sword for a trial run.

I knew Vegvisir wouldn't stop glaring at me any time soon, but I was glad he'd answered my questions because I'd been confused about the growing flames last night. The concept made sense at least. I really had been in the killing mindset during our battle against Svelgard, and the more effective my cutlass was, the more determined I became to finish those assholes off quick.

Which probably didn't make me look like any less of a murder machine to Vegvisir, but it served my purposes.

"Alright," I sighed as I took a sturdy stance in front of a black trunk. "Let's see if this works."

"Gonna want to change your intentions," the wanderling mumbled in a reluctant tone.

"Really? I figured I'd just focus the same as--"

"You lookin' to shoot spears out of that sword, or slash with it?" the old man cut in. "You've got a different medium in your hand this time, boy, so think hard about what you're seeking to create with that rune. Visualize the outcome you want, or you'll be throwing ice daggers all over the damn place with every cut. Good luck directing each one at the same time."

I raised my eyebrows. "Okay, I see your point. I'll keep that in mind."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, and I focused on the presence of the hilt in my hand. Brokk's jagged sword grew heavier the longer I visualized the effect I wanted to bring out of the ice rune, and once I had a clear intention blazing in my core, I raised the blade.

Then I slashed it across the jet-black trunk in front of me.



Chapter 23

As soon as my runed sword struck the tree, the splintery sound of grating glass pierced my ears, and a pure white slit tore through the black bark. The enchanted ice splintered into crystalline shards as it grew into a jagged gash, and I could hear the wood of the tree cracking and splitting in response.

I jumped back when I realized the ice was spreading inward through the trunk, but on the outside, the white spikes continued elongating like a crop of perilous crystals. Then the magic settled as a low groan echoed through the tree, and I held my breath.

Luckily, it didn't keel over, and Vegvisir and I exchanged a silent glance.

"Welp," the old man sighed. "I'd say the damn rune works."

"Looks like it," I snorted. "You think this'll be enough against the wolves, or should I engrave another..."

I trailed off as I registered the wanderling's hard stare, and then I swiftly nodded.

"Never mind," I muttered.

The two of us turned back to the pure white growth blooming on the tree, and I tried to be respectful and keep my grin in check. I remained straight-faced and stoic on the outside, but inside my head, a greedy chuckle echoed through my skull.

This was fucking awesome.

My second runed weapon worked out without a single hitch, and I couldn't help imagining a gash like this splintering its way through Stranholf's gut.

"Thanks for deciding to come along with us," I said in a casual tone. "I honestly thought you'd take off after last night."

"Yeah, well," the old man drawled. "I thought about what you said, and what went down... now I think about it, I'm not so sure you

know what you were fighting for.”

“What do you mean?” I furrowed my brow and looked over. “I told you I was just trying to survive.”

“Yeah, and you’ve told me that mark acts up when you’re either killing something, or claiming these women,” Vegvisir replied.

“Not when I’m killing everything,” I clarified. “It doesn’t burn when I’m hunting.”

“But it burns when you’re in a tight spot or up against your enemies?” the wanderling asked, and I nodded. “Well, I’ve seen how you fight when you’re in a tight spot, and I’ve never known a man to stay that focused when shit goes south. Those vanahrut didn’t shake ye’, you dived right into a damn stampede, and I haven’t seen you cower in front of a troop of Farthegns yet. Makes me wonder if you got any control over how you kill.”

I narrowed my eyes and considered this. “I can control myself.”

“Can you?” The old man sent me a shrewd look like he knew better. “Ever tried to cool that mark down once it started burning? Ever tried to not give a woman wings when you slept with her? Or do you feed off that mark every time it acts up?”

“I guess I feed off it,” I admitted. “Even with the wings...”

“That’s why I’m going with you.” Vegvisir shrugged. “You strike me as a decent man, but if that mark ain’t always been on you, then you don’t know how it’s functioning any better than I do. Those wings seem to turn these women into vipers, too. Tally all that up, and I’d say your symbol could be a fuckin’ curse. Puts you in a spot of trouble, boy.”

I sobered as my limbs tingled at the thought, but I didn’t have much time to dwell on the implications. My two winged women were returning through the trees now, and even though Nora’s eyes were back to normal, her presence had already spooked our mounts.

I helped Vegvisir keep a hold on his reins while Eir hurried to calm down the other drekkadyr. Nora sent me a sweet smile and

kept her distance, but her smile dropped when she looked at Vegvisir. Then she turned her blue wings to both of us.

“By the way,” I muttered under my breath. “You didn’t mention Selkies lure people in and fucking eat them alive. You could’ve brought it up when Eir was going on and on about that hide.”

“Thought it went without saying,” Vegvisir snorted. “I told you men fear ‘em, but she didn’t eat you, so it don’t matter much, does it? Just make sure she doesn’t find that fur, or we’ll all be on the menu.”

“I didn’t hide it,” I said, and the old man did a double-take.

“What’d you do with it?” he hissed.

“I gave it back to her,” I answered. “I didn’t want her to get worried about where it’d gone, and I obviously wasn’t about to steal her, so I went to the coast this morning. Nora and I ended up running into each other on the shore, and once she stopped spellbinding me, things sort of... escalated from there. She asked me to stay with her, I invited her to come back here with me, and she agreed.”

“The Selkie asked you to stay?” Vegvisir scoffed. “A human man?”

“Yes,” I whispered and motioned for him to quiet down even though Nora could’ve heard him from miles away. “I’m pretty sure Nora’s the ‘blue’ the sky elf warned me about, too. I felt it in my bones the second I met her. She definitely wanted to kill me. Things went a different way though, so...”

I shrugged and grinned, and Vegvisir shook his head in bewilderment.

“Boy, you’re a fuckin’ enigma,” the old man sighed. “Get on that damn mount.”

“Speaking of mounts,” I chuckled. “Would it be alright if one of the women rode with you? Dyggur’s not back yet, and three of us on one drekka--”

“Hell no,” Vegvisir refused. “You wanna keep giving women wings, then you can lug their murderly asses around yourself.”

The old man climbed up onto his saddle without another word, and I nodded toward the snow.

“Fair enough,” I mumbled.

Then I headed over to the others, and Nora and Eir slid their arms around my waist the second I was within reach.

“You ladies ready to go?” I asked.

“Yes, my chief,” Eir said with a nod. “Although, I disagree with the wanderling’s opinions. I am no more a viper now than I have always been, and after seeing how beautiful Nora looks when her eyes change, I have decided I don’t mind the way mine behave. It’s terrifying to behold. Why should I dislike it?”

“Um, yeah,” I agreed, but I was confused where all this was coming from.

“I also think you are certainly not cursed,” my wife continued. “I consider your mark a blessing, along with yourself.”

“Yes, and killing for the sake of survival isn’t a curious inclination,” Nora added. “The ability to remain calm and persevere when faced with a deadly opponent is the mark of a superior predator.”

I smirked as I finally realized the Selkie had been listening in again, and both women looked at me with frank expressions while they crossed their arms in unison.

“So, should I assume nothing I do is private from here on out?” I checked.

“I can’t pretend I don’t hear you, Aaron,” Nora told me. “I’ll hold my tongue about it all if you want, but I don’t like the idea of keeping secrets from your wife.”

“Neither do I,” I assured her. “I’m not complaining, just making sure I know the protocol.”

“But you agree with us?” Eir asked. “You feel the mark isn’t a curse?”

“I don’t know what it is,” I said. “But I’m open to finding out the truth, whether I like it or not. Go on and mount up. We should’ve left by now.”

The blonde promptly climbed up onto the drekkadyr’s saddle, and once I untethered his reins, she worked on keeping him steady so I could join her. Eir wiggled her ass the second I settled in behind her, and I chuckled as I pulled her snug between my thighs. Then I made good on my promise and teased her wings just enough to make her shiver, and my wife’s black feathers rippled against my palm while she tried to stifle a moan.

It took both of us pulling on the reins to keep the drekkadyr still once Nora came closer, but the Selkie didn’t have any trouble climbing up despite his kicking. She seemed to enjoy his prey-like response and easily dodged his huge hooves as she pounced, and she even chuckled at his panicked braying while she climbed over his rump. Then Nora eased her leather-clad thighs around me until her magnificent breasts were flush against my back, and she looped her porcelain arms tight around my abs.

There was plenty of room on the horned beast for all three of us, but the Selkie stayed as close to me as possible. I could feel her nuzzling her warm cheek against my spine already, and then Eir wiggled a little more to make sure her ass cheeks were pressed against my dick.

As I considered how cushy being tucked between the pair was, I decided Dyggur did me a solid by taking off. This was probably going to be the most enjoyable leg of the trip.

“Shall we?” I murmured in Eir’s ear.

“Yes, my love,” the Nordic beauty purred.

Then she flicked the reins of our mount, and I slid my palm down to the warm nook between my wife’s legs.

I made sure to keep my fingers tucked around her inner thigh so I was just close enough to her pussy to torture her for the rest of the ride. My other hand rested on the leather-clad thigh of Nora’s leg,

and as the Selkie snuggled a little closer to my back, we set out up the slope.

Vegvisir took the lead once we crested the ridge, and we only lingered on the mountainside long enough to scan the blustery shoreline for beasts. It was just as deserted as this morning, and twice as windy. Once we descended, the extra snowfall made it easier to keep up a clipped pace, and our mounts trotted north without any issues thanks to the added traction.

After a couple miles passed, I wondered if we'd gotten lucky enough to avoid all the beasts at this time of day. We didn't pass a single vanahrut, and the golthr nests that were dug out along the base of the mountains looked deserted. Even the area beyond the stretch where the wolves had feasted was abandoned when we got there, and I mentioned how strange this seemed, but Nora cleared up my confusion pretty quickly.

Apparently, her presence usually scared the northern beasts away for miles, so I added this to the list of things I liked about the Selkie. Thanks to her, we traveled another ten miles without coming across a single issue.

The smooth crossing gave me plenty of time to think too, and I was grateful for it since Vegvisir's hypothesis was still stuck in my mind. I didn't know how to feel about his ideas where my mark was concerned, but I couldn't deny that his logic held up. The more I thought back to the times the symbol on my chest burned the hottest, the more I was sure I'd never tried to smother the blaze. I let it take over my mind every time, but this made sense to me given the circumstances.

I wasn't raised to slaughter hulking, Viking fucks. And I was up against warriors who'd spent their lives honing their most barbaric skills.

Hundreds and hundreds of them.

I needed all the help I could get, and so far, my mark had never let me down. Maybe I didn't know how or why this was the case, but I knew the burning in my chest kept me in the headspace I needed to fight my ass off.

On the other hand, if Vegvisir was right, and I had no control over the way I did this, then I might be in a bit of trouble. I only wanted to survive and get by alright in this life, not blindly slaughter the fuck out of anyone who crossed me, so I was glad the wanderling brought it up. The fact that he didn't walk away when he realized this could be the case was a relief, too. He even gave me pointers on the rune I engraved against his wishes, and I hoped this meant he'd stick around if things got even more questionable real soon.

I didn't know shit about curses, and if I was carrying some kind of voodoo killing hex on my chest, I'd sure as hell need some input on what to do about it.

For now, I let the issue lie rather than worry too much about the future. I'd probably find out how bad things could get sooner rather than later.

Being sandwiched between two gorgeous women made it easier to stay unconcerned, and I distracted myself by thinking over the recreational activities I wanted to try with both of them.

My imagination was tongue and balls deep in a double-cowgirl when Nora suddenly growled, and I honestly thought it was part of my fantasy until the drekkadyr started acting up.

"What's wrong?" I called over my shoulder.

"We should get out of view," Nora answered. "The ships are coming, and they'll row into shore if they take an interest in us."

"Did you say ships?" I hollered against the wind.

"Shit!" Eir cursed, and she kicked our mount into a gallop so she could catch up to Vegvisir.

I was beyond confused, but I figured the women knew what they were up to. When Eir yelled to the wanderling about ships, he actually seemed to be on the same page. The old man steered his drekkadyr inland without any questions, and I just held on tight to the women around me while the bumpy ride brought a smirk to my face. No one slowed their mounts until we were nearly to the slopes, and

as soon as we were tucked behind a cluster of ragged ice pillars, Eir and Vegvisir reined us in.

“Keep the beasts still,” Nora instructed, and she slid off the saddle.

Eir did the same, so I followed suit, and Vegvisir joined us down on the ice while we all moved in closer to stay out of sight. Then Nora carefully peered around the ice.

“How many?” the wanderling asked.

“Four vessels heading south,” Nora reported. “They’re less than a sixth of a mile offshore.”

“What kind of beings sail this ocean in four vessel fleets?” I muttered.

“Farthegns,” Eir answered. “Óhreinn owns this water.”

“No man owns this water,” Nora said in a deadly tone, and my wife clamped her mouth shut.

“Everyone’s certainly trying to, though,” Vegvisir snorted. “You cross these waters, and the sky elves will tell you it’s theirs. Head a little south, and the white witches will set a storm on your ass for trespassing a forty-mile stretch of sea. But all of ‘em steer clear of this coast. No one wants to bother with Óhreinn.”

“Wait, isn’t Óhreinn the clan west of Dalir?” I asked. “Below the cliff we used to reach Illska?”

“Yes, that’s Óhreinn,” Eir confirmed.

“They have that many ships?” I scoffed. “Like... big ones?”

“Come and see,” Nora offered.

I handed my mount’s reins off to Eir, and I crept closer to the edge of the ice pillars. Then I tucked Nora against me as I peered over her head, and my eyebrows shot up.

The longships sailing by were the stuff of peak Viking-age exploration, but they looked larger than the ones I’d seen images of online. Instead of one mast, these behemoths had two masts apiece, but the sails weren’t rigged, and dozens of oars protruded from the

hulls on either side instead. The prow and stern were curved upward with massive, hand-carved figureheads mounted at each end, and all four vessels bore a different style of beast I didn't recognize. Other than this, the sturdy, wooden ships were identically built, and all of their decks were overrun with fur-cloaked Farthegns.

I couldn't make out much about their garb from this distance, but between the four vessels, there must have been well over two hundred warriors out there.

I grinned in awe as I watched the ships slice through rolling waves while the giant oars rowed in unison, but then I heard Nora growling under me, and I wiped the smile off my face.

"Are these some of the sailors you hunt?" I asked with my lips against her ear.

"Yes," the Selkie growled back. "I swam from Thelacrecia to hunt these waters."

"Where's that?"

"About seven hundred miles south of here," Vegvisir answered.

"Holy shit," I snorted. "That's a hell of a swim."

"It was worth the journey," Nora assured me. "This coast is infested with Óhreinn scum, and they deserve to be dragged to the depths. Every last one of them."

"Well, that is true," Eir agreed. "Their clan is vile, but they have proven resilient. I heard they possess more riches than all the other clans combined on account of their plundering. They sail to many regions and do their raiding there, but this is good for the rest of us."

"How many strong are they?" I asked while I eyed the crowded decks.

"No one knows anymore," my wife answered. "It's been centuries since we've had to war with Óhreinn at all, but it would be tedious to battle their warriors anyways. Óhreinn are famously barbaric, ruthless, and sea-faring dogs. It is fortunate all they seek is out on the water. This keeps their filthy clan from causing strife in the Red Forest."

“Must be kind of nice,” I mused.

Nora whipped her head around and stared at me, and I straightened up to find Eir looking my way with just as much disapproval.

“Having ships is what I meant,” I clarified. “Imagine it. Never having to deal with the other clans, getting out of the forest whenever you want to... think how much this clan’s seen of the world compared to the other Farthegns.”

Eir rolled her eyes like this wasn’t even close to impressive, and Vegvisir snickered as Nora pursed her plump lips.

“You’re in the wrong company, boy,” the old man informed me. “Farthegns like Óhreinn are a plague to the Selkies. Half the reason their kind are dying out is because those assholes have been sailing this ocean for over a thousand years.”

“Yes, and who cares what they have seen,” Eir curtly added. “I have traveled quite a bit myself, so they are hardly superior.”

I bit my cheek to keep from laughing too loud, but I couldn’t hide my amusement completely. Then Eir blushed and avoided my gaze, so I didn’t bother raining on her parade. I really was proud of her for how she’d handled this trip so far, and hearing her compare this one journey to centuries of intercontinental voyaging was adorable as hell.

Still, Nora didn’t look at all amused. She silently went back to watching the passing ships, and I pulled her into my arms as I laid a couple kisses in her auburn hair. For her sake, I could understand hating the idea of these travelers, but I couldn’t ignore how fucking jealous I was all of a sudden.

The rugged ships practically gleamed like gold in my eyes, and I watched them slice through the arctic water until they were well beyond our range.

I wanted those ships.

The four of us mounted up again, and we headed north at a quicker pace to make up for lost time. But the whole way, my focus

stayed stuck on Óhreinn's ships, and my chieftain-brain took over.

Not that I was lacking in my own resources, but I knew Óhreinn had to be sitting on heaps of provisions and worldly goods. Ships that size with enough men rowing them could travel practically non-stop, and this wasn't the only appeal. Having an unknown number of warriors meant their count had to be well beyond my own, and if my runed armory might not work, then numbers were what I needed more than anything. Any clan housing more than my current stock of warriors would put me on par with Hylmrek, and that was my most immediate goal:

Crushing Hylmrek under my boot.

For the rest of our journey north, my thoughts vacillated between scheming against my western neighbors and ravaging two women at once. I found time to snack on plenty of jerky as well, and the landscape got less appealing as the miles wore one. Eventually, there was less to look at, but the stark, flat, frozen planes of the far north were impressive in their own way.

The polar wind and snow ripped over the land and left the lower mountains worn smooth, and I squinted hard to keep my eyes from freezing over. Eir's wings were frosted from the icy particles flying through the air, but Nora stayed as hot as a flame at my back. I was grateful she held me so tight against her. It kept my core temperature in check despite the plummeting chill we galloped through, and the snug riding conditions kept Eir's ass nice and warm between my thighs.

Our drekkadyr were caked with ice and snow by now, but they didn't waver for a second, and without any beasts in our path, they took this leg of the journey better than the previous ones. The sky wasn't even dimming yet when I saw the land ahead of us curving to the west, and my gaze followed the line of the stark blue shore to find what looked like an arctic island.

The water between the mountains and the island must have been shallow, because the coast was frozen from one shore to the other. But this was the least interesting thing about what I was looking at.

The island was small and looked like it was mostly made up of glaciers, and a single stony peak rose up from the middle of the blue planes. Even from this distance, I could make out the giant shadowy mouth of a cave halfway up the peak, and this area was a gritty black color that I recognized as lava rock. The same substrate spewed down the ridge below the dark entrance before it mixed with ice and snow, but so far, there wasn't a wolf in sight out there.

Vegvisir took us closer to the slopes to the east of us as we followed the curve of the coast. Once we were less than a mile from the frozen crossing to the island, he brought his mount to a stop.

"Better tie the beasts off up in these mountains," the old man hollered, and the ripping wind almost swallowed his words up.

"You sure they'll be safe this close to the den?" I yelled back. "They're our only ride back to the south!"

Vegvisir nodded. "Get 'em up over that ridge, and they'll be downwind when the helgrind come out to hunt. Gotta hurry, though. Sun will be going down in less than an hour, and we gotta be ready to cross that ice lickity-split once it does."

"Wait..." I glanced toward the icy island in the distance. "We've gotta cross that whole stretch after the wolves are already out? Then get back again before they return?"

"Never said this part would be easy, boy!" the old man called back, and he sent me a toothy grin. "Should be a hell of a trip!"

Ten minutes later, we dismounted on the other side of the ridge closest to the coast, and we tethered our mounts before we got suited up for the crossing. Everyone except Nora swapped out their hides for a fresh set without ice all over them, but we stuck with the thinnest fur we had so they wouldn't weigh us down during the run.

Then we divvied up our weapons. Vegvisir insisted on only bringing his staff, but I wasn't about to go into that den with just one runed sword. Not after seeing how effective the ice rune was. And I didn't bother trying to hide what I had in mind. I figured honesty would be the best policy now that Vegvisir and I hit a bit of a snag on

the rune front, and I just dug out my graver and dropped down in the snow to get to work.

Then I engraved the ice rune on two serrated scythes in a matter of minutes.

I glanced up just once during the process, and I wasn't surprised to find Vegvisir side-eyeing my work. The old man was stretching his muscles a few feet away, and he didn't look at all pleased about the engravings I decided to replicate. Still, he didn't say a damn word about it, and when Eir stepped forward with a thoroughly arched eyebrow, the old man looked away entirely.

My winged wife had just finished strapping two canisters of arrows to her back, and she didn't argue when I told her to sheath a Khopesh sword on her belt. Then she practiced keeping her wings out of the way during quick draws with her bow, and she had her movements down to a science when I finished my engravings.

I strapped my runed scythes in a cross at my back before I added a spare Khopesh sword to my belt as well, but this was just a precaution since I was packing three runed blades now.

"You're sure you don't need any weapons?" I asked Nora as I shifted my jagged sword to a more accessible position.

The half-dressed Selkie nodded. "I work best with my teeth."

"Okay, but these wolves drip lava from their eyes and fangs," I pointed out. "Getting close enough to bite them puts you at a high risk of your skin getting melted off, and I'd really hate to see skin as soft as yours getting damaged on our account."

"I've fought the helgrind before, Aaron," Nora reminded me, and she smiled at my concern. "I'll be just fine."

"Any advice about our approach?" Eir asked and came over to Nora's side.

"Yeah, don't get eaten," Vegvisir snorted.

I smirked in his direction. "Eir, just remember what you saw on the coast the other day."

“The helgrind surrounded their prey and tested their strength like the jakyls do,” my wife recalled.

“Exactly,” I replied. “But wolves in general are more patient. Some will hang back to drive us into the jaws of their packmates, but overall, they’re most likely to jump us from behind. So stay sharp and close to us with your gaze directed outward.”

“He’s right,” Nora said. “Don’t turn your back on the wolves unless you’re intentionally baiting them, and remember, they’re a fiery species. You better aim those arrows directly at their hearts or heads. Otherwise, they’re likely to burn away before they can do much damage.”

“Same goes for blades,” I added. “Take quick, precise cuts, but be careful about how long the steel’s in their flesh. Use your sword if you need to trip the wolves up, but then get to where you’ve got a better shot with your bow. With your aim, these wolves won’t stand a chance.”

“This is true,” my wife agreed with a sage nod.

“Most importantly, these wolves are gonna see us as an enemy pack,” I continued. “We’re gonna have to fight like it. Once we’re deep in that den, they’ll be defending their turf instead of looking at us solely like prey, so be ready for a free-for-all.”

“But try and have some fun,” Vegvisir chuckled while he stretched his hamstrings. “This here may be the last thing you ever do. Might as well enjoy it.”

I sighed at the sentiment, but I couldn’t help grinning. The old guy sure as hell knew how to stay in the right mindset at least. Eir dying today wasn’t an option though, no matter how much fun we had, and I came over to my wife before I took her hands in mine.

“Eir, you’re using your wings for this one,” I instructed, and her sea green eyes flared at the thought. “The helgrind may be lethal, but they can’t fly. Get up in the air as much as you can manage it, and take your shots straight down from above. You’re our best weapon so long as you’ve got a clear shot.”

Eir furrowed her brow severely. "Aaron Briggs, I don't know how to fly. I only just learned how to break my fall yesterday."

"I've seen you fly," I said. "You took off like nothing at the battle in Illska."

"That was different," my wife argued and pulled her hands from mine. "I might as well have been possessed at the time. I didn't know what I was doing."

"But your wings know," Nora assured her, and she linked arms with Eir. "If you've flown before, you can fly again. This is what your wings were made to do, and they're a part of you now. Don't focus on how to do it, focus on how tethered you are to them. You can feel the strength in your wings as well as I can. So trust them to lift you off the ground."

"She knows what she's talking about," Vegvisir said. "With a wingspan like that, there's no reason you can't fly like any other winged creature. But we gotta get moving. Practice it along the way, girl, and don't lag behind. We only got one shot at this, and time's already running out."

I nodded in agreement. "Let's head to the coast. If we run down and get in position before the sun sets, we'll have enough time to rest before the crossing. Then everyone hauls ass."

I gave both of the drekkadyr a few reassuring pats before we left, but then the four of us headed off along the slope. We kept up a steady jog despite the icy air biting at our lungs, and it felt good to cross the land on foot again rather than on a mount's back. I let the exhilaration buzz in my veins to keep from worrying about what lay ahead.

Vegvisir stayed in pace with me without any trouble, and I was impressed to see how fit the old guy was. Granted, he'd been traveling across the world on foot for most of his life, and I could tell this kind of thing came naturally to him by now. Regardless of the snow and the cold, the wanderling kept a practiced posture and stride that showed he was used to running cross-country even at this age, and my concerns about looking after him eased up quite a lot after that.

My two women ran a ways behind us while they talked back and forth, but I couldn't make out most of what they said with so much wind howling around us. Then I saw a flicker of blue feathers in my peripherals, and I guessed they were discussing flying.

Nora almost crashed into a tree when she tried to land for the first time, but she had a grin on her face while she did it, and I smirked at the glint in her midnight blue eyes. The Selkie probably never dreamed she'd be taking to the skies, but she ended up adjusting faster than Eir did.

Swimming was probably pretty close to flying, in its own way.

My Farthegn wife muttered angrily to herself in her language throughout the entire process, and I pretended I didn't hear how many times she smacked into trees behind me. After several minutes of this, she was laughing instead, and when I snuck a glance over my shoulder, I caught sight of both women landing at once.

They kicked up the snow for ten feet in every direction while their blue and black feathers splayed around them, and they chuckled with manic grins on their faces. The sight of the women's sculpted bodies taking the hard landing was almost as enjoyable as the sheer badassery of their matching wings, but seeing how much fun they were having together warmed my blood a bit. Nora nudged Eir on the arm with a teasing smile while my wife threw her head back and laughed, and the two jogged along perfectly in step with each other even though they didn't seem to notice.

Then they caught me watching them, and their red and pink blushes just about did me in.

I promptly looked forward so I wouldn't end up being the one running into trees, and I held onto the image of them playing around with their wings in the snow for as long as I could.

Because we were descending the ridge now, and the shadowy den of the helgrind loomed across a barren stretch of ice ahead.



Chapter 24

The clouds had just started fading to a soft blue, and the ocean steadily sank closer to black like a spilled bottle of ink. White foam crested every thrashing wave that rolled in from the west, and the four of us waited crouched behind a sheath of ice at the base of the mountainside.

Ahead of us, the icy crossing was deserted all the way to the glacial island, and I kept my eyes locked on the shadowy maw at the center of the craggy peak.

Once the sky started darkening, I noticed a faint orange glow coming from the helgrind's cave, but nothing else about the scenery changed for what felt like an hour. I got up every now and then to stretch out my cold muscles, but I didn't move any more than necessary since the wolves could emerge at any moment.

Eir and Nora stayed crouched on either side of me with their blue and black wings folded at their backs. Vegvisir did squat and lunge repetitions non-stop, and he kept his gaze on the den like the rest of us while his eyes stayed sharp and shrewd. He squinted into the wind like this until he finally knelt on one knee beside Eir and sent me a nod.

"Here we go," the wanderling drawled.

"They're coming," Nora agreed.

I shifted my weight on my haunches as my heart did a jump-start behind my ribs, and I instinctively checked the direction of the howling wind once again.

We were downwind at the moment, but the gales kept shifting on us. One second the wind blew straight in from the west before it would suddenly whip around and blast over us from the north. The wolves would be traveling south of us once they made the icy crossing, so I silently willed the western gale to keep up for as long as possible. Otherwise, we'd end up directly upwind of the hunting party when they were closest to our hiding spot.

Then the orange glow in the den grew stronger, and the pointed ears of the helgrind appeared.

It was hard to make out their figures against the cooled black lava rock on the cave walls, but thin streams of molten rock trickled from their eyes, and the pack grew in size while they gathered on the threshold. Most of the lion-sized elders stood tall and still as they turned their angular muzzles upward to survey the frozen land. Their glowing eyes gleamed steadily in the fading light like hellish beacons, but the younger ones in the pack paced energetically and started yipping in anticipation.

They didn't have to wait long.

The heads of the pack didn't linger on the threshold for more than a minute, and as soon as they descended the craggy ridge, the rest of the helgrind followed in droves.

Dozens of the black wolves emerged from the den, and there didn't seem to be an end to their numbers. They poured down the peak in an endless stream of glowing eyes and ragged black fur, and steam billowed up around their paws the moment they hit the ice.

I drew a steadying breath while the helgrind came trotting straight at us. The way their lava eyes streamed down their cheeks was almost as terrifying as the sheer size of the pack. I'd seen plenty of wolves in my life, but never a pack so fucking huge as this one, and they crossed the expanse of ice like a tidal wave of lava while more and more black beasts spilled from the cave.

The billowing steam built into a cloud that blotted out the horde aside from their streaming eyes, but I kept my gaze on the seven wolves at the head of the pack. They were the ones we had to worry about now, because every helgrind would follow their trail. If they didn't turn south in the next minute, we'd be directly in their path.

Luckily, the pack leaders trotted along the curve of the icy shore, and they continued southward.

I let out the breath I'd been holding as I watched the steaming pack follow suit, but my nerves stayed tightly knotted while over forty wolves passed. Then the numbers inched closer to sixty, then

seventy, and when I saw the giant hunting party break into two groups, I shook my head in awe. Half the wolves trotted up the southern ridge and poured into the black forest, and the other half continued prowling along the coast like we'd seen them do yesterday.

Then Vegvisir nudged my arm with the head of his staff, and I turned around.

"You sure that's all of the hunters?" I asked.

"Should be," the wanderling answered. "Better get gone."

He didn't have to tell me twice.

All of us took only one last glimpse at the pack in the distance before we shot to our feet, and we sprinted out onto the steaming ice like our asses were on fire.

The arctic wind ripped over me as I ran straight into the gale, and when I felt the winds shifting and blowing down from the north, I ran even faster. Eir and Nora flanked me on either side, and they streamlined their feathers back so the wings wouldn't slow their pace. Vegvisir managed to stay only a few paces behind us all, and like this, the four of us bolted across the polar stretch as fast as we could.

My breaths grated painfully in my frigid lungs as I pumped my arms and legs like my life depended on it. But since it actually fucking did, I hardly noticed the way my skin burned from the arctic air. All I focused on was the dim cave ahead in the distance, and I hoped it wouldn't start glowing again before we reached it. There was no chance the den was completely deserted, and at this point, we were out in the open with no trees to climb, no beasts to ride, and not a chance of survival if we were caught.

Then we neared the glacial island, and I could hear everyone panting hard as we lunged up onto the shelves of blue ice. I only paused long enough to throw my hand down and help haul Vegvisir up faster, but then we were running again, and I followed the two winged women across the planes and crevices of glacial ice.

My legs were burning as much as my frozen eyes were by the time we started scaling the craggy slope of the peak. Then I found myself stumbling over the iced remains of old prey. Massive golthr carcasses that had been eaten almost all the way through laid strewn around the place, but the arctic temperatures prevented them from decaying. Now, half-gnawed rib bones twice my size jutted up from torn, purple organ meat, and I slipped over the icy sheen coating everything.

Finally, the incline became so steep that we had to scamper up it on all fours, and we struggled to keep up the pace while the sky dimmed more every second. The trail of lava the pack left behind was already hardening from the polar wind, but the extent of the flow was startling up close, and the warning of the sky elf flashed into my mind.

Once we were inside, the wind wouldn't help solidify the molten rock of the helgrind, and being trapped on the other side of a sea of lava with ravenous wolves could be the end of us.

Nora reached the den entrance first, and the Selkie dropped onto her hands and knees so she could catch Eir's arm and pull her up. Then the two women grabbed my hands and yanked me up in one firm tug, and since Vegvisir only weighed about a hundred and ten pounds, the three of us easily got the guy up in a flash.

The moment I was on my feet, I swiftly drew a runed scythe from my back. Eir readied her first arrow just as quickly, and I nodded to the others before I turned toward the den.

Only the faintest glow of orange came from the depths, and sheer black walls vaulted nearly seventy feet above our heads.

We tried to quiet our grating breaths as we stood just a few feet shy of the threshold, but Nora wasn't even winded, and she silently crept forward so she could listen better without the howling gale in her ears. A minute later, the Selkie motioned with her arm for us to follow, and I took a last look toward the coast behind me.

The pack was well beyond our range by now, but their steaming cloud was tinged with orange as it continued traveling south.

It was now or never.

“How many do you think are still here?” Vegvisir muttered to the Selkie.

Nora furrowed her brow and listened for a few seconds longer. “More than thirty. Possible forty, but their paws are echoing too much to be sure. They’re deep in there.”

“How far down are we heading?” I asked the old man.

“As far as we can make it,” he replied. “Won’t find any murals for half a mile, and by then... we’ll be deep in the maze.”

“Maze?” Eir whispered with a calculating look. “There are tunnels?”

“Tunnels, caverns, and rivers of lava,” Vegvisir confirmed. “Some of the paths will leave ye’ lost in there, so stick close.”

I nodded. “Lead the way.”

“Like hell,” the old man snorted, and he caught my hand in his knobby grip to drag me over. “You’re the one with the fuckin’ killing instincts, boy. You’re leading this shit with me.”

I smirked despite how anxious I was, and I tightened my grip on the scythe I held across my chest. Then the two of us entered the cave, and Eir and Nora took up the rear with their wings tensed and their eyes roving every corner.

Each step echoed off the vaulted ceiling as we descended a rocky path into the darkness. The dim orange glow ahead illuminated just enough for us to see which way we were heading, and a stale, cold draft blew up from the depths of the den. It wasn’t nearly so frigid as the air outside had been, and it brought the subtle stench of wolf urine with it.

It wasn’t long before the howling wind was hardly discernible in the distance, and the duskish light disappeared from behind us while we moved deeper. Every skittering rock under our boots made five times more noise than I wanted it to, but there wasn’t much we could do to prevent the sliding. We had to move fast, and the path dropped at a steep downward slope. It only got steeper over the next several

minutes, and we were sinking deeper under the surface than I ever expected to travel in this world. The helgrind den seemed endless too, and more and more tunnels started looming on either side of us.

Then our path took a few twists and turns, and I noticed the glowing orange was actually coming from several different tunnels rather than just one cavern. We passed by ten dim orange passages in a matter of minutes, and my heart raced in my chest as Vegvisir and I scanned our darkened surroundings with wide eyes and hard frowns.

The farther we traveled into the ground, the more glowing tunnels we passed until we were well beyond the point of return, and the temperature heated up as our path opened up to a huge cavern. Then I turned full circle to be sure we were the only ones in here, but it was hard to tell because three streams of lava flowed across the lofty cavern from one side to the other. They wound around massive black boulders that interrupted my line of sight in every direction, and heat rays warped the stifling air everywhere I looked.

Nora came forward with her eyes narrowed, and the Selkie stood perfectly still while she surveyed the area. Then she snatched my wrist without a word, and she pulled me along with her as she quickly approached the first river of lava.

All of us hurried to stay close, and as soon as Nora climbed up onto a boulder higher than my head, I didn't hesitate to follow. From the top, the Selkie leapt clear over the molten stream, and she landed in a practiced crouch with her wings unfurled while I eyed the rippling lava coursing between us.

Nora was already motioning for us to hurry, so I swiftly jumped the width of the river before Vegvisir stepped up and did the same. Eir crossed last, and the moment she landed near me, the Selkie grabbed me again. Then Nora led us all to the center of the wide slab of stone we were on, and she looked around at the craggy walls of the cavern.

"They're coming," Nora breathed. "They know we're inside. They'll be here in less than a minute."

“Shit,” I growled, and we all shifted so we could cluster with our backs together. “How many?”

“Not all of them,” the Selkie assured me. “Maybe a dozen.”

“Eir, get ready to fly,” I told my wife.

“No, not yet!” Nora countered. “We’ll bait them first. Keep them focused right here on this spot until they’ve closed in. Then they can’t spread out fast enough once we take flight.”

“Good idea,” I agreed. “Do whatever you have to, just be careful. Vegvisir, which way are we heading from here?”

“Tunnel with the broken ceiling just ahead,” the old man said, and I craned my neck to find the passage he had in mind.

“Ladies, keep the helgrind away from that path so the lava doesn’t flood it,” I ordered. “Once this shit kicks off, more wolves will hear and come running, so we’ve gotta finish this fast. The second we have an opening, book it to that tunnel. Clock’s ticking.”

“Yes, my chief,” Eir said with a nod.

“Vegvisir, what are the chances more wolves are farther along on our route?” I asked next.

The old man sent me a loaded look over his shoulder, and I snorted in understanding.

Chances were obviously high.

Before I could say any more, a low, gurgling snarl echoed from the tunnel to our right. Adrenaline surged through my veins as I listened to more wolves join in the chorus, and the snarls started coming from several tunnels that steadily grew brighter around us. Seconds after, the first set of dripping eyes emerged on my right.

The helgrind’s black snout wrinkled while it prowled forward with its molten fangs bared, and lava dripped from its growling jaws and pooled around its feet. The black beast kept his glowing eyes locked with mine like it had already decided on the first kill, but I didn’t drop my gaze.

I sized the wolf up to find it was just as huge as the leaders who led the pack out for the hunt, and now that I had a closer look, I could tell how shredded its lean hindquarters were.

I knew from one glance that this beast could jump farther and faster than regular wolves, and I was about to warn Eir about this when the next six wolves arrived. They brought their own trails of lava with them as they slowly started circling the wide cavern, and unlike the wolves I was used to, it didn't look like the old, sickly, or even the pups were left behind.

All these molten bastards were full grown and in their prime, and as soon as fifteen wolves had us surrounded, they started testing our formation.

Two wolves charged us from opposing sides, and Vegvisir's staff struck the ground before I could blink. Then a jagged lance of white ice shot straight into a helgrind's skull, and the beast yelped and crashed to the stone mid-leap. The other wolf took Eir's arrow right between the eyes, and she sent another directly behind it to make sure her quarry wouldn't rise again.

The snarling got louder after that, and the remaining wolves started pacing closer while they snapped their molten fangs at us. The heat in the cavern increased as the helgrind's lava slickened the stone floor, and I tried to keep my senses sharp, but I honestly couldn't tell if my chest was burning from my hides, my anxiety, or my mark.

Either way, Vegvisir took another helgrind out with an icy lance through its ribs, but when he shot a third beast in the neck, the last eleven wolves tore after us en masse.

They took twenty-foot leaps to close the gap between their pack and ours, and then they ran straight through the rivers and brought sprays of lava with them. I steadied my stance as I watched the glowing eyes close in from all sides, and right as their paws hit the rock slab we stood on, Eir vaulted toward the ceiling.

Then Nora used her wings to pounce fifteen feet into the air, and she landed hard on a helgrind's back as my wife sent two swift arrows into a charging wolf's skull. The last I saw of the Selkie, she

had her pronged fangs tearing through a snarling wolf's neck, but then I whipped around and swung high with my scythe.

The moment the runed blade sliced across a pouncing wolf's gut, it let out a squealing yelp, and I staggered aside as it crashed down and flailed on the stone where I'd stood. The enchanted ice was already spreading through its innards, and shards of white tore through its flesh from the inside. The perilous spikes continued to grow as the helgrind's screeching got louder, and I flipped my scythe and chopped down hard through its neck to put it out of its misery.

More ice bloomed from the severed neck as the squealing abruptly cut out, but I didn't have any time to pause before another wolf reached me. Then I swung my scythe out wide and cut through its shoulder, and as it careened sideways, Eir swooped in and loosed an arrow straight down through its c-spine.

That's when I noticed my wife's eyes were stained black again. She looked more like a demon than ever as she grinned and dove low over a river of lava. Her black feathers glowed orange, and they rippled through the heat as she deftly strung her bow mid-flight. Then she handily dropped another wolf like she'd been fighting this way all her life, and she spiraled back around with her next arrow already strung.

Right below Eir, Nora was pouncing from one mauled helgrind to the next, and her all-blue eyes flashed hungrily as fresh blood spilled down her chin. She didn't even flinch when a splatter of lava splattered against her thigh, either. The Selkie just growled louder and tore more viciously into her prey, and I chuckled at the savage double-attack the women were keeping up before I lunged up and over a boulder to help Vegvisir out.

The old man had a freshly lanced wolf in front of him, but another helgrind was snapping wildly at his ankles, and the lava singed his pants and hides as it splattered with every bite. Vegvisir was stumbling back and attempting to lance the bastard, but his staff couldn't strike at the proper angle to pull it off.

I jumped off the boulder and landed in a crashing roll, and the wanderling's attacker growled and spat lava all over at the sight of

me. A few drops scalded my cheek, but I gritted my teeth, braced my knees, and let the wolf charge. Then I cut my scythe through his snarling face, and its skull split in half as blood, lava, and ice sprayed across the stones.

“Duck, boy!” Vegvisir roared, and I flattened myself out on the stone just before an icy lance shot over my head.

I rolled in time to see the next helgrind behind me flail as the ice bloomed in his shoulder, and with one swipe of my scythe, the wolf’s head went flying and rolled into the nearest molten stream.

Vegvisir caught hold of my hide a second later, and he helped me up while the snarls and yelps of the helgrind echoed around the vaulted cavern.

“We gotta go, boy!” the old man hollered. “I can hear more comin’ already!”

“Shit,” I growled and whipped around.

My wife was diving and running down a fleeing wolf, and Nora ripped a helgrind’s jugular out of its neck. After the two finished with their quarry, only one more wolf remained, but I could hear the distant snarls as well as Vegvisir could.

I shoved him toward our next path without any protests from him.

“Nora, Eir!” I bellowed. “Let’s go! I’ll get the last wolf!”

Vegvisir was already leaping over the third river when Eir jetted after him, and Nora sent me a bloody smile as she sprinted past me. Then I took off right on her heels as a raging helgrind leapt clear over a boulder to reach us, and I waited until I saw Eir land and disappear into the next tunnel before I flipped around.

The wolf pursuing us was three feet away with his fangs oozing orange, and I lashed out with my scythe to cut a crystalline gouge out of his sternum.

I left the helgrind twitching on the stone as I leapt over the next river, and then I sprinted around four molten puddles, scaled a

craggy boulder, dove over the final stream, and barreled after the others.

Sweat poured down my face as my boots pounded against the shattered stones, and the distant howls behind me grew louder with every step. I was only twenty feet behind Eir and Nora when a gurgling snarl ripped through a tunnel on my left, but before I could raise my scythe, an arrow pierced the wolf's head instead. The close call made my knees go numb, but I kept on running, and Nora and Eir were waiting to flank me when I reached them.

"Thanks for that," I panted as the women bolted at my sides.

"My pleasure, my chief!" Eir gasped. "This is so invigorating! All of the lava! And the wolves! Did you see me flying?"

"I saw," I chuckled. "I'm so fucking proud of you."

"More than a dozen helgrind are behind us, Aaron!" Nora reported. "I sense at least fifteen more straight ahead!"

"Son of a bitch," I growled.

"The first murals are coming up on our right, boy!" the old man hollered from up ahead. "The tunnel with the low ceiling will take us through!"

"We've got company both ahead and behind us!" I yelled back, but Vegvisir had already ducked into a side passage.

"Go with him, my chief!" Eir panted, and she came to a pounding stop. "Nora and I will handle the wolves."

"Are you sure?" I asked through grating breaths. "That's a shit-ton of wolves for two women to take down."

"We'll be just fine," Nora said with a bloody smirk.

"Find out all you can as quickly as possible," Eir insisted. "We will buy you time from out here."

I nodded and lunged after Vegvisir, but then I abruptly backtracked so I could drag the Nordic beauty into my arms. I kissed her until her knees almost gave out, and my wife clawed at my neck for more while I felt her heart pounding against my chest. When I

roughly released her, she kept me locked in her hold for a moment longer.

“I love you, Aaron Briggs,” Eir panted as sweat streamed down her temples.

I grinned. “I love you, too.”

My wife’s black eyes bulged as her jaw dropped at the words. My whole body tingled as I watched her try to process the sound of such a declaration coming from my mouth, but then I just chuckled at her fierce blush and ran off to follow Vegvisir.

“Give ‘em hell!” I called over my shoulder.

I heard the two winged women chuckling mirthlessly, and just as I ducked into the lower tunnel, the next fleet of helgrind arrived.



Chapter 25

“Hurry, boy!” Vegvisir called out from the end of the tunnel.

I had to crouch down into a squat to make it through the pitch-black passage. My hands dragged along the walls to help me find my way, and I moved as fast as I could as the sounds of wolves and shrieking women echoed behind me. This only made my heart thud heavier, but Vegvisir’s wiry legs came into view before my imagination could play a scene of my women getting torn to shreds.

It looked like he’d summoned some enchanted flames, and I quickened my pace now that I could see my path more clearly. Then I finally reached the old man and came to a stunned stop on the other side.

Vegvisir had a large plume of enchanted flames billowing several inches above the head of his staff, and through this light, I could see the low-lying tunnel opened abruptly to a vaulted cavern that stretched hundreds of feet into the shadowy heights above.

The craggy walls glistened with condensation as water dripped down from huge, black stalactites, and it smelled old and dank in here, with something like rotting fish wafting on the cold air.

All around us, the stone floor was made up of broken slabs and boulders, and a handful of the slabs looked so smooth that I wondered if they’d been formed by other beings. The more I considered my surroundings, the more it seemed like someone had come in here excavating a huge palace hall and then just walked off the jobsite halfway through the job. Some of the stone shards sort of resembled crumbled columns, and others had distinctly carved details on the surface. I even thought I saw the clawed foot of a large bird somewhere in the rubble, but it was hard to make out much about the shadowy place from where I stood.

“Holy shit,” I breathed and craned my neck back. “This place is fucking huge.”

“We’re under the ocean now,” Vegvisir said. “Come on. There’s some murals over this way.”

I nodded and followed the old man as he quickly headed across the broken cavern floor, and I could almost feel the excitement radiating from his weathered form. The wanderling had an eager grin on his face while he looked around and clambered through the wreckage, and it was clear he lived for this kind of shit. His shrewd eyes flashed in the firelight every time he looked back to make sure I was keeping up, but I was mostly trying to study everything around me as quickly as possible.

Because I was positive there were carvings in the rubble now.

I definitely saw a chunk of rock the size of my head that looked like a feline’s eyeball. Twice, I even saw the distinct shape of a human’s foot out there, but other pieces didn’t resemble anything more than shattered boulders.

“Who used to occupy this place?” I asked as I slipped over the damp stone. “You said this is the remnants of the old world, but did similar species roam around back then?”

“Couldn’t say for sure,” Vegvisir said over his shoulder.

“Not even by studying who’s in the murals?”

“Well, that’s the thing about these paintings,” he snorted. “Take a look, boy.”

Vegvisir came to a stop once we reached the far-left wall of the cavern, and he held his staff aloft to reveal an ancient pictograph.

It was only ten feet across and about as tall. The water dripping down the walls had destroyed large portions of the image over the centuries, so thick streaks of damp stone interrupted the mural in several spots. But the parts that had stood the test of time were stranger than I expected.

I’d seen images of pictographs and petroglyphs online before, and in general, they resembled human beings or creatures I could recognize.

The beings on this mural were like nothing I'd ever seen in this world or the last.

They had three heads and long, squiggly necks, and they looked more like alien humanoids than regular humans. They stood upright on bare feet like a human, and their arms stayed against their sides in a natural position, but the three heads were perfectly round with pinched eyes and eerie smiles. About ten identical renditions of these beings were lined up on the mural, and there was nothing else I could make out about them or their surroundings. They were just walking behind each other, and they were heading in the same direction we'd traveled to get over here.

Then we continued onward, and a similar mural was painted twenty feet away. This one was less damaged but bore a slightly different style of being. They still had three heads and squiggly necks, but these guys were four-legged and hooved, and the next mural showed the three-headed creatures with long, furry bodies and enormous paws.

"You don't recognize any of these beasts from any of your travels?" I asked the old man.

"Never seen nothing with three of those heads," Vegvisir replied. "Never seen a beast change its body three times over like that, either."

"Then it's gotta be symbolic," I guessed as I retraced my steps to look over the murals again. "Most primitive paintings relied on symbolism since the artists didn't have a whole lot to work with."

"That's true," Vegvisir agreed, and I could tell he was smiling by the tone of his voice.

"Over by you, we've got animals with paws, and a beast that large generally hunts ungulates," I continued. "So it's strange the hooved beast is following the predator. Then you've got these upright, almost-humanoid guys at the back, and they're not armed with any hunting devices. They're most likely more intelligent than the others, but they're not leading or hunting the beasts. They're either following them or herding them."

“They’re all smiling, too,” Vegvisir pointed out. “Even the predators.”

“Exactly, but the eyes are closed,” I said. “It’s like they’re sleepwalking, or maybe just delirious.”

“Or dead,” the old man offered. “In my experience, the paintings with closed eyes usually depict the dead.”

I grimaced at the idea of these smiling, three-headed creatures actually being the walking dead, but I didn’t discount it. Not after seeing my own wife raise the souls of fallen warriors less than a month ago.

“Identical faces, identical heads, but each creature is from a distinctly different class of species,” I mused, and I looked over all three murals one more time. “It’s like they share these three minds, and they’re all walking in the same direction. Completely uniform. Maybe there’s no rank at all. No leader or follower.”

“There’s one thing ye’ missed, though,” Vegvisir told me.

I glanced away from the hooved beasts and over my shoulder. “What’s that?”

“Look in front of the ones with the paws,” the wanderling instructed.

The old man turned and continued onward, and I followed right behind him until he stopped a few feet beyond the mural of the larger, furrrier beasts.

Then my eyes widened.

Carved directly into the rock face was a three-foot-tall symbol with three interlocking triangles surrounded by a circle, and it matched the mark on my chest to a tee.

“What the fuck?” I mumbled.

“Yep,” Vegvisir drawled. “That’s why I thought it had to be a rune. It’s carved, not painted like the rest of what you see in here, and runes work best when they’re embedded in the medium you’re using. Most of the runes I’ve found around the world are painted though, and I suspect it’s for this reason. This way, it’s less likely the

rune will be activated. They're only being documented is all. But if you look all over this cavern, you'll find more and more of these strange creatures with three heads, and every line of them is led by this symbol. Three triangles carved straight into the stone."

"Three triangles, three heads," I muttered mostly to myself.

"I noticed that, too," the old man said as I traced my fingers along the carved stone.

Then I furrowed my brow. "Why is it heated?"

"What do you mean?"

"The carving," I explained. "Feel it. It's warmer than it should be in these temperatures."

Vegvisir's bushy eyebrows clumped together at once, and he promptly placed his palm on the marking. The old man stood like that with a focused frown on his face for a moment, and I waited for a spark of intrigue to come to his eyes, but he just shrugged.

"Feels the same as the rest of the rock," the wanderling said.

"Bullshit," I countered, and I placed my other hand on blank stone. "This carving is at least twenty degrees warmer than the rest of the wall. You really don't feel that?"

Now Vegvisir looked both intrigued and concerned, and he slowly shook his head. "Don't feel no difference. Is that symbol of yours heating up?"

"Not at all," I said, but then a loud snarl broke through the tunnel behind us, and I heard a wolf yowling in pain a second later. "We better hurry up. The women might need my help back there soon."

"This way," Vegvisir instructed.

The old man clambered back into the rubble, and the two of us slipped and climbed across the cavern until we reached the far-right wall. Right away, I noticed more three-headed creatures walking in the same direction the others had been, but Vegvisir hobbled past all six of the murals we came across. He didn't stop until we reached

one that was set apart from the rest, and this painting made my spine tingle at first sight.

Five naked and winged women hovered in the air with their raven-like wings fully extended, and the woman at the center of the group had black feathers. The rest were various, muted shades of dark colors that had faded over time, but all five of the women were painted in identical form aside from this. A pornographic amount of detail went into their beautiful bodies, but their faces were turned up toward the sky, and their palms were raised to the sides and tilted upward as well. Below their bare feet, a sea of dead bodies emitted a bluish, smoky mist, and the haze dissipated into wispish lines that dragged upward and straight to the women's forms.

There was no misinterpreting the scene.

It was exactly what I'd witnessed in Illska the day Eir summoned the souls of the dead. But instead of one winged woman, there were five just like her all doing the same thing.

Then Vegvisir pointed above their heads, and I realized the women's faces weren't turned to the sky. They were directed toward another carved symbol like the one I bore on my chest.

I shifted my weight uncomfortably while I studied the women's wings more closely. Now that there were so many of them side by side, I couldn't deny the imagery was familiar. They were practically photocopied from the pages of the Old Norse history books my brother had shown me, and I wished I'd paid more attention at the time. Brandon went through a whole summer of being full-on obsessed with Viking lore when we were in high school, and even though I did do some of my own research for his sake, I couldn't remember too much of what I read.

But if these women were truly Valkyries, I knew for damn sure who they were supposed to be following.

And it wasn't a random wildlife biologist. It was a god of war.

The notion made my pulse quicken as I looked all around at the walls surrounding the Valkyrie mural. Vegvisir hurried after me as my legs seemed to travel around with a mind of their own.

“Are there more paintings like this one?” I asked.

“This is the only one I’ve seen of women in here,” Vegvisir answered.

“But is this the only cavern like this in the den?” I pressed, and I squinted around at the shadowy chamber as I scanned the walls.

“Probably not,” the old man said. “There’s usually a hell of a lot more to be found in these kinds of places, but this cavern’s all I’ve been able to see down here. Last time, I only had about ten minutes to take a gander before I had to hightail it out of here, and if those women can’t hold off the wolves, we probably won’t have much more than that--”

“Back there,” I interrupted, and I stopped in my tracks and pointed to a hollowed-out corner. “That’s an opening.”

“Where?”

“Directly opposite of where we entered,” I explained. “Those rocks break away at the top, see? They cut inward like the passes we saw earlier, and every three-headed beast in this place is facing that direction. It’s gotta be a fucking tunnel.”

“Let’s go,” the wanderling ordered.

Both of us broke into a jog while we rounded the bigger heaps of rubble, and I kept half an ear on the snarling in the distance while my eyes stayed locked on the hollowed-out shadows ahead. If the wolves were still snarling, then my women were still holding their own, and I couldn’t turn back now that I’d seen this much.

There had to be more. And at this point, I felt like I’d lose my damn mind if I didn’t get some more answers in the next ten seconds.

Vegvisir and I reached the furthest wall after just a minute of scrambling through the broken stonework, and sure enough, the shadowy rocks broke away into another low-lying tunnel.

“Lead the way with your staff,” I said as I pulled Vegvisir ahead of me. “But can you leave some flames at this end? That way the women know which way we went if they try to find us.”

“Sure thing, boy,” the old man panted, and he struck his staff on the ground to leave a pillar of fire outside the tunnel.

Then he dove straight into the darkness with his staff still ignited like a torch, and the two of us hunkered down to run through the low passage. The air got less briny once a full minute ticked by, and the lack of muggy dampness made me start to worry this was a dead end. The tunnel went on and on with no end in sight, but it gave me plenty of time to study the walls we wound our way through, and I decided the ceiling of this pass didn’t used to be so low. There was a distinct fracture along the wall like it had collapsed down at some point, but lower down, a lot of the stone looked as smooth as the slabs we’d seen in the outer chamber.

Which meant whoever lived here in the past built this tunnel for a reason, so it had to lead somewhere.

It must have been another four minutes of hustling before we finally reached the end, and the wanderling let out a heavy sigh of relief as we stumbled out into another chamber. This one was half the size of the last, but it was dry as a bone and not nearly so trashed, and I gasped as I realized how many paintings there were down here. There must have been over a hundred murals of all different sizes, and they reached all the way to the shadowy ceiling high above us. The majority of what I could see from here didn’t look too damaged, either, and Vegvisir nudged me on the arm as he sent me a greedy grin.

“Take the left wall,” the wanderling said. “I’ll take the right.”

“Deal,” I agreed.

The old man struck his staff on the ground, and as soon as five pillars of flame illuminated the chamber, we promptly split up to study the paintings. I didn’t know which of us was more stoked at this point, but I heard Vegvisir chuckling to himself like a maniac, so I guessed it might be him. But I was panting more from excitement than running when I reached the first mural, and when I came to an eager stop, I immediately realized this room was gonna be vastly different from the last.

The pictograph in front of me was mostly undisturbed thanks to how dry the chamber was, and it was still mottled with age but more detailed and vibrant than the others we'd seen.

But the quality of the image wasn't what struck me most. It was the violent scene it depicted and the lack of three-headed creatures.

A dark, blood-red valley loomed on the rock face in front of me. Some species of giant were tearing their way up through the dirt, but they were entirely made of bones with no sinews or flesh in sight. The beings fighting against these bony titans were on their knees all over the valley like rows and rows of tombstones, and the few whose details weren't too worn out had blood pouring from their mouths and only hollow orbs where their eyes used to be.

In another image, massive serpents reared their heads as high as skyscrapers, and pink lightning shot through the clouds above them and ignited the peaks of black mountains. It looked like these serpents were splitting the land open with similar bolts that jetted from their eyes, but the image directly beyond this one showed all three serpents with their heads cut off and tumbling into the chasm they'd created. Above this mural, my mark was carved into the stone, and the prickling feeling in my fingers began to spread up through my arms.

The next two murals showed the monsters winning with no sign of my symbol anywhere. Then the third depicted a pile of rotted hogs as big as semi trucks. They were in a swampish land with a tribe of half-naked, wild-eyed humans setting fire to their bodies, and the whole scene reminded me of a crazed, sacrificial ceremony. It was depicted in violently bright colors that I thought must be symbolic, but after finding ten different women on the mural with the same bright red eyes and red tips on their hair, I wondered if this was another type of being I'd never heard of before. Either way, my symbol was carved directly above the sacrificial scene.

I didn't know whether to take this as a good or a bad thing.

"Better take a look at this, boy!" Vegvisir called from across the chamber.

I dragged my eyes off the dead hogs and followed the echo of the wanderling's voice. When I joined him on the other side of the cavern, the old man gestured to yet another mural.

It must have had ten different shades of green in it, but this one was so elaborate that the colors had blurred together too much over time and were almost impossible to make anything out anymore. I guessed from the streaks of brown that this was meant to be a forest, but at the center of the mottled scenery, there were a few figures looking down.

Four of these figures had Valkyrie wings, and they surrounded two others who were on the ground between them.

One of the lower figures was a human man.

At least, I figured he was. There was nothing strange about him like the wild-eyed sacrificial beings in the last painting, and he had broad shoulders and smudged black clothing that didn't stand out in any way. He looked like an ordinary guy with a decent fitness routine, and in his arms he held a frail and small body with long, light-colored hair. I inched closer to the painting, but I couldn't make out what the tiny creature was supposed to be.

"Those are fairy wings on her back," Vegvisir explained. "Looks like a fae child."

I nodded in understanding, but I didn't like to hear it. The body the man held was draped in an unnatural position, and one tiny arm of the young fairy was strewn limp on the ground while her head fell back. Then I looked back up at the bowed heads of the Valkyries, and I knew this fairy child was either dead or dying. She must have been found in the middle of fucking nowhere like that too, because there were no other fairies in the vast, forested image.

Just one man and his Valkyries.

"This is the only serene painting I've seen in here," I realized. "It's sad, of course, but the rest are crazy battle scenes or mass slaughters."

"Well... then we got this one here," Vegvisir continued and nudged me.

I turned to the next mural, and this one started with the same array of greens around the edges. But inside this border, it was an inferno. The trees were orange and red in the boughs, and the trunks snapped and sent white smoke up all over the place. I couldn't make out any details of the ground except for one figure with broad shoulders and black garb, and he stood alone at the center of the blaze. Up in the smoky sky, four Valkyries were flying side by side, and above their heads, I found my mark carved larger than before.

"Where is this supposed to be?" I asked. "Where do the fairies live?"

"Couldn't say where they lived when this painting was done, but they're all over the world nowadays," Vegvisir replied. "Got fairy villages not two hundred miles south of the Red Forest, but this here looks a lot like Sortilége."

"Sounds French," I muttered.

"What's French?" he asked.

"A language I've heard before," I explained. "It has similar pronunciations."

"Well, the word 'Sortilége' is from the Fae Tongue," the wanderling clarified. "You remember I said the sky elves live across this sea? On the other side of Aushnaes, there's a forest that's said to be the oldest and most potent land in the world. It covers more than half the continent, and even the dirt has magic in it. That's Sortilége, and it's where the fairies and the nymphs began. The predecessors of the first Nature Maiden have ruled over all of Sortilége longer than anyone can say. Sure is strange to see such a familiar place way down in the bowels of the old world, though."

"Could Sortilége be as old as everything down here?" I wondered.

"Hell, it wouldn't surprise me if it was," Vegvisir sighed. "I've seen stranger shit, and I've seen Sortilége, too. There's something about that land that ain't like nothing you'll find anywhere else in the world."

“Looks like this guy burned it up,” I pointed out. “Or wherever this place is supposed to be.”

I couldn't help being disappointed that my mark appeared above this scene, especially in contrast to the last one, but Vegvisir shrugged.

“We don't know what was in that forest that needed burnin', boy,” the wanderling reasoned. “Something or someone had to have killed that fae child. But if this is Sortilége, I'd wager the Nature Maiden melted this bastard into the springs for harming the forest. That's sacred land out there.”

“Have you seen any other images of this man?” I asked next. “I haven't seen any Valkyries in here, and none of the murals show regular-looking guys in them. He's the only one I've seen.”

“I'm getting the same results,” the wanderling said with a loaded look.

Then he gestured for me to keep looking around, and as I wandered farther into the cavern, every landscape I passed was bloody, fiery, storm-ridden, or all of the above. Each one was riddled with monsters I never could have dreamed up in a hundred years, but there were other beings, too. I saw whole armies of dwarves charging through flames on beasts as large as heillhausts, and in one mural they speared horned bears, but another showed the dwarves up against three different breeds of dragon.

No matter who was involved in the scenes, most of the battles ended in massacres. But every now and then, the same monsters were slain in the next mural, and my mark was always carved above the bloody aftermath.

Then I started noticing smaller symbols in the bottom corners of the paintings, and I recognized their designs.

Most used straight lines arranged in various intercrossing designs, and I knew they had to be runes. They weren't carved into the stone, so a lot of them were too worn away to make out entirely, and I couldn't imagine how much traveling Vegvisir had to have done to gather so many runes. Figuring out what they were all used for

was even more impressive, given how little indication there was in the murals, but then I came to a stranger painting that derailed all my attention.

This one was only made up of grays and blacks with a few hints of blood-red splattered around, and it looked like an abstract with no real landscape defined. A man's body laid crumpled on its side on the ground, and five Valkyries hovered a few feet above him in all-black garb. At first, I thought it was another scene of them raising souls from the dead, but there wasn't any blue smoke around. Just the five Valkyries with hooked talons extended from their fingertips, and their eyes were blotted out in all black. All the Valkyries wore screeching expressions too, and they looked as furious as Eir did the first time the blue-eyed twin tried to strangle me.

Then I noticed one of the Valkyries had lightning sparking from her talons, and the woman beside her held a dark blue palm straight up toward the clouds. That's when I realized the group were in the middle of a massive, churning storm, and it looked like the Valkyries were the ones causing it.

A chill ran down my spine as I looked into the screaming faces of the winged women. As absolutely terrifying as they appeared, I couldn't help but feel bad for them. There was no doubt in my mind that the body on the ground was someone they cared about as much as Eir cared for me, and I'd only ever seen my wife this mad when my life was in danger.

Still, I couldn't help smirking while I imagined the wrath these five Valkyries were about to bring down on the world. Eir was scary enough on her own, and she and Nora combined had already proven to be an impressively vicious force. But five women just like them working together? With fucking storm magic spewing from their fingers?

No one stood a chance against a wrath like that.

"Aaron Briggs!" Eir panted suddenly, and I whipped around to see my two winged lovers running into the cavern.

They were wild-haired, singed, bloody, and covered in sweat, but it was a hell of a sight, and relief flooded my limbs as both of them ran up and grabbed my arms.

“What happened with the wolves?” I asked.

“The wolves are dead,” Eir said through grating breaths.

My eyebrows shot up. “All of them?”

“Yes, Aaron,” Nora confirmed. “But there is a slight problem.”

“We were fighting the wolves, and it was going wonderfully,” Eir explained. “Then a few of them got quite mad about the teasing--”

“What teasing?” I cut in.

“Eir was flying up and down so they’d jump around to try and catch her,” Nora chuckled, and my wife flashed a toothy grin.

“This has been fun,” the Nordic beauty assured me.

“Until the wolves got very mad,” Nora added. “Then four of them jumped up onto a ledge to get to her, broke some of the stones loose--”

“Jesus Christ,” I gasped as I looked the women over for any breaks or bruising.

“We are perfectly fine,” my sweaty wife said. “It’s only that when the ledge broke, it opened some sort of melted chasm, and now the lava is--”

Eir abruptly stopped talking as the distinct sound of sizzling built up in the distance, and my eyes almost bulged out of my head.

“Don’t tell me that’s lava I’m hearing,” I croaked as I stared at the dark tunnel my women just came from.

“Yes, that’s the slight problem,” Nora concluded. “The lava’s flooding the cave.”

“Shit!” My limbs went numb. “We gotta get the fuck out of here before we’re completely out of time.”

“Okay, so... do not be upset, my chief,” Eir said, “but we are in fact trapped already.”



Chapter 26

“We’re what?” I blurted out, and my wife calmly held up a hand to stop me there.

“However,” Eir continued. “Nora and I think we can fly you out so long as the tunnel isn’t too flooded yet. How hard could it be, right? Where is the old man?”

I rifled my sweaty hair as my heart rate hit the roof, but the two winged women were surprisingly calm, so I tried to mirror my stoic Farthegn wife’s energy right now. I was her chieftain after all, but when I turned full circle, I didn’t see Vegvisir anywhere. The three of us were alone in the vast and ancient cavern, and the sizzling sound was growing louder.

Then I noticed a small pillar of enchanted flames near the wall on the opposite end of the cave, and I knew Vegvisir must have discovered yet another tunnel. How long that passage was could determine whether or not we boiled alive in here though, and I just hoped it wouldn’t take me another five minutes of crouched running to track him down.

We definitely did not have ten minutes to spare.

“Wait here,” I ordered the women, and I jumped up and over a shattered boulder.

Then I bolted through the dry and dusty cavern until I reached the next tunnel, and I dove into the squat passageway as quickly as possible. The tunnel was long enough that I couldn’t see Vegvisir’s flaming staff up ahead, and my shoulders slammed back and forth between the winding walls while I blindly pressed onward. I forced myself not to count the seconds as they passed, but the warning of the sky elf blared in my mind with every pounding step.

The lava was flooding, and Eleni said I had to choose my next path carefully from here, or else I’d perish.

Luckily, this tunnel was only half as long as the last, and as soon as I saw a glow of firelight ahead, I doubled my speed, took a few rocky jabs to the shoulder, and burst into the next chamber. I didn't bother looking around at a damn thing once I saw the wanderling standing at the far end of the cavern. I just pelted straight toward him, and when I came to a panicked stop beside him, the old man had a listless look on his face.

"Vegvisir," I panted and shook his limp arm, but he didn't even blink. "The lava's flooding. It's just like the sky elf warned me. We've gotta get the hell..."

I trailed off as my eyes flicked from the dazed old man to what he was looking at. All words vanished from my mind a second later, and my jaw went slack. Then I craned my neck all the way back, and I found myself staring up at a hundred-foot-tall statue.

It was made of some kind of metal instead of stone, and it was so old that the vast surface was warped and corroded away in several areas. But the figure was undoubtedly a man. Or a man-beast hybrid. He had fucking shredded calves and arms that made the Hulk look like a teddy bear, and he carried a spear in one hand and a raven-crested shield in the other. From the shoulders up, he was a wolf instead of a human, and judging by the rippling lines on the cheeks, I guessed lava was dripping from his eyes.

Just like the helgrind we fought to get here.

More importantly, the figure bore a giant symbol on his brawny chest, and it was made up of three interlocking triangles with a circle enclosing them.

Just like me.

"What the actual fuck?" I mumbled to no one in particular.

Behind this statue the entire lofted wall of the cavern was covered in one massive mural, and it looked like we were standing in the middle of an epic shrine. Half the room around us was painted over with a variety of creatures, and they bowed so low on their knees that their faces touched the ground. The other half was made up of partially mutilated, monstrous beings who were wailing their

way toward death, and in the middle of it all, right behind the statue, was a swarm of Valkyries.

There were so many, I couldn't tell one pair of dark wings from the next. The flock stretched from floor to ceiling, and I suddenly felt like my mind might splinter apart. The amount of information I'd been trying to process in the last fifteen minutes was challenging enough, but this statue with my mark and the horde of Valkyries just about did me in. Too many questions spiraled through my brain, and none of them computed. But somewhere far beyond all of this, I heard my brother raving about the wars of the Norse gods.

He sounded like his teenage self, and his voice even cracked a couple times in his excitement, but when the word "Ragnarok" echoed through my skull, everything else faded into white noise.

I numbly groped around to grab Vegvisir's arm, and I tugged him away from the statue while I stared at the grisly monsters being slaughtered on the right side of the room.

"Come on, we... we gotta get the hell out of here," I muttered. "Let's go, we came, we saw, and we're gonna get fucking boiled alive if we stick around."

"Yeah..." the old man drawled in a blank state, and he kept his listless eyes on the massive statue. "Yeah, let's go, boy."

Then the two of us stumbled backward a few more paces. Eventually, we managed to drag our eyes off the ancient shrine, and we tripped into the entrance tunnel with dumbfounded stares plastered to our faces. I barely noticed how many rocks I slammed into after that. I just ran through the passage in a bewildered state, and I was still just as shell-shocked when we reached the next cavern.

We found my two winged women studying the painting of the storm-wielding Valkyries on the wall, and Eir whipped around with wide eyes when Vegvisir and I came sprinting toward them.

"Aaron Briggs, look at this woman in the painting!" Eir gasped. "Did you see her?"

"She has the same black wings as Eir," Nora pointed out.

“But do you see her fingertips?” my wife asked. “Why does she have the lightning on them? Do you think I will get to have the lightning?”

“I don’t know,” I panted and caught her arm. “We can talk about this later. Let’s go!”

Eir and Nora stumbled after me while Vegvisir took the lead, and the four of us ducked into the next tunnel. We scrambled as fast as we could toward the sizzling in the damp cavern, and every second, I expected a flood of lava to block our path. The thought of getting caught this deep in the passage by a river of molten rock made it a little hard to keep sprinting onward, but I didn’t slow down for anything. I kept my eyes just ahead of the fire on Vegvisir’s staff, and when the glowing end of the tunnel came into view, I was relieved to see no lava had reached this area yet.

Once we stumbled into the damper cavern though, I let out a stream of curses.

A swell of lava oozed around the heaps of rubble on the cave floor. The entrance tunnel was already flooding, and only a foot of space was left below the low-lying ceiling.

“We can’t fly anyone through a space that small,” Nora gasped.

“We have to think of something,” I said. “This flood is gonna reach us any minute, and then the only way to go will be deeper into the caves.”

“Look for another tunnel!” Eir ordered.

“No need,” Vegvisir cut in, and we all stared at the old man. “Stay right where you are and let me focus for a moment. There’s still time, I just gotta open that tunnel up.”

I nodded as I eyed his runed staff. “Can you manage to move that much stone without causing a cave-in?”

“I think so,” the wanderling said, but I noticed his brow was pinched with unease. “I can reform the rubble to make a bridge over the top of it all too, but it’s gonna cost me a hell of a lot of energy.”

“We’ll help you make it out of here,” I assured the man. “I promise.”

Vegvisir didn’t look my way or acknowledge the statement. He just narrowed his shrewd eyes on the flooding tunnel across the cavern, and he adjusted his grip on the staff a few times to ready himself. Then the old man quickly glanced over his shoulder and struck his staff on the ground.

I furrowed my brow as the passage behind us ended up sealing off entirely, but I quickly realized what Vegvisir was thinking. After seeing all those unmarred paintings and the giant, ancient shrine, I didn’t want all this lava destroying everything, either. Now, no matter what happened in here, all that crazy shit we’d just witnessed would remain untouched.

Vegvisir struck his staff once more, and this time the flooding tunnel ahead of us started to reform. The creaking of shifting rocks thundered throughout the cavern, and I grabbed both women and eyed the ceiling above us. Then I kept my gaze on the shuddering stalactites as several of them shimmied loose and plummeted down like huge, jagged spears. Sprays of lava shot up as the rocks pierced the growing tide, and more sea water began seeping in through the ceiling, too.

I held my breath, but Vegvisir continued altering the stonework without pause. He didn’t stop until a rough shelf of stone jutted out above the rising flood of the entrance, and above this, a low but passable opening was hollowed out. Then Vegvisir let the rock settle as he braced his weight on his staff, and he gave a tired nod.

“Now, you ladies conserve your strength,” he instructed. “No saying what’s waiting for us on the other side of this shit, and you’ve done a lot of fighting today. I’ll shift the rubble around and get us over there, and everyone just keep up.”

“I’m right behind you,” I assured the old man as he swayed a little on his feet.

We all headed to the highest pile of rubble we had clear access to, and as soon as the four of us were balancing on the rocks, Vegvisir summoned the next lumps of stone. The shattered rocks

rose up from the flood and formed makeshift stepping stones for us to cross, and I could tell the wanderling was trying to use as little energy as possible with the rock rune he wielded. Once the divide between two lumps of rock was slim enough to jump safely across, Vegvisir stopped altering things and leapt over, and I made sure to stay right on his tail in case he couldn't keep his balance.

The old guy was stumbling a bit when we finally reached the shelf on the opposite end of the huge cavern, but he jogged through the new tunnel without looking back. I just hoped he'd be able to hold out a little longer.

All of us were breathing harder and harder as the heat of the lava stifled the air around us. I could hardly see straight by the time we neared the other end of the passageway, and sweat poured down my face and into my burning eyes. Vegvisir started coughing loudly ahead of me, but he still managed to pull the stonework up so we had somewhere to land. Then we exited the tunnel in the same spot where I'd left Eir and Nora earlier, but I didn't even recognize the place anymore.

A lavafall spewed from the broken stonework across the den, and it flowed at such a fast rate that every diverging path was flooded. There was nowhere to head from here that wouldn't melt our skin right off, and a deep, rumbling sound came from the cave walls that I knew didn't bode too well. The rocks around us were trembling a bit too, and I had a feeling this whole place was about to blow.

But the burning heat around us was getting unbearable as the molten tide rose by another inch. I felt like my hides were melding with my drenched skin, and I squinted through the blaring, orange glow to find nothing but lava in every direction.

"There!" Eir coughed, and she pointed across the flood. "That is the way we came from, and I can see some stone beyond the lava. We can land safely there. It's not too far of a flight."

"Get Vegvisir over there first," I croaked and caught the swaying man in a firm grip.

Eir and Nora nodded and flanked the wanderling on both sides. He clutched his staff to his chest as they looped their arms under his armpits, and then the two women tried to take flight. They wobbled a little from the effort to lift the slight old man off the ground, and they coughed and sputtered from the scorching air, but their feathers didn't look like they were singeing at least. With some effort, they managed to lift Vegvisir from the ground, and then they swooped out over the molten flood,

The old man kicked wildly to try and spare his legs from the heat, and my gut clenched as I watched the group bob and sway in the air. Fortunately, the women didn't lose their hold on Vegvisir, and they finally landed on the other side without crashing into the flood of lava.

Then Nora and Eir immediately flew back across the swell. They hovered above me so they could get a firm hold under my arms, but as soon as they tried to lift me, I knew this wasn't going to work. I was over two hundred pounds, and the winged women were both half my size. Not to mention, they'd just learned how to use their wings, taken a marathon sprint across an arctic shore, slayed dozens of helgrind, and were sweating away all the water they had left in their bodies.

Still, Eir and Nora grunted and strained while I only stumbled from side to side, and even if they had managed to lift me, I could tell they wouldn't be able to hold my weight for long.

Definitely not long enough to cross the rising, molten tide.

Nora growled furiously under her breath as Eir grunted with all her might, and the women almost toppled me into the lava in their determination. I countered my weight just in time to avoid melting my boots, and my wife finally gave up as she touched down beside me.

"Aaron Briggs, why do your muscles weigh so much?" Eir screeched and stomped her foot. "You cannot possibly be this heavy!"

"Woman, I'm practically a foot taller than you!" I scoffed. "What the hell did you expect?"

“Weigh less!” Eir shrieked.

I honestly would’ve obeyed her if I could.

My Farthegn wife looked ready to light on fire with fury. Her eyes blacked out while she roared at the lava closing in around us, and Nora’s eyes were stained a midnight blue, too. The Selkie bared her pronged fangs through the heat like a cornered panther, and both women were drenched with sweat and flushed bright red from the rising temperature.

But they only shifted even tighter against me, and seeing how determined they were to stick by my side made my stomach hollow out.

All at once, I was acutely aware of how much I meant to these incredible, deadly, and unstoppable women, and never had the reality of Eir’s vow to me hit so hard. I was beyond pissed that she’d actually die for me like this, but that Nora was somehow just as stubborn only frustrated me more. And yet, I knew from the rage in their inky eyes that there was nothing I could say or do to make them leave.

I briefly lost the ability to focus.

My chest ignited as I racked my brain for any way to force Eir and Nora out of this molten hellhole, but there were just no options. If I didn’t go with them, they’d fucking die here right along with me, and a crippling fury burned in my veins at the thought.

“Get a good footing!” Vegvisir suddenly yelled, and I squinted through the rippling air to see him holding his staff high in his shaky hands. “And hold on tight! Shit’s gonna start moving, and the lava’s gonna rise!”

I waved my arm in understanding and then dragged my winged women higher up on the small platform we stood on. They braced their weight against me while I flattened my back against the wall, and I kept my arms clutched around Eir and Nora’s hips as the ground began to creak.

The shuddering stone sloshed the lava around, and the ominous rumbling in the walls increased. But within a few seconds, a

sheath of stone rose up from under the tide. It was only about five inches wide, but it continued stretching across the river, and I watched with burning eyes as a slim bridge formed between us and Vegvisir.

The second it reached our side, I nudged Eir forward, and I locked my hand in hers before I shifted Nora behind me. Then I clamped my hold on the Selkie too, and the three of us started making our way across the meager bridge.

The molten river continued to rise around us as the lavafall spewed like a jet into the den, but I knew the wanderling wouldn't be able to alter the stone any more with us still on it. One wrong move, and we'd all tip straight into the lava, so all we could do was hope we crossed fast enough without losing our balance.

The whole way, my skin blistered from the heat. I felt like my blood was genuinely starting to boil in this hellish oven, and Nora's hand felt even hotter than mine in my hold. Knowing the Selkie was probably worse off than me made it easier to focus on anything but the torturous temperature right now, but my mind and eyes were growing foggy. The heat was officially kicking my ass in here, but we were ten feet from Vegvisir now, and the old man kept nodding groggily to himself like he was willing us to make it.

Then the rumbling in the walls became twice as loud, the bridge began to shudder, and Eir gasped as she released my hand and sprinted the last stretch of the crossing. I was right behind her when the stones started cracking under us, but then I felt Nora slip behind me.

I flipped around just in time to catch the Selkie.

She was inches away from hitting the lava, but she clung to me as she beat her blue wings in panic, and I pitched sideways in my effort to help her. Eir shrieked from the sidelines, but at the same exact moment, Vegvisir struck his staff. Then the stones under me bucked us clear into the air, and I grappled with my hold on Nora to make sure I didn't lose her during the fall.

A few seconds later, the two of us crashed down into the rocky tunnel.

The first thing I heard was Eir whimpering with relief, and Vegvisir let out a heavy sigh just before my wife dropped onto her knees beside me.

“My chief!” Eir gasped and patted me all over in a panic. “Can you move? Are you burned? Are you broken?”

“I’m fine,” I wheezed, but I was pretty sure I’d just cracked a rib.

Pain ripped through my spine and gut as Nora swiftly rolled off me, but this was a lot better than boiling alive. I was mostly just relieved I’d managed to soften the Selkie’s landing, even if mine was brutal as fuck.

“Aaron, you’re hurt,” Nora whimpered as her inked-out blue eyes roved all over me. She slid her hands under my back to check for blood, and Eir began frantically doing the same with my head, but I grabbed both the women’s wrists to get them refocused again.

“I’ll be fine, but we gotta move before those walls give out,” I hollered above the rumbling. “The hunting party could get back any second too, so run for the entrance and don’t look back. Keep an eye on the shore for us, and I’ll help Vegvisir.”

“Get up first,” Eir demanded. “I won’t leave you lying down like this.”

I nodded in agreement, gritted my teeth, and strained to stand up. Despite the lightning bolts of pain shooting through my back, I managed to get on my feet again, and I forced a sturdy nod for the women’s sake. Then I motioned for them to get going, and I made sure I kept myself strictly upright until they stopped looking me over. The second Eir and Nora finally took off running, I let myself grimace again and hobbled over to Vegvisir.

The wanderling was leaning against the wall with his eyes drooped and his knees wobbling. I grabbed his scrawny arm to hitch it over my shoulder.

“Let’s move, old man!” I ordered.

Vegvisir nodded shakily, and I was impressed he could keep stumbling on despite how worn through he looked. The two of us tripped and scrambled up the rocky incline to reach the surface again, but the journey was painfully slow on account of my aching back and his tired legs. The heat wasn't letting up by even a fraction of a degree, either, and as a booming crack burst out behind us, we both lurched forward and crashed to the ground.

Then the rushing sound of the lavafall increased as the river sloshed up behind us.

"Motherfucking shit," I groaned.

I struggled to get back on my feet, but Vegvisir's head was bleeding from his fall now. He could hardly get his legs moving, so I dragged him along with me as best I could while I watched the lava gaining on us. I knew we had nearly a quarter of a mile left of climbing to do, and there was no way we'd outstrip the flood at this pace.

Vegvisir must have realized this too, because he started trying to pry my grip off his arm.

I stubbornly kept my hold on the old man.

"Get gone, boy!" Vegvisir yelled, and his voice grated with exhaustion. "Get those women back across the ice! Time's running out!"

"It is," I growled. "So get the fuck up and run!"

"I got nothin' left," the old man wheezed.

I locked my jaw as his words struck a chord in me. And all at once, I remembered a key part of the sky elf's fortune that I'd somehow forgotten up until now.

I'd been so focused on the "blue" and the "orange" for most of our journey, but now that Vegvisir was wearing out and insisting I move on, I realized the stars had foretold this exact moment. Eleni told me I'd have to let the old man do what he had to do out here, and that it favored my destiny to trust his path. But I couldn't bring myself to take her advice this time.

Vegvisir saved all our lives not five minutes ago, and if my fate was supposedly to leave him behind in a molten flood just to save my own life, then the stars could kiss my Alaskan ass.

I'd gladly take any other path than this one.

I hitched both my arms under Vegvisir's and wrenched him up the rocky incline as I ignored every stabbing pain in my back. The whole time, the wanderling dragged limply in my hold and cursed me for sticking around this long, but as soon as I gained another sixty feet between us and the swell, I let go of him and dropped to the ground.

"Give me your staff!" I bellowed in his ear. "I'm caving this shit in!"

Vegvisir didn't hesitate to thrust the staff into my hand.

I used it to haul my ass back onto my feet, and I didn't care which rune I summoned of the multitude that were etched into the staff. I didn't even bother asking the wanderling for instructions. I just let my mark blaze in my core, and I imagined burying the tunnel below us in a heap of rocks so heavy that not a drop of lava could seep out.

Then I struck the staff against the ground.

The instant shaking in the tunnel sent me sliding back down the incline, and I stumbled to keep my footing before I could tumble into the flood. Then I clambered back up to Vegvisir as the walls began to split open, but something felt off this time. It was like I had the weight of the rune magic pulsing in my limbs, and the effect was so strong that it made my body three times heavier. My heart started thudding heavy and slow as my vision blurred, and the chaotic crashing and cracking around me didn't make it any easier to function.

"Get up, boy," Vegvisir slurred as his eyes finally fell shut. "Keep moving."

I nodded groggily and shoved his staff into the scythe holder on my back. I was seeing double by the time I got a firm hold under his arms, but then I dragged him onward.

Rocks cascaded down from the ceiling, but the biggest break was far below us, at least. Massive chunks of stone cracked loose from the tunnel right above the molten tideline, and it sounded like the cave-in was spreading deeper and deeper into the den. The distant sizzling of lava and rumbling of stones echoed so loud that I couldn't tell which way was up for a second, but I didn't stop dragging the unconscious wanderling up toward the surface.

Every time I slipped and crashed down, I crawled back up and kept climbing, and the farther we got from the breakage, the easier it became to keep my footing.

But the heavy pulsing in my limbs got worse and worse. I felt like my body was sinking into a weighted pit, and I knew this must be the rune feeding off my energy. Vegvisir had warned me about this very thing. It was why he said lighting a whole mountain on fire would be the death of him. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to disconnect from the goddamn rune that was draining me, and the old man was passed out cold in my arms.

I just hoped working with intention was the answer for this too, and I tried not focusing on the cave-in rattling the world around me. Instead, I thought about Eir and Nora's flawless breasts. I imagined burying my face in their pillowy cleavage and blocking the rest of this crazy world out completely, and to my surprise, this actually fucking worked.

The more I pictured their pink and red nipples, the less heavy my limbs felt, and while I was still more exhausted than I'd been in a long-ass time, I didn't feel like I was sinking into a pit anymore. I was even able to pick up the pace again, but I decided I'd definitely think twice before playing with magical staves from now on. Sure, it did the trick, but the effort of causing the cave-in hit me like a heavy dose of ketamine without the perks of feeling no pain. And I didn't doubt I'd be paying the price for a while yet.

At least I wasn't completely done for though, and I fed off my adrenaline to keep the pain in my back from slowing me down even more.

Then I heard Eir and Nora hollering to me not too far away, and the cold rush of arctic air blew down from the mouth of the den. I let the women help with the old man once they ran down to meet me, and the three of us worked on getting Vegvisir up to the surface faster.

“My chief, what happened?” Eir demanded. “You took forever, and I have been worried sick, but Nora refused to let me go in after you because the rocks were shaking, and I--”

“Had a bit of a cave-in,” I slurred and sent Nora a grateful grin. “Thank you for looking after Eir. She’s about as stubborn as they come.”

“I noticed.” The Selkie smiled back at me as she kept pulling Vegvisir along, but then her expression shifted to a serious one. “Aaron, the helgrind pack is already returning. We saw them less than three miles south. We must push onward. We’re almost out of time.”

I nodded as we finally reached the ridge at the mouth of the cave. A fierce, polar wind blasted over me, and it stung against my burning skin as I looked out across the darkened landscape. After all the heat and lava we’d been locked in, the sight of such a blue and frozen expanse threw me off for a moment, but there wasn’t any time to adjust. A crescent moon had already risen well above the horizon, and far in the distance to the south, a glowing cloud of steam was building on the coast.

The entire pack of eighty wolves converged on the shore, and just like the first night I’d seen them, their gaping jaws splattered lava all over the ice. They were amped up with predatory energy and howling their way back to the north, and it looked like they were running twice as fast to keep ahead of the ice melt they caused.

“Fly Vegvisir out of here,” I ordered the women. “Stay high and get him over that ridge to the drekkadyr before the wolves can pick up on the scent.”

“What?” Eir scoffed.

“Go,” I commanded, and I pulled Vegvisir’s staff from my back so nothing would happen to it. “Take this with you, and I’ll meet you in the mountains.”

Nora nodded, hitched the staff under her arm, and readied herself near Vegvisir’s unconscious body. My wife, on the other hand, didn’t move a damn inch as she stubbornly crossed her arms.

“Aaron Briggs, I am not leaving you again,” Eir refused.

“Eir, if you stay here, the old man’s stuck here too, and there’s nothing we can do against that many wolves,” I firmly countered. “Our scent will be stronger if we stay in a group on the ground, and any chance we have of outrunning these bastards will be nil. The two of you can at least carry the wanderling though, so do it. Get to the mountains, tend to Vegvisir, and stay there until Nora can confirm the wolves are isolated on this island. Then you’re allowed to come check on me. I’ll run north for a ways, and then east to try and stay under the pack’s radar, but we’re wasting time arguing about this. If that ice melts before I cross, I’m fucked.”

“Precisely,” Eir growled, and her blacked-out eyes narrowed into perilous slits. “I gave my word to all of Dalir, and I gave my word to you. I am not the sort of woman who would abandon her husband in such a feat. I will run beside you no matter the--”

Nora sighed so loudly that Eir glanced her way, and both of us turned just in time to see the Selkie boot Vegvisir right off the edge of the ridge.

“Holy shit!” I yelled as his limp body spiraled toward the ice below.

Then Nora clamped Eir’s hand in hers and jumped after Vegvisir. As soon as she unfurled her deep blue wings, she dropped her hold on my wife so the blonde warrior had no choice. All Eir could do now was fly and dive to save the old man from a bone-crushing death, and she screamed blistering curses the whole way down.

Half a moment later, they both managed to catch Vegvisir’s arms, and my heart almost dropped through my asshole when the

women slowed their fall just a few feet above the glacier. I could still hear Eir cussing the Selkie out as the two turned their wings toward the mountains, and I just tried to get my pulse beating at a regular pace again.

Hanging out with a sea-born woman was definitely going to take some getting used to. But to Nora's credit, her fly or die tactic worked like a charm.

Eir didn't stubbornly abandon their ward to return to my side, and even though they struggled to stay high in the sky with the howling wind, it looked like they'd all reach the mountains a hell of a lot faster than I would.

Which was what mattered most, in my opinion.

I nodded with relief and shifted my gaze to gauge the pack's progress. Then I saw that they'd already traveled a whole mile closer, and I instantly dropped down to descend the steep, lava rock ridge.

"Shit, shit, shit," I muttered as I mostly slid my way down.

I ignored the constant scraping of my palms and knees, and I managed to make it to the base of the craggy rocks in record time. Then I zigzagged through the field of frozen carcasses and out onto the glacial plains, and when I reached the edge of the frozen island, I leapt down to the icy shore.

Every bone in my back shuddered from the impact of my landing, but I gritted my teeth and forced my legs to get moving. I bolted straight into the flat, desolate icescape north of the island, and I kept my eyes on the thrashing waves in the distance while the wind pushed against all my effort. If I got that far, I might be out of range of the ice melt once the pack arrived. But I'd also be directly upwind of the helgrind.

If they caught my scent, it would hardly matter whether I cheated the ice melt or not, but I didn't let myself dwell on the odds. I just ran to the north at full bore until I reached the edge of the crossing. Then I turned due east and got a glimpse of the incoming helgrind.

They were already half a mile from the crossing, but none of the pack were veering off to head into the mountains. This meant Eir, Nora, and Vegvisir must have made it out of range in time, and I held onto this win as I pumped my legs faster despite my aching back.

Then I heard a single, piercing howl.

I whipped my head to the right just as the pack hit the icy crossing, and sure as shit, the lead wolves turned my way.

“Fuck,” I wheezed through my stabbing lungs. “Fucking shit, god damnit, and tits! Fuck!”

I was frozen to the bone now that all the sweat from the caves was icing up on my body, and there was just no way I could outrun a pack this size. Even if I could, they were leaving a melted trail behind them, and if they followed me and got stuck in the mountains rather than the island, we’d all end up killed and eaten before sunrise.

I felt my knees going numb as I ran like a bat out of hell anyways, but part of me knew this was it.

All eighty of the yipping, snarling helgrind were closing in. I was gonna die freezing my ass off while a pack of ravenous wolves tore me to shreds.

Ironically, this didn’t seem too off-brand for me no matter what world I was on. But it was fucking infuriating. I had so much to live for here, and I was so pissed off that I couldn’t even resign myself to giving up no matter how bright the glow of their lava became. Even when I saw a massive beast break apart from the pack, I didn’t bother looking over at my killer. I just braced myself for its molten fangs and kept on running.

A second later, I heard a heillhaust’s roar tear through the wind.

I swiveled my head so fast that I almost snapped my own neck, but it was worth it to see which massive beast had managed to outstrip the entire pack of helgrind.

He didn’t have pointed ears or glowing eyes, but rays of heat warped the air around him as the ice thundered under his hooves,

and I let out a loud whoop of victory as I finally slowed my pace by a fraction of a degree.

“Dyggurrrrr!” I bellowed and waved my arms high in the air. “Keep running, you scaly son of a bitch! You’ve got this! Fucking ruuuuun!”

The heillhaust let out an eardrum-shattering roar as the distance between him and the pack increased, and his injured leg didn’t limp at all from the effort. Dyggur only picked up more speed the closer he got to me, and I didn’t stop running until he came to a pounding stop at my side like a four-legged hockey player digging his skates into the ice. Then I hitched my boot on his front knee, scaled his back in two quick steps, and let the heat of his scales fucking scald my frostbitten skin.

The heillhaust still had his bridle tied around his snout and everything, and I grappled to grab hold of his reins as I eyed the incoming pack.

“Holy shit, you are such a fucking badass beast!” I panted. “Get us the hell out of here, buddy. Go! Go! Goooo!”

Dyggur reared up at the command, and I let out another whoop as he lurched into a gallop.

Then the heillhaust turned straight toward the pack.

“Not that way!” I roared, but this time, Dyggur ignored me.

The scaly bastard ran headlong into the steamy fray, and just as we were about to collide with the first line of snapping jaws, he veered west.

“Shiiiiiiit!” I screamed as we narrowly dodged the molten fangs.

Then Dyggur galloped back toward the island I’d just escaped from, and he wove deeper into the pack while chaos broke out on the melting ice. Every helgrind in the hunting party went wild trying to get after us, but then two sets of black and blue wings dove in as well, and I heard Eir’s deadly laugh along with Nora’s low growl.

“God damnit, women! I told you to wait in the mountains!” I bellowed, but neither of the winged daredevils paid me any mind.

They were too busy goading and luring the wolves into a frenzy, and as Dyggur circled back around toward the mountains, I realized what they were all up to.

The ice was melting away fast, but enough of it was still left for the pack to follow us if we weren't careful. And with Eir, Nora, and Dyggur leading the wolves all over the place, they were quickly burning through the last opening. The heillhaust kept himself just ahead of the ice melt while my two winged women slowed the pack down with their taunting, and I chuckled with pride as I finally heard the helgrind start yelping in panic.

When I risked a glance over my shoulder, I saw half the pack fleeing for their lives toward the glacial island. The other half dropped into the frigid sea as the ice separated entirely, and only five lava wolves managed to stay on my trail.

Nora and Eir were closing in on them fast, and the flying Selkie bared her fangs as my Farthegn wife strung an arrow.

The last I saw of the two hellions, they were shooting down and mauling my final trackers as blood splattered across the snow, but Dyggur didn't stop galloping. He scaled the ridge at a breakneck speed while I struggled to stay on his back, and the distant sounds of my growling and shrieking women brought a deep, throaty laugh out of me.

Maybe it was my shock that I was still alive, or maybe it was just the sheer badassery of our great escape. Either way, I snickered like a drunken fool all the way back to the drekkadyr, and when I heard Eir smack into a tree behind me, I chortled even more.

Then Dyggur reined himself in near Vegvisir like a good boy, and Eir and Nora landed with a snowy thud.

"You see?" my wife preened. "Dyggur loves you, Aaron Briggs! You are his favorite man he has ever met in all the forest! You are his very best friend, and he adores you just as much as I do!"

The heillhaust snorted so loud at the words that smoke billowed from his nostrils. Then he bucked me off his back in seconds flat, but I didn't mind the rocky landing. I just burst out

laughing all over again as I toppled into the snow, and I was still laughing my ass off when Nora and Eir came crashing down in a heap on top of me.

The two winged women covered me in slightly bloody kisses and giggled at my huge grin, but as much as I wanted to kiss them back, I was just too exhausted to do it. I finally settled for locking them both in a bear hug so I could try and catch my breath, and I gasped toward the snowy boughs for a full minute.

“Well, damn,” I heard Vegvisir chuckle. “That’s one way to get a thing done.”

“We’re alive,” I sighed. “Holy fucking shit, we did it.”

Nora snuggled her cheek against me as a soft purr rippled in her throat, and I thought I heard Eir mumble something about “invigorating,” but I couldn’t make out the rest since her face was nuzzled on my chest at the moment.



Chapter 27

Orange moonlight shone down on the snowy mountainside, and the night seemed oddly warm in the molten glow, even with the constant icy breeze. Vegvisir's enchanted flames were dancing in front of me as we all sat around the fire, and I finished my last helping of stew while I eyed the drekkadyr tethered nearby.

They didn't look so calm now that Dyggur was posted only a couple dozen feet away, but the heillhaust seemed determined to stand guard all night. He had his snout tilted up toward the arctic wind, and he looked out across the frozen shore below like a scaly sentry.

I wondered if he was showing off a bit. He had a distinctly proud posture, but he'd definitely earned the glory moment.

Beside me, Eir and Nora were still singed all over, and the tips of my wife's blonde braids and knots were frayed after being burned by splatters of lava. She didn't seem to notice or care, though. She kept stroking my crossed legs absentmindedly like it was any other evening, and her black wings shifted slowly behind her as she gazed at her brave heillhaust with adoration in her eyes.

I couldn't help smiling every time I looked at my gorgeous Farthegn wife, but Nora was tucked under my left arm, so it was hard to decide where I should be looking.

The Selkie had cleaned her face and fangs off in the snow, so she wasn't so shocking a sight anymore, but there were still some streaks of helgrind blood caked to her porcelain chest. Her long, dark auburn hair was wildly tousled, but her plump lips were curled in a calm smile every time I looked her way. Her midnight blue eyes met mine with nothing but sweetness in them too, and to look at her heart-shaped face, it was hard to believe she was capable of viciously mauling anyone.

But I knew better.

We'd all changed into fresh wools and hides by now, but Vegvisir didn't look as content as any of us. He was bundled up to his chin on the other side of the fire with his back turned to the wind. His sallow face looked about fifteen years older, and his wrinkly eyelids sagged over his bloodshot eyes. He'd taken a few tonics though, and he didn't appear to be on the verge of death anymore, so when he insisted we stay out on the mountainside for our meal, I humored him.

Honestly, the last thing I wanted to see right now were dark, rocky walls closing me in, anyway. Plus, the need to hole up for safety's sake was pretty much gone for the time being. From where we sat, we could see the melted crossing between us and the helgrind den, and it didn't look like it would freeze up for several hours. The waves were just too strong to ice over, and by the time the wolves could cross again, we'd be farther south and hopefully out of their territory.

We had miles of travel ahead of us before we could sleep, but for now, Nora's presence was enough to keep all the other night beasts at bay. She assured us we were the only creatures for miles on this stretch of the mountains, and against all odds, the frigid world felt calm around us.

Which gave me a much-needed moment to recover.

My aches and pains were ebbing thanks to Amaeda's remedies, but the heavy exhaustion in my limbs hadn't faded. I could still feel the effects of the rune magic I'd summoned to bury the den, and after running like hell to escape the wolves, I was more than content to sit my tired ass on a hide in the snow and watch the moon rise for a while.

Then Vegvisir handed his flask of spirits over to me, and I took another swig and glanced up at the star-studded sky.

"What I don't understand about these Valek... Vak... Vakleery..." Eir scrunched up her nose in the effort.

"Valkyrie," I chuckled.

“Valk... Valkyrie?” my wife tried once more, and I nodded my approval. “What I don’t understand about these Valkyries is how you can know I am one of them if there was no writing on the walls of the den. I have never heard of such a word. Nora, do you know about this species of woman?”

“No, I don’t,” the Selkie answered as she snuggled up a little tighter against my side. “But I’ve seen them before.”

Vegvisir and I both turned our heads at once.

“You have?” I asked.

“Yes, they’re in the caverns down in the depths of the sea.” Nora shrugged. “I’ve seen broken statues of winged women down there, but I thought their kind must inhabit less watery places. I’ve never seen a live one in any of my travels before. Not until I saw Eir.”

“What else did you see in those caverns?” the wanderling asked in a hoarse, tired voice.

“Many things,” the Selkie replied. “Never a man like you, Aaron, but the symbol you have on your chest was down there. I recognized it on you when the Farthegns attacked you the other night. There’s other statues of creatures, too. No paintings.”

“Too wet for them to last,” Vegvisir pointed out. “It’s a damn shame we can’t get down there and see this for ourselves.”

“No shit,” I agreed, and I took a small swig before passing the old man his flask. “Nora, do you think you could check these underwater caverns out for us? Just to let us know what other kinds of statues are down there?”

“I wish I could.” Nora frowned a little. “But the caverns are on the other side of the world. It’d take me quite some time to swim there for you. And then to swim back... If you really want me to, though--”

“No, don’t worry about it,” I said.

“The other side of the world sounds very far, my chief,” Eir said as she sent me a speculative look. “I wonder what your mark is doing way over there.”

“Me too,” I muttered. “I’ve got more questions now than I did before we ever came up here, and unfortunately, I’m out of ways to get answers. The fucking den’s caved in, and who knows what got destroyed when I did it.”

“Get used to it, boy,” Vegvisir chuckled, and he sent me a wry smirk. “That’s just the way of things sometimes, but we got a few answers out of this one. Found out about your wife’s wings. Tell me about these Valkyries you mentioned. What is their kind prone to?”

“From my understanding, Valkyries decide who lives and who dies in battle,” I explained. “I’m not sure how they do that, but afterward, they do exactly what Eir was up to in Illska. They summon the souls of the slain and bring them to Valhalla.”

“But I left the dead Illskans in your tomb in Alaska,” Eir countered.

“You have a tomb, Aaron?” Nora inquired.

“No, I don’t,” I sighed. “I’ll explain it all to you later, but Eir, that’s why I told you it wasn’t Alaska you went to. It couldn’t be. What you described is... Fuck, I don’t know what it is, but it sounds more like this Valhalla place. From what I’ve heard, Valhalla’s a hall where the army of the dead waits around to be unleashed by a god named Odin.”

“And this god is... not a foot rot,” Eir recalled.

“Correct,” I chuckled. “A god is a being you put your faith in. Someone who looks after your soul, or whatever. A superior entity.”

“Well, that is you!” my wife said with wide eyes. “That is precisely who you are. Look at all you have accomplished and all you have done in the Red Forest. Your clansmen put their faith in you, and your superiority is perfectly clear to any who--”

“Nooo, no, no,” I chortled. “Not the same thing. Gods are immortal. They’re not just men, they’re supreme beings. All-powerful, and all-knowing.”

“And you know so much!” my wife added, but she deflated a bit when I shook my head at the idea.

“I’m a chieftain, not an immortal,” I reiterated. “I’m just trying to stay the fuck alive here, and I sure as hell don’t walk around looking after anyone’s souls or getting my ass worshipped. Two very different things.”

“I don’t know about that,” Vegvisir snorted. “I’ve seen the way those Farthegns dog after you. The slaves, too. Farthegns don’t love nothin’ but killin’ and stealin’, but they love you.”

I grinned. “Still not the same.”

“Then tell me this,” the old man said in a harsher tone. “Where did you learn about any of this shit? Because I’ve heard just about everything that’s floating around this world, and I rarely come across someone who knows a story I don’t know.”

“Oh, uhh...” I muttered, and I scruffed my beard while I tried to decide how honest I wanted to be right now. Then I chose the vaguest route possible, because I hadn’t talked about my deceased brother to anyone in years. “I... used to know a guy who was into learning about all kinds of wild stuff. He told me about the Valkyries and Odin. Apparently, there was some long series of wars called Ragnarok, or maybe it was one massive war, I’m not sure. A bunch of crazy-ass monsters plagued the world, and the gods were fighting them, or fighting each other. Something like that. Either way, all hell broke loose.”

“Like we saw on the murals,” Vegvisir concluded, and I offered a nod. “Shit. That don’t bode too well.”

“But these murals were of the old world, yes?” Eir pointed out. “Surely they show what came before, not what is to come.”

“Unless the paintings show the fates foretold by the stars,” Nora added.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m thinking it don’t bode too well,” the wanderling drawled. “The fates in the stars change a whole lot in a short time, and those chambers down there are old as shit, but seeing as how things are getting in the other regions... I wouldn’t ignore what we saw down there.”

“Was the man who taught you about the Valkyries a soothsayer, Aaron?” Nora asked next. “Some soothsayers see beyond the stars.”

“Or was he from... Alaska?” Eir tentatively checked.

“Yeah.” I sent my wife a quick glance. “He was from there, but he wasn’t any kind of magical being. Just a guy. Same as me, really.”

“Well, that is not likely,” the Nordic beauty snorted. “No one could possibly be the same as you, my love.”

I rolled my eyes as she and Nora chuckled to one another, but I bit back the words that were on the tip of my tongue. It was almost impossible not to mention that my brother and I were actually identical twins, but I didn’t do it. I just smirked at my chuckling women and took another swig from the flask instead. I was about to change the subject when I noticed Vegvisir’s shrewd eyes were looking my way.

The wanderling had no idea I was from another world, and I doubted he’d come to a conclusion that huge just by reading through me again. But I really wished he’d stop trying to figure me out. That wasn’t a can of worms I felt like opening tonight.

“I think it’s just a legend,” I fumbled to explain before he could ask anymore. “You know how people talk. The stories make it sound like Ragnarok happened ages ago, and in... a whole different place. This god, Odin, supposedly ended up destroyed along with a slew of other gods, so if Ragnarok was real, it’s over by now.”

“Is it?” the wanderling asked. “You said gods are immortal. If this Ragnarok was bad enough to kick their asses, how is it meant to be ended for good?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, and my two women narrowed their eyes at the thought. “Trust me, I wish I knew more about it, but I just don’t. Either way, the two of you wearing the wings of a Valkyrie could mean anything at this juncture. My main concern is that you’re capable of summoning the dead and packing them away in some random tomb.”

“It is your tomb,” Eir insisted. “I felt your presence in the air, my love, I know it must belong to you.”

“I think I’d be aware if I owned an endless tomb of the dead,” I told her, and I couldn’t help grinning at the fact that I had to say this. “Maybe you just sensed me at the time because we were so far apart. You and I both know separation’s been an issue lately, and I swear, I can practically taste you when I’m in a different territory sometimes.”

“I suppose you are right,” my wife sighed. “But Nora is proof that I have not been wrong about one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“That you are truly the one bestowing our wings upon us,” Eir said as she sent me an uneasy look. “Nora grew wings when you filled her willing body with your seed, same as me, and no one we have met so far has ever known other Valkyries. If you alone can create them, then what does that mean about your mark? Why can you give us wings? And for what purpose?”

“That’s what I’m wondering, too,” I assured her. “But here’s what I figure: Valkyries are connected to legends of gods. Just because Farthegns don’t recognize any gods doesn’t mean there’s none being worshipped elsewhere, right? The world is huge, anything’s possible.”

The women both nodded, and Vegvisir kept his gaze on the fire without responding.

“Now, if the two of you are looking after some random god’s tomb, that’s something we need to address,” I continued. “Especially if I’m the one helping you gain that kind of power.”

“What shall we do about this, my chief?” Eir asked.

“Find out if any gods are being worshipped, who they are, and if they’re inclined to unleash a bunch of fucking monsters on us all,” I concluded, and I briefly considered how crazy I sounded.

Still, it was the most rational next step I could come up with, and Nora nodded once more in calm agreement like this wasn’t the

weirdest conversation she'd ever heard.

Eir nodded too, but her brow was deeply furrowed. "And how do we travel so far--"

"The fire," Nora quickly cut in. "Douse the flames. The ships are coming."

Vegvisir snatched his staff from the snow beside him, and with a swift rapping of the wood, the fire vanished. Then we all silently glanced up and down the shore below, but it was several more minutes before any sign of a ship arrived.

To my surprise, the longships came from the north again, but they couldn't have been the same four vessels we saw earlier. We'd been on this coast all day, and there was no chance the ships could have traveled north and back again in the little bit of time we were inside the helgrind den.

Plus, there were six vessels instead of four.

"Jesus Christ," I breathed as I counted the carved figureheads on the bows. "How many ships does Óhreinn have?"

"Too many," Nora growled.

I shook my head in awe as I eyed the crowded upper decks, and just like earlier, there had to be hundreds of warriors out there. Torches were blazing to illuminate their grisly forms, and they were so raucous, we could hear their guttural laughter through the wind. From what I could tell, they were guzzling out of drinking horns and feasting under the stars tonight, and they all swayed with the rocking of their ships while the rowing crew below deck kept their large oars slicing in perfect time.

It looked like this clan didn't have a single care in the world out here, and as I considered the arctic sea they had at their disposal, I felt another dose of jealousy bloom in my gut.

Or maybe it was closer to Farthegn greed this time.

"Unbelievable," I muttered mostly to myself. "Those fuckers have it made. They could sail anywhere they please and never give a shit about the rest of the clans."

“A ship would be nice,” Vegvisir mused, and he turned back around to face me. “Pretty damn useful too, given all these questions you want answered. Gotta cross a few oceans if you wanna get to most of the world.”

I cocked an eyebrow as I considered the strange glint in the old man’s shrewd eyes. “Are you actually suggesting I conquer those bastards?”

“Does that surprise you?” Vegvisir chuckled.

“It does. I didn’t take you for the conquering type. You seem to look down on the inclination.”

“Yeah, well, that’s because I’m not the conquering type,” the wanderling snorted, and a twisted grin came to his lips. “But you are. You want those ships so bad, boy, why don’t you go on and take ‘em?”

I smirked a bit, and then I shrugged as I glanced out at the six longships crossing toward the south. “Maybe I will. I happen to need a few hundred more warriors for a battle I’ve got coming up. And a whole fleet of ships would be nice, too.”

“You would rid the sea of those men?” Nora asked at once, and when I looked down, her big blue eyes were searching mine.

“It’s hard to say,” I admitted. “Right now, I’m looking to gain warriors, not wipe them all out. If I conquered Óhreinn, I’d have even more territory to keep in hand, so sending my most loyal warriors to sail around plundering for me doesn’t make sense. I have hundreds of clansmen to take care of. Gaining all I can for my efforts here is necessary. That means I need able-bodied men who can man the ships to do the work and bring me the resources I need. The best men for sailing are the sailors.”

“I see,” the Selkie murmured, and she looked down at my lap.

“On the other hand,” I continued, “there’s no chance I’d put up with any bullshit from any of them. Especially if they’re behaving like the type of bastards you’re here to hunt. If you wanna maul a few of their asses to keep them in line, I’d gladly look the other way. I trust your judgement.”

Nora smiled from ear to ear as I said this, and seeing her light up made me instinctively pull her tighter against my side. Her deep blue eyes shimmered as a soft purr rippled in her throat, but then I noticed Eir had a scheming look on her face.

“I suppose it would serve you well to have the filthy sea-dogs under your control,” my wife decided. “But I hope you will not forget Svelgard deserves your immediate punishment. They must be dealt with swiftly, my chief.”

“They what?” I asked with some confusion.

“Aaron Briggs, Svelgard has attacked the honorable chieftain of two Farthegn clans,” Eir scoffed. “This is unacceptable. Under the codes of the Red Forest, this is an act of war.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t know I’m a chief,” I said. “Those twins found us trespassing, so technically--”

“It does not matter,” Eir interrupted. “What’s done is done, and as you said, we have been forced to slay two of their women outside of a battlefield because of their foolish actions.”

“That’s not exactly how I worded it--”

“And when I tell your warlords what has occurred,” Eir stubbornly continued, “all of Svelgard will be sentenced to swift and bloody deaths at the hands of your clansmen. We will show them no mercy for what they have done to you, and by the time your flaming blade has taken the head of their foolish chieftain, nothing will remain of Svelgard. Not even hostages.”

I raised my brow at my wife’s cryptic tone and hollow eyes, but I decided not to point out that her Hylmrek side was starting to show.

Because she did make a valid point about my warlords.

Hell, I could already see Thyrrri gutting some poor Svelgard bastard for this, and Anakol’s rant would go on for days if I denied him some kind of revenge. Igrid would probably be just as bad as him, and even Brokkr wouldn’t shrug an incident like this off. He’d advise me to use a whole armory of runed cutlasses against the

assholes, but the thought made me realize Vegvisir was listening to all of this.

And the old man definitely wouldn't be too keen on the idea of me using his runes as weapons against the Farthegns.

Again.

I cleared my throat. "I don't know, Eir, you make a good point, but let's just play this one by ear. Hylmrek's the most immediate threat, and as much as I love the mountains, I don't really need an entire range for myself right now. I've got a lot of land to lock down already."

"And he needs to hunt the sea-dogs first," Nora added as her eyes flashed in a predatory way.

"Conquer the sea-dogs," I gently corrected. "Remember, a lot of Óhreinn needs to survive to be useful to me."

Nora pursed her plump red lips and snuggled her cheek against my shoulder, but Eir let out a huff.

"Fine, conquer the sea-dogs and destroy Hylmrek first, but then you should take even more land," my wife said. "Look at all of these mountains! You could do so much with them!"

"Maybe," I chuckled at her greedy smile. "But honestly, if I was gonna go through all the trouble of slaughtering Svelgard, I'd rather just give Krugg Mond back to the dwarves when I'm done."

Vegvisir's gaze darted to me, but Eir clicked her tongue.

"Why should the dwarves get to have it all?" she demanded. "If you have worked so hard to earn it--"

"Eir, this land belonged to the dwarves first," I cut in. "How else are they gonna get it back? Besides, I need metal more than I need mountains. Taking all this territory and giving it back to the dwarves would put me in a better position to strike a deal with them. A fair one... with less robbing involved."

"You serious?" the wanderling asked, and I found him still staring at me. "You'd give Krugg Mond back to the dwarves?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, why wouldn't I?"

Vegvisir's eyes widened by a few degrees, but he didn't continue the discussion. The old man took a nice long swig and passed the flask in Eir's direction, but my wife looked much less impressed by my words than he did.

"Aaron Briggs, I implore you to consider all you have accomplished," she groaned. "Surely, you are more deserving than the dwarves. You have two Farthegn clans, soon to be three, and you have entered a den of the helgrind and lived to tell the tale! Who else has achieved so much? Not to mention, you have claimed two wives for your own. Two!"

I felt my face get hot as my eyes shot to Nora, and the Selkie looked more than uncomfortable. She'd stopped snuggling with my shoulder and was clearly avoiding my gaze, and I awkwardly cleared my throat while I tried to decide how to put this as delicately as possible.

"Eir," I muttered. "I don't think it's fair to just assume Nora's a wife of mine. After all, Selkies belong near the sea, remember? We live nowhere near here, and I told you we're not taking her away from her home just because we might want to."

"Don't be ridiculous," Eir chuckled and waved a dismissive hand. "Of course, we'll take her away with us. Thanks to you, she is a Valkyrie now with exquisite wings, and she already told me she wants to be your wife forever."

"She... what?" I looked down at Nora again, and the sea-born woman was pulling something blue and brown from behind her back. I stared blankly as the porcelain beauty sent me a nervous smile, but then she gently unfolded her Selkie fur and draped it across my lap.

"Hold on," I said and shifted to face her. "Nora, I already told you, this is something you should be carrying, not me. It's your hide, and I really don't feel right about--"

"Please?" Nora murmured softly, and her big blue eyes cut straight through my heart when she said it. "I want to belong to you,

and if anyone finds my fur, I'll be torn away from you. Will you keep it safe for me, and never let another man take it?"

I managed a hazy grin. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"I trust you, Aaron," the Selkie replied. "I know you're the right man to protect it, and to own me... if you want to."

"Fuuuck yeah, I want to," I chuckled. "But right now, all my clans are in the Red Forest. Don't you have to stay by the sea?"

"Eir told me you have rivers and hot springs in your lands," Nora said with a smile. "I'd be happy to play there for the time being, but will you take me to see the ocean sometimes? I'll miss it too much if I stay away for long."

I pulled the Selkie closer to me, and she shifted so her supple ass was in my lap as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

"I will do anything for you," I promised. "Name it, and it's yours. I don't care when or what's happening, if you want to go anywhere, we're leaving. No questions asked."

Nora flushed bright red at the offer, and she didn't hesitate to delve her tongue into my mouth. Her thick, heated lips devoured mine as the image of her writhing naked against the ice flashed through my mind, and dozens of erotic possibilities followed behind as I realized I might actually be the luckiest man in the fucking world.

My spine was vibrating with arousal by the time the Selkie finally released my lips, and she was out of breath with excitement as she clutched me close and looked deep into my eyes.

"Does this mean you'll let me be your wife?" Nora asked.

"Let you?" I snorted. "Woman, I'm about ten seconds away from begging you to be."

Eir squealed before Nora could respond, and my Farthegn wife threw her arms around both of us. I chuckled at her enthusiastic kisses as she covered my whole face and neck in them, and when she forced a few gracious pecks on Nora as well, I just tried so hard to keep my dick limp.

Even though all of this made me wish we were back in my private hut like... right this second. With both of my Valkyrie wives wearing the markings of Dalir and riding my face and dick at the same time.

As it was, we were way up in the northern mountains with Vegvisir snorting nearby, but Eir didn't pay him any mind. She just started gushing on and on about how much Nora would love being a chieftain's wife, and how respected she'd be among my clansmen. The Nordic beauty seemed beyond excited that she'd have another Valkyrie around, and she even let Nora know that they'd make my women warriors twice as jealous of them with our sexy escapades.

Eventually, my wife was talking so fast that Nora couldn't do anything but smile and giggle. She clearly tried to listen to every word, but the whole time, the Selkie kept her warm fingers tracing tantalizing little circles against the back of my neck.

"And you must formally meet Dyggur!" Eir gasped. "I didn't want to get his hopes up before in case you were not going to be staying in our little family, but now that you have so wisely chosen to give yourself to my husband, you have to meet him! He is the most handsome heillhaust in the Red Forest, and as you have seen, the most loyal, brave, and daring beast you will probably ever meet."

With that, Eir dragged Nora off my lap, and the Selkie sent me a blushing smile before she let my wife lead her over to Dyggur.

I watched as their blue and black wings shifted side by side. Then they linked their arms together, and the sight made the mark on my chest heat up in a deeply satisfying way. There was something so perfect about the way their pale and flawless bodies contrasted so much and complemented each other completely, but it was more than that. Somehow, seeing two winged women together, and knowing they only wanted to be owned by me, sent an extra wave of heat through my core.

And I couldn't deny that Eir had been right. Owning two ridiculously rare and lethal women did feel kind of... right.

I smirked at the idea while I carefully folded Nora's soft fur into a neat bundle, and I was already racking my brain for a place I could

keep it where no one would ever be able to take it from me.

“Well, shit,” Vegvisir snorted. “Looks like you’ll be hauling a couple deadly women around with you from now on.”

“Hell yeah, I will,” I chuckled with pride, and I smiled even more when I saw Dyggur nuzzle his snout against Nora’s forehead.

Unlike Dyggur and I, the seal-woman and the scaly beast seemed to connect instantly. I figured it had to do with her mauling side, or maybe it was the fact that she smelled like the fresh ocean breeze he couldn’t get enough of. Dyggur kept sniffing her ample cleavage like this was the case, and Nora and Eir were laughing as they playfully batted him away.

“Suppose you won’t have to worry about getting your ass killed any time soon,” the wanderling mused. “Based on those murals, I’d say these women might just serve you better than all those fucking Farthegns combined.”

I grinned at the sentiment and glanced over at the old man, but he didn’t seem as amused as I expected. He was dead tired and looked like this journey had just about done him in, and he checked the shore to make sure the six vessels were far to the south before he struck his staff to get the fire going again. Then he met my gaze with an exhausted sigh.

“Thank you, by the way,” I said in earnest. “I know this trip turned into a bit of a shitshow, but I really appreciate you getting us here.”

“Yeah, well,” he drawled with a shrug. “I’m just surprised I lived through the damn thing. Last I remember, I was on the verge of dying in that den... Suppose I should be thanking you, even though you’re a damn idiot for risking your neck to get a grumpy old asshole like me outta there.”

“You’re welcome,” I chuckled. “But I’m not done with my end of the bargain. I told you I’d make sure you made it south again, and I intend to see you safely on your way to wherever you’re headed next.”

The old man nodded his appreciation, but I noticed he didn't look too enthusiastic about the prospect. He just furrowed his brow and studied the enchanted fire.

"You know," I led, "you told me wanderlings are after answers. I've got a lot I'm gonna be trying to figure out, and if you don't feel like wandering off in your own direction, you could stick around. Figure some shit out with me. I'd appreciate the help."

Vegvisir shrugged. "I might do that. Can't stand being around Farthegns, but most of the questions I got on my mind lately are to do with you. That statue we saw..."

I sobered at the mention of it, and the two of us exchanged a long look.

"That's why I think I've got a god controlling this mark," I told him in a low voice. "That statue couldn't be anything but a god."

"That's what a god looks like, eh?" the old man snorted.

"I'd say so," I confirmed.

"Huh." Vegvisir glanced down at my shoulders and arms like he was sizing me up, but then he nodded. "Well, if you're sure. There's also the issue of the other shit we saw down there. Not just the monsters, but the ones fighting them, and the--"

"Exactly," I agreed as my analytical mind began to churn. "I saw fairies and dwarves in some of those murals, and if that forest was Sortilége, then this 'bowels of the old world' stuff doesn't stand up to logic. Where's the divide between the old and the new? Because you make it sound like all this up here is entirely separate, but it looks like some species have survived from the old world into this one, and there's more than just one degree of habitat loss. If everything we saw down there actually happened, then that poses a lot of questions. Are we talking about full-on, mass habitat destruction, or just degradation? Or isolated fragmentation? Or did it not happen at all, and if that's the case--"

"Slow down, boy," the old man laughed. "You ain't gonna find all the answers tonight, that's for damn sure. Gotta take this one step at a time, and I'd say no matter where you start, you'll end up closer

to finding out the truth about that mark. Which is the most important part. Don't lose sight of that."

Vegvisir sent me a pointed look from across the fire, and I shifted a little uncomfortably as I caught his meaning. We may have discovered more about my wife's wings, but in terms of my mark, very little was concrete. And none of it was looking too good.

"Everywhere my mark appeared down there, all hell was breaking loose," I recalled.

"Sure was."

"But the placement was distinct," I continued.

"I noticed that, too. It was near the Valkyries, and we know you can create those. It was also leading the three-headed beings, but the only other place I saw it carved was above the death scenes. Wherever those huge motherfuckers were slain, your mark was carved directly above. Like it was responsible for it."

The two of us sat in silence for a moment while the old man took another couple of swigs from his flask. I could hear my two women chatting non-stop near Dyggur, but I hardly noticed. The violent images I'd seen in the helgrind den were flickering through my brain, but as concerning as the bloody scenes were, I had to speak my mind.

"I don't know if I can control the effect this mark has on me," I finally said as I watched the black waves rippling in the distance. "I've honestly never tried to resist it, and I may not know where it came from, but that doesn't mean this mark is the direct cause of what we saw down there."

"I agree," the old man admitted, and I was relieved to hear it. "I don't think it's the cause. Truth be told, I've been wondering if that mark's meant to strengthen you against the monsters we saw in that cave. Think of how you fight when that symbol heats up. No fear, no second thoughts, no mercy. Maybe it's that kinda thinking that's needed to defeat 'em."

"Yeah, but on whose behalf?" My pulse quickened, but I tried to stay calm. "I'm creating Valkyries. They're capable of filling a fucking

tomb of the dead for someone, and it sure as hell isn't for me. If this mark belongs to the god they're working for, we're either minions doing his bidding, or--"

"Or..." Vegvisir interrupted. "Maybe those women are meant to be filling that tomb for you."

"Trust me, I'm not a god," I snorted.

"I'm not convinced," the old man told me outright, and I furrowed my brow at the strange half-grin on his face. "You'll learn a great deal by taking a look around this world, and I'm sure you'll gain plenty from it. I advise you to travel far and wide to sort this one out, but I'll tell you right now... I have seen and heard a lot in my life. And I ain't never come across one mention of any 'gods.'"

"Never?" I swallowed hard as my heart began to thrum heavily in my ears. "Not once? Not anywhere in this world?"

Vegvisir shook his head. "The only person I've met who's said anything about them or the Valkyries is you. Tonight, I saw a statue of a man with a mark on his chest. Just like you. You're telling me it's a statue of a god, and here I am, talking to a man with the same mark on his chest. So, how's all that factor into your little theory?"

My skull prickled all over as the weight of the wanderling's words pressed heavily on my shoulders. He chuckled a bit at the look on my face before he handed over his flask.

"Better polish this off yourself, boy," Vegvisir said. "I got a feeling you're gonna need it."

I mechanically took the flask and drained it in four desperate swigs, and I barely noticed the hands of my Valkyries pawing at my arms as they settled in on either side of me.

Nora was murmuring something against the nape of my neck, and Eir sighed as she stroked her fingers through my hair, but my vision was tunneling.

At the center of the tunnel, the enchanted fire illuminated Vegvisir's sharp eyes, and the wanderling offered me a single nod like he knew exactly what I was thinking.

What if there really weren't any gods in this world?

What if the Valkyries were stocking a tomb full of souls just for me?

And what the fuck would I need an army of dead soldiers for?

End of Book Two



End Notes

Hello! I hope you loved Viking Rune Smith 2. I'll probably put out book 3 and 4 in 2022.

If you aren't [in my Facebook group, you should be.](#)

You should also [check out my Patreon](#), where fans like you are supporting the [Tamer Visual Audiobook](#) as well as erotic paintings. I'll have one of Eir up there in a few months.