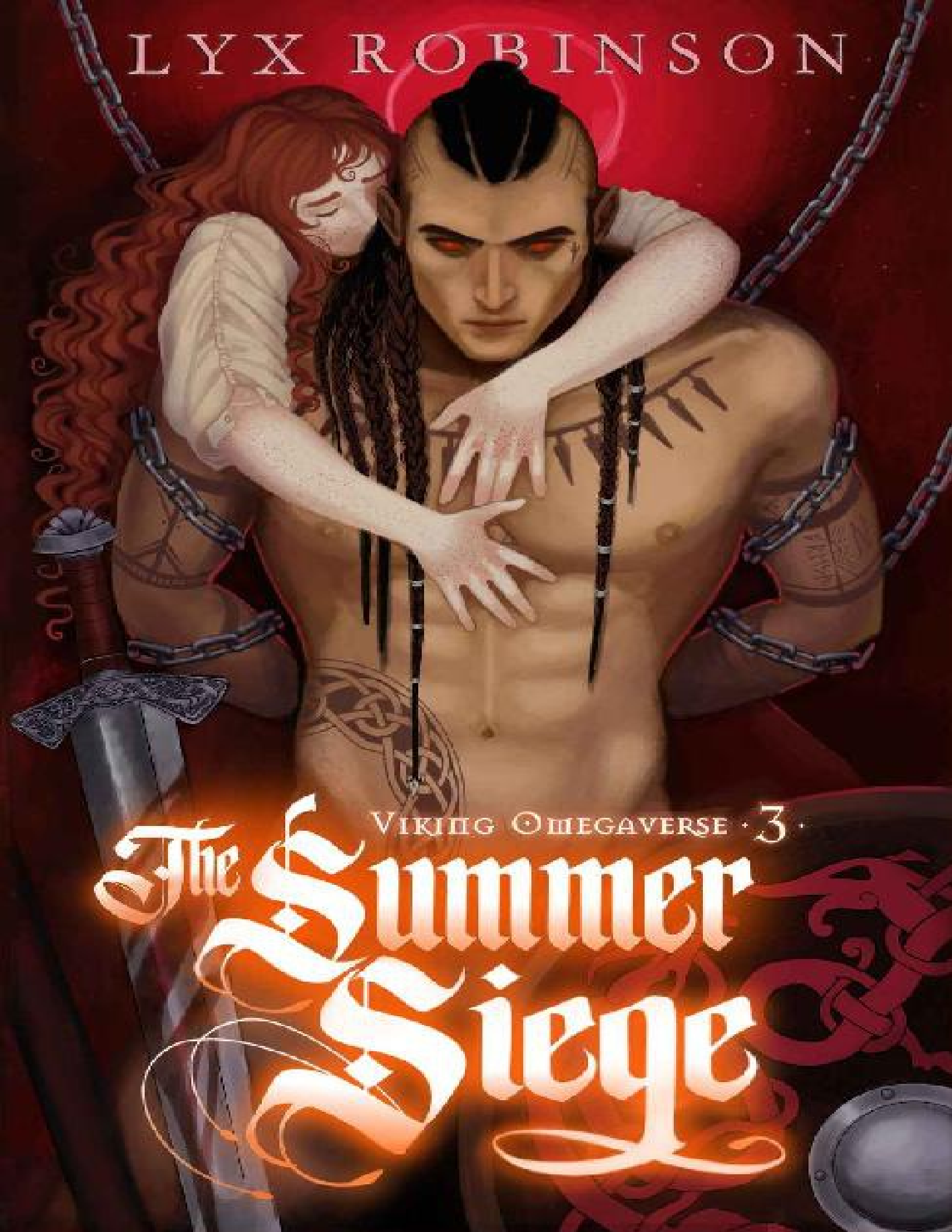


LYX ROBINSON

VIKING OMEGIVERSE · 3 ·

The Summer
Siege



Lyx Robinson

The Summer Siege

Viking Omegaverse #3

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Contents

GLOSSARY & MAPS

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[PART TWO](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[PART III](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

Chapter 61

Chapter 62

Cast of Characters

Notes on Historical Details

Acknowledgments

About the Author

GLOSSARY & MAPS

In this series, the Old Norse language includes some modern Icelandic phrases (which is the closest modern language to Old Norse), for anything I didn't find in my Old Norse resources.

As for the extinct Brittonic language of Strathclyde, I borrowed from its sister-languages and descendants, namely: Welsh (modern and medieval), and Breton (modern).

Quick Pronunciation Guide

Norse **Þ**: hard 'th' like in *thing*

Norse **ð**: soft 'th' like in *father*

Welsh **dd**: soft 'th'

Welsh **w**: 'oo' like in *food*

Welsh **ch**: like in the Scottish "loch"

Brittonic

Ankou: Death

Annwn: the Otherworld

Arglwyddes: my lady

Cariad: love/sweetheart

Os gweledd in da: please

Tylwyth Teg: the Fair Folk

Ymlaen: come on

Old Norse

Alfarblót: festival of last harvest

Bifrost: rainbow bridge between the realms

Elskan mín: my darling

Fjölkyngi: magical lore

Fylgja: “Follower”, a concept similar to the totem animal

Galdr: song/chant

Góðan dag: good day

Hefja: lift

Jörmungandr: a mythological serpent encircling Midgard

Kátr-Ekkja: Merry Widow

Níðhöggr: a mythological serpent that eats the roots of Yggdrasil.

Literally “malice-striker”

Nætreliding eda dægr: night and day

Norns: mythological trio of women who weave fate

Pabbi: Daddy (from Icelandic)

Sæta: sweetheart (from Icelandic)

Seiðr: a type of magic involving divination & curse-casting

Seiðmaðr: male practitioner of *seiðr*

Sól: female personification of the sun

Sorðinn: fuck

Skál: a drinking toast

Skjeppe: measuring unit, 1/8 of a barrel (approx. 17L)

Varg: the term they use for Alphas

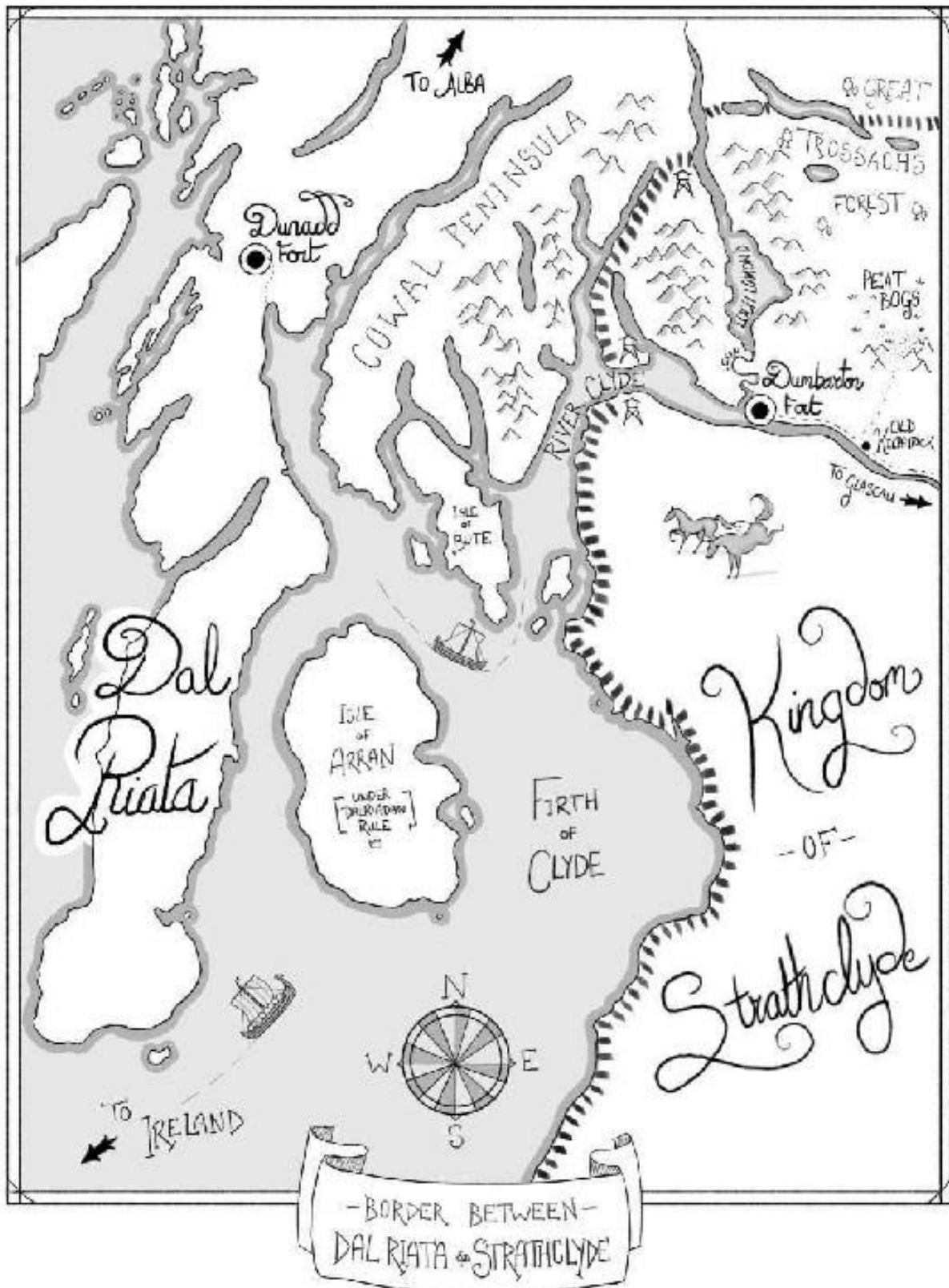
Vyrger: plural of Varg

Vanirdottir: the term they use for Omegas

Vanirdøtur: plural of Vanirdottir

Völva: a sorceress & seeress





PART ONE

THE SIEGE OF DUMBARTON FORT

Chapter 1



THRAIN

Year 870

Waning Moon of June

My axe weighs heavy in my right hand. I'm sweating on the leather-bound grip, eyes on the sails ahead of me.

Our fleet is turning into the mouth of the river Clyde. All around us, teeming green countryside parts for us, deceptively welcoming. It's a bright, changing day; shafts of sunlight pierce through the clouds, illuminating spots of the river, and the country we're poised to ravage.

I can feel Tamsin in the hold of my ship. She's in my head, in my body. It is utter strangeness to feel the pair-bond now, on the cusp of battle. Her heartbeat dictates mine; her breath exits my lips. The fear that thrums in my lower belly has to be hers; it weighs heavy as lead, whereas my anticipation of battle has always been like the sparks of a fire, light and dizzying.

How does one push out an influence like that? Last time we had controlled the pair-bond, we had been bent together, skin against skin. Now I'm facing only open air, and she's huddled in the darkness below, scared out of her mind.

I close my eyes. *Get out.* I try to throw the intention at her, frowning. *Get out. Please.*

No one has accosted us from the clifftops. We take the opportunity to manoeuvre in the large mouth of the Clyde, reordering the fleet. As per King Gofraid's orders, Ivar, Olaf and I are leading the entire fleet now; we will have to sail the furthest to launch our pincer attack on the royal fort of Dumbarton.

For a while, we simply glide along as though in a dream. Then we see two stone towers ahead on either bank of the river. Both stand on rocky heels of land; both undoubtedly defended. Spiked wooden walls surround each tower, several stories high. It's an easy guess that archers await within.

We were warned that the Britons have a deadly range with their longbows. Squinting ahead, I can see a second pair of towers a little way ahead.

No matter. They cannot force us ashore even if they shoot at us from there. We'll sail past these and absorb their attacks easily.

"*SHIELDS!*" Ivar yells – Olaf and I repeat it, and those behind us arm themselves accordingly.

Fear spikes in my gut as I lift my shield. Not my fear; Tamsin must've heard the cry.

It's beginning.

Eyes on the towers, I encourage those men who are still rowing, protected by our shields. Anticipation makes the air feel cooler against my skin, as

though I could feel every particle of spray from the ship's backwash.

There are archers in those towers. No doubt about it.

But they aren't attacking us at all.

We sail past the first two. I glance across the waters to Ivar, who's frowning at the second pair up ahead. Olaf seems to be thinking on his feet, puzzling out whatever trap this might be.

We let the wind and waves carry us until maybe a dozen of our ships are sailing between both checkpoints.

And then a sound unlike any I have ever heard rends the silence.

A metallic *chug-chug-chug* resounds all around us. It seems to be coming from the water. I stride to the prow, check overboard – could it be that they kept some sordid river creature beneath these waves, in this land of legends?

Then I realise the sound is above water, too; it's the cranking of large metallic wheels, dragging something up from the water.

Ahead, the waves begin to froth. And a chain, thick and black as the Midgard serpent, rises up from them. It lifts and grows taut, hovering horizontally above the water, barring the way forward for any ship.

And we're heading straight for it.

At the speed we're going, surely it'll bite into our hulls like the jaws of the great snake.

"*HALT!*" I yell, and I hear my brothers do the same. "*HAAALT!*"

The rowers lift up their oars, the men sheet in the sails. We're so close to the chains, and my Dálriadan ship is higher than the longboats – I grab the rudder and yank it with all my might, trying to heave the ship around.

Tamsin, I think desperately, unable to stop myself – if our hull is breached, she and Rhun will have to scramble onto the deck. Into danger.

The awareness of her floods my body, like she's pressed herself against

my back. She's reaching out to me – the exact opposite of the suppressing I had asked her to do.

Get off, my darling, my love, hold onto the rails, get out of my head – the thoughts tumble senselessly, I want her off this ship, out of this situation, I want her safe, but the chain is looming and we're skidding on our sides through the waves, slowly, slowly –

Zzzzzip. The air steadily fills with hissing, like many birds of prey screeching at once as they dive. I don't have to look up to recognise what's making that sound.

Arrows. A thick black hail of them, darkening the sky.

“SHIELDS! SHIELDS!”

Anyone who'd lowered their shields raises them again. I do the same, glancing over my shoulder. Behind the dozen ships, the first pair of towers has lifted their own thick chain too, barring the way to the rest of the fleet.

We're caught in their trap.

Think think think – arrows hit wood, cries of pain resound as some hit true. But I barely have the time to ascertain whether any of my men have been hit. A sickening *crunch* of wood crackles in the air, stopping my heart and pulling my gaze around again.

Ivar. Ivar was further ahead than us.

Ivar's ship meets the chain, side-on. The metal links chafe over the side, making it rock dangerously. Then the chain snaps the many taut hemp ropes of his sail, so that the great yardarm groans and twists out of place.

“IVAR!” I shout, dread pulling at my insides. The large red sail is falling, yawning over the whole ship like a great red mouth. Ivar yells to his men to rush to the bows while the sail engulfs almost all of the deck.

It happens too fast; men are caught in whipping ropes, under the large red

square of wool. They don't have many options; he and his men could take to the water, but if they do, they'd be completely at the mercy of the Britons' arrows.

With the chaos of the fallen sail, they already are.

Olaf and I drag our ships to a halt just in time. The chain does nothing more than caress the sides of our ships. With the way we're positioned, I can row closer to Ivar and grab his men, though it'll be a squeeze to haul them all aboard.

"TAKE THE SOUTHERN TOWER!" I yell across the waves to Olaf. Ivar and I can take the northern tower once I haul him out of his battered ship.

Olaf separates from me, manoeuvring his ship around. He yells to encourage those who had halted behind him to follow him ashore. I do the same – the Cathalain are behind me, as are a few Southern Isle warbands. I command them to go ashore while I see to Ivar.

These chains make a deadly trap. I've never seen anything like them. I want nothing more than to work out how the Britons operate them, how the chains are connected to the towers – this is brutal warcraft, a technology that would be vital to learn.

But in order to learn it, we have to get out of this trap alive.

Arrows pelt us, such a large number that they fall like forests from the sky. Blood is spattered across Ivar's deck; he's grouped with his men, holding shields above the injured as they're dragged from under the red wool. His pale face is turned toward me.

They'd have to shove away the entire sail to be able to row ashore. And there's no time for that.

My ship brushes past his, close enough to jump from one deck to the other. He commands his men to go, all of them, some hauling the injured

along. He stays behind until the last of them have jumped aboard my ship – I’m almost past him by that point.

I stand at my stern, holding out my hand, eyes on my brother as he runs to his prow, shield over his head.

“Come on, come on,” I urge him – I won’t lose him, I will *not* lose him – he jumps, limber as a black cat, and his feet slam down on my deck. He grasps my arm for balance, our shields knocking together as I gather him against me.

“Fuck me,” he swears. “What in the name of Odin’s *balls* –”

He goes on cursing and I laugh out of sheer relief, relishing his body heat against mine, the strength of his grip. He’s fine; he’s fine.

We’re nearing the shore now, keeping a steady pace as there is only that rocky beach to receive us. It’ll be rough on the ships, but there is no other choice.

We have to storm that tower. And hope that the chain mechanism can be undone swiftly enough for us to regain our ships without suffering whatever counterattack the Britons have prepared. There’s neither infantry nor calvary in sight – but the dense copse of trees all around us offer ample hiding places for an ambush party.

As the shore comes closer, Ivar and I stare up at the stone tower and its many arrow slits. Its extra wooden fortifications add ground for archers to pelt us from.

“We’ll see what kind of mechanism it is,” I tell him, “once we get in there.”

Ivar glances down at the deck under our feet. Then he looks at me, eyebrow cocked.

“We’re just going to leave them in the hold while we attack?” he asks.

I breathe out, anxiety kicking up in my chest. His words throw an image of Tamsin into my mind, huddled with Rhun, holding hands, and it's as though he had pushed me through the bond right into her arms.

She's sick with worry. Can't breathe. It's her kin we're about to meet in that tower. Briton blood we're about to spill.

I can only hope she feels nothing of this bloodlust I'm holding, this need to keep my men safe, to keep my brothers safe. To slaughter the enemy until the danger is passed – it is the mindset of war.

No. Of course she feels it. She must feel it burning in her body, this anticipation of sinking sharp metal into flesh.

I shake my head as though I could physically shake her off, though I know it's futile.

“We have no other choice,” I say.

* * *

We swarm the Briton shore, a tidal wave of metal-clad muscle, feet stomping up the rocky beach. It's treacherous footing, exacerbated by the Britons' design.

We all hold our shields overhead as we run. Tamsin's dread is as a keel dragging after me. At my side Ivar brandishes his sword, yelling in encouragement – *ODIIN!* And the warbands and Cathalain shieldmaidens at our backs roar the invocation as we run under the hail of arrows.

Zip, zip. I flinch away as the arrows fly. The drumbeat in my chest is hard and fast; my left arm shakes as the *thunk* of arrows land in my shield.

I'm not used to this. Daylight and carnage ahead; my left hand trapped behind my shield, my right poised to strike. It feels slanted. Wrong.

I have to make do.

The tower is surrounded by those wooden fortifications. Up ahead, a wooden gate bars the way in, guarded by archers.

Everything is simple in these moments. There's a door. We must batter it, and try not to die from the rocks and arrows they fling at us from up above.

All thought ends there.

We slam our shoulders into sturdy wood. It splinters and cracks. Under the joint mass of bodies wrapped in chainmail, it gives way, the lashed wooden planks bursting like overripe fruit.

Inside, the Britons are ready for us.

Odin watches from the treeline as we scoop through the bodies on our way to the stone tower, axes bloody. He is eager to see us show our worth; he waits to meet those warriors who will join him in Valhöll.

I wonder if Freya watches, too. I wonder if she grieves for her daughters as we merrily butcher these men they love; their sons and husbands and fathers.

But these men... these men are the same who would have the Vanirdøtur flog themselves. Hide from the world. Remain ignorant.

These men are the Vanirdøtur's jailors.

I wish it weren't so easy for this to feel like righteous revenge. Tamsin loves these people... these men... her countrymen. But they do not deserve her love.

My mind is full of screams. I grip my axe tighter as I hit bone, tear through boiled leather. My right hand will see me through this. It has to. If I can just –

Smack. The world tilts as my head snaps aside. One of the waiting Britons crowds me, throws his arm around my throat. We're tangled in a melee – I

can smell his sweat, his Varg musk, the rust of his chainmail.

Metal flashes. Fuck – *fuck*. He's going to stab me. My left hand flies down to parry, forgetting it carries a shield and not a seax – I hit the man's forearm hard with the shield edge. Bone breaks with a salient *CRACK*. He screams so loud my ears ring.

Twisting, I swing my axe to his middle. He wears a tabard with the wolfsbane flower, marking him as a Cavalier.

A deep cut of metal and he's wearing his guts instead.

Ivar is the one who shouts commands. He's capable of retaining his shrewdness and quick thinking when I cannot. Like a master ordering his hunting hounds, he commands us to climb up the archers' ledges. I lead my Dubliners and a handful of Cathalain shieldmaidens up the ladders – the archers concentrate their fire on us, hurrying to destroy any means to reach them. But once we step onto their ledge, it's over for them.

I march across the wooden planks, nimble-footed Skaði at my back. Both of us hide as best we can behind our battered shields. Blood covers us, wood splinters pierce our chainmail, but I hardly feel any of it.

We have rows of archers ahead of us. The nearest have turned to confront us, faces pale, while their fellows go on shooting arrows into the Viking masses below.

Skaði gives a war cry that chills my blood. A smile lifts my mouth, uncontrolled, the pure bloodlust of battle overwhelming me.

We run straight for the enemy.

It's impossible to fight without feeling the thrill of butchery. Blood pumps through my veins, power pounds in every step, in every life I cleave with the sharp edge of my axe.

But there are hands clinging to my shoulders, small ghostly hands, and a

gasp stuck at the back of my throat.

Tamsin feels it all. The cuts along my flesh, the tremor that runs up my arm when my axe hits bone. The shrill ringing in my ears as I tear screams from men's throats.

I can't repress any of it. Not like this.

By the time we've taken the fortifications, the ground has turned into a bumpy barrowland of bodies. Ivar is already mounting the attack on the tower door; above us, an avalanche of rocks descends onto our shields. Some splinter, overworn from the abuse. Cries of agony sound around us as our Dubliners and Southern Islers fall.

The door breaks.

We keep going. Until the tower is taken; until there is not a single Briton left within it, we do not stop.

Thrain, that choked voice pulses in my throat, Tamsin's tears cold upon my cheeks. *Thrain, Thrain...* she thinks it with fear, with love, with agony, filling out that name with a blood-drenched silhouette, a fanged monster. She is imagining me, mapping out my body as per the sensations she feels.

Peace comes after the last body falls atop the tower. I'm panting, leaning against the crenellations, squeezing my eyes shut.

Don't. I try to form the Gaelic word loud and clear in my mind. *Don't. Don't stay here.*

Ivar comes to me, claps me on the shoulder. Stark red splashes decorate the dips of his face. He leans over the stone bricks, both of us gazing down.

The river below is choked with wooden splinters and clouds of blood. Our ships are parked along the riverbanks at odd angles. Beyond the chain trap, the rest of the fleet waits, grouped in the centre of the river, safely out of range of any remaining archers.

Opposite us, the southern tower is on fire. Smoke belches up from the wooden fortifications, and there are the cries and clanging metal of men fighting. Olaf didn't have as many men as us and yet the tower looks on the verge of crumbling.

"Look at him," I mutter. "Like Thor himself, conquering alone."

"And to think I worried about him for a moment there," Ivar pants as he catches his breath. "We lost more than I thought we would. At least, we lost plenty of *men*. The Cathalain haven't lost a single warrior."

I scoff. "Why am I not surprised?"

"I sent one of their elders to work out the chain mechanism," Ivar adds. "Let's see if the bastards are hiding in the woods."

We march to the other side of the tower lookout, checking the land this time. From here we have a brilliant view of the surrounding countryside; farmlands and forests stretch out at our feet, the canopies dense enough to hide a large company of soldiers.

We squint at the treeline while our men recuperate. Before long, sunlight flashes in my eyes, reflecting off of metal. I grasp Ivar's shoulder.

"There," I mutter, pointing. "Under those trees, look."

We focus our gazes, trying to see how many they are, whether mounted or not. It would make treacherous footing for cavalry. But if they planned this... they must've planned the numbers and method to accost us.

"Oh, I see them," Ivar says. "This welcome party just keeps getting better."

"We're safe while we have the tower," I tell him. "If we could just get them to move... we could see how many there are. We have to find a way to cover our arses if we want to make it back to the ships."

Ivar pushes away from the wall, as though struck by an epiphany. "We

can make them move,” he murmurs.

He leans over one of the dead archers, plucks up his bow. Then he glances back at the treeline, black eyes wild; he is in that deep bloodlust with me, smiling a wolfish smile as he observes his prey.

He notches and draws an arrow. “Yes... they might just be within range.”

I watch him. He’s standing tall, his posture impeccable as he lets the tip of his arrow guide his aim.

Goosebumps prickle my neck. I can feel those hands again, nails digging into my skin.

I’m not the only one looking at Ivar. Tamsin sees him through me, in this strange transparent world we share. My admiration of him translates to her in shapes, the impression of evenly distributed weight, the brittle arrow fletching against his fingers tickling my own.

He is every bit the hunter. Lean and merciless.

She coils up into herself as she senses his murderous intent. She is on the end of his arrow; she feels his aim, his black eye, the intention to pierce and tunnel through her – right upon her heart.

Then Ivar lowers his bow and jerks his chin at me.

“Call our archers up,” he barks. “I have an idea.”

Chapter 2



IVAR

Waning Moon of June

The woods below are dark and dense. Between the boughs of the trees, helmets and spear-ends reflect sunlight.

The Britons are readying to charge us, just as soon as we stick our noses out from this tower.

I breathe out slowly. While Thrain calls up our men, I pull my pendant from beneath my tunic and chainmail. The bronze statuette of Freya is warmed by my skin – I kiss her for her favour, spread an offering of blood upon her with my thumb.

Blood of the enemy.

She's here. I can feel her breath on the back of my neck.

There is no getting used to this place. How green and lovely it is, though the wind howls and the sky is shredded. A temperamental beauty. It is the land of my dreams; the land I have been chasing since childhood. I would sit

with Olaf as the skálds sang of this faraway realm, where Freya walks in her luscious feather cloak while her daughters play among the trees.

We vowed together that we would find it. Back then, Olaf had fashioned himself as a conqueror; he would find those enchanted lands, pluck a rosy-cheeked girl from the wilderness as his own bride, and claim ownership of the place. Just as he did in Dublin. Everything there is really a facsimile of our dream; a greyer, duller version of it.

I never projected myself beyond this fantasised moment. Standing here with my own two feet, sword at my hip. Staring at the land of my dreams and believing it was real.

It still does not feel real. Our pale maidens aren't in the trees now – only spears and metal await. The maidens are locked away, and one way or another, blood must run to release them.

But while Father's army is here to besiege and conquer, my brothers and I have a new agenda. We are here to blunder about like fools, try to limit the damage as best we can while we find some way to save this place. Hence, we have to be *careful*. Careful! When we are faced by these murderous hounds at the door.

Mercy, Olaf said. We must push through to the fort with the rest of the army, but spare who you can. Force them into retreat when you can.

He said it as though the Briton Cavaliers were not a force to be reckoned with. I've already seen my life flash before my eyes a dozen times, and we haven't even been here for half a breath.

Olaf ordered a merciful slaughter. It is a paradox; an impossibility.

Let my brothers struggle with their mercy. I care not how many of those Briton curs we cull. So the Vanirdøtur will be saddened, so! Let them find their anger, as Tamsin did. Let them set loose all that holy rage, whomever

their target may be. Perhaps some already understand that they are jailed here, clipped and defanged, taking thin bloodless nourishment from their Christian book.

To think of what Tamsin is capable of. Carnage and chaos. If the moon was full, she could take both these towers by herself.

In this thrumming of blood that accompanies battle, I only relish the thought. Even if we fail here, even if all we manage to do is bloody these lands and tear our dreams to tatters – at least we will have unleashed the fury of the Vanirdøtur.

Freya, they do not even need this army at all.

My archers arrive. Skaði comes beside me first; the Norse-Irish giantess claps me on the shoulder with the strength of an ox. She has her bow in hand, still eager with bloodlust.

She cares not a jot, either. Her and the Cathalain women thrive as ever in the slaying of men.

“Are we still doing headcounts, Ivar Gofraidsson?” she asks me.

“I didn’t think it would be appropriate,” I tell her graciously.

“Oh, you care about appropriateness, now?” she sneers at me. “I have twenty-four.”

I raise my eyebrows. Then, touching my heart, I quote Odin’s adage: “A man shall not boast of his keenness of skill, but keep it close in his breast.”

“Sod that humble nonsense! Out with it.”

I grin back at her. “Fifty-one.”

“Oh, you wily bastard!”

“Are we ready, brother?” Thrain interrupts us. He gazes at me with some dark warning in his eye, a reprimand for making games out of a solemn day. I nod at him.

“Go,” I tell him. “Run straight out with the men. As soon as the Britons are within our range, you double back.”

He nods, still stony-faced as he hurries back down into the tower.

Gods. He was magnificent in the frenzy of battle. But now his reluctance shows. Pure ingrained habit moves him, but he is as a dog trotting through a room he thinks he has no right to trespass in. When the noise dies down, he lowers his head, tail tucked in.

I have never seen him kill with reluctance before today. It is a bizarre thing indeed.

I grip my borrowed longbow, order my archers to space out. We hide in the crenellated lookout, waiting for Thrain to launch the bait.

Like a fox running from its lair, Thrain leads his group out of the tower. They run out, pretending to be making for the ships.

And the Britons charge out of the trees, yelling their battle cry. Spearmen, all on foot.

Good.

“*FIRE!*” I yell.

We send volleys of arrows at them while Thrain runs back to the safety of the tower. The Britons follow, shields up, before hesitating and skidding to a halt. Confusion slows them; they know they should safeguard their numbers if victory is not certain. Someone shouts; a retreat is ordered.

I knew it. They think us savage and unruly; they didn’t think us capable of planning even the simplest tactic.

“*GO!*” I yell down at Thrain, and chuck down my own bow as I lead the way down.

Easier to chase away a confused, retreating party than one in full charge, imbued with purpose. Thrain leads his group out again, this time heading

straight for the Britons.

Pride surges in me as I hear him shout encouragement to his men. I can't shake the fear of him getting hurt now that he bears that idiotic injury. But so far he's the one who's saved my arse – and he's borne through this battle with heroic efficiency.

There is a stone in my gut when I think of Tamsin. It sits upon a nest of anger and frustration that I have not yet voiced, that I cannot voice. I'm angry at her for many things, most of which are outside of her control.

But that – Thrain's mutilated hand – that is one thing she is guilty of. And while Thrain seems to think he deserves it, it is a difficult thing to forgive when I am by his side, watching him struggle where before he would've been as Fenrir devouring the world.

The *chug-chug-chug* of the river chain's pulley system echoes in our ears as we fight. The Cathalain must have found how to operate it; Olaf's men are doing the same in the other tower.

I carve my way through the crowds until I am at Thrain's back. He's struggling with an enemy – he's incapacitated several, leaving them alive and writhing on the ground, but now this one is beating him back.

I dive beside him, swing up my sword. It slices through his opponent's throat, opening it wide, spattering us both with blood.

“*No mercy!*” I yell at Thrain. “You preserve yourself first!”

“I had him!” he growls back at me. “I don't need your help –”

But an infantryman thumps against his shield, and Thrain staggers, turning clumsily. He's left his right flank wide open again. I cover him, teeth grinding in annoyance – and we chase away the last of these foolhardy footmen together.

* * *

We rush back to the ships once the Britons are in full retreat. Olaf is ahead; he and his crew already man their longboats. They're steering them back to the centre of the river. Shouts rise as his crewmen pull on the rigging to orient the sails.

My men and I push Thrain's ship into deeper water, and we all climb aboard. I grab Thrain by the arm while the others get to rowing. He's brooding and reluctant as I force him to put down his shield and show me his left hand.

"It's fine," he rumbles at me as I inspect him. He's shaking hard, his fingers stuck in a curl.

"You aren't used to this," I insist. "So don't put yourself through the added difficulty of holding back. All right?"

He grumbles, "I said it's fine." But when I help him to slowly stretch out his arm, he can't hold back a sharp breath of pain.

"Tch. Your whole arm's turned to stone," I mutter. "Look at me. Thrain – look. We're going to open that hand. Work with me, now."

He lets me manipulate him, and we manage to uncurl his fingers, to give them back some mobility. I massage his arm, slip under his chainmail sleeve to his shoulder, where he's just as tensed up.

"You did well," I tell him, because I hate to see how he shakes. "For an off-handed effort, that was excellent."

He only scoffs. "I must look pitiful indeed if you're giving me compliments."

“I mean it. If I had to take on those Cavaliers with my off-hand, they would’ve wiped me across the wall like a shit stain,” I tell him, making him laugh despite himself. “They’re a skilled bunch. This isn’t going to be easy.”

“I know.”

He glances up as we row past my own ship. I’ve been trying to ignore it thus far. We’re leaving it there, slanted on the shore, wearing its sail like a blanket. It hasn’t taken such damage that it couldn’t be repaired, but there’s no time.

I have to abandon it there.

Eventually I can’t help but follow Thrain’s gaze as we leave it behind us, its beautiful red sail trailing thick hemp ropes, its carved runes along the prow.

Of course it would be me. Of course I would be the one to fuck up. Though Olaf shouts his praise over the water at us, I feel no glory; the rush of battle has dimmed, and now I can see all the errors I’ve made, all the ways in which I could’ve done better.

Thrain is the one who grasps me now and squeezes me affectionately.

“If it hadn’t been your ship, it would’ve been one of ours,” he says. “You couldn’t avoid it.”

“I should’ve rammed the chain,” I say with a sigh. “It was a mistake to slow down. At the right velocity, I could’ve at least broken it, kept the way open.”

“You couldn’t have known right on the spot,” Thrain says. “Perhaps there’ll be time to come back to it. At least to unrig the sail and take it with us.”

The large square of wool stares back at me. Women’s hands wove it meticulously, hundreds of hours of work into which they spun their love and

will to protect their men.

“Perhaps,” I indulge Thrain, not really believing it.

Losing an entire ship like this... it’s a bad augury if I ever saw one. I focus on Thrain again, buckling on his bracer for him.

Bad luck. I can hear it now in my ear, my grandmother’s voice. Her gnarled fingers steering me away, bone bracelets jangling. *You bring nothing but bad luck, boy.*

I try my best to ignore her.

Thrain is staring at the aft deck, where the trap door leads to the hold. Tamsin and Rhun are under there, huddling beneath our feet. They must feel the onward motion of the ship, the hauling of the rowers.

They know we’ve prevailed over the first battle. I watch, curious, as Thrain brings his free hand up to where his mating mark lies, hidden underneath his chainmail.

“How is she?” I ask Thrain.

Thrain lets out a mirthless scoff. “How do you think?”

Chapter 3



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of June

I can't breathe.

Rhun is talking to me. His sweaty skin shines in the dim light. I stare at that skin, stretched over muscle and ridges of bone. So thin. Delicate. So easy to slice into.

Blood dribbles, oily and hot, down my hands – Thrain's hands – I can't shake it off. These sensations, I can't shake anything off. The ease of cutting into a man's stomach. The feeling of hard bone when I encounter it – when *Thrain* encounters it – when it breaks, I can hear it, that horrid *snap* that precedes all sorts of wrong angles.

So fragile. We're so fragile. The cursed – they can tear us apart like cooked lamb, falling in strips from the bone.

"Tamsin," Rhun's saying, "Tamsin, you have to breathe."

My lungs are on fire. I want to step out of my body. I want to sink into the floor. Become wood. Is that not what Thrain's legends say? That the Vanirdøtur all turned into trees? At least we'd be more difficult to break, then.

They're all dying. All the Cavaliers and infantrymen and archers who'd been posted around the river. They're all being hacked apart. The earth shudders under the heft of men's bodies as they fall.

"Tamsin."

I can hear some creature breathing in rasping whines, so fast it shouldn't be possible. Is that Rhun? Is that – *me*?

"You have to get out," Rhun insists. "Get out of Thrain's head."

"I can't," I gasp. "I can't, I'm trying but – they're all dead – *they're all dead* –"

"Stop it!"

He's shouting. A harsh *slap* resounds in the silence, my head snapped to the side. Heat blooms over my cheek.

I blink and I can see the hold again. I'm me, I'm sitting on the floor, leaning on both hands. *My* hands, small and clean and shaking. No oily red blood, no heavy shield, no leather-bound axe hilt.

"Stop it," Rhun insists. "Stop it..."

He brings his hands to his face, drags them up into his hair. When his eyes are visible again I find them wild and unfocussed, his mouth open in a grimace of horror.

We're surrounded on all sides by screams and crackling fire. Woodsmoke and salt. The noises and smells seep in from everywhere until there is no air left to breathe.

My head's going to burst. I have to – have to keep it together for Rhun. I

try to pull myself out of the pair-bond, but it's so hard, like trying to wade out of a relentless current. Gulping in salty air, I reach forward, take my brother's hands in mine.

"Don't," he gasps, pushing me away.

I blink at him.

"I thought they would have mercy," he breathes. "Isn't that what they said? Your *husband* – he and his brothers – they'd do their utmost to hold back?"

The hatred in his voice spears into my chest. "They said they had to push through with the others," I tell him. "That's what Olaf said. That they could do nothing to prevent this initial push."

Rhun stares at me then with red-rimmed eyes. I know what he's thinking. Olaf made it sound like they would have to suffer through this battle reluctantly. But they don't seem to be suffering much at all.

On the contrary. There's so much bloodlust pulsing through me. A feeling of... righteousness, almost.

"They're leading the attack," Rhun says. "They're destroying our defenses."

I close my eyes, hot tears falling down my cheeks.

"It isn't just them," I whisper, though it soothes neither of us. "King Gofraid's lords are with them. They all have to go along with King Gofraid's orders."

"We were so fucking stupid," Rhun says, shaking his head. "We believed them. We believed they'd be merciful – the three fucking wolves of Dublin –"

"They said they couldn't avoid contributing to this push," I insist again.

"Contributing!" Rhun shouts. "They're *slaughtering* us, Tamsin!"

His voice breaks. I open my mouth but the words have died on my tongue.

He's right.

The man... the man I love. He's covered in the blood of my countrymen.

And still I'm worrying whether or not he's all right. Still I'm hoping that he makes it out alive. Even while he butchers those men and boys I once knew.

Rhun takes in a shaking breath, stringy with saliva. "It's my fault," he sobs. "It's my fault. None of this would be happening – none of them would've died if I'd just gone to the fucking bogs –"

I reach for him again, grasp his hands firmly this time.

"Don't," I warn him. "Don't you ever think that."

Red-rimmed eyes meet mine again, and I know we're of one mind as always. If there is anything God values above all else, it is one's willingness to sacrifice even what one loves most. Rhun... Rhun is a walking sacrifice; he must feel the pull of his borrowed time. God's hands on his shoulders.

What if he's right? What if this would all go away if we simply followed the pull of God's hands?

Instinct bucks up in me. "No," I grind out through my teeth.

"It isn't your decision to make," Rhun insists. "You had no right to save me. Now I'm alive and all those other Cavaliers out there are being *massacred* –"

"Stop it," I snap at him. "Shut up! It wouldn't bring anyone back if you threw yourself on someone's sword."

"I should've done it from the start!" he shouts. Then he shoves me away, hands trembling, shouting *get off* until I let him go. His fingers rise to rub his face, pressing into his eyes until it must hurt.

I don't know how to comfort him. Not when I half believe him. We're both guilty; we both sullied the ritual, the one that has kept Strathclyde's borders intact for centuries. The blood of the cursed, tracing a red perimetre. Safeguarding us from invasion.

Blood of the lamb, smeared on the doors of those whom God wants to protect.

The importance of the ritual might've been drilled into me all my life, but I can't accept it any more. Not him. Not my brother. So many boys sitting on those benches were innocent. *Innocent*.

I won't let Him take you, I want to say. But Rhun will not hear such blasphemes in his state; his eyes are still wide and sightless, his shoulders drooping from the weight of all the killings out there.

"Rhun," I implore him. "This isn't your burden to bear. Please. Don't take the blame for the whole war – it's far too big a burden for one person."

I should know; I wrestled with that guilt once, myself. But he shakes his head and refuses to say another word.

* * *

Rhun sits apart from me as we sail further down the river. I huddle by the cargo rail, one hand covering Thrain's claiming mark.

This mark is the reason Rhun won't accept my reassurance. It's like a taint. Touching me brings him into contact with a blood-stained Viking warlord, however indirectly, and he can't stand it.

I can barely stand it, myself.

I want to call Thrain to me, hold him, make sure he's all right. Fold myself into the warmth of his arms. But at the same time, it feels *wrong*. Like

I should pull all of this love and concern out.

It hurts too much. To love him.

I close my eyes, thumbing the circular bite mark he left on my neck. A hot throb pulses in me as he feels it, the touch only strengthening the pair-bond. He feels my conflict; my soul is naked before him. I have no strength to hide it.

Cariad...

The endearment floats into my mind. It's soft, Death's hand brushing my cheek.

I squeeze my eyes shut, a soft hum leaving my throat as I feel him closing around me, as though he were wrapping his arms around me.

The primal response throbs in me. *Need you. Need you here.* My fingers crook into the mark as though I could pull him closer around me.

No. Stop it, stop acting like a child. Sniffing, I dig my nails into my skin until it hurts.

Soon, comes the response, swirling inside me like warm smoke. *I'll be with you soon.*

I tuck myself into a tight ball, holding onto that reassurance despite myself, and try to shut everything else out.

Chapter 4



THRAIN

Waning Moon of June

Dumbarton fort looms ahead.

Our longboats cut through the water like knives. The fort juts up from a heel of land, flanked by the great river Clyde on one side and the thinner Leven on the other. Gofraid and his army will turn into the Leven to claim its bridges and port town, while my brothers and I...

We're sailing down the Clyde, straight for the village of Dumbartonshire.

The clusters of farmsteads cling to a slope that leads up to the fortifications. They should be mostly abandoned, the villagers stowed away safely in the fort. The Vanirdøtur, at the very least.

The Clyde's riverbanks are riddled with carved wooden spikes, planted to halt our advance. From there, the ground slopes up. It'll be a climb to reach the first houses, nestled in the hilly forested landscape.

Whatever army awaits us, they have the high ground. Though they can't unleash their cavalry on this rocky footing, there's no doubt that they've got more archers in those woods. Yet more surprises planned for us.

Ivar and I work together to steer our ship ashore. We leave several men onboard – they're to row back out to the centre of the river, to keep Tamsin and Rhun safe.

Our feet splash into slushy Briton sand. While our men all jump down, Ivar leading us all onward, I look back to the ship reflexively.

I can feel her in that hold. That small dismal place is like a black nightmarish world, far removed from the clear air I'm breathing. I've glimpsed it through the bond; the festering nightmare she's wrapped in. It wrenches at my guts even now, but I have to leave her behind.

All alone on the river.

“Oy.” Ivar jabs my shield with his own. “With me, now.”

I push him away with a glare. I know he's concerned about me; he wants to steer my mind to battle. But he's being callous.

He doesn't realise it at all. What this is like for her. Since they first met he's treated her with a type of wary respect, as though she were our equal in strength and power, as though she could stomach war just as well as we do. But she's still just a girl.

Olaf splashes into the shallow water nearby, and we spring to action, turning to acknowledge him as the men all group together. One of Gofraid's most trusted Jarls is with us, Ögmundr, a great bald mountain of a man who's salivating with eagerness. He leads his men to the trees first, several other warbands following.

“Remember!” Olaf shouts at the disembarking Dubliners. “We aim to take as many prisoners as we can! Whenever possible, you *incapacitate!* You

don't kill!" He sweeps through them, making sure they're all listening. "Got that?"

"Aye!" come the many shouts, men lifting their weapons.

Ivar glances at me as we stride through swampy sand toward drier land.

"Except for you," he mutters. "You stay with me and you defend yourself. *Properly.*"

"By all the gods, will you stop?" I grumble at him. "I don't need you mothering me like this."

"You do when you're looking over your shoulder all the time."

I let out an aggravated sigh. But just with that suggestion, I'm glancing at the ship again. Wishing I could stay to protect her.

"We're returning for them as soon as we have the village?" I ask my brother.

A muscle jumps in Ivar's jaw. "We are. She'll be *fine*, Thrain. You would do better to worry about yourself."

He glances pointedly at my shaking left hand, wedged as it is in my shield strap. I shift to the side, hiding it from him irritably.

"I need you focused and ready," he insists.

"Fine, fine... I hear you."

Olaf calls to us next, wearing his familiar determination. We nod at one another; we Jarls who have come here against our will.

Then Olaf begins to run, setting the pace for us. And we follow, splashing up the narrow beach, shields high as we make for the treeline.

* * *

The journey up is a flurry of arrows and narrow paths through the forest. The Britons are hiding everywhere. We fight beneath the canopy, our cries tangled in the tree branches.

Again and again, we shout at the men not to chase their attackers too far. There are plains ahead, ploughed fields, many of them fallow; we explored them last we were here. If the attackers manage to pull us out onto open land, they will surely have cavalry waiting.

Whatever you do, Causantin cautioned us, you must work to avoid their cavalry. It is their greatest strength. Divert their attention, throw several attacks at once, and you should prevail.

Gofraid's attack on the Leven bridges will no doubt have attracted plenty of attention. The land he is storming is flatter, with many more wide open spaces. He risks the onslaught of the Britons' finest horsemen to give us an opening, so we may take the village, which is strategically vital.

As I march through the trees, checking the wounded after an umpteenth attack, I feel that tug at the back of my mind. Tamsin knows these paths; she knows these trees. She's ridden through here plenty of times.

Glancing aside, I see her, dappled by sunlight as she sits astride Cynan. A smile blooms on her face as her brother trots to meet her. I know it's just an image, a pulse of the past that she's painting over empty air.

But it still stops my breath that I could share something like that with her. I'm *feeling* this place as though I'd always lived here.

"Thrain!"

Ivar tugs me aside – an arrow sails through the illusion, plants itself right where I was standing. I lift my shield, jerked back rudely to the present as we face a fresh volley of arrows.

No time to lose myself in the mysteries of the pair-bond now.

We chase the archers. Squat stone walls lead us through the forest, to the first clusters of houses and animal pens. We use them to hide and launch ourselves at the right moments, playing a dangerous game with the men in the trees.

When the forest is silent again, we pick our way through the pathways, following where the stone walls lead. We pass by closed chicken coops, squares of burnt crops, a bakehouse around which a sweet waft of baking bread still lingers. Many of their crops are grown in small clearings or on the forest floor itself; their efforts to burn what we could use left black charred streaks everywhere. The place was too rain-sodden for a forest fire to ignite; its leftover smoke is sweet, like a damp campfire.

We climb steadily. An abandoned herd of black sheep clutters the narrow forest road at one point, bleating in fear. One of the Cathalain scoops one up on her shoulder as a jest.

Familiar. All of it jarringly familiar.

I'm home... home... but I'm not. Not really.

Tension strains my muscles. We haven't encountered their main force yet. Somewhere higher up in the hills, after these small clusters of farmhouses and the stealthy archers that stalk us... the Britons are lying in wait.

And then we finally reach the forest edge. The trees thin to make way for many thatched roofs, all of them surrounding a central firepit, the main square of Dumbartonshire. The sweet scents of Vanirdøtur linger everywhere, making trails that are achingly easy to follow. They all hastily packed up, took their horses, their animals, their food. And they all fled, making a beeline for the fort.

The fort, which looms ahead.

We stand in this abandoned village, staring up at Dumbarton fort, this time without any trees to obscure our view. Beyond the village, a wide plain opens like a palm. It lays at the foot of a steep rocky incline. The outer wall of Dumbarton fort crowns that incline, a sheer stone structure that is magnificently put together.

That wide plain... Tamsin called it the King's Garden. I know it even now, her own recognition of it flaring within me.

Upon that plain stand several hundred Briton soldiers.

They are grouped in tight formations. Shields brandished, spears in hand, they all wear identical wolfsbane-stamped tabards. Some are mounted, but most are on foot, proudly boasting flags and banners with Strathclyde's green and gold stripes.

They are Cavaliers. Vyrgen men who survived their trials, who drug themselves under the full moon. All of them match us in strength. A richly decorated commander looms on horseback, golden crown around his helmet; he must be a Briton prince.

One of Tamsin's cousins.

"*Rally!*" I growl at the men, and my brothers echo the command until we are all grouped together. We can't afford to be slapdash about this. The forest at our backs still teems with unseen menace; and those men ahead are tightly knit.

We will have to break their neat square formations one after the other.

I glance at Ivar.

Incapacitate... take as many prisoners as you can.

He does not look like he's about to go easy on any of these men. He's blood-spattered and hungry-looking, his black eyes sharp as he takes them in.

Then he meets my gaze and slams that warning glare upon me again. That I had better not put myself in danger.

It's his way of showing affection, I suppose. *You'd better take care of yourself, or I'll kick your arse.*

When I hold his gaze to challenge him, he curls a hand around his sword hilt.

“If we die in some ridiculous manner, you find me in Valhöll,” Ivar tells me. “So I can express my feelings about it. With an axe.”

I scoff. “If you follow me into a ridiculous death, you only have yourself to blame.”

That earns me a smirk. “You watch your mouth.”

Ögmundr steps forward, so we and the other warbands follow. Anticipation rushes giddily in my veins. And all of us break into a run, leading the charge. Hearts racing, we thunder ahead towards the solid wall of Briton shields, our own held high, not a smidgeon of fear to be felt.

Olaf and Ögmundr both raise their swords and set the war cry, until it leaps from all our throats at once, completing the invocation.

“ODIIN!”

Chapter 5



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of June

The battle lasts well into the night. I've been clutching onto the cargo railing for so long that I don't feel it any more, so involved in the glimpses of war that the pair-bond offers. My own body's gone numb, a tiny uninhabited seashell stuck to the hull of the ship.

The darkness of my closed eyelids swirls with glittering dots and imprints of light and colour.

Thrain... where are you? How many are you fighting?

Torchlight gleams off of metal. There are countless bodies crowding him in. His shield pushes against scrabbling men, parting them like an oar through stormy waves.

Ivar is with him. They're together most of the time – Ivar's body is imprinted on Thrain's senses, as though he were wearing a protective black

cape. He's annoyed – he wants to shake his brother off. But Ivar clings, protective, insistent.

The tension of battle paralyzes me, holds me in a tight fist. Time stretches on, endless, both Rhun and I so crushingly exhausted but still wide-eyed. Waiting.

And then...

Some kind of relief blooms in me. I lift my head, breathing through the new sensations. Thrain's battered and bloody, but he's... glad.

Glad.

I see the dawn illuminating high walls. Archers – there are archers on the walls, and horns blasting as many retreating men run between the trees, beyond reach.

“Tamsin?” Rhun asks, eyes imploring. I must look insane, huddled there rocking and muttering to myself. “What is it? Have we won?”

“I don't know. I can't tell.”

“You can look into his head, right?” He grips me tight. “Look harder!”

“It's not as easy as that!” I gasp, pushing him off. “I think they've stopped... stopped fighting.”

We don't have long to wait for the verdict. Someone breathes on my soul, Thrain reaching through the bond, and goosebumps erupt all over my body.

I'm coming, cariad.

* * *

The trap door creaks open.

Rhun and I both stare up at the man framed by the golden dawn. Thrain stands over the square of light, tall and threatening. His chainmail shines

crimson; the wind whips at his hair, some strands stuck together in reddish clumps. His shield is slung over his back, tracing the unmistakable outline of the Viking warrior.

He took the time to wash his face, at least, but the dark patches and shining bloody metal he wears defeat the purpose of trying to appear as anything other than who he is.

The Great Wolf of Dublin. The terror of Ireland.

The Ankou himself.

It seems like a dream, the gentle moments we spent together, the relationship we built. Surely it can't be the same man who danced with me in Dál Riata, this tall haggard warrior who stands against the golden sky of Strathclyde, who wears the blood of my kin.

Something's breaking in my chest as I stare at him.

He holds out a hand.

"Come," he tells us, his voice hoarse. "It's over."

Rhun strides to the ladder first, lets himself be hoisted up on deck. I climb up next. I can't look Thrain in the face. Instead I stare at his chainmail, his belt. The axe slotted there is smeared red and black, hastily shoved in its loop by his battle-weary hand.

The same he's holding out to me.

I swallow hard and take it, let him heave me up. Rhun is waiting for me; we go together to the bulwark, eyes wide as we look upon our homeland.

Pillars of black smoke rise from the lush green hills. They darken the sky, shredding as they rise. The fort is visible from here, high above us, cutting a stark shape in the sky; roared military commands rise into the air, but it's hard to distinguish the language from where we are.

Rhun turns to Thrain, his voice gravelly as he poses the question I can't

bear to ask:

“So you won, then? You took the fort –?”

“We did not win the fort,” Thrain corrects him. “No one could win it like this, in one day. It’s too well defended. But we won the village of Dumbartonshire.”

Rhun exchanges a glance with me. To know the fort is still under Briton command has lent him back some courage, clearly.

Thrain carefully avoids looking at me when he speaks again: “The Briton army retreated to the fort and the surrounding forest. We overwhelmed them with our numbers, so they acted very defensively. I’ve no doubt they’ll be back to harass us.”

“The retreat was tactical, then,” Rhun says, his tone defiant, hopeful. “They let you have the village.”

“Yes. It’s probable. They only had a few hundred posted here; their true numbers must be out in the forests, readying for a counterattack.”

Somehow, with the calm tone he’s taken, it’s possible to let in a modicum of hope, that the carnage is not quite as bad as it seems. We stand there as though forming a war council, Thrain offering us his report, though we are still wide-eyed and raggedy. He crosses his arms over his chainmail as he goes on, still formal and curt.

“We took many prisoners. Our Dubliners are saving as many of the survivors as we can. As of right now, King Gofraid is still consolidating his perimeter around the fort. I should get you up there while it’s calmed down – you’ll both have to do exactly as I say to avoid danger. Is that clear?”

He speaks with the cool authority of a warlord; we can do nothing but nod. A flick of his fingers, and the small crew of Dubliners mill around us, preparing to escort us off the ship. Rhun falls into step beside Nýr.

Thrain leads me on. Though neither of us says anything, his presence is so large and warm beside me. Brow furrowed, I blurt out my question before I can help myself: “You’re all right, then?”

I can feel him looking at me. “I’m fine, Tamsin.”

“I felt you get cut –”

“The wounds are shallow. You know we heal fast.”

“And Ivar? Olaf?”

“Alive and well.” He gives me a moment to breathe out in relief. When he speaks again, his voice is low and pained, as though he’s stopped pretending now that we’re alone. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry I couldn’t cut you off.”

I shake my head. There’s nothing I can say, nothing to do now but face what awaits us. Rhun is already being so brave, splashing onto the shore, striding out with his head held high. I need to be brave just like he is – hold onto what hope we can.

Thrain jumps down first from the ship, and turns to help me down. My body aches as he takes me by the waist, steadies my descent. Just for a moment, I let him hold me, leaning into him as he grips me close and protective.

Then he lets go of me. Marks a distance like before.

“Are you ready?” he asks.

I try to steel myself, find enough strength to look into the dirt-smearred face of my mate.

“Yes.”

* * *

We don't talk as we march through the forests. For all of Thrain's warnings, there's no one around. It's so quiet. Faint voices rise and fall from beyond as those Vikings in the main square organise themselves, but otherwise...

It isn't the same noises as we're used to. Here on these paths, there would be the bleating of sheep, the shrieking laughter of children running after the herds. Fathers shouting across stone-lined pathways to their wives, who'd be bent over the season's crops. The clip-clop of hooves as messengers and hunters made their way through, horses loaded with game.

There's nobody. The crops are burnt, the houses empty.

My body moves by itself. I step ahead of Thrain, reach for my brother's hand. It's a small token on familiarity; holding Rhun's hand as we walked through these paths.

He holds me tight.

"The villagers are all at the fort," Rhun says. He's resolute, like he wants to convince himself of the best possible outcome. "They're all fine."

"Mm," I hum in agreement.

Just like the dust and silence hanging suspended in the air, so everything in me is suspended, weightless. The dread and plummeting feeling – it's stopped. I'm floating in the middle of a well, eyes staring down into the darkness.

What's ahead? What have they done with the main square?

Thrain's limping behind me. I can feel his pain, his battle wounds burning, his left arm aching. His boots crack on the woodland floor, his scent and heat so close and overwhelming behind me that I feel I'm trailing a wolf. The leader of the pack, staying behind, watching our backs.

One step in front of the other. The trees slowly begin to thin, wooden bridges creaking as we step over little rivers.

And the noise grows.

Vikings are milling around Dumbartonshire's main square, moving in groups, huge shapes in the trees. That hum of crackling fire grows louder; everything grows louder, male voices, harsh laughter, the shouts of men claiming dominance over one another.

It is not the sound of battle. It's the sound of jailors laughing and subduing their prisoners.

Thrain had said they'd taken many. To save the survivors.

To save them...

Rhun's hand tightens around mine as we approach the roundhouses. There are dark lumps on the forest floor, dark streaks along the tree bark.

Bodies.

Blood.

Rushing sounds draw my eye to a pair of Vikings who are dragging a dead man after them. Then I realise there are many of them, dragging bodies, hauling wounded men along. The aftermath of battle.

Rhun and I stop in our tracks. That man they're dragging over there... he died behind the miller's house. The stone basin of the grain mill is spattered red. And that one, over there... he died right where I would stop to let Cynan graze with the miller's horse. We'd talk with the miller's wife about the markets, the riverside port gossip, sunshine and rain.

Then a shout comes – *"Kelwynn! KELWYNN!"*

We both turn to see the source of the commotion. There's a young Cavalier – blood-spattered, straining against the grip of two Vikings. He's shouting and sobbing, trying to break out of his captors' grasp so he can go to one of the men who's being dragged away.

I stare at that broken body, darkened by muck, barely recognisable.

That's... surely it isn't...

Kelwynn. One of the tanner's boys. One of the friends we grew up with, before the wolfsbane trials shattered the bonds we shared. Rhun and his band of cursed boys all dreamed of earning their precious Cavalier's tabard, to earn their place on a battlefield like this.

Kelwynn's wearing his Cavalier's tabard now. And it's sliced open at the front, drenched red.

"*Kelwynn,*" the other young Cavalier sobs. "Let me go – let me go –"

I know him, too. That's Kelwynn's older brother, Emrys. The boy who gave me my first kiss and then broke my heart, back when we were all young and stupid.

I can't rip my eyes from him. I always thought he was such an arrogant brute, but now there's none of that arrogance left in him; his eyes are wild and terrified as the Dubliners drag him away to whatever pen they're keeping the prisoners in.

Rhun starts forward – I grab his arm, pull him back reflexively, but he shakes me off. There's something terrible emanating from him.

"Let him go," Rhun calls to the Dubliner who's dragging Kelwynn's body away. Then, he lets out the full force of his bark: "LET HIM GO!"

The Dubliner, who's older and larger than Rhun, barely twitches. He glances instead at Thrain, who allows it with a hand gesture. I've covered my mouth with both hands as I watch Rhun stride to the body.

He sinks down beside it, clutches that ashen face, wipes back the grime until he clears some skin. Thrain marches over to him. Like before the bond weighs between us like a sagging sheet, waterlogged with sorrow.

"Come," he says softly to my brother, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Get up, Rhun –"

“Don’t *touch me*,” Rhun hisses. Then to my horror he pushes himself up, glaring into Thrain’s face, his expression creased in rage. He breathes harsh, savage breaths as he surges, metal clinking, his fists bunching up Thrain’s chainmail.

“You fucking bastard,” Rhun seethes as Thrain lets himself be driven back. “We believed you! We believed you could be decent – we *trusted you* –”

“Shut your mouth,” Thrain growls urgently, a reminder of the secrecy of our mission. But Rhun only laughs, high and wild – then he whacks Thrain across the jaw, making me cry out. Thrain retaliates in seconds. They struggle, grunting and shoving against one another until my brother’s knee hits the ground – Thrain’s tucked an arm around his throat, half throttling him, growling to subdue him.

“Stop it!” I shout as I rush to them both. “Please, stop it –”

“We’re with you,” Thrain urges my brother even as I tug at his arm, trying to make him let go. “We did what we could, Rhun, we held back as much as we could. You have to calm down.”

Gofraid’s warbands are milling around, still deciding which section of camp to give to which warlord. If Rhun starts shouting about Thrain’s secret pledge to help us... I know he’s angry, but he can’t do that, he knows he can’t do that. Doesn’t he?

“Calm down?” Rhun hisses through the stranglehold, his chin held up. “*Calm down?* I’ll fucking *kill you*, Thrain Mordsson – you made worthless concessions to win over my sister, but you don’t give a shit –”

“You will *shut your mouth*, pup –”

“You should’ve killed your king!” Rhun seethes, his voice thinning as Thrain chokes him harder. “If you had any balls at all – if you really cared

about us – King Gofraid is the one you should’ve – *gutted* –”

Thrain’s stranglehold closes Rhun’s windpipe. No more words come out. But Rhun said enough to send our thoughts spinning. I glance at Thrain’s face, the harrowing expression he’s wearing, the tug of doubt like a hook in the pair-bond.

“You think it would’ve changed anything?” Thrain growls. “If we’d killed Gofraid? The warlords would’ve elected a new leader to bring them all out here. Every single Jarl in this army has been salivating over Strathclyde and its prize. Gofraid’s death would not have stopped any of them, on the contrary. They would’ve seen it as an opportunity for their own advancement.”

“Let go of him,” I beg Thrain as Rhun’s face starts growing redder. “Please –”

“I need to know you understand that,” Thrain says, and though he says it to my brother, his eyes meet mine. “Tell me you understand that.”

He loosens his hold just a little, giving my brother enough room to respond. But Rhun takes the chance to struggle against Thrain’s grip again, scraping and twisting like a mad thing.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll *fucking kill you!*” Rhun yells. He turns to better attack Thrain – and his knee juts up, smacks into my belly.

The shock of the blow robs me of my breath. I’ve staggered back and fallen on my backside before I could even process where the hit came from.

The pair-bond is snapped taut with concern as Thrain sees me on the floor. But he’s caught up in Rhun’s assault, and he can only try to contain my brother.

Footsteps crackle across the leaf-strewn ground as they fight. A low growl blooms behind me, casting shivers down my spine.

“Princess,” comes Olaf’s deep voice, and he’s knelt by my side in seconds, eyes on the hand I’ve got on my lower belly. He wraps an arm around my shoulders to help me straighten. “Are you all right?”

This pain – it’s like a needle in the middle of my belly, a sharp stab I’ve never felt before. I frown, trying to locate it properly, but it ebbs again before vanishing under the dull ache.

“I’m fine, he didn’t hit me that hard,” I mutter.

“Stay still,” Olaf grumbles. He’s never held me like this; his hand on my shoulder is tight with worry. “You have to take care. You can’t put yourself in danger like that.”

Realisation rushes over me like a waterfall.

Of course. I’m – Jesus Christ, I’m pregnant, aren’t I? I hadn’t forgotten it, but with everything going on, I never had the presence of mind to think that I’m not alone, now; there’s something else in me that feels every jilted step I take, every lurch and stumble.

My nails dig into my dress. “Oh,” I mutter, and Olaf’s grip of me tightens as I acknowledge what he did not speak aloud.

I turn to find Rhun struggling on the floor, Thrain pinning him down, more brutal now – outrage and concern over me pushes him to punish Rhun harder. Viking warriors are coming to see who’s doing all the shouting. The Southern Islers are jeering at the duel, but the Dubliners... they stare at the scene, frowning, empathy in their faces.

Thrain’s panting as he holds my brother down. The cuts and bruises over his body are costing him energy, but not as much as the sorrow I feel weighing down the bond. His eyes are wide and intense as he holds Rhun’s gaze, willing him to be quiet.

“What’s happening back there? Thrain, are you battling a Jötunn?”

A towering giant emerges from behind one of the roundhouses. White beard, huge frame, protruding gut; King Gofraid himself has come to see the source of all the fuss.

I sink back against Olaf. Gofraid is trailing his Southern Isle Jarls, who grin when they see the scene. One of them leads a horse bearing heavy saddlebags; the Viking King picks something metallic from those bulging sacks and chucks it at Thrain.

Metal clatters on the ground. Thrain looks up and reaches for the object.

“Shut him in one of the houses,” Gofraid orders. “So he can calm down. I won’t have him wandering around while we’re still setting up camp.”

Thrain drags the object up from the floor.

Those are shackles. Iron shackles.

Obediently, Thrain closes them around Rhun’s wrists, then at his ankles, the chain forcing him to keep his hands low. Then he drags my brother up to his feet and pulls him towards one of the smaller houses, belonging to Osian the weaver, though it’s empty now like all the others.

I watch the darkness of the house envelop Rhun’s lean body. Thrain slams the wooden door shut and wrenches a thick branch across the handle, so the prisoner can’t get out.

Rhun’s all alone in there. Standing shackled in the dark.

No. No, I won’t just let this madness keep going. I surge toward the house, breaking out of Olaf’s grasp. Thrain hears me approach, feels me through the bond. Slowly, as though it pains him, he turns and meets my gaze.

He looks so hounded. His eyes are shining, his face streaked with dirt. He’s holding back – I can feel how much he wants to wrap me in his arms, make sure I’m all right. I’m glad he doesn’t. It’s already hard enough to stand

here in front of him, enemies in the eyes of all who would see us, though the marks on our necks say otherwise.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, eyes flickering down to my belly.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “But you’ve got to let me in there. I can’t leave him alone right now.”

Olaf reaches us, his imposing presence lingering at my back. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” he grumbles.

“Please,” I beg Thrain. “I need to be with him. He thinks this is all his fault. That if he’d gone to the bogs, none of this would’ve happened.”

Thrain lowers his chin, icy blue eyes still fixed on mine. He knows how our minds work by now; he’s had to grapple with my own guilt, time and again.

“Do you still believe that, too?” he asks. “That all of this rests on your shoulders?”

I swallow hard. “Whatever I might believe, I’m not going to let my brother hurt himself.”

At least we both know that to be true. He nods at me slowly and sighs. “All right.”

“We’re going to need her out here,” Olaf reminds him.

Both of them exchange a hard look.

“She can at least comfort her brother,” Thrain growls. “There is so much left to do. Let them rest awhile.”

Olaf pauses a moment. When he looks at me again he seems almost ashamed to have suggested to drag me along without a moment’s respite. He bows his head to me.

“Of course, princess. My apologies. I’ll call Nýr over, so he can watch over you both. We’ll come to fetch you once you’ve rested.”

Thrain opens the prison door again so I might enter. As I pass him, he seems to check himself, as though forcing himself not to reach out and touch me.

Like waves, the pair-bond rocks between us, surging and retreating.

Forgive me, it says, the yearn swelling between us. And then the wish contradicts itself, the waves turning dark. *No. Don't ask that of her. She won't, she can't. She shouldn't forgive.*

Slowly, the waves retreat to blackness. A curious quiet stretches between us, expectation glinting like dust motes in empty air. I breathe in, find myself quite alone with my emotions for the first time today.

I stare up at Thrain. He isn't looking at me. His eyes are on Olaf and the other milling Dubliners as he waits to close the door behind me. I realise what it is as I see his drawn expression, the tired lines of his face.

He's found out how to shut me out.

Chapter 6



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of June

All Rhun wants to do is fight. Our voices rise in that little house – we accomplish nothing at all until Nýr arrives. And then it only gets worse. I barely manage to squeeze myself into a corner as they argue. It culminates to a fight, and Nýr locks Rhun against him in an embrace, pinning his arms to his chest so he can't move.

This time Rhun breaks down, letting himself be held as he weeps.

“Rhun,” Nýr pants against him. “Calm down. I don't want to do this. I don't want to fight you –”

“Fuck you,” Rhun snarls. “Fuck your sympathy.”

“Rhun –”

“I wish you would die,” Rhun hisses against his shoulder. His words grow too mangled with sorrow to be understandable, but one phrase is clear: “...just leave me alone. Leave me alone...”

It takes some time for Nýr to drag him to the bed and subdue him. I pace around the house, trying to make things comfortable if he's to stay here; there isn't much left in terms of furniture, just the bed, the central hearth, and Osian's great loom in one corner. Nýr and Rhun's voices rumble as they talk, and I stay apart from them; I have no idea what to say.

I can't shake the feeling that something has broken, between Rhun and I.

What if... what if I can't manage to fix it? As it stands, he won't even let me try.

The day passes in a blur of rest and uneasy conversation. By evening, Rhun is curled up in the bed, exhausted. I tuck my cape around him as a blanket; it's the closest I've been able to get to him since we were shut in here. Nýr has fetched us some dinner, so I help him kindle the central hearth.

Methodically we set some stew to boil. He has scratches across his forearms, his chestnut hair falling in messy strands from its bun. His usually friendly features have flattened to concern.

I know he's seen my brother through several full moons now. This can't have been easy for him, either.

"Are you all right?" I ask him, gesturing at his forearms.

"Oh, this?" he says, forcing a smile. "I'm used to your brother's tempers. Don't worry."

I watch him stir the stew with large, assured hands. He has a deeper Norse accent than the others when he speaks, like he isn't quite comfortable with Gaelic. I remember, back in Dál Riata, how he and Rhun would speak in Norse together – how quickly my brother had picked up the language.

"You and Rhun became friends in Dál Riata, didn't you?" I manage in undertones.

"Friends," Nýr echoes with a wry smile. "I don't know that he'd word it

that way.”

I wait for him to elaborate.

“Rhun was always looking for trouble, at first,” he says. “When King Gofraid sent him to work with us at the docks, he’d pick fights. He needed to hide from the others sometimes, so he’d hide out at the smithy’s. Where I worked.”

“You’re a blacksmith?”

He turns to me with another of those smiles. “I’m a farrier. I make horseshoes in peacetime; small metalwork when war is at hand. Right now, I’m mostly the nails and rivets man.”

It’s so strange to hear of his occupation outside of warring. Nýr is a hardened warrior like the others – I try to imagine him, trimming horses’ hooves or hammering away at molten metal, bent over the minutiae of crafting nails.

“So your metalwork holds things together,” I mutter.

“You could say that.”

The bowl of hot stew he hands me is a small bit of comfort. He eats swiftly, perfunctorily. But I can’t touch my food.

“Nýr,” I squeeze out past my tight throat. “Will you... will you take care of him for me? I don’t know if he’ll want to see my face when he wakes.”

Nýr lays a gentle look on me.

“Of course, princess. We’ll keep him safe,” he promises. “And we’ll keep you safe too. The Jarls and the whole pack will see to it.”

I nod at him. “Thank you.”

* * *

Clang, clang...

The church bells pull me from sleep. It takes me a moment to remember I'm not in my room, up in the fort – I'm down here in the village, that's why they sound so far away. The peals must be resounding around the whole siege camp.

I push myself up in bed and sit for a while, gazing at Rhun beside me. How much time have we been in here? It feels like a single hour stretching on forever, since the first battle cry resounded in my ears. But it has just been one more night, the second night already since the start of this war.

Rhun is in a heap now, sleeping deeply, his chains weighing in the hay mattress. I stroke his hair out of his eyes, kiss his temple before getting up. Best that he sleeps. That way he can go on blissfully ignoring what's outside this house a little longer.

As for me... I have to see it. What the Vikings have done with the conquered village while we were shut away.

I push myself to the door, heart banging. The smell of sizzling meat is rich in the air. Nýr lets me out.

“All right, princess?” he says on a yawn. “How is he?”

“Still asleep for now.”

“Good.” He quietly shuts the door and bolts it behind us. “Here, there's some breakfast if you're hungry.”

I blink in the morning sunlight. The Dubliners have completely taken over this section of the village. As Nýr leads me further down the dirt path, I see only familiar faces, old Sigbrand stirring a large cauldron of porridge, Orm the blackbeard and his fellows leading horses along. The men have taken up residence in the different roundhouses, some erecting tents under tall oak trees and around the vegetable patches. The dirt paths meet at a main

crossroads, which marks the centre of the neighbourhood; a great stone-lined firepit is blazing merrily there. Dubliners bustle around it, eating, sharing reports, shouting over one another's heads.

Kátr-Ekkja, they greet me solemnly as I pass them by. Many bow their heads. Thankfully there are no vestiges of battle left around here, save for the piles of armour everywhere. Beyond the firepit, they've arranged benches to mark the limit of their neighbourhood, and erected banners; a sharp-toothed wolf snarls against a red backdrop, crowned by a crescent moon.

"What is that?" I ask Nýr as he hands me a bowl of porridge.

"Oh – you mean our banner?" he says. "Banner of Dublin, that. So the rest of the warbands know to leave off. This is our neighbourhood, now; each to their own section of camp."

Clang, clang... the church bells are still tolling over our heads as we eat. Everyone is so matter-of-fact as they move about that it seems I've stepped into a district of Dublin itself. Men greet each other in Norse or Gaelic as they throw open doors and shutters, many of them cooking breakfast and slopping water out of heavy water buckets.

"I had better get back to Rhun," Nýr says, stopping when we're several steps from the prison house. "But you can move about freely in our section. You'll be safe here, princess."

I gaze at his calm, benevolent expression. I'm trying to cling to this precarious morning peace, so I decide that I like him. It's good that Rhun's jailor could be someone he knows; someone who's gentle with him.

Still gripping my bowl of porridge in a trembling hand, I walk among the roundhouses, greeting the Dubliners awkwardly. Olaf said he'd need me, but what am I meant to do? How is one even meant to act in a siege camp? I'm

drifting, half-absent, my face frozen in an inoffensive smile while they all move around with so much purpose.

In truth, I've never been around the Dublin pack without Thrain. Now that the pair-bond is shut, I don't even know where he is, what he's doing. With Rhun locked away, and the three wolves occupied, I feel I'm lurching around in this strange solitude. Severed from any kind of purpose or normality as I walk around my disfigured village.

A clatter of hooves resounds beyond. I turn around, and my heart leaps as I find Olaf astride a gleaming Alsvithr, trotting up to the banners. He is resplendent in the dawn, pale blue cloak sweeping down to pool over Alsvithr's hindquarters. He pulls his horse to a stop, scanning the neighbourhood until he finds me.

"Princess," he calls. "Come with me. Your people are calling for a parley."

Oh. The church bells – that must be why. I try not to trip in my hurry to reach Olaf. Alsvithr shifts, and a small palomino horse comes into view – Olaf is holding Cynan by a lead rope.

Saints, I could cry. I rush to my horse, stroke his face as he whickers and snorts in greeting.

Olaf watches us with a small smile. "The horses were dropped off and corralled at the Leven Port last night," he says. "That little one's been anxious to see you."

I glance between Alsvithr and Cynan; they sailed here aboard the Viking longboats too, those that were built to take horses. To have him back now, and to have the Dubliners building our own little territory – perhaps once I collect enough pieces of familiarity, everything will feel less daunting.

Once I've climbed on and joined Olaf's side, I can't help asking,

“Where’s Thrain?”

“On perimetre duty,” Olaf says. “Ivar should be watching our prisoners. We’ll be switching duties later, so you’ll no doubt see them. Come.”

* * *

He leads me across camp, crossing the territory of different warbands, until we reach the main square of Dumbartonshire. From here, we have a sprawling view of the wider village, and the roads that lead all the way down to the Leven river. The smoke is at its worst down there; the Vikings must’ve had an arduous task of extinguishing the fires so they could set up camp.

By God’s *wounds*. There are thousands of men down there. Hundreds of tents. An entire army, sat confidently on conquered land.

A great roaring cheer is rising from further down the camp. I spy a huge rider trotting between the tents, his gauntleted hand up in the air, catching the sunlight. It is King Gofraid, basking in the cheers of his army. He’s headed in our direction.

Clang, clang... the church bells go on ringing from high up there in Dumbarton fort, a painfully familiar sound.

Olaf lays a kind look on me and nods ahead.

“Come,” he says. “Stay close to me.”

* * *

We ride behind Gofraid into the ruined King’s Garden, accompanied by his closest Jarls. I keep my eyes firmly ahead, trying to ignore the corpses and groaning men that still lie about in the grass. The Viking King pulls us all to a

stop once we're in the shadow of the fort's outer wall. He sits straight-backed upon his horse, bearded face turned upward, a giant to all who would look upon him.

Way up above us, a long line of Cavalier archers stand among the crenellations with their longbows and white banners. At the foot of the wall, Viking corpses mark the range of their bows, bodies bristling with arrows where they lay. Gofraid has had the sense not to venture past them.

A hush falls as a figure comes into view among the crenels, standing between his Cavaliers. Sunlight gleams upon his crown.

I try to strangle the cry that leaps to my throat. It's my Uncle Arthgal, standing up there like a proud king from a storybook, facing down the Vikings. He must see the devastation far better than us from that vantage point.

"Hail, Arthgal, King of the Britons!" Gofraid booms, so loudly that surely the whole camp can hear him. "It has been two long days, and your men have fought bravely indeed. I am honoured to stand upon your enchanted lands!"

"Speak your piece, Viking," Uncle Arthgal calls back down icily.

Gofraid marks a pause then, as though he'd expected his enemy to be a little more polite.

"A man of few words! I shall be brief, then," Gofraid says. "I do not want to bring any more destruction to your beautiful kingdom. Kindly lay down your arms, and bring down your drawbridge, so that you and I may begin our peace talk. My hunters have just brought down a stag that I think would make a fine luncheon—"

"Peace talk, you say," Uncle Arthgal interrupts, his tone disbelieving. "I would have you speak your terms now."

"My friend, I will lose my voice if we are to shout pleasantries at each

other all morning –”

“Speak plainly then!”

“All right, if you insist,” Gofraid concedes. “I hate to be crass, but here we are. We will give you until the full moon to open your gates to us. If you do not, then I will unleash my warbands upon your lands until there is not a single stick of wood nor God-fearing Christian left standing. If you would like to avoid this, however, as I imagine you do... then you will welcome us with open arms. You will share your riches, and your women. We will have a nice, long feast together, to solidify our friendship. And while we enjoy your hospitality, we will decide together which part of your lands you will cede to us. I must say I rather like the west bank of the Leven...”

“And what else?” Uncle Arthgal calls savagely. “You ask for so little!”

“Ah! I confess, I do get rather overeager,” Gofraid hollers. “We may speak of it more when we sup together. So? What do you say, friend? I bring good ale! And good men, too!”

His Jarls all send up an insolent cheer at that.

“I see you are busy with your campsite,” Uncle Arthgal calls down frostily. “I cannot rightly accept a luncheon when you have many wounded to tend to. Enjoy the stag between yourselves, and do make sure you pull the corpses from the rivers. I would hate for your army to contract fever.”

“Thank you for your concern!” Gofraid replies, still smiling as though this were simply pleasant small talk. “Are you sure you will not reconsider?”

“Oh, I’m quite sure,” Uncle Arthgal says. Then his voice takes on a dire depth; “You may make your threats, Gofraid, king of the lawless. But I assure you, these lands are guarded by forces well beyond your comprehension. The hills will swallow your men and spit you out before you

can ever dream of calling this place yours. So take care where you tread now. Good day to you.”

And with that, Uncle Arthgal turns and disappears behind his Cavaliers.

“Is that it, then?” calls one of Gofraid’s huge bald Jarls. “You call this a king? A blunt-toothed coward who hides behind his wall –”

A Cavalier hollers back: “Why don’t you go and fuck yourself, you Viking *dog* –!”

Roared insults break out, only stopping once Gofraid smacks his Jarl around the head and bellows at the others to pack it in. Several Cavaliers shoot vengeful arrows until their captains yell at them to stop wasting ammunition. I stick close to Olaf, shaking, making a fist in his long blue cape, trying not to shrivel under all this loud male aggression.

“Come! He has made himself plain,” Gofraid calls at last, rallying his men with all the confidence of a conqueror. “Let him stew in his little stone rooms. We have much work to be getting on with.”

* * *

My breath is coming shorter and shorter as I ride after Olaf back through the camp. I know that Uncle Arthgal is a good tactician, that his bold words must mean he has some plan – but I can’t get myself to believe his confidence.

There are *so many* Vikings all around us. Ten thousand men. They are a flood, covering our lands. Rhun and I, and the three-hundred-odd Dubliners... we are barely a tiny little speck among them all.

How can we ever hope to make a difference here?

Olaf’s expression is resolute as he leads me back to the Dubliner’s section. We trot past our red banners, men greeting us with lifted hands.

When we're out of earshot of the other warbands, we ride knee to knee, close enough to speak.

"Princess." Olaf sees the face I'm making; he lays a large, warm hand on my shoulder. "Princess. Breathe."

I let out a long sigh, holding myself around the middle.

"What are we going to do?" I mutter. "What *can* we do?"

"We'll take it one step at a time," Olaf says, his deep voice gentle. "Come. I've been working on a plan. Let me show you."

We ride through the trees until we come to a large animal pen. It's Uthyr's cattle pen, low stone walls marking a large square in a clearing. Within, there are no hairy Highland cattle now. I gasp as I see the many Cavaliers and infantrymen squashed in there instead, sitting with their wrists shackled to their ankles. Some of them are wounded and resting against their fellows, moaning in pain.

The pride of Strathclyde, shackled and penned in.

All around them, Dubliners are patrolling. With a lurch, I recognise Ivar on the far side, waving over a fresh line of prisoners. They're added to the pen, jostling those already inside.

"The survivors are all being shuttled here," Olaf tells me. "It is custom, when we go warring with our father, that we be the ones to handle the prisoners. Father trusts us with them."

I gaze at him, so he offers me a smile.

"We'll start with them," he says. "We're going to save them, princess."

Images rush through my mind, then – of the cattle pen being opened in the night, all these prisoners freed and sent into the wilderness. But with the enormous camp all around us, surely they'd be noticed – surely it could not be so simple.

“How?” I ask him.

“Well, we would usually take a few days to transport our prisoners to Dublin,” Olaf says. “As it is the largest port of harbour in the Irish Sea that deals in slaves, we have facilities there to keep them properly. So, we will load them on our ships and set sail, just as Father expects us to. And then... we will set them down again on your own southern shores, so they can rejoin your army.”

I let out a breath. “But there are hundreds of them. Surely we’ll be seen.”

“We’ll have to sail further downriver, and find somewhere discreet to set them down.”

To shift so many men, and try to be discreet about it – it’s a terrifying plan. But Olaf looks resolute as ever as he watches me.

“It’s important to build rapport with the Cavalier captains, so they might help us with this task and those that will come afterward,” he says. “We’re going to need you as a mediator, to reassure them.”

I blink, stomach flipping over as I gaze at my countrymen.

“For now, just tell them that they have friends among the Vikings,” Olaf says. His voice is gentle as always as he adds, “Do you think you can do that for me, Tamsin?”

I breathe out slowly and nod. If this is what he needs me for; if this is how I can make myself useful... then I will have to do my best. Never mind all the ways in which his plan could go horribly wrong for all of us.

I follow Olaf to the pen unthinkingly. The Dublin guards hand me a packhorse laden with heavy waterskins, then open the pen for me.

Heart racing, I gather up the packhorse’s reins and step inside.

It feels like years since I last walked among my own people. Time has been behaving very strangely since I left home; that scintillating May

afternoon seems only yesterday, or perhaps a decade ago.

These men. I never thought I'd miss the sound of their Brittonic so much, the blunt turns of phrase, the colourful swearing. Those nearest to me wear the green and gold tabards of drafted peasant folk, uncursed men; they look up, eyes crinkling when they see me.

“Tamsin? Princess Tamsin?”

“By God's teeth, you're alive! Oy – look, it is the princess in the flesh!”

My face cracks into a wide smile. They all seem so glad to see me.

“H – hello,” I greet them like an idiot. They throw up their hands, as though they'd embrace me but for their clinking chains.

“Come, come closer!”

I crouch, heart banging as I offer them my waterskins. Immediately they sweep me into conversation.

“We thought you and Princess Eormen were lost to us!”

“Yes – that terrible day, when you sailed off to Dál Riata, and the Viking fleet came down on you – how did you survive it?”

While I help them to drink, I try to unpack those red-tinted memories, explaining how we were locked in the ship's hold. And they tell me what it was like here, to witness the aftermath of that massacre. Apparently the tide brought them back pieces of our Briton fleet, crates of goods... and drowned Galloway horses, washed up on the shore.

I try to shake that ominous image away. For them to have seen their two princesses off to be wed, making a merry celebration of it, only to receive such dire omens afterward – they must've known right then, to prepare for war.

“It's difficult to believe we survived it,” I conclude for them. “But we did, Eormen and I.”

“Princess Eormen is alive, then? Is she here, too?”

A pang runs through me at the thought of my cousin. “We lost sight of her back in Dál Riata,” I tell them. “But she was trying to find a way to come back here. She’s very resourceful, as you know – I’m sure she’s all right.”

They’re all buzzing now, calling to each other about Eormen. It’s funny to see how invested they are in her fate and mine. I can’t remember being hailed by so many peasant folk at once; they must have some glittering image of us, their royal princesses. They look upon me now as though I were a shining figure of legend swooping down to afford them charity, rather than a grotty girl in days-old clothes.

To think I wouldn’t have looked at them twice before, when I rode through their fields and forests, or traipsed through the midsummer dances of Gwyl Ifan alongside them. Now I look all around me at their glad faces and I’m bursting with love for them, as though they were my long-lost uncles.

“Here,” I say as I stoop to the next man, and the next man, tilting my waterskin, squeezing their dirty hands. I listen to them talk about their wives, their girls, all those who were swept away into Dumbarton fort and other strongholds. I imagine these men as they were before being drafted; fathers taking their girls out to fairy circles, sitting them atop carved standing stones. Some of them wear complicated braids in their hair; I spy protective charms all around me, dried rowan berries strung into bracelets, horseshoe nails worn as pendants, spiral tattoos along their arms.

I remember making those same fae charms for Rhun, as a child. I want to gather all these men to me and hug them. To apologise for all I’ve done, to wipe the dirt from their faces, to cry on their shoulders.

I never thought... I never dreamed they’d welcome me back so merrily.

Then a familiar voice rises ahead, making me start:

“Tamsin?”

I swivel around, see auburn hair, wild dark eyes. His face is paler than ever as he stares at me, bewildered, as though I were a hallucination.

Emrys.

Memories stream through me. Him as a child, clattering across the courtyard of Dumbarton fort with his father and brother, carrying furs for their tannery. The hours spent in orchards with him and Rhun, young cursed boys all sparring together with sticks. The first time he kissed me, spiriting me away behind a tree while the others fought and laughed in the light of golden afternoons.

It seems like I know him from another life. It doesn't even matter that I'd come to despise him afterward, when he returned from his training a fully-fledged knight of the Cavalier Order, haughtier than ever and ready to berate me for the slightest misconduct. Right then, the knowing we share is the knowing of countrymen.

Emrys is holding onto something. A pouch full of tin coins, tokens of valour that cursed boys win during their extensive training. It is Kelwynn's pouch.

A knot forms in my throat as I hold his gaze. Of those two little boys who grew up in our court, only one remains.

I stride over to him, fall to my knees and pull him into a hug. He makes a noise, curling an uncertain hand around my arm.

“I'm sorry,” I mutter into the folds of his chainmail hood. “I'm so sorry about Kelwynn.”

He sighs into my hair. When I move away, he frowns as though ashamed of such an ostentatious show of emotion, and wipes away his tears.

Looking around myself, I sober up quite abruptly.

I've come to a part of the pen that's full of dark silhouettes. The Cavaliers, all in black, their eyes turned to me.

There are far less fae charms and hopeful smiles here. They are a diligent, deeply Christian Order; they all wear grave expressions, and I shudder to think of all the uncomfortable questions they surely want to ask me.

I swallow hard. Remember my duty. I must find the captains, tell them of Olaf's plan.

All of these cursed men bear their dark knighthood with a gravitas that makes my hands tremble. They are far superior in strength and in piety to the infantry; they have all survived their wolfsbane trial, and earned their knighthood through a year's harsh training at the Church of Glascau. They wear their prizes proudly; the rosaries around their wrists, their wolfsbane tabards, and their black Galloway steeds.

They are all unhorsed now, unmanned and chained. But they have been such a constant shadow in my life, a reminder of rigour and virtue, that I find myself straightening my spine reflexively.

"Princess!"

I turn, find a familiar figure nearby. Broad-shouldered and sturdy, with neatly tied white hair and the graceful airs of a man who was fair in his youth; it is Captain Llewellyn, formerly of the palace guard. He calls me over to him, so I crouch beside him with my waterskin.

"Captain," I greet him, trying to be as formal as my role dictates. But he takes both my hands in his like the peasant folk, eyes shining.

"Thank God," he says. "Thank God you're alive, princess. The Vikings are holding you hostage, then?"

The word makes me balk. But how could I explain it otherwise? "... yes, they are."

I've found the captains; I have to say my piece. This is the moment. But to have authority now is a strange, singular thing. I remember feeling so powerless around the Cavalier Order before, and now... now they depend upon me and the good will of my allies, to get out of this alive.

"I've come to tell you something," I say. "We have friends among the Vikings. They've been taking care of me – and they plan to free you as soon as they can."

The Cavaliers around me are murmuring nonstop, relaying my words to those sitting further away. Captain Llewellyn frowns at me, still with that grave seriousness.

"Friends?" he asks. "Whom do you speak of?"

I try not to flinch as I answer him. "These men who are guarding you – they are the Dublin warband. I've managed to form a friendship with the three lords of Dublin... so I could best serve the country."

I try to word it as credibly as I can. Llewellyn's gaze bores into mine, incredulous. "The lords of Dublin?" He stares over the stone walls, looking over the Dubliners as though to pinpoint which ones they are. "You mean Thrain Mordsson and his brothers?"

"Yes, the very same."

He stares, barely hiding his contempt. Eventually he asks, "Princess, if I may ask – how in God's name have those three monsters come to be your friends?"

I tuck in my chin, heart twanging painfully.

How do I even begin to explain this?

How can I get any of them to trust the bond between the wolves and I, when their bloody reputation precedes them?

Llewellyn sees something in my silence. And then his gaze slips to my

neck, and he sees something even more damning still.

My hand flies to my cloak, pulling it closer over my mating mark. I thought I'd covered it. But it's too late.

"Oh," he says. "I see."

When I meet his eyes again, he is looking horribly sympathetic. Saints, he must be imagining that I offered myself to the Vikings like a martyred, unwilling slave.

His hands on mine tighten. "I'm sorry, princess. I'm very sorry this happened to you."

The Cavaliers around us saw the mark, too. To my horror, I hear them all discussing it now, whispering it to each other.

She's bitten.

Many of the older Cavaliers throw me strange glances. Llewellyn stares at our joint hands long and hard, as though not quite sure how to keep going.

Something in me lurches, a strange impression of falling.

"You know about the bite, then?" I ask him. "Why are we never taught anything about it?"

He looks distinctly uncomfortable to be broaching something so taboo. Quietly he says, "We keep the population ignorant of the bite, to dissuade cursed men from pursuing it. But of course, some do discover it. So there are daughters of Clota who must unfortunately bear the injury."

"What happens to them? Why have I never even seen a bitten woman before?"

His kind gaze is painful to bear. "It is because we take them to the convents of Cumberland, in Southern Strathclyde. They may convalesce there, and spend their lives in peace." Softly he adds, "Princess... I'm sorry to tell you this. But the bite corrupts you. It turns a woman mad."

The words thud into my gut.

“No... no, it doesn't, it...”

I try to line up my defense. Surely he only calls it madness because he doesn't understand the intricacies of it, nor how the pair-bond works. But when I lift my head, I find many other pitying eyes on me. And my defense shrivels up.

I've lost all credibility. Now that they've seen my mating mark, they either pity my latent madness, or revile me entirely for being bound to a Viking.

“Please,” I stammer, grappling to recover that lovely feeling of belonging. “I promise you it isn't madness that prompts my words. I speak the truth when I tell you that you have friends among the Vikings. I'm here to tell you to have hope.”

Llewellyn takes in a long breath, releases it again thoughtfully. Then he says, “I did wonder why many of the Vikings were sparing us left and right. And the giant bearded one over there – he allowed us to retreat. Didn't even try to pursue.”

“Yes, that's Olaf Gofraidsson, the eldest of the three brothers,” I tell him quickly. At least he takes me seriously enough to return to military discussion.

He nods, asks me more questions about the Dublin warband and how they're organised. From the resolute way he's looking at me, he's decided on his judgment; he will heed me regardless of the bite. But around him, other Cavaliers have clearly decided otherwise.

When I move on to offer them water, they refuse. Some won't even look at me now. They turn their heads, lean away as though I were a leper.

I stare at them. How pure and close to God they are, with their rosaries

and their wolfsbane bottles. They would send girls like me to the chapels, when we bore even the slightest pink flush on our cheeks; they encouraged us to beat away what sinful lust we may suffer. And now – to think some women are sent to spend the rest of their lives in convents, just because of one bite?

Christ, but they don't know half of what I've been through. They don't know *anything*, they're just as stuck-up and asinine as ever, sticking to their principles instead of *hearing* me –

I grit my teeth and force myself to get on with it.

When I return to Emrys, he wears that gratingly pitying expression too, as though I had announced some terminal illness. I kneel beside him, tugging my cloak closer around my neck.

"I'm so sorry, Tamsin," he mutters.

"Don't be," I tell him. There's something about his haggard, sorrowful state that makes me want to dare honesty. "I didn't suffer it. The bite confers protection, too; it changes our scent to repel cursed men. The one who gave it to me did it to protect me."

Instantly I know it was the wrong thing to say.

He withdraws and stares at me, aghast. "What, so you mean to say – you actually lay with one of them willingly? You're the one who instigated it?"

My mouth goes dry. He has the gall to ask it like an accusation – like I've wronged him personally!

"I knew you were capable of doing many things out of calculation, Tamsin," he goes on in disbelief. "But this – this is going too far."

I have no idea what I should say. What he even wants me to say. Why in God's name are they so intent on judging my virtue – when I'm trying to tell them that I've made allies, that I'm going to save their lives? They are chained

and held in a Viking siege camp, and *still* they choose to obsess like this about my sinfulness?

God, but I'd forgotten what a bunch of self-righteous bastards they all are.

"The fort in Dál Riata hosted thousands of cursed Vikings," I snap at Emrys. "Hundreds of warbands. And the full moon came, and Eormen and I were the only daughters of Clota there for miles. Do you really think she and I could've made many *calculated moves* in that situation?"

Emry's expression is turning from accusatory to hesitant.

"We did what we could to stay alive, so we could come here to help you," I finish, too angry to want to explain any more. "If you want to judge our means of survival, you do that, Emrys. Now do you want water or not?"

"Sorry," he says stiffly, at long last. "I know you must've been through a lot."

I shrug. "I'm going to go if you don't want to drink."

Without saying another word, he tilts up his head. I nudge the waterskin against his lips, holding it up for him. When water dribbles down his chin, I wipe it with my sleeve, as he's shackled and can't do it himself. The gesture makes him frown.

"How are you going to manage in the Viking camp?" he asks. "All by yourself?"

I can't tell if it's concern that prompts the question, or just another way to get me to admit to promiscuity. I glare at him, cork the waterskin.

"I suppose I'll leave that to your vast imagination," I tell him curtly. Then I turn on my heel and leave him there.

Christ. This is just a taste of what is to come... the judgment that awaits me here. And Eormen, too, if she decided to accept the bite from someone.

It doesn't matter. It shouldn't matter that the Cavaliers might think me mad or disgusting. I'm just one person, and there are so many here that depend on my actions and that of my allies. I need to be above their judgment; I'm here to help them, never mind that they might despise their helper.

I head for another group of infantrymen, straight-backed, even-paced. They reach out to me, thanking me for the water. If they heard of my bite, they don't seem to care; most of them only want to talk, to speak of those they lost, and take comfort from a princess's smile.

For every foul look, there is another man who will smile up at me – so I try to take courage from that, and prove to those baleful onlookers that I can still do good.

They're my people... my people.

Chapter 7



IVAR

Waning Moon of June

“*Ahh,*” I groan as I sit on a misshapen log. My entire body aches from the ceaseless toil. To sit, perchance to *rest*, seems the height of luxury.

The latest batch of prisoners have been successfully corralled into the pen. This whole day has been an endless back-and-forth between the battlefield of the King’s Garden and this cattle pen. Dragging the survivors from the grass, dusting them off, seeing which are mostly in one piece. Dumping the limbless and less fortunate at the healer’s tent we erected out there, then trudging here with the rest.

Father has been overseeing the process. He knows he will get a wolf’s share of the profit, as he always does when he carts his prisoners off to our slave market. I have no bloody clue how things will turn out this time around, since we don’t plan on selling any of these fine gentlemen – but it is as Olaf says.

One thing at a time.

Olaf lumbers towards me, lays a great paw on my shoulder.

“Is this the last of them?” he asks. I scoff.

“Not nearly,” I tell him. “The King’s Garden is still grimy with bodies. And the other warbands are plucking survivors out of the woods, and the Leven Port area... it’s going to take some time.” Yawning wide, I add, “We were going to do another sweep of the Garden before turning in for the night.”

“All right.” He squeezes my shoulder. “How are you faring?”

I laugh as I stretch out, feeling my spine pop. “Oh, I’m fantastic. It’s my favourite thing in the world, hauling unwashed men around like this. Really fulfilling.” Then my back twinges. “*Agh*... I promise you, all this camp set-up really does your back in.”

Olaf grins. “Aye, they say warring is a young man’s sport...”

“Excuse me.”

For a moment we both gaze tiredly at the mossy stone walls delineating the pen. The many soldiers and Cavaliers within have their heads bowed, a mutter of Brittonic in the air. We have a couple hundred already in there, and there are still many more to come.

“How many Britons are convalescing in the healer’s tent?” Olaf asks.

“We have a few dozen at least who could walk again, given some time.”

“Mm.” He combs his fingers through his beard, thinking hard. “If we’re to set sail with as many as we can... do you think it’s worth it to wait for the wounded?”

“I think so. There are enough of them for it to mark a difference,” I say. “For those who are in good enough shape, it would probably take me a couple of weeks to get them back on their feet.”

He breathes out slowly. “A couple of weeks... that would bring us close to the moon’s first quarter. It cannot be any longer than that.”

“All right. Two weeks, then.”

My men are returning from their break, waving over at me. I sigh as their readiness calls me back to work, reluctantly pushing off from my log.

And then I hear her arrive.

Tamsin’s voice cuts through the tangle of deep male timbers. Turning, I find her right there, cutting a stark black-clad figure at the entrance of the prisoner pen. She’s with Armod, handing him back the packhorse; they’re speaking together, looking serious. Then she nods at him, turns, and comes straight toward Olaf and I.

The sight of her steely expression hits me in the gut. So far I’ve only glimpsed her from afar, held her firmly away from my mind. There was so much to do, and someone had to protect her idiot of a husband. But now she’s so close, her sheer presence floods over me as she stands before us.

She fixes those moss-green eyes on mine, then says without preamble: “Armod told me you were looking for more survivors on the battlefield. I want to come.”

I let out a breath. She asks me boldly like this, without so much as a hello, because she knows it’s ludicrous.

“Tamsin,” Olaf speaks first. “The work we’re doing out there is hardly fit for a princess –”

“They’re my countrymen,” she says. “And I’m not much of a princess, anyway, as you well know.”

“Please, princess,” Olaf rumbles, taken aback by her fiery tone. “You’ve already helped us immensely today. You should rest.”

“Why should I be the only one to rest, while you’re all working so hard?”

Let me help. Let me make myself useful.”

I exchange a glance with Olaf. She’s seen battle aftermaths already, and she’s participated in her own share of bloody carnage. But this is different, it’s hands-on work; somehow, trying to save someone’s life is often more gruesome than ending it.

“I’m not sure Thrain would be keen on you plucking men out of the muck,” I tell her.

The mention of Thrain pulls her back from her vigour. She opens her mouth, lost for words a moment.

“Perhaps she could help in the healer’s tent,” Olaf suggests. “Thrain wanted us to watch over you while he stayed on perimetre duty, princess. If you work with the healers, Ivar could keep an eye on you that way.”

Tamsin has gone quite still at the idea that Thrain might’ve discussed her with us like this, even while he slunk away into the woods with his tail between his legs. I can still see his shamed expression, his grey-faced sorrow. I’d clutched him, berated him for this sentimentality we have no time for; but he’d only shaken his head at me.

We’re breaking her, he said to me. *We’re breaking everything she holds dear.*

He spoke as though she were made of glass, but she’s much stronger than he gives her credit for. I saw her bent in deep conversation with the Cavalier captains, moving with all the authority of her royal station. It irritates me, how he makes her out to be some poor helpless child when she’s been so composed thus far, dutifully playing her role.

I know he would rather spare her all of this, shut her away while the siege clatters on. But he knows just like we do, that the only way forward now is to

make the most of our position in this camp, and in Father's confidence. We must all put in the work if we're to save this place.

"All right," I tell her. "But you must stay close to me and the Dubliners. Don't go wandering about; we'll be treading the territory of many different warbands out there. You hear?"

She nods, resolute. When she falls into step beside me, I try to flatten the small smile that's pulling at my mouth. This is *very* far removed from any type of courtship, of course, but...

I can't say I'm not pleased to have her with me, for once.

* * *

The wind has picked up by the time we return to Dumbartonshire's main square. Tamsin dogs my footsteps as we head together toward the large healer's tent we erected.

She steps in, eyes on her countrymen. Thankfully we found enough hemp sheets to cover most of them; they're laying on cots now, their flowery tabards and armour piled beside them. Though many are bloody and moaning, she decidedly does not shy away.

The Cathalain shieldmaidens are helping us to restore them. One of the women comes forward, and Tamsin is quickly pulled into the work. As she can speak Brittonic, she finds her role soon enough. The wounded Britons recognise her, and she pulls her cloak closer around her neck as she bends to soothe them.

I watch her, fascinated by her resilience. Any other girl of her age and status would surely balk before such a grimy task. But she forges onward bravely, her face set. I wish I could stay and listen to that sing-song Brittonic

of hers, but I have to leave her there; the entrance of the tent is visible from the King's Garden, so I may keep an eye on her as I return to my toil.

My men and I stride through the King's Garden one last time. Crows circle overhead in the late evening sun, gathering to watch us as we bend over the many bodies.

There are still a few writhing Cavaliers hauling themselves toward the bow range of the wall. Even as they spit at me and protest my help, it's difficult not to respect the lads as I pluck them up and lean them against me.

Of all the battlefields I've known, I have never fought such difficult opponents. Skilled, tireless, their commanders wielding absolute control. Olaf and I could only dream of having our Vyrgen so neatly moving in and out of formation.

One of the Briton lads I find in the grass glares up at me, bloodied but very much alive. I remember him – sword lifted, eyes wild with bloodlust. This one almost gutted me.

“We meet again,” I greet him. Then, summoning what little Brittonic I know: “*Noswaith dda.*” *Good evening.*

He hisses through his bloody mouth: “Eat shit and die, Viking.”

I grin at him as I bend to scoop him from the grass. “Aye, that's the spirit.”

He struggles weakly as I rid him of his weapons and haul his arm over my shoulder. These boys are so small – his feet barely touch the ground as I march him along.

Reflexively I glance toward the healer's tent, and find Tamsin there, an apron tied around her dress. She's staring at us, eyes wide. Then, she plucks her skirt up and rushes to join us, feet sinking into sodden earth.

“Tamsin,” I warn her, but she reaches my Briton lad in a heartbeat,

flanking his other side.

“Bowen,” she breathes while the lad grunts at her in recognition. “Are you all right?”

“You know him?” I ask her.

“Yes, he was part of the fort garrison,” she wheezes out. He’s weighing on her now, his armour and chainmail only adding to the burden.

“Tamsin, let me take him –”

“No, let me help. I can help.”

She doggedly stays by him, though he’s surely too heavy for her. So we haul him together to the tent, until the waiting Dubliners can pluck him from us.

She staggers a little as she lets him go; I find myself catching her, pulling her closer in the milling of many men. She watches as those still-breathing Britons are brought in.

“Will they be all right?” she asks me.

I let myself gaze down at her at last.

Her face is etched with determination. Though there is so much destruction around her, she does not even wince.

Pride thrums in me. Thrain’s wrong about this girl; she’s stronger than iron. She’s proven that to us so many times already.

“I’m sure we’ll save a good number of them,” I tell her. She nods, then abruptly turns back to the Garden, following the others. “Tamsin – I don’t think you should be tramping around out there!”

She throws me a glare over her shoulder. Her stubbornness makes me grin. But there is nothing I can say to dissuade her now; she’s set on this.

So we return to the Garden together to find the last survivors.

A restless sort of hope animates her. I thought she might weep for her

own kin, like Rhun did; he all but came apart. But she seems to have stitched herself so tight that nothing is emerging. She moves with the energy of the responsible sibling, like Olaf, taking it upon herself to navigate the storm.

The crows circle around her, perch on planted spears and discarded shields. She pushes back her ginger curls, speaks in Brittonic to the wounded. And I feel I am just like the crows – a scavenger perched over this precious scene, this time alone with her that is so rarely mine to enjoy.

I stare at her graceful profile, the notable absence of tear tracks on her cheeks. The blazing look she wears as she stands fearlessly on this battlefield. The sight of her sends chills down my spine; here is a Vanirdottir in the flesh, blessing the dead with her presence. But she is also Tamsin... Tamsin, the girl we've travelled with for the past moon. The girl who claimed us as pack, all red eyes and sharp, hungry claws.

I know the others feel the same as I while we move around her; this bone-deep belonging of pack. She may speak with her kin, she may bend over them protectively.

But she is ours, now.

Steadily, darkness falls. We both work by the light of the great firepit out in the main square, and the torches we've brought into the healer's tent. Even as I set the night watch and wash my hands of all the grime, she's still sitting with one of the Briton men, speaking to him softly.

"Tamsin. Come here, lamb."

She pushes herself up and comes to me. We've not spoken much, but to be around her, brushing past her, working together... the glow of her company has settled in my bones like the warmth of a fire. I allow myself one indulgence; a hand on her shoulder, my fingers digging in possessively.

"I should bring you back to our section of camp," I tell her softly. "It's

getting late.”

“Can I come back here with you tomorrow?”

I tilt my head in thought. “Olaf already wants you to care for the prisoners up at the pen. I wouldn’t want to overwork you.”

She lowers her eyes then, wearing a sort of weary resignation on her face. “The men up there need water, and these ones need reassurance,” she says. “There are many hours in the day. I would rather keep busy. Everyone keeps saying *rest, rest*, but resting is the last thing I want to do.”

I stroke back her curls, tucking them behind her ear. I have the distinct impression she wants to keep hurtling onward so she might not have to stop and let herself feel. But it is hard to resist the idea of spending all that time in her company, even if we must work back to back.

“All right,” I tell her. “But you must promise me to at least *occasionally* do as you’re told. I can’t protect you if you insist on scurrying off by yourself through the camp –”

“I don’t mean to *scurry*,” she protests. Then she angles those green-gold eyes at me, and I could swear she’s on the verge of a smile. “I promise I’ll listen to you. Occasionally.”

I grin at her. “Good enough, I suppose.”

I take one of the torches so I might lead her out of here, and we head out, toward the siren song of sleep.

Chapter 8



IVAR

New Moon of July

She works alongside me the following days, readying the wounded for the journey that lies ahead of us. She doesn't have much skill in healing, but she labours to make herself useful; carrying water, translating, staying with the Briton lads when they're in for a chop, a splint or a stitch.

Her sights are always fixed on who might need her next. So much so that she forgets to eat, forgets to care for herself. Her braided hair is wilder than ever, and she stuffs it away in a cloth instead of tending it properly. I have to pull her away, push bread and cheese into her hands. She eats unthinkingly, always drifting to the next groaning Briton soldier.

I know she is stretching herself thin, between the prisoner pen and this healing tent. Her nights with Rhun cannot be restful, either; Nýr tells me how Rhun spurns her and everyone else, moaning into his pillows, sleeping all day and all night.

Soon it has been a week since we first arrived, and she is no closer to resting. There are some moments where she steps away – some moments when she even smiles. Bursts of summer rain have everyone running for cover, leaving smatters of rainbows over the fort. Father’s men try to herd what livestock they’ve found, and we often see them staggering half-drunk across the square, shaking their fists at a runaway cow.

But out in the King’s Garden, the Cathalain women are slowly building a pyre. And if ever Tamsin finds her smile, it is quick to flatten again as she watches them work. They’ve piled logs all around to keep feeding it once we light it; it will have to burn hot for many days, if we’re to go through all the bodies.

Finally, the night comes when the pyre is done and dry enough to begin the burning. A Cathalain woman comes to tell me they’ll start the ceremony soon, so I catch Tamsin’s eye, wondering. Thrain is away, as he always is, on perimeter duty; though he checks on her, he allows me full authority over her in the meantime. I wonder... would she want to stay?

She comes to me, working a cloth over her grimy hands.

“It’s the new moon tonight,” I tell her softly. “They will light the pyre in the King’s Garden.”

She stares outside at the great mass of wood, and the covered lines of men beside it; Vikings on one side, Britons on the other. Something seems to occur to her quite suddenly.

“You’re going to burn them? The Britons too?” she asks.

“Yes, we are.”

“You can’t do that. We don’t – we don’t do it like that.”

Ah gods, I should’ve known. Christians.

“There are too many of them to bury,” I tell her. “If we don’t burn them

then they'll attract pestilence and vermin."

That makes her flinch. "But we have hallowed grounds," she insists. "A little way off to the east. That is where we bury our dead."

I glance at the trees. "How far? Is it inside the camp perimeter?"

She falters. "I don't think so. But by horse, it isn't so far..."

She must realise what she's asking. Father's army has built a solid perimeter all around Dumbartonshire to stave off attackers; if a group of us branches off to bury the dead, we'd be risking our lives.

"Tamsin, we'd have to travel there," I say. "And then spend the better part of a day digging a trench long and deep enough for all these men. We'd be offering up our backs to your archers like pheasants lined up for a culling."

She swallows hard. "I... I hear you, but..." Her hand rises to fiddle with her Yggdrasil pendant. "Maybe we could find somewhere closer, then?"

"Where?" I ask her. "You want us to dig between the houses? Or perhaps in your King's Garden?"

That distresses her. "No. No, but what about in the trees?" she says thinly. "Maybe that way we can –"

"We?" I echo. "We'll certainly not let you do that kind of work. And I doubt we'll find a party of men who'd want to toil for the dead, either."

She glares at me. "You can command them, can't you?"

"You've never dug a pit, princess. It's hard work. A useless expenditure of energy when an attack could come at any moment."

"Oh, and building a pyre isn't a useless expenditure of energy?"

"We're in the centre of the village. We don't have to lug all these bodies halfway through the forest. You have to think of the pragmatics."

"Pragmatics," she echoes in a hollow sort of voice. As though she can't

believe I would put it that way.

Hm. Maybe that *was* a little callous.

“How in God’s name can you just talk like that?” she accuses me. “You’re heartless. You’re just – so completely detached from everything.”

“I have to be, lamb,” I tell her. “Wouldn’t be much use to anyone if I climbed up into my own head, would I?”

“You could stand to show *some* human emotion,” she snaps.

Ha. Human emotion, indeed. Thrain’s out there having more than enough *human emotion* for the both of us; in the meantime, I have to shoulder all of this and try not to make a mess of it.

She returns to her wounded lads without another word. It isn’t before dinnertime that I approach her again, as the Dubliners are passing around food. We both take some, and I deliberate over whether to bring her back to our camp. But she sits quietly beside me, eyes still on the pyre, holding her untouched food in a loose grip; I can’t bring myself to pull her away when she is watching so intently.

The Cathalain women are kneeling by our dead men’s sides, washing their faces. They all died in a blaze of glory; they’re counting on us to send them on to meet Odin with all the proper rites. The women trace sooty bind-runes on greying skin to protect the dead on their journey.

Their mutterings tighten the air with intent and prayer. The feeling of their magic tugs at my bones. Tamsin is silent as she watches them work, all ashen and exhausted now. She’s not going to eat; that much is obvious.

Tch. I was far too callous with her. There was surely a different way to handle this.

I reach for her, slick back a curl of her wild hair. “Would you like us to collect offerings for your men?” I ask her, more softly now. “There are

hydrangea bushes over there.”

Wordlessly she nods. I take her with me to the towering flower bushes, and we pick blue bunches together. She frowns down at her armful as though mulling over a thought.

Finally she asks, “Why do you burn your men?”

The question is so simple, yet it throws me off-guard. Nobody asks such things.

“Do you really want me to explain it to you?” I ask her warily. Surely it would only come across as more callousness, to start theorising at a time when a less *heartless* man might mourn.

But she only nods. So I breathe in, mulling over a simple explanation.

“Well... man’s shape is changeable,” I tell her. “In the form of ash, one may travel on the wind far further than one might on foot.”

That only confuses her. “I don’t understand. You say *changeable*, but to burn isn’t to change; it’s to be destroyed.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure I’d agree.”

I know Christians are very attached to the purity and integrity of their bodies. It will be difficult to explain something so contrary to her own beliefs. I turn more fully to face her, gesticulating with flower-laden fingers as I speak:

“All right. Bear with me for a moment. You’ll agree that a man cannot change so much at will, yes? Under the full moon we may grow sharp teeth and red eyes, but naught else. Women are another example – your shape changes when with child. But while we are in Midgard, we cannot change much beyond the shape we were born with.

“Now Odin, if you remember, knows much more deep magic than us. He may change his shape into many things, animals and trees and the like. He

and the gods know these laws far better than we do. When a dead man's ashes arrive at Odin's hall, the gods may change him back to his usual shape."

She nods along, thoughtful now. She seems calmer, to be keeping these things in the realm of hypothetical discussion rather than facing the rough reality that surrounds us.

She asks, "So when you send them off to – to Odin's hall, you don't keep any part of them here? Even relics or things like that?"

Her outlandish reasoning makes me scoff. "You cannot separate a person into multiple parts. No use leaving a man's feet in Midgard if he needs them in Valhöll."

"But then," she insists, frowning, "if their graves are empty, if there's nothing left of a person on this Earth... where do you go to mourn them? Where do you go to talk to them, after they're gone? If their soul has no anchor in this world, then surely you can't reach them."

"Of course we can reach them. They must only return to the door from which they exited this world."

"You mean their graves? To you, they are doors?"

"In a sense." With the lines of dead men beyond, I had better not tell her of the undead, the *draugr*, who decide to drag themselves out from their graves though they have no place in Midgard any longer. "The dead are ever restless," I mutter.

She frowns thoughtfully. "You say you cannot separate a man into multiple parts," she says. "But the soul – the soul is separate."

"The *soul*," I repeat the Gaelic word, the one that has fascinated me for a long time. "We don't have a term for that."

She stares at me. "You mean you don't believe in souls at all?"

I gaze back at her curiously. “I don’t rightly know what they are.”

That makes her laugh a short, surprised laugh, though it holds no mirth. “I wouldn’t know how to explain it,” she says. “They are a man’s own essence. The light in you that animates you, the light that God placed there. It acts upon the body, makes it survive when all seems lost. Your soul is the purest form of who you are.”

I watch her, fascinated. “So everyone has a soul? It isn’t something you have to build?”

“I’m not sure if everyone has one,” she says. “Some people say heathens don’t have souls.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” I say. “After all, it isn’t your god that animated us.”

She stands there, as though made uncomfortable by the idea that there is no godly light shining in me or any of the Vikings that mill around. For a moment we walk in silence, bringing our flowers to honour her dead. I think on her explanation as we walk along the row of Briton soldiers; Tamsin keeps her eyes on her flowers.

“We do have something similar, I think,” I say at length. “A skilled sorceress may throw out her mind, her spirit if you will – if that is the correct translation – into another realm, even while her body remains in Midgard. But that is a skill reserved for the gods and sorcerers. A regular man should not let his mind slip away.”

She tilts her head. “You conflate mind and spirit; you speak of something that is mortal?”

“Yes.”

“Hm. Then it isn’t the same as the soul.” She crouches, places a little bunch of blue flowers upon the chest of a man. I crouch beside her, too

involved now in the conversation to even mind what it is we're doing. "Is there nothing that lives on forever?"

"There is," I say. "A man has his name, his reputation, the legacy he's built. The luck that has borne him through life. If you want a man's advice, you ask his son, who carries on his name." I gesture at the line of Vikings just ahead, where one of my best warriors lies. "That is Hjor; he has a good, strong name. His son back in Dublin will be glad to carry it."

She hums thoughtfully, reflecting on our conversation just as I am. There are Cathalain women near us, still painting bind-runes upon pale skin. They move around the men; I pull her back so we might leave them space. Tamsin watches them work intently.

"Those runes they painted on Hjor's face, and the dead all around," she says at length. "You wear the same. Your tattoos."

Astute girl. I touch the side of my head without thinking.

"Some of these are protective spells," I tell her quietly. "The Cathalain paint those runes to secure safe travels for the dead. This serves a similar function."

Her eyes roam over the spidery runes that climb up my neck and arch over my shaved skull. "What does it say?"

"*The gods are under me and over me,*" I tell her. "It is part of a larger spell."

Still she stares. "I thought it was just decorative," she mutters. "But it's pagan magic, then, what you wear on your skin."

"Pagan magic," I echo, amused. "We call it *fjölkyngi*, if you want to call it by its proper name. Protection is one of its main branches, and runes one of its many tools. That bind-rune you see there, on Hjor's forehead – it is made of the runes *raido* and *algiz*, for protection on the long road to Odin's hall."

That fascinates her. “So you know all about this – this magic?”

I can’t help but smile. It isn’t something I speak of; those closest to me know better than to ask me point-blank about magic. But she is so candid in her curiosity.

It’s a strange evening, the pyre and the Cathalain’s spells giving the atmosphere a unique raw quality. I’m standing in the heart of her childhood; it seems only fitting that I might show her the heart of mine.

“I don’t practice it, but I know it,” I tell her. Then, since we are already speaking in quiet tones of these deep things, I decide to admit it to her: “My mother was a Völva; a sorceress, if you will. So there are certain things I learned by observation.”

She’s rooted to her spot.

“I didn’t know you were born a witch’s son,” she says.

That makes me smirk. “Indeed. You see now why the title of *prince* doesn’t sit well on my shoulders.”

She’s frowning as she takes this in, perhaps imagining what kind of childhood a boy has who grows up in the herb-strewn cavern of a Völva. Then she looks up at me, as though seeing me in a different light.

“Is there a reason you don’t practice magic?” she asks.

Tension creeps across my shoulders. “I just don’t.”

“Is it because women’s magic is dishonourable?” she asks. “Here any woman practicing magic would be accused of doing the devil’s work.”

I scoff at that. “No. On the contrary. *Fjölkyngi* is not reserved to women, nor is it dishonourable to learn,” I tell her. “It is women who excel at it, though. Freya herself taught Odin many things; and he went to Hel many times, seeking out ancient sorceresses to add to his knowledge.”

“So you respect your sorceresses, then?”

Hmm. *Respect*. I think on that a moment. In every settlement I've lived in, there has been a group of wisewomen among us, drifting across our settlements to deliver their auguries, receiving us in their caverns for blessings or healing. I think on the way we view them; the wisewoman is respected, yes, but not necessarily appreciated.

"We respect our Völvas as you might respect a thunderstorm," I tell her. "What they do is dangerous work. Best to stay at a distance from it all and let it run its course."

She's quiet for a moment. Then she tilts her head contemplatively and says, "You know, I still think the title of prince suits you."

The simple honesty of her words thuds into me like an arrow.

"What makes you say that?" I ask.

"You speak like one." Then, more wryly; "You give yourself all the airs of one, too."

I grin. "I knew you weren't just going to freely offer me a compliment."

"No, but I do mean it. You know so much," she says. "I've not had many opportunities to speak like this before."

I gaze at her, this delightful girl, and try not to let her see just how pleased I am to be in her company alone. To enjoy this, though the circumstances really should not lend themselves to enjoyment. To see her so somber and profound gives me an odd rush. The Norns deemed it fit to tie our threads together; of course she would have these appetites for deep conversation.

"My pleasure, lamb," I tell her. "But we'd better get back to our section. I've let you linger here long enough."

"Oh... would it be all right if I stayed awhile longer?" she asks me. All traces of benign curiosity are gone now as she gazes down at the line of her

fallen kinsmen's tabards. "Someone should pray for them."

I grit my jaw. I cannot keep a Vanirdottir from weaving her own spells, though they're spoken in the Latin of the Christian god. I nod at her, looking on in fascination as she goes to kneel by the chainmail-clad bulk of a Cavalier, and places her little hand upon him.

She signs the cross and prays. And I leave her and the others to their spell-weaving, while I stand on the outskirts and watch as I always have.

* * *

Night has fallen when the men gather around the pyre, readying to send off their brethren. Olaf has returned, the fire glowing on the gold he wears. From what the Dubliners told me, Thrain is securing our portion of Dumbartonshire as ever; someone must always stay to make sure the fires are lit and the perimeter guarded.

Perhaps he hopes that she may forgive him if he stays out of her sight. I'm not sure she shares this idea of needing space away from him; she is so quiet and exhausted now, following me around as though she might crumble if she stops moving.

She stays silent and reverent as she watches our funerary rites, still dry-eyed, still walking through this endless aftermath with quiet resignation.

The elder Cathalain offer us a long ribbon to hold, so we may all be united around the pyre. Tamsin does not take it; she shrinks against me as I fold my fingers around it. My free hand settles naturally on her waist; she stays close to me, envelops me in the homey scent she wears in between moons.

To have her here... though she does not mean it, her presence is significant to everyone around this pyre. She is consecrating it without effort, simply by lending her presence to the passage of our men. She is as Freya's afterimage; she offers them luck on their path to Odin's hall.

The elder Cathalain lift their hands all around the pyre as the flames grow and expand to a mighty brazier. One of them beats a wide drum as they sing the dead onward. They intone the words of Odin, their harsh voices melding with the crackling of the fire until it seems the pyre itself is speaking.

I translate the words into Tamsin's hair, to honour the dead myself, and so she may better understand the value of a name.

*“... cattle die, and kinsmen die,
And so one dies oneself;
One thing now that never dies,
The fame of a dead man's deeds.”*

She tilts her head, appreciative of the translation. But the words stay stuck in my throat after I've spoken them, as I stare at that billowing smoke above.

Indeed, our deeds will never die. We have changed this place forever, and those deeds will echo through time. They will touch those Vanirdøtur who live in these lands, and the children born to us, who must bear our names whether they like it or not.

Soot prickles my eyes as I watch the fire burning. The land of my dreams is lit orange with the funeral pyre; and the Vanirdottir who stands by me watches on, silent and dry-eyed.

* * *

“Is Thrain still on his watch?” she asks once we’re walking back through our red banners, both of us still blinking away blind spots from the burning pyre.

To see her looking around for him reminds me of my role. I cannot pretend her and I are alone any longer. Thrain entrusted me with his Vanirdottir; I’m to bring her to the prison house tonight, like every night, unless he decides otherwise and collects her himself. As always, I am toeing the line, treading carefully across territory that is not mine.

My Varg instincts may snarl at the indignity of it, that I must bow in deference and stay in my place. But I’m used to this. These moments with her... they are made all the more vivid by how ephemeral they are.

“Thrain should’ve gotten back by now,” I tell her. Then, frowning; “Don’t you feel him through the bond?”

She says nothing for a moment. I wonder if she’s testing it; the idea of their connection brews as much fascination in me as it does envy.

“He’s cut himself off,” she admits at last. “I don’t know how he did it. We both struggled to do it while the fighting went on, and then... he shut it, and now it’s as though there were no bond at all.”

What? He would cut himself off *now* of all times, and leave her entirely alone for a *week*? Even when he’s been pining after her, himself? Surely he must’ve realised by now that giving her space isn’t any kind of favour; she’s leaning against me, all but searching for companionship, the evening weighing heavily on her.

“I’ll go find him for you,” I grit out. “He can’t be far.”

“No, don’t go bothering him for nothing. I need to get back to my brother, anyway...”

“Tamsin,” I tell her, stopping us both. “Enough of this nonsense. Look at me. When was the last time you took some time for yourself?”

She just stares at me, deadened. I point to the baker’s house. “This was meant to be yours; the men prepared it for you on the first day. You’ll find everything you might need in there to build a nest. So I’ll go fetch your husband, drag him here, and he can take care of you instead of keeping his distance like a halfwit.”

She’s speechless for a moment. Then, quietly she says, “I don’t think Thrain will want to do that.”

“Well, I’m not going to give him a choice.”

A ghost of a smile flickers on her mouth. She dithers there a moment, still gazing at the door to the baker’s house. It’s carved with a familiar Celtic motif, three spirals locked together. She lays her hand on it.

“Go on,” I encourage her. “There are some sacks of grain in there, just push them aside.”

“But this is Angharad’s house,” she says faintly. “The baker. I can’t just barge into her house...”

“She isn’t here, lamb,” I tell her. She’s getting a little delirious with fatigue. She should know these houses are no longer homes belonging to families; they are the camping site of an army. “It’s one of the largest houses. You’ll be comfortable.”

She still won’t open the door. I push it open for her, offer her my torch.

“Here. Light the hearth, get yourself warmed up.”

Imbued with purpose, she finally steps inside. I leave her to get her bearings, striding away to begin my hunt for Thrain. Halfway across the neighbourhood, I finally find him – both of my brothers are marching together nearby, leading their patrol group of Dubliners.

“Thrain!” I bark at him, and he falters in his tracks, glancing over at me. “I put her in the baker’s house. She needs you.”

The words carve a dent in his brow. “No she doesn’t,” he mutters.

Oh, this absolute *troll*. I can only fight the urge to whack some sense into him.

“Yes she does,” I say calmly. “She was explicitly asking for you.”

He doesn’t even see the privilege he has. To think he might turn it away like this is just madness.

“You’ve been with her, haven’t you?” he asks.

“Yes, but –”

“Then stay with her.”

Gods, do I really have to spell it out for him? “Thrain,” I say, trying for patience, opening a hand in the air. “You are her husband. She is asking for her husband. I’m not the man she loves, am I? So. You should go to her.”

His blue eyes are clear as ice as he stares me. I hear what he’s thinking, though he has too much tact to speak it.

That’s exactly why you should stay. She doesn’t love you. It’s easier to be around you, to bear the hurt if it comes from you.

I let my hand fall to my thigh, sighing in annoyance, pretending there is no cold spell spreading in my chest. “Brother, you’re the one she’s always turned to for comfort –”

“And now I’ve killed her kin,” he growls at me. “And put her brother in chains right in front of her. Do you think she’ll want me in her bed? Do you really think I can give her any comfort now?”

“Well, you’d know what she wants if you looked into the pair-bond, wouldn’t you?” I seethe at him. “You were given the privilege of a pair-bond, the first in *centuries*, and you’re too much of a coward to even look into it –”

That makes him fist my tunic, a growl stuttering in his chest. Olaf places a great paw on his shoulder, giving us both a short warning growl that tempers Thrain's.

"Down," Olaf barks at us. "Ivar, you stay with her for now. Watch duty alternates after midnight, so you can both switch then."

Thrain turns, frowning. "But –"

"You both need to sleep," Olaf snaps at us. "And she's alone in that house while you butt your thick heads together. Ivar, go back to her. Now."

There is no arguing with him. Thrain and I share one last glance; him, the golden boy, the one who's had wide open eyes since the beginning, whom Tamsin trusts more than anyone. And me, the scavenger smeared in black blood, who's already making a mess of this.

"Midnight, then," I tell him with a stiff nod. He returns it. I wait for him to give me some message to communicate to his wife, but he only turns, stony-faced, and resumes his night watch.

Chapter 9



TAMSIN

New Moon of July

I've never been in Angharad's house. The central hearthstone is prettily decorated, with enough space around it for a family to sit during meal-times. Rolled-up furs hang from the low ceiling rafters; I take them one by one, unroll them to lay around the fire so that it looks more lived-in. The bedding materials are similarly rolled up and tucked away, everything stowed above-ground to protect it from vermin.

To the left of the hearthstone is the large family-sized bed, surrounded by coffers among which I recognise my own. To the right are the grain sacks, a desk and a set of shelves bearing oddments of earthenware and children's wooden toys. There are no candles anywhere; the main source of light is the hearth.

It's strangely comforting to go through the motions of unrolling hemp sheets and preparing the bed. I had a nursemaid who would do this for me up

at the fort, prepare my room like this, her hands moving in mindless domestic motions. I try to mimic her now; I've never had to do this myself.

I must've slept only once or twice in these types of large roundhouses. When there were festival nights in the village, my nursemaid Hilda would invite me to stay with her family. It was so different from life at the fort, with all its stone walls and high ceilings, its servants waiting upon you hand and foot. Here, the low roof serves every function; pantry, wardrobe, shelter. The rafters all rise around you so that you feel embraced by a small forest; if you need anything, you may simply reach up into its branches and take it.

There's no food hanging from the rafters now. Angharad's family must've taken their perishables and valuables to the fort. Though Angharad's bread oven is in its own section, a dependency adjoining the house, there's still a faint smell of baking bread in here sweetening the air.

Once the sheets are laid down, I sit on the hay-stuffed bed and close my eyes. It smells so reassuring. The thatched roof envelops me in earthy notes of tree sap and rye straw, the smoke from the fire sifting through the bunched strands to dissipate into the night sky.

Home... if I close my eyes and stop thinking... I'm home. Hilda and her sister would be pottering by the hearth, making sure it doesn't go out. Then she'd open the door and call for her girls to come in for the night... and we'd all squeeze into the family bed.

It was so much warmer and livelier than having my own room at the fort. The way Cinnie and her sisters would all be bunched around me as we slept... I can still smell it, the musk of girls piled together, the slightly stale breath.

The feeling of safety and contentment.

I open my eyes again. I'm so tired, but the urge to complete this feeling

pushes me to search for more furs, more comfortable things. This place makes a good nest already, once the door is shut and I can pretend nothing exists beyond this thatched sanctuary.

I'm unrolling the winter furs and sheepskins onto the bed when the door creaks open. I turn, ready to apologise to Angharad for taking over her house; then Ivar stoops in, far too tall for the squat Briton-sized doorway.

He carries a water bucket with him. I brush down the furs absently as I watch him take in his surroundings, the way I've prepared the place. It feels overwhelmingly like play-acting; neither of us belong here, yet we're moving around the place like newlyweds settling in for the night.

I should be more nervous. This is the first time I've spent so long alone in Ivar's company. And the sleek black-clad lines of his body spell one thing: *danger*.

But at the same time... I'm too tired to care. About anything.

"I found Thrain," he tells me as he sets the bucket down by the shelves. I watch him numbly as he rummages for a bowl and folded hemp cloths. "He's taken the night watch. He should come after midnight."

Thrain... a small thrill of expectation kicks up in me only to vanish again when I realise he isn't here, now; he won't be coming for a while. I hum to let Ivar know I've heard. Words are too hard to form. There are none in my mind; only sensations, animal urges for comfort and sleep, for all the noise to cease.

When I next blink to awareness, Ivar's sitting by the firepit, pulling off his chainmail and tunic. He dunks a cloth into the bucket so he might wash the grime off his skin. I have a cloth in my hand, too; I'm holding it limply, staring down at the dark, rippling water, the glints of orange light that dance across it.

“Tamsin.”

Cold water trickles over my palms, along my fingers. I look up, find Ivar kneeling beside me, rubbing the damp hemp cloth over my hands. His brow is furrowed as he works. He doesn't try to prompt me further; has he been trying to talk to me? I don't even remember. He seems strangely subdued compared to earlier.

I stare at the runes that arch over his shaved skull, travelling down his neck in spindly lines. Stark black curves of ink cover his pectorals, arrowheads fanning out from them. A wide circle of Celtic knotwork rises over his hip, disappearing into his breeches.

Beautiful.

He unlaces my shoes, picks them off my feet. Then, not caring about the grimy state they're in, he hauls each foot in his lap to wash them. He's silent as he works; his fingers knead into the soles and under my toes, making me close my eyes and sigh.

For all the intimacy we've might've shared so far, this feels more intimate than anything else. He isn't weaving any erotic spells in my ear; he isn't making a performance of it. If anything he looks almost uncomfortable to be sharing something so raw.

Then his lovely kneading hands are gone, and he's stooping over the coffers. I can't fathom how he can move so fast; how he can have so much of his head.

“Here,” he says. Something appears in my palms; a slab of jerky, a hunk of cheese. My mouth feels so dry, surely they'll choke me if I try to eat them.

“I'm not hungry,” I manage.

“You have to eat something.” He's got some kind of thin stick in his mouth; he's had one at his lips this whole week. He holds it loosely now

between his teeth as he cuts up the meat.

“What is that?” I ask him. “You’re always chewing on one of those.”

He plucks it from his mouth. “This? It’s liquorice root. Want to try it?”

It’s all chewed and slick on one end; he’s grinning as he offers me the opposite end. I try nibbling on it, and the taste of raw liquorice bursts over my tongue. It’s what he tastes like, what lingers in his scent, but it’s far too strong from the root.

“Might be a bit much, that one,” he chuckles as I grimace and hand it back. Then as he rummages through the coffers, the clink of glass resounds in the quiet. “Oh... what’s this doing here?”

I look up and find him holding a pot of something golden. He takes out another, surprised to find such a bounty in those coffers.

“Must be a gift from somebody... Freya, that smells good,” he mutters. Then he sits beside me on the bed with a huff, popping open the lid of the pot. “Here, take a sniff of this.”

The lush golden scent of honey overwhelms me as he holds the pot under my nose. I lift my chin as it soothes my soul like a healing balm.

“Can’t say no to that, can you?” Ivar asks, a smile in his voice.

I watch him as he scoops some out on his little finger, sucks it off and hums with delight. He offers the pot to me, but I shake my head.

“You shouldn’t do that,” I mutter. “It’s rude, not using a spoon.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realise they’re absurd in this context. But I can’t line my thoughts up properly.

There’s something... something beyond this tiredness; something I’m terrified of feeling. Absurdity seems infinitely preferable.

“Come on. I know you’ll like this.”

He nudges my mouth with his thumb, rubs the honey along my lower lip.

The intimacy of his touch makes me jerk to attention. Cheeks heating, I turn to break the contact; the honey clings, slick and sticky, and I raise my hand to hide my mouth as I lick it away.

God, that's divine. I suck on my lower lip, the sweetness of the honey setting off sparks behind my eyelids. It rushes through me, giving me a burst of energy, enough to wake me up properly to the present moment.

Ivar's black eyes are oddly gentle as he watches me. He touches my wrist, coaxes my hand down.

"No need to hide from me," he murmurs, making me flush. "It's good, isn't it?"

"Um – yes, it's lovely," I stammer. I scoop some with my index finger, just so I don't have to look at him.

"I'm not sure honey alone is much of a dinner," he says. "But then, I think we can do as we like tonight."

There's some childish petulance about that as we both dig in, scooping up honey with our fingers. He smears some over the cheese he brought out, so we eat that too, the savours lighting up my palate.

"Cheese and honey," Ivar teases through his mouthful. "A fitting dinner for a princess. Would Your Grace like a bath of mare's milk with that?"

"You can't really talk," I protest. "Under the full moon, you have entire barrels of mead for your dinner, don't you?"

He scoffs. "Mm. Gods, I could do with some mead tonight." Then those black eyes meet mine again, firelight dancing in them. "You know, mead makes a perfectly good liquid meal. The gods themselves brew it; that must count for something."

"Do they?" Somehow he's managing to make me smile. "What am I saying. Of course they do."

“There is one type,” he says. “The mead of Kvasir. He was the wisest of the gods, so wise that he was murdered for it. It’s said that the dwarves mixed his blood with honey, to partake of his wisdom... and any who drank of that mead learned the art of poetry.”

I’m imagining it now. Blood and honey. The stark red colour of pain and the gleaming gold of healing, swirling together like life and death in a cup.

“You drank of Kvasir’s mead, then?” I ask him. “Seeing as you know your poetry.”

“I must’ve done,” he says, raising his eyebrows. “Unless my poetry hurts people’s ears and they’re just too kind to mention it.”

I’m trying to smile, trying to carry on the exchange; he seems eager to return to his tales, to share them with me as he did earlier. But the image of blood clings. It brings back other images... arms entwined, lifeless fingers... blood pooling in the grass.

Dead... so many dead.

“Oh,” I mutter as the weight of it bears on me until I can’t sit up, I can’t think any more, can’t do anything other than grasp the edge of the bed and wait for the world to stop crushing me.

Thrain always knows how best to deal with this panic. But when I reach out into the bond, it still feels as though I’m standing on a broken bridge, staring out into nothing.

I need him. God, I need him so much. I understand why he keeps away, I do, or at least I did when I had my head. Now I feel like a child reaching out in desperation, abandonment making the world feel blurry with danger.

“Tamsin?” Ivar’s voice is a sharp prick of reality in this nightmare I’m falling into. I can’t move, my heart’s alternating between sluggish pumps and

a rushing racing rhythm. I try to breathe as Thrain told me, slowly, on a count of three – but it all keeps falling apart.

I hear Ivar mutter a curse in Norse. He wraps an arm around me, pressing me up against the warmth of his body.

“I’m no good at this, lamb,” he says as he strokes my arm. “What is it you need?”

“I don’t know,” I gasp, pressing a hand over my heart. “It feels like – like I’m dying, or –”

“You aren’t dying. It’s just panic.”

Just panic. He makes it sound like a small problem. I wish it were.

The shimmer... that always works. I grip his hand and his dark starry sky blooms behind my eyelids, offering sweet relief, a sparkling cape that I want to wrap myself up in. I nuzzle into his shoulder, reminded of that deep connection we shared once; we were mindless then too, and it was so peaceful to be wrapped in a moonlit dream together.

I ache to think of the full moon. I wish it could steal away all rhyme and reason now.

Licking my lips, I manage to say, “I... I think I need to lie down.”

His free hand finds my face, cups it gently, as though not quite sure he has the permission to touch me like this, which seems absurd after what we’ve shared already. Then he shifts, locking me in a secure hold.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders as he moves me, both of us sinking into the soft nest I made. He tucks my head under his chin, pulling me flush against him, his thigh pressed between mine so I can hook onto him. A soft soothing growl rumbles from his chest, enveloping us both.

He’s breathing softly as he lets the shimmer fill him too. There’s so much bare skin between us; his inked chest heaves against me as he breathes, each

movement reassuring, his warm skin reminding me that under this roof, in this little world, we are alive and breathing.

The panic eases as that growl pummels into me. I burrow further into the embrace, my muscles relaxing slowly as the sweet taste of honey in my mouth and his own familiar presence do away with my fear.

* * *

Noises in the night wrench me from sleep every time I manage to reach its doorstep. Ivar's on high alert; from the steadiness of his breathing, he's still wide awake. I'm in the dip just before unconsciousness, too warm and comfortable to feel anything but groggy exhaustion.

"What is it?" I whisper in the flickering darkness. The firelight outlines Ivar's dark shape, gives a gleam to the sharp angles of his profile – he's drawn his head up, staring at the door.

"Nothing," he says after a moment, settling back in the pillows. "We would've heard an alert otherwise. Go back to sleep, lamb."

"Mmm."

The way he's pillowing my body is altogether too comfortable. In this half-awake state, my instincts are singing to have my packmate so close, spreading his liquorice scent in my nest. I hook his thigh further between mine, humming softly as the contact adds another note to these simple carnal pleasures.

His breath hitches, but he doesn't move away. Before long I can feel a tell-tale ridge growing against my thigh, his body responding to mine, bulging against his breeches. But he doesn't move; only stays there, settled against me, and the intimacy of it sets my heart to thrumming.

It's unfamiliar to me, this closeness between us without Thrain. The angles of Ivar's body are so different; he's leaner, more slender, his hipbones rising in jagged arches, his collarbones salient. He's every bit the hungry predator slinking in the dark.

Some part of me is amazed I could find comfort in the arms of someone like him. Tall and dark and tattooed, the witch's son who prowls around the dead. But darkness isn't all there is to him, though it clings to him like an undercurrent; he can sing and dance, too, and play music and weave words into spells. He's like a mirage, a glittering image that lures you in, and though you know it's dangerous, you still want to try and reach it.

So far he's always held back from me. He's never mentioned the ties that bind us, the shimmer, the idea that we're fated according to his Norse myths. Perhaps that's why he's tense as he lies against me now; this is non-sexual, the way a man would care for his mate. Not the carefree teasing that seems to be his preferred territory.

I hunch into the embrace, frowning. It seems baffling to worry about something so trivial – to want to apologise for making him uncomfortable. But still the impression of his reluctance persists.

“Ivar?” I whisper.

“What is it?”

“Thank you for this.”

He runs his slender fingers along my side. “Funny thing to say on a night like this. What are you thanking me for?”

“For this, just... staying close,” I breathe. “I'm sorry to impose on you.”

“You really think it's an imposition for me to lie here like this?” he murmurs, teasing in his tone again. “With my packmate, in a sumptuous bed of furs?”

I manage to smile at that. *Packmate*. The fact that he'd use that term makes my heart thud.

"I thought you were only comfortable with this under the full moon," I mumble. "Being close like this."

That makes him scoff. "I'm sorry I gave you that impression. You'll find I'm not such a heartless bastard that I can't give you a hug when you need one."

"No, that's not – that's not what I meant."

"I know," he says. Then he adds: "We're pack, Tamsin. I'm here for you. Whatever you need."

Pack. The ambiguity of the word is in full sway when he says it. Pack can mean two things: what he shares with his Dubliners, loyalty, close friendship, something like family. But it can also mean my chosen pack, the Vanirdottir's pack. The bonds that tie Thrain and I together, bonds of courtship and marriage.

I can't ask him which pack he means. It's already awkward enough. We're both breathing softly in the dark, wide awake now. Ivar's fingers idle along my side, feeling the velvet of my mourning gown, and I start relaxing again as he trails leisurely down my waist, taking his time. I hunch closer with a shiver of pleasure as he caresses my back.

He growls for me again, and a soft moan escapes my throat as the insistence of it soothes down my body.

How are you going to manage in the Viking camp? All by yourself?

Surely Emrys is imagining this. Surely those Cavaliers are all picturing something like this; a Viking wrapped around me, staking his claim of me. There is no other way for a daughter of Clota to survive but to whore herself,

ruin herself completely, just to satisfy the base instinct of survival; that is how they would view this tenderness.

Would they have appreciated me more if I had borne signs of abuse? If I'd come to them bruised and limping, so they could be reassured by the fact that I could not have wanted this?

Perhaps they would've respected me more if I had appropriately martyred myself. That I might crave this closeness at all makes me despicable to them. Dirty. I feel it so sharply that it's as though the Cavaliers were sitting in this house, staring at us.

Whore. Witch.

Is it true?

Did you instigate it?

I breathe out shakily. Where I was empty before, now everything is crowding into me. My arms are folded against Ivar's chest, hands tucked away; I turn one around, press the flat of my palm against his pectorals, feeling the vibration of his growl.

It's soothing, but it does nothing to calm the storm of voices within me. We breathe together, intimately close. The yearn to do exactly as the Cavaliers expect is dizzying; to charge right into those acts that make me such a monster. I don't know if it would be in protest or surrender of their image of Tamsin the Madwoman, Tamsin the Whore.

I only know that I can't bear this dissonance any longer.

I lift my chin and kiss my dark packmate, bite into his lower lip. He frowns, hums in surprise. But he lets me do it, his hand sliding up my body to cup my neck. I kiss him hard, all teeth and tongue – this is what I am, isn't it, lecherous and greedy and disgusting – until he breaks off at last, gazing at me in the dark.

Seriousness gives his eyes a deep, mesmerising quality. I've caught the mirage; I'm lying in front of it, basking in its rich glitter.

I hear his thoughts without him speaking them. *What are you doing, Tamsin?*

It's a quiet moment, the kind that only seems to exist at midnight. He dips his head slowly, runs his lips lightly against mine, deliberating. Then he licks into my mouth, sliding his long tongue along mine as he accepts my invitation. The contact lights up my spine, makes me arch into him as he leaves a streak of sweetness in my mouth.

"Mmm." His hips shift languidly so he can press his erection further against my thigh. "You taste like honey."

Somehow he is the perfect company for this strange night of pagan funerals and smoke. There is no one more appropriate than the witch's son himself, to help break me apart.

"So do you," I tell him. Honey and blood; Kvasir's mead.

He smiles and leans in for another, this time robbing me of my breath.

Chapter 10



IVAR

New Moon of July

What is she doing? What is she thinking?

She has a hand over my heart. Surely she can feel how it races now that she's wrapped herself around me. It was different earlier, speaking together, enjoying one another's company. But when we're like this, as close as this, it's as though reality begins to trickle away until we both become translucent, blending into one another.

I fantasised about this for so long. The unimaginable idea of not only finding the daughters of Freya, but finding the one who was for *me* – the one whose thread had been coiled with mine, just as Tamsin is coiled around my body now.

A fantasy. That's what it was. Something belonging in the songs of heroes.

And now... she's here, she's alone with me; she is everything I ever wanted.

To have her, to be wanted by her... it's so immediate. Intoxicatingly so. My hands are shaking, cold and clammy as they slide over her velvet dress. I frown as I close my eyes and savour it. Like a dreamer, holding onto the dream before it can collapse.

Whatever you need, I told her. If this is what she needs, then why should I deny her? Why should I deny myself?

Her tongue is sweet against mine, her velvet-clad thighs pulling me in closer. She's biting and sighing into my mouth as though she could lay all her worries upon my tongue. Perhaps that's what moves her, the urge to taste and touch and *feel*, to remind ourselves that we're alive after standing before a funeral pyre.

I push my thigh between hers, and she hums into the kiss. Like this, I've buried my erection in her velvet dress; she is the one who grinds against it, slow and crushing, enough to torture me. When I grasp her hips to encourage her, she does not try to stop, only follows me giddily as it escalates.

"Lamb," I murmur.

"Mm."

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

She stills for a moment, and I grin at the sheepish way she blinks up at me.

"I'm..." She struggles to find an answer. "... maybe?"

Tch. She has no right to be so adorable. I can't get rid of my smile as I whisper *come here*, and she's climbing over me, her bony knee gliding over my hip as she straddles me roughly. I catch her face, her hair curling around my fingers. All I need do is tilt up my chin and she's devouring me again.

For all her forwardness, she's trembling too. I push her hair from her face, give her a moment to breathe. I'm no stranger to the lust that comes with war, whether it be prompted by battle or funerals, but this – I need to slow things down. She was panicking earlier, the first crack she's shown all week. I should ask her... ask if she's all right.

But before I can ask her anything at all, she whispers, "Please... don't stop."

I kiss her again, suck on her lower lip so that she moans.

"I'm going to need precisions, my darling," I murmur.

"... precisions?"

"What is it that you want? Just a kiss goodnight?"

"Um." She breathes, her face red. "I thought maybe..."

"Maybe...?"

She only sits her weight further on my erection, rocking her hips, massaging me from the base to the tip. I tilt back my head with a groan.

Well. The girl can certainly make an argument.

I kiss her until she's moaning and writhing in my lap, summoning my cock to such a degree of hardness that it might as well be a block of steel.

"Maybe what?" I breathe. "Use your words, lamb."

"... maybe more?" she relents at last.

She really is asking for this. For me. I reach for the laces of her dress, feeling them slip between my fingers; it feels forbidden somehow, a privilege reserved for her husband; but she lets me do it.

"You'll have to work on this seduction of yours," I tell her, still trying to throw this illusion of confidence up, though my fingers shake. "I'm not sure it counts as a serenade if it's only two words long."

She makes a little indignant noise. "Like you need much seducing at all."

Ah, there she is. The minx who talks back to me. I bite down hard on her lip in reprimand; there is no hiding how much I want her, when she's perched upon the proof of it.

"Are you calling me wanton, now?" I tease her.

"Do you deny it?"

Ha. Well. She has me there.

"You know, insulting a man isn't usually the best way to get him into bed."

"I don't see it discouraging you," she taunts.

That... oh, I won't let her get away with that. I tear the last of her laces loose, pull her dress over her head. She's panting, all disheveled as I run my hands over her shift, feeling the curves of her body, the puckered peaks of her nipples. I scoop her hair up in a tight fist, making her squint with pain, though she squarely meets the challenge of holding my gaze.

"You want me to fuck you?" I growl. "Say it."

She breathes out the phrase, freeing it from her cage of modesty: "I... I want you to fuck me."

Thor's glory, to hear those words in her mouth.

"I am not gentle," I warn.

Her eyes glint in the dark. "Nor am I fragile."

Admiration sings in me as it did this evening; as it has done every time I let myself look at her.

"I know," I tell her.

She pulls me in to kiss me, and there is absolutely nothing I could do to stop this now. My mind is gone – it's just gone. For some reason she wants this, she wants *me*, and *now* of all times – it's as though I were watching an

avalanche cracking away from the mountainside, hurtling down. There is no moving away from such a spectacle.

Would she laugh, I wonder, if she knew how hard my heart was beating?

The excitement is morphing into this acute sense of dread; of something that is over before it can even start. Reaching the end of a butterfly chase and finding powder on my fingers; knowing that to catch it means to spoil it.

Doesn't matter. Dread or not, I will let nothing stand in the way of this.

We move in a warm haze; her fingers find my own laces, trembling as she releases my hard length. I tug away her shift automatically, losing myself along the bare plains of her thighs. It is all breathy darkness, her ginger curls falling around me, the tuft between her thighs brushing over me. Then she moves, presses down, catches me; and I'm inside her, my mouth open against hers, a gasp caught between us.

I can barely – think – she's sucking me in, tight wet silk wrapped around my cock. How did we get here, are we really here at all, doing this right now – it's so immediate I can barely believe it. She's moving over me, engulfing me in her torrential, sweet-smelling hair, and there is no escaping the feather-soft fantasy she's pulled me into.

I'm with her... I'm with her. My Vanirdottir. I have to remind myself of it, lest she vanish between my grasping hands.

I want to mark her. Let her flesh bear testimony to this; so she might wear the tokens of her shadowy suitor, who waits in the dark only to snatch and devour her. Once this ends... she will remember that she was mine, if only for one night.

“Turn your back to me,” I hiss at her. “Keep me inside you and twist around.”

She does; the divine grip of her insides twists around my cock, like a slick

turning fist, making me bite my lip. She's facing away now, straddling me still; I pull her down against my chest, hold her firm. Like this I can suck on her neck, rake my nails over the stretched canvas of her body; her breasts, her stomach.

"Good girl," I hiss in her ear as I find her sweet spots. Her nipples are taut with eagerness, the nub between her thighs slick and puffy. I catch her there, rub and pinch her as she needs even as I hammer into her, and though she tries to muffle her sounds, those sweet whines still escape her.

I clasp a hand over her mouth; she breathes in bursts over my knuckles, so fast she must be getting light-headed. She grasps onto my forearm, her spine arching against me; to have her body weight crushing me like this means I feel every glorious point of tension in her, and I wonder, I wonder... if she'll let me take it up a notch.

I drag my hand down to her throat, choking her even as I rub her between the thighs, slamming up into her mercilessly. A savage rhythm – as though I could stamp the beat in her bones, make her feel it for days. She tenses enough to turn to stone, her mouth open, no breath escaping – *fuck*, surely even Thor's grip could not rival how her cunt is strangling me – and when she comes, she shakes, as though breaking through her stone skin.

She's bursting silently with pleasure, writhing in my grip, slick dripping down my shaft to anoint me. I lodge myself deep inside and stay there, lest she pull me over the edge.

Let her feel this depth, even long after this ends.

When I let her go she gasps and splutters. I give her a moment, amorously tracing the paths where I've hurt her, dug red lines into her skin. But she needs no pause; she pushes herself up, chasing the enduring climax as she

rides me hard. Shoulders hunched, she props herself against the mattress, her hands planted between my thighs.

From here I can see the bruises I've sucked into her shoulders, the purple and red I've left along the unbitten side of her neck. I reach up, half dazed as she goes on fucking herself on my cock, and I rake my claws down her back. *Hard*. Let her feel that sting; how it complements this pleasure.

She arches, throwing up her head with a gasp.

"Do that again," she whispers.

I rake down harder still. *Loki*, the way she's clamping down on me again; she loves it, the way pain and pleasure twist together.

She repeats it with a neediness that makes my cock pulse; "Do it harder."

I stroke the naked length of her back. She has scars here. They make her sensitive; I've watched Thrain kiss and stroke her there many a time. He's always so careful with her... but she wants me to pull her onto the knife's edge tonight.

There is no way of hiding my own excitement at the prospect, the way my cock twitches eagerly inside her. It's my predilection, after all; bringing my partner just close enough to pain for the pleasure to bloom more keenly afterwards.

I plant my nails in her shoulder-blades and rake all the way down her scarred spine. The way she throws out her arms, head tilted back as though in supplication... Freya have mercy.

I know I'll wake up from this dream soon. But not now.

Not yet.

I stroke over the lines I scraped into her, giving her softness after the dagger-sharp pain. She's lost in the contrasting sensations, still writhing

instinctively on my cock, giving me such a beautiful view as we alternate between pain and softness.

“Harder,” she whispers. “Please...”

Loki, she’s perfect.

Red lines are rising against her dainty skin. Even in the darkness I can see how they’re blurring together into a picture of blissful agony. Her breath is coming shorter, more strangled; why is it that this feels like prayer? The words are crude – *harder, harder, please* – but she invokes him too, that god of hers, again and again.

Though my pulse is pounding with the bestial excitement of it, she’s trembling so much now. I’ll break skin if I keep going. I push myself up so I might embrace her from behind, this precious girl, and hold her close to soothe her.

“Please don’t stop,” she moans, struggling weakly in my grip. She almost sounds like she’s crying. “Keep going... keep going.”

“Tamsin.” I’m frowning into her hair, breathing her in. The whirl of her blood is tainting her scent, now.

Gods, why didn’t I even think of the *reason* her back is scarred? Those are traces of self-inflicted lacerations. Thrain has been privy to it whilst I have not; but I know her back is the territory she uses to punish herself.

She isn’t just asking this of me because she likes it, is she.

No. She wants me to help her in her own self-punishment.

My arms tighten around her. I stare into the darkness as she sniffs and sighs against me.

Is this why? Is this the true reason why she’s throwing herself at me tonight? I should stop us both here, now, if that’s the case. But I know how it feels to turn to this. It’s happened many a time for me to seek these pleasures

for deeper, murkier reasons. She has not even shed a tear all week; so she turns to bestial violence, to unravel what she's wound up inside herself so tight.

She must've known, surely. That this wasn't a particularly good idea.

She must also know that I'll not discourage her when she comes to me with bad ideas.

I'm still lodged achingly snug inside her. She rocks back against me as I lay a hand over the hot, risen lines of her back.

"Again," she begs. I trail kisses along her shoulder, nuzzling into her hair.

"No," I tell her. "Enough."

"Please, Ivar..."

"No."

Freya, those little noises she's making. My possessiveness is wrenching out of the stranglehold I keep it in. She's mine when she's like this, when we're together in these deep dark places... she's *mine*.

I slide a hand down between her thighs to bring her back to bliss. Both of us pick up the pace as climax looms, a sweet synchronic rocking. We're panting together as it crashes over us, the giddy culmination; her own pleasure strangles mine, drags a deep groan from my throat. With each thrust I'm spilling inside her, and she's unravelling in my arms.

I can smell the sweetness of her climax twined with the scent of blood where it's risen to her skin. She lets herself fall through bliss until her muffled moans turn to sobs.

She's broken open now, crying at long last. I wrap my arms around her as she gives in to it, and there's nothing more I can do now but hold her as she wears herself out.

Ah, gods... I should've seen it.

I thought she was so ironclad. I thought she came upon me because she was sure of her own desires. I see her as this strong, willful Vanirdottir, but...

Perhaps Thrain was right. Perhaps I should've taken more cares with her.

Thrain... he would've found a way to soothe her that did not involve this madness.

His mating mark is just below my mouth, at the base of her neck. I let my lips run along the column of her throat, careful not to touch it.

I want to ask her, is the bond still shut? Does he know what we've done?

My closest friend. My brother. We all agreed to share, but there's no way Thrain would've approved of this. She and I both know it. He would've slammed down the request if she'd asked him to bloody her back.

I've disregarded Thrain's own opinion of this entirely.

Hmph. Something to worry about in the morning. Whatever fate I bear – a black eye and a dislocated jaw, perhaps – I don't want to think of it while I have her cradled in my arms.

Once she's calmed, I coax her down on her belly in the furs, so I can view her back in the firelight. Red scratches cover her entirely; here and there, tiny pinpricks of blood cling like red pearls.

I lean over her, kiss the heated skin, making her sigh brokenly in the pillows. I cover her in soft kisses, looming so she might feel my warmth, taste her blood on my tongue when I nurse those spots.

Gods, it will be complicated to fold away this roaring possessiveness come morning. It purrs in contentment now as I soothe her. Her eyes are open a sliver; she's staring at nothing, dazed in the aftermath, firelight glinting along her tear-strewn lashes. I nuzzle her neck, kiss her cheek, her brow.

My senses may scream that she is my Vanirdottir, that she belongs to me in the deepest way possible – but that is all poetry and ancient magic, that is

the dream that gleams upon her, holding me transfixed when I let myself look at her. But the reality is that she is suffering, and she wears Thrain's mark, and I... I am who I am.

The witch's son blackens what he touches.

"Tamsin?" I whisper. "Talk to me."

"I'm... I'm all right," she whispers. "Thank you. I'm sorry..."

I pull her back against me, tucking her hot, swollen back against my chest carefully. She sighs in contentment as I drape an arm around her waist, making sure she feels as enveloped and safe as she needs.

"Thank you," she repeats, her voice small and tired.

Those words again, sitting strangely in my chest. "I told you," I whisper in her ear. "I'm here for you, lamb. Whatever you need."

She nods, then relaxes against me as exhaustion catches up to her at last.

* * *

I've dozed off by the time noise and movement catch my attention again. It's either very late, or very early; the fire is burning low, and someone's prodding at the embers, keeping them alive.

Thrain's great bulk is outlined in hearthlight, shining on his chainmail and long sleek hair. He leans close to blow on the embers, having added a log for them to burn. Outside the wind rushes against the thatched roof, the smell of rain adding its sweetness to the fire smoke and rye straw.

Though Tamsin's still curled up against me, breathing deeply, our embrace warm and comfortable – his presence makes me bristle up. I untangle myself from her, then crawl slowly down the bed to join my brother, bracing myself.

“Thrain,” I greet him warily.

He sits back against the wood panelling that boxes in the bed. Then he just turns his head, signalling that he’s listening. His armour and discarded weapons remind me of the night watch he’s just returned from; he must’ve seen us, scented us, and yet all he did was sit and stoke the fire, deciding to let us sleep.

I mutter in Norse, “Why didn’t you wake me? Weren’t we meant to alternate the watch?”

“Sigbrand took my patrol group. You can stay if you like.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Olaf is letting me skip watch duty?”

Thrain throws a glance at me over his shoulder. He’s tired enough to have lost some of his earlier stony stubbornness; I can even spy a hint of a smile.

“He thought I’d be more likely to accept dismissal, if you stayed here too,” he says. “Like I’m too afraid to be alone with my wife.”

That makes me scoff. Since he doesn’t seem about to attack me just yet, I let myself fall down from the bed and into the furs beside him.

“Well, I can see why Olaf would come to that conclusion,” I tell him.

He makes an indignant sort of noise, then pulls his chainmail over his head to exempt him from replying. He’s frowning when he emerges, squinting through the pain of his left hand as he lets the chainmail shirt crumple to the floor.

Irritably I take his hand, find it bandaged and bloody, clearly overworked as ever.

“Freya help us,” I sigh. “What is it going to accomplish to keep pushing yourself like this? What? You want to lose your whole hand?”

“It’s nothing,” he growls, trying to pull it back.

“It is not *nothing*. You’ll find men generally have use for their hands. No

– stop moving. Let me bind it properly.”

He stares sullenly as I wash and bind his injury. The hemp bandage is thick and neatly tied by the time he musters the courage to ask after his wife.

“...so... how is she?”

What a question that is. His voice is low, like a boy asking about something he knows he broke himself.

I try to find some way to word my answer. Both of us studiously avoid looking at one another as I tuck the bandage more neatly than necessary. I know he can scent her on me, surely – it’s driving me mad that he won’t even say anything about it.

“Well, you’d know exactly how she is if you just looked into her head,” I say at long last. “What’s the use of having a pair-bond if you’re not going to access it?”

He sighs, looking like he already regrets bringing this up with me. “You don’t understand,” he grumbles. “She had to endure a whole day and night of warfare because I wasn’t capable of shutting her off. And I could feel her panic without being able to do anything about it. It was less looking through the pair-bond, and more getting our faces shoved into it whether we liked it or not.”

“So, what? Now that you know how to shut it off, you think you’re sparing her?”

He glances sidelong at me. “Yes. I don’t want her to feel what I’m feeling right now.”

“And what is that?”

He pauses a moment. “Are there even words for it?” he mutters. “Guilt seems far too small a word.”

“I know, brother,” I tell him with a sigh; I have seen him wear that guilt

the whole week long, after all.

For a long time Thrain stares at the fire like a wizened old man, ruminating on his own thoughts. Steadily a shine comes to his eyes, a muscle in his jaw standing out, until his expression bears so much self-hatred you'd think the man was Christian. I shift in the furs and pull the big lump against me in a proper embrace.

“What are we doing here, Ivar?” he sighs as he leans against me. “What in Odin’s name are we doing here?”

“We’ve done what we must,” I grumble into his hair. “It was never going to be a clean mission. Tamsin knew that.”

“I should’ve taken her to Dublin, spared her all this –”

“She didn’t want to wait out the war,” I remind him. “She understands that this is the only way we could secure a good position here, to help her kin.”

“Perhaps, but...”

“We both know she’s stronger than she appears, Thrain.”

He’s quiet for a moment. Then he mutters into my shoulder, “She shouldn’t have to be strong.”

I tighten my grip of him. Now that his face is hidden from me, he drags words out from the depth of himself, and they are barely voiced at all as they emerge:

“I’ve dealt her so much pain. There is no coming back from this.”

I let my hand idle over his broad back. “Perhaps you should let her decide that,” I murmur. “It’s you she needed tonight. You would’ve known better than I how to comfort her.”

He lets out a breath and says, with a certain gruffness, “You seem to have done something right.”

A nervous grin crooks my mouth. I want to say, *I'm not sure it was particularly constructive*. But I have no idea how to even broach the subject. Thus far Tamsin and I had shared only teasing caresses and stolen kisses – but this, this was something else, something far more profound. I'm still reeling from it, the aftertaste of her savage prayer lingering on my tongue.

We stay like that for a long time. I make a fist in Thrain's tunic, glad for his warmth, for the solid weight of him against me. We have not shared such a long embrace in years; in any other war-time context, we would be clinking our horns together right now, celebrating a difficult win, complaining over the workload. But everything is different here. Everything. Even this brotherhood of ours, which had been so effortless, has turned jagged and complicated again.

Before long, something cold trickles along my neck. He's quiet; he does not want me to hear nor see his tears. But I draw back anyway, take his head in my hands. His eyes are downcast; I sweep my thumbs along his cheeks to wipe away what glitters there.

"Oy," I mutter. "She loves you. You know that."

He scoffs. "Then she's a fool."

"You know she's far from a fool," I tell him, and press a kiss to his forehead. "Come. Let's get some dinner in you."

I manage to make him eat a little, and stretch his arm out until it behaves like an arm rather than a block of wood. Then, as he seems settled there with his eyes on the fire, I lay out his chainmail for a good cleaning tomorrow and give him a stern look.

"You need to rest," I tell him. "You're not going to sleep here on the floor, are you? When there's this gigantic bed?"

He shakes his head. "I'm fine here," he grumbles. Then, with a pinch of

irritation in his face he adds, “You keep her company.”

Once again he skirts close to mentioning the scent-marks I’m wearing on my mouth and, well. Everywhere else. At least he isn’t actively trying to murder me – that’s a start.

I squeeze his shoulder as I climb back onto the bed. “You’re a stubborn ass, you know that?” I mutter. But he only shrugs me off.

“*Goodnight, Ivar.*”

I crawl over Tamsin’s sleeping form. I’m all too aware of Thrain’s presence in the room as I lean over her. I can see the boundaries of our dynamic much more clearly now that he’s here; I’m back in my place.

“Princess,” I whisper in her ear, and she moves sleepily beneath me.

“Mmm?”

“Your husband’s here.”

She breathes in, a small gasp that cleaves through her sleepiness. It’s a feat for her to turn in the tangle she’s made of sheets and furs; but she manages to push herself up, tug her shift over her nakedness again, and look at him.

I lean back against the carved headrest, watching as she hesitates. Then, resolutely, she shuffles down the bed to where Thrain’s sitting. He barely has the time to turn his head before she loops her arms around his shoulders from behind, burying her face in his hair.

“You’re here,” she sighs, and he makes a noise in his throat that sounds like confusion and relief all at the same time. They stay like that a long moment, long enough for me to slump against the headrest, blinking sleepily.

“How is everything outside?” Tamsin asks him.

“Calm,” he rumbles. “You have nothing to fear tonight.”

“Is Olaf still out there?”

“He is. He’s well surrounded, don’t worry.”

A pause. She nuzzles his hair and his breathing deepens as the touch relaxes him.

“How are you?” Tamsin whispers. “Your wounds?”

“Mostly healed now.”

“You’re staying, aren’t you?”

“...I am.”

“Come to bed, then.”

He shakes his head. But then she kisses him, and the sight of Thrain turning, raking back her hair, opening her mouth with his tongue – Odin, they always look so perfect together.

“I want you here,” she insists softly. “With me. With us.”

“I am here with you, cariad,” he murmurs. “You sleep. I’ll watch the fire.”

I push down the urge to clobber the idiot around the head, pull him bodily into the bed where she wants him. But this rocky reunion is theirs to have; theirs to pace.

She stays there with her head at the foot of the bed, Thrain’s hand clutched in hers. From the tension in her shoulders, she’s clearly upset by his rejection; but she stays close to him nevertheless.

It will uncomplicate things, surely, if I leave. She has no more use of me now that he’s here. But when I move to go, her little hand closes around my wrist to keep me there.

My eyes flicker between hers. Gods, to have a pair-bond with her – just so I might have an inkling of what’s going through her head tonight. She tugs at me, so I lay down behind her, pulling the hemp sheet over us.

To think she would insist on this togetherness, even when by rights this

should be their moment. I have no place here, surely; not when she has him, not when the only true purpose I serve is company in recklessness.

She reaches down to pull my arm closer around her waist.

Thank you, she's telling me again. Thank you for staying with me.

I close my eyes, and smile into her hair as I take that with me into sleep.

Chapter 11



THRAIN

Waxing Moon of July

Dawn brightens the baker's house, streaming in through the open door. Someone pulled sheets and furs over me while I slept on the floor; I dislodge them as I emerge, pulled up by the delicious smell that is wafting through the house.

Tamsin is standing in the open doorway, dressed in her shift and a big woollen shawl. Outside are chattering voices; Ivar is fully armoured, speaking with several men. As I watch, he hands Tamsin a little package and smiles at her.

“Don't take too long,” he says. Then he kisses her forehead and turns to leave. “I hear Armod found an orchard – there might actually be fresh fruit this morning, if you catch him in time.”

She comes to me as I'm pushing myself up from the fur-strewn ground. The package she holds is emanating that sweet scent; it is fresh baked bread

wrapped in a cloth, looking crisp and golden.

She kneels beside me, pats down the covers so she can lay the bread there. She actually... brought me breakfast. The captive princess, laying down breakfast for her Viking lord – so the tale would go.

“Good morning,” she says, fidgeting. She cannot meet my eye.

We sit there for a moment, tenseness brimming. But it is such a tender gesture, to have covered me and brought me fresh bread. Our hands lay aching close on the covers, as though we were a pair of adolescents who could not admit their closeness. Just like last night, falling asleep with our hands joined over the edge of the bed.

It's you she needed tonight, Ivar said.

Ridiculous. It's ridiculous to keep holding back from her like this when I want nothing more than to embrace her. I move first, brush her knuckles with mine. Then, my hand rising boldly, I stroke the hair from her face, let myself caress her cheek.

My wife. My dearest one. Only now, sitting close to her like this, do I allow myself to feel how deeply I've missed her. Her nose is red, her eyes similarly so, signs of long weeping. Perhaps Ivar is right; perhaps I was a coward to keep away from her when she needed company, someone to cling to through the night.

Not just *someone*. Her pack. Those closest to her.

“I have to tell you something,” she mutters, her brow furrowed. “Last night... Ivar and I, we...”

As I wait, her blush deepens, and she comes no closer to spitting it out. But her meaning is clear and bold as the daylight, and I can scarcely believe she's sitting there looking so apologetic about it. I know they were intimate; she wears his scent all over her.

“Tamsin,” I say gently. “I know. It’s all right.”

She meets my eye at last. “You’re... you’re sure?”

Gods, how can she still be worried about hurting me even now?

“We all agreed to share, cariad,” I remind her. She nods, looking serious and solemn, and this swelling affection for her is threatening to strangle me. “Come here,” I grunt, and I pull her against me at long last.

She sighs with relief, all soft and warm as we cling to each other. Gods... she cannot just be tender like this with me. Otherwise I’ll have to keep her here, and make up for this long week while the others take on my tasks.

She winces as I run a hand down her back. There’s a frown of pain on her face as she pushes away from me, still looking furtive and ashamed.

I stare at her, those lopsided shoulders, that familiar posture that speaks of pain.

“Tamsin,” I say through a dry mouth. “Did you –?”

The words stay stuck in my throat. I know she does not have her flogger on hand. But she is resourceful, and I dread to think what she might’ve found to compensate for it.

She says nothing, eyes averted.

“Show me,” I command her. She protests feebly, then finally turns around. I draw up the ample folds of her shift, revealing her naked back.

Angry red lines cover her from her nape to her lower back. As though she self-flagellated... but those are not the marks of a flogger.

Those are nail marks.

Fresh fury climbs up at my spine as I glare at the open doorway, empty now of Ivar’s dark silhouette.

He did this? He actually thought it was in any way acceptable to do this to her?

You would've known better than I how to comfort her, he said. So he was aware, at least, that this was not any kind of brilliant solution to her sorrow. But Odin, I trusted him with her – I trusted him to care for her as she justly deserved, and he –

“Please,” Tamsin says, pulling her shift down again. “Don’t be angry with him. It was me, I asked him to do it.”

“He shouldn’t have heeded you,” I grunt, unable to articulate it without the gravel of fury.

“I needed it,” she insists. “I think I would’ve found a way to do it, regardless. It’s the only way I know how... how to...”

I stare at her freckled face.

How to cope.

The only way she knows how to cope is to hurt herself.

Gods, I should’ve stayed. I would’ve lulled her, kissed her, tried a hundred different ways to soothe her without letting her resort to this.

“I don’t know how to do this,” she says, her voice shaking. “Any of it. I’m trying, but...”

Odin, I will never forgive myself for leaving her alone last night. Never mind the muck that clings to my own feet. I wrap an arm around her again, and she gives a little moan as she hugs me back tight.

“He was gentle,” she insists. “He stopped even when I begged him to keep going. Please don’t be angry with him.”

Gentle. *Gentle*. There is nothing gentle about these angry pink lines. Though... rationally I know from the sight of them that they will fade within a few days; I know Ivar is always controlled in these things, always dealing exactly the amount of pain he thinks a person is capable of enduring. Always soothing afterwards. He would’ve done this properly; conscientiously.

She would've been much more violent with herself.

Still. If he had not left, I would have avenged myself upon him right here, regardless of how she begs me not to.

"We won't do this again," she mutters. "I won't ask him to. I promise."

I stroke her messy hair. "Can I hold you to that promise?"

"You can."

* * *

I tell myself that I will heed her words; that I will not go seeking Ivar out to act on this thudding rage. But he is right outside, his voice rising among the chatter of men taking breakfast by the neighbourhood firepit. For a moment I manage to focus on buckling my gear and brushing down my chainmail, Tamsin and I both preparing ourselves for the day.

But when I step outside, he is there, a lean black-clad figure talking and laughing with the others like it's a perfectly normal morning.

And I cannot hold back.

He breaks off his conversation as he sees me coming. Understanding sparks immediately, and all he says is, "Ah."

The others instinctively close ranks around him, but he barks at them to leave off. He's guarded, watching me with that dark, hooded gaze.

I stride straight for him.

He doesn't move as I bunch both my fists in his chainmail, ignoring the screech of pain that crackles up my left arm. He lets me march him backwards and shove him roughly against the wall of a nearby roundhouse.

There is sensual intimacy; then there is the intimacy of the threat, growled into your enemy's ear; the intimacy of invading your enemy's space so that

he can do nothing but heed you.

“Is there no shred of decency in you?” I snarl. “I trusted you with her and you just –”

“I know,” he says, his voice low. “I know, brother. I should not have done it.”

I tighten my fists in his chainmail. I want him to fight back, to meet my challenge as he usually does. But the truth is, we acted just as badly as one another. I for staying away, and he for pulling her into games of pain when she has such a long habit of self-soothing with a flogger.

“You’ve never seen her do it, have you? The self-flagellation,” I growl at him. “The first time I met her in that chapel, that was what she was doing. Whipping herself bloody. And when she arrived in Dál Riata and stayed locked up in that tower for two weeks, she practically flayed herself. She wore bandages for days afterwards.”

“I hear you. I won’t do it again, brother.” Those dark eyes meet mine. “You have my word.”

I go on glaring at him for a spell. I know that his repentance is a rare, hard-won thing; that when he gives me his word, he means it. But I have not spent even half my rage.

“She isn’t one of your pups, to train along a spectrum of pain and pleasure,” I tell him, and that earns me a glare in return.

“You think I don’t know that?” he snarls. “I will admit my own faults but I don’t need you to talk down to me.”

Those black eyes are full of disdain as he stares me down. My instincts are telling me that this moment where he lets me aggressively invade his space is coming to a close.

Then there is a rush of steps, and Tamsin calls out to us as she wades

between the watching men. She hurries to my side so she might peel us away from one another.

“Please,” she insists. “Please don’t fight. I’m fine – I’m *fine*.”

She is very far from fine, but she stands between us, one hand on Ivar’s chest, the other on my arm. She sees my trembling bandaged hand, and Ivar’s rumpled state; her face is taut with worry.

“Can we just,” she stammers. “Can we just have breakfast? Please?”

* * *

We sit by the firepit, disgruntled and quiet, as Tamsin greets the men and accepts the food they offer her. Armod has just arrived with a sackful of apples, which helps to diffuse the tension. He hands them out, smiling at Tamsin when he reaches her. Ivar and I try to pretend we aren’t watching her every move, looking for signs of pain – but she moves freely, plopping down beside us with her apple and a bowl of honeyed porridge.

“You all right, lamb?” Ivar asks her in quiet tones.

“Yes,” she huffs, annoyed and a little furtive. “I told you. I’m fine.”

Many men grill their bread over the fire, adding soft cheese and herbs, so that the delicious waft of cooking food surrounds us. The Dubliners who were on early morning patrol start trickling back, and soon enough there’s no time to ponder our own personal issues as they come to us with news. The men all greet each other cheerfully, then bow their heads to Tamsin with many a murmured *Kátr-Ekkja*.

“I bring word from Olaf,” calls old Sigbrand, the returning patrol leader, looking weary and greyer than ever. “He’s at the prisoner pen. He worries about the waxing moon, and the amount of prisoners we’ve gathered... there

are near five hundred, now. He wants to hurry and move them as soon as possible.”

Tamsin blinks at us. The reality of our imminent mission floods over me again; the perilous journey that awaits us. While we took the time to gather and heal the prisoners, we did not have to worry about moving them yet; but it will be the most difficult and dangerous part to accomplish.

Ivar sighs and lifts an impatient hand.

“We’ve done what we can. If Olaf wants us to move them now, we’ll have to leave behind a lot of the wounded.”

“He says he can give you a few more days. The moon waxes to its first quarter soon; we cannot sail any later than that.”

“So he’s told me already. We will hurry things along, then,” Ivar tells him, clapping his hands on his thighs. “And make what sacrifices we must.”

* * *

Tamsin is all but ready to spring up and continue her work out at the healers’ tent. But after last night, we both know she could do with some proper rest, and time away from the stress of prisoner-handling. So Ivar and I agree – though it is mostly a silent, tacit agreement – that we should push these personal issues aside for now, and let Tamsin rest while we wrap up this part of Olaf’s plan. We need to be as efficient as we can, and this bickering between us will not help.

Tamsin still protests the very idea of ‘rest’, so I find her tasks in our camp to keep her busy. The horses must be seen to, and there is the question of Rhun to supervise. Though she worries about how the prisoners will fare

without her to translate, I see how the tension leaves her shoulders, how much calmer she is when she walks across our horse paddocks.

The hot July sun warms us as we each take to our tasks, healing prisoners, crafting necessities, pacing around the perimeter watch. When night falls, Tamsin returns to Rhun, so Ivar and I slip back into our old nightly routine. The three of us have all somehow wordlessly agreed that it is far less complicated this way; Ivar sleeps by the neighbourhood firepit, while I take what sleep I can once I've finished my perimeter rounds. He pretends he is unaffected by this return to normality, even going so far as to join in with the music and singing around the campfire. But the sting of our last encounter remains, prickling under every gaze we share, every formal conversation.

As long as Tamsin sleeps, and does not hurt herself again; that is all that matters to me.

* * *

The moon waxes to its first quarter, marking two weeks since we arrived. And at last, the prisoners have all been healed and gathered up, the ships prepared.

We're ready to sail.

A bright dawn blooms over Dumbartonshire as Tamsin, Ivar and I join Olaf at our prisoner enclosure. I don't know whether that man has even slept this past fortnight – he is always here, protecting the Britons, making sure the rest of us are on-task. He claps us on the shoulder in his usual laconic greeting, and then bows his head to Tamsin.

“Was the baker's house suitable?” he asks her quietly. “I trust you found what you need for a nest?”

“I did,” Tamsin says, cheeks a little pink. “It was very comfortable, though I’m sleeping with Rhun again for now. Thank you.”

He nods, and that is all the time he spares for idle chatter. Dutifully we begin the process of funneling the prisoners out, forcing them to march out two-by-two accompanied by Dubliner guards.

“So,” Tamsin recites quietly as we stride together through the forest, fencing in the Britons. “Right now, Gofraid and his army believe we’re taking them to the slave markets of Dublin.”

“Yes,” Ivar says. “We’ll sail out as far as the Firth of Clyde, I think. Then we’ll find somewhere discreet to free your men, and look for somewhere to sleep. It takes some time to make a round trip to Dublin; Father won’t be expecting us back before tomorrow, at the very least.”

Tamsin looks a lot more involved and eager about this whole prospect than I feel.

“So we aren’t actually going out to Dublin at all?” she asks. “Even after we’ve freed the prisoners?”

“Of course not, lamb,” Ivar says. “We could not be discreet if we all went to Dublin in a cortège of empty longboats.”

“Oh,” Tamsin says, a little deflated.

“You wanted to see Dublin?” Ivar says with a grin. “I’m sure you’ll see it soon enough. I mean, you’ll have to meet Thrain’s mother one day.”

She blinks at that, turns to me. “Your mother’s there?”

The jibe only makes me think of her and worry, as ever. “She is.”

“Thrain’s mother runs the place when we aren’t around,” Ivar goes on. “She rules with an iron fist.”

That makes me scoff. But it softens me to see how Tamsin is awed by this, how she asks for more details. Ivar describes our great ship fortress to

her, and the gilded hall, until I feel a little homesick.

These past few days, they've been informal like this around each other, talking comfortably enough, though Ivar decidedly does not touch her nor linger in her presence. It eases my anger to see her move around him with no hint of fear. Clearly he did not hurt her any deeper than skin-level, that night.

I've forgiven him, I know it; but there has been no opportunity to tell him so. I watch them now, Ivar talking animatedly with gesticulating hands, and the sight of Tamsin's quiet smile summons one to my own lips.

Though it is hard for me to trust anyone with her... I know he's been good to her. I know he would not hurt her out of malice of any kind. It is just his way, to tease and test boundaries – I know that better than most.

As we walk on through the trees, I realise I am not the only one watching them. Some of the Briton prisoners turn their heads and scowl to see her walking among us and smiling at a tall, dark Viking.

Some wear a look of deep betrayal.

I take her by the arm, move to cover her. She falls quiet, sensing the shift in atmosphere. But inevitably, the tentative calm breaks.

One of the older Cavaliers steps out of line, glaring at Tamsin and the way we've surrounded her. He has the gall to step up to us – Armod has him by the arm in moments, but the old man still hisses an insult at Tamsin in Brittonic.

Then he spits at her feet.

Tamsin recoils – Ivar and I move instinctively. I wrap a protective arm around her whilst Ivar unsheathes his seax and digs it up under the old man's chin.

“You want to say that again?” he growls. “It is only for her sake that we are keeping decrepit old shits like you alive.”

“*Whore!*” come the shouts from other Cavaliers beyond. “*Viking whore!*”

There’s a tumult, Cavaliers pulling each other back – clearly they are not all agreed on this judgment of their princess being a whore. The fair one I know to be Captain Llewellyn barks at his men as though he could command them even in chains.

“Stand down! How dare you use such terms – *stand down!*” he shouts, until the commotion has been contained.

Tamsin’s panting against me.

“Maybe I shouldn’t come with you after all,” she says in a small voice.

I’m so angry that I can barely speak. My good hand is curled around my seax hilt as I glare at the marching prisoners. These are the men we are supposed to save, these men who are giving me only more reason to ship them straight to the slave markets as Gofraid expects us to.

It appears to me quite suddenly. This is why she asked Ivar to carve lines into her back that night. She’s been taking care of these wretches for a fortnight – what have they been saying to her, while she walked among them alone? Clearly they said enough to reopen these tired old wounds.

“You don’t have to come, cariad,” I tell her, the words gritting out somehow. “I can stay at the Dubliners’ camp with you.”

“No... no,” she says, taking a rallying breath. “Olaf wanted me to be mediator. And it’ll be better if I do come – at least then, they’ll associate me with something good.”

She wants to redeem herself in their eyes. As if it was her duty to satisfy these old pricks. I can only hope for their sakes that they will learn the error of their ways, or our mercy will fall very short indeed.

* * *

We accompany the prisoners all the way down to the riverbank. Beyond our own shored ships, longboats patrol the water, Gofraid's warbands holding the river. They will oversee our boarding of prisoners and our first few miles of travel. We must keep every appearance for now, of loading prospective slaves for the sea voyage.

My brothers and I commandeer two of the shored longboats. Both ships have a capacity for about three hundred men, giving us enough room to divide the prisoners into two parties and man the crafts with solid crews.

I fall into my role easily, shuttling men along, raising my voice to bark at stragglers. Every now and then I glance at Tamsin, who is staring at the many ships that have been run ashore. The dragon-carved prows stand proudly in the morning light, sails rolled up, oars stowed away. They all belong to different warbands; the one with the most elaborately carved prow belongs to the Cathalain.

She drifts along the shore while we stow the prisoners. At first I assume she's trying to put some space between herself and the vindictive Cavaliers. But then something seems to catch her eye, and she stares up at the Cathalain's longboat as though intrigued. She starts making her way over to its great carved bows, so I call to her, delegating my role to Orm while I stride to fetch her.

"Tamsin," I chastise her. "You shouldn't stray too far."

"I saw somebody," she says.

I frown up at the Cathalain's ship, the prow-head figuring their Irish war goddess, the Morrigan. It's a particularly large longboat; a canvas tent beneath the mast allows them a comfortable cabin.

"The Cathalain are all up at the camp," I tell her.

“There was definitely somebody in that tent,” she says in a low voice.

I squint up at the ship but see no movement at all. Could they be thieves? Or Briton spies, having surreptitiously climbed aboard our ships in some plan to take them, or destroy them?

“Stay here,” I growl at Tamsin.

She grasps my hand as I pass her. “Be careful.”

I advance on the ship, stepping into the cold grey water of the Clyde. I stride right up to the prow, grasp the thick wood, heave myself aboard. The huge ship rocks slightly as I board it, alerting whoever is hiding in that cabin.

Shield drawn, I creep along the deck. A wooden door leads into the cabin structure; it’s ajar, darkness within.

“Woman of the Cathalain, if you’re in there, stop playing with me,” I call in Norse, first. That would be the best possible option – perhaps they kept some wounded in that cabin.

To my relief, it is a female voice that drifts out, speaking Norse. But that relief is short-lived:

“I have an arrow on you, Thrain Mordsson, if you’re thinking of calling attention to us.”

Freya. I know that voice. I can only scoff in bewilderment. “Is that you, Skaði?” I ask the little slit of darkness. “You know you have my friendship.”

The door creaks wider, revealing a little of the interior. Dim light shows me Skaði in her full armour, soot smeared over her eyes, shaved head tilted, her blond braid cast down one shoulder. She’s sitting by the door, arrow casually notched in her bow.

Odin, what’s she playing at?

“You have Princess Tamsin with you?” Skaði says.

“I do.”

“Tell her to come aboard. Discreetly. Then we’ll talk.”

I’m trying to calculate all possible explanations for her behaviour as I walk to the ship’s edge, peering over. Tamsin’s close, her slipper-clad feet dipped in cold Clyde water, staring up at the ship.

I lean over, offer her a hand.

“It’s Skaði,” I tell her, unable to keep the bewilderment from my voice. “She has an arrow on me, for some reason. She wants to see you.”

Tamsin’s eyes widen in alarm. I hoist her up, and she strides ahead of me toward the cabin. She holds out one arm as though to shield me from Skaði’s arrow.

As ever... I stare at her red-gold tresses, the fall of her dress. She will insist on making me fall in love with her over again.

“I’m here,” Tamsin says warily as we reach the door. Skaði opens wider for us, stowing her bow. Then, a little way in, we see her companion.

The girl appears as a small Cathalain figure at first, dressed in their leathers and armour. Then she plucks off her helmet, and though her long blond hair is drawn back by braids, there is no mistaking the grace and royal bearing of Princess Eormen.

The eldest daughter of the Briton King stands before us, resplendent in her armour.

Tamsin’s face lights up. “Eormen!”

“*Tamsin –*”

The names rush out of them both as they stride to one another. Skaði and I stand by the door together, unlikely guardians keeping watch while the two Briton princesses reunite.

Chapter 12



TAMSIN

First Quarter of July

Eormen smells of salt, leather and wood wax, but I find her familiar floral notes once she pulls my face into her hair. She wraps me so tight against her that I hardly have any breath left.

She's safe. She's alive. And she's here with me. The joy of finding each other alive and well makes us hold each other like we'd been close-knit sisters all our lives.

"You've been here all along? On the Cathalain's ship?" I ask her.

"Yes. I sailed with them from Dál Riata –"

"Ha!" Skaði snorts. "*Sailed*. You stowed away, princess. It is not sailing if you travel inside a barrel."

Eormen shoots her a glance. Then, with dignity, she adds: "Skaði helped me to stay hidden."

I can't help smiling as I stare into her achingly familiar face.

“I’m so glad you’re all right,” I gush at her.

“And you,” she says. The joy of reunion is quick to abate as she dives into our situation. “That first day was... it was brutal. Is Rhun all right?”

A pang goes through me as I picture him in the prison house. “The Dubliners locked him up. He’s well, he’s just a little... we’re afraid he’s a danger to himself right now.”

Eormen’s eyes are soft with understanding.

“I wanted to go up to the village,” she says. “I wanted to, but I couldn’t stomach it.”

“And you’re safer here,” Skaði says, striding to us. “You would make far too valuable a hostage to King Gofraid, if he knew you were here.”

Thrain steps closer, too. “Do the Cathalain all know you’re here?” he asks.

“Yes,” says Eormen, eyes flickering between our guardians. “They’re keeping the secret, as they know what danger I would be in if it became known among those cursed hordes that I am here.”

I gaze at her worriedly. “You’re sure they’ll keep the secret?”

“They are a clan of shieldmaidens,” Eormen says. “From what I understand – it is their guiding principle to let no woman suffer at the hands of men. And they hold that principle above the authority of kings.”

She glances at Skaði, as though to verify her recitation. Skaði only nods curtly. “That is so,” she agrees. “They will say nothing – you can count on it.”

I try to take their word for it. Eormen clears her throat, cloaking herself entirely in the mantle of the King’s daughter, the glitter of royalty I recognise all too well. And she turns to Thrain.

“I wanted to ask you, Thrain Mordsson... you’ve sworn to help us,

haven't you? Tamsin told me so."

The words thud into us both. Thrain glances at Skaði, but she only gives him a crooked grin.

"You can speak plainly with me," she says. "I am pledged to this one now, for better or worse."

"I'm not sure I follow," Thrain says slowly. "What is your position here exactly, Skaði? You're telling me you've broken off from your clan?"

"Put briefly, yes," Skaði says. "They don't think I am capable of any larger revolt all by myself; they believe I am simply keeping her safe, away from the warzone. But from what Eormen tells me," she adds, eyes burning into Thrain's, "you and your Dubliners are brewing something rather interesting."

Thrain draws in a breath. The conversation is taking a turn for the dangerous.

"I want to join you," Skaði says. "I can't continue to protect Princess Eormen alone. And my clanswomen are only interested in liberating the Vanirdøtur from their Christian captors; they don't care about slaughtering Briton men as they go about it."

"And what is your position on that?" Thrain asks, still frosty.

"Frankly, I don't care much for the men, myself," Skaði says. "But I will do as my princess commands. As they are her countrymen, I am beholden to sheathe my sword if she wills it."

Thrain lifts his chin. They are exactly alike; especially the way Skaði says those words. *My princess.*

Eormen's pale face has grown a little pink from Skaði's declaration. She keeps her eyes fixed on Thrain, determinedly avoiding me.

"Well?" she asks. "We have shown you our position. Will you show us

yours? What are you doing with those chained Cavaliers outside? What is it you hope to accomplish?"

Thrain glances at the three of us, clearly deliberating. Then he breathes out slowly, and takes the gamble.

"Our goal is to break this siege," he says. "We are helping the Britons in any way we can." Here he looks at Eormen. "Right now we are upholding the appearance of shuttling the prisoners away to Dublin. But we will set them down on the south bank of the Clyde and free them."

Eormen lets out an excited breath. She looks between us, then offers Thrain a little bow of the head.

"Then you are a true ally," she says. "I thank you for your collaboration, Thrain Mordsson. It is a precious gift you offer us. I know our men will recognise it and be grateful for it."

Thrain gives a small wry laugh at that. "I hope they do recognise it," he says. "Right now they will not believe in our friendship until they have proof of it; hence, we must hurry on with the task. However," he adds thoughtfully, "if you were to come with us and reveal yourself to them..."

"Yes," I agree, meeting Eormen's gaze again. "They've been asking after you. They'll be so happy to see you."

My heart's banging as I think of all the ways Eormen fulfills the expectations of a good Briton princess, and all the ways I fall short.

"They'll believe you if you explain it all to them," I tell her.

She frowns at me. "Surely they were already happy to see you alive and well? Didn't you bring your plan to them?"

Shame claws up my throat, making it hard to speak. Eormen... she knows what I've done; she forgives me for it. I bring up my hand, because surely the sight of my mark will speak eloquently enough for what I mean. She and

Skaði watch me as I pull aside my cloak to reveal the bite-mark at the crook of my neck.

Thrain stiffens, indignant as ever that I might show it.

“They know about this,” I tell Eormen, whose face has grown very serious and concerned. “I don’t think I can hold much sway over them now.”

“Oh, Tamsin,” she says. Frowning, she tucks my cloak over the mark again, smoothing it down with the careful reverence of someone covering a wound. Then she sighs and speaks in Brittonic: “I see what you mean. I wouldn’t expect a Cavalier to understand why you did this.”

I hold her hand tight, a ball in my throat. God, I didn’t realise how much I had missed her.

“May we come with you?” Skaði asks Thrain. “To accompany you on this mission?”

“I think it would be beneficial, yes,” Thrain says. “But you will have to make yourselves discreet.”

“Naturally.”

Eormen bends down, picks her helmet from the ground. I watch her as she shakes back her braided hair, then slides it onto her head again. The eye holes are outlined by such large strips of metal that they cover most of her face. She turns to me, grins at me apprehensively.

“How’s this?” she says.

I half want to laugh. The sight of her in that helmet makes excitement bubble up in me, as though we were dressing up for some game of stealth that did not involve the lives of hundreds of men.

Skaði slides on something similar, then knocks on Eormen’s playfully.

“Come on then,” she says, offering her a gauntleted hand. Thrain and I watch as Eormen lets herself be hoisted up, glittery gowns replaced now by

the leathers of a Cathalain warrior.

“Take care to keep hidden for now,” Thrain instructs her. “We will tell you when you may reveal yourself.”

“Understood,” Eormen says with a nod.

* * *

Side by side, Eormen and I march aboard Thrain’s longboat. The deck groans under many feet, chains clinking and clattering as the prisoners all take their seats. Dubliners are striding around them, following Thrain’s shouted commands. We stay out of their way as they lay the oars across the prisoners’ laps, settling everyone in their proper place.

Then with a lurch, we are pushed out into deeper water. I watch with dread in my gut as the dragonhead prow rises, a stark silhouette in the drizzling rain.

Ivar hops onboard, breeches drenched; he must’ve contributed to the push. He strides across the deck, joining Thrain’s side. Olaf is manning the second ship; he commands his own crew with similar ease. Ringed fingers outstretched, he points out toward the river’s wide curve.

“Row!” Olaf shouts.

And the prisoners obey his command.

Ripples spread across the river from the impact of many synchronic oars. The river is alight with glitter as we glide across it. I grip onto the bulwark, fingers digging into the wood.

The river blockade is up ahead.

Dozens of Viking longboats drift on the water. And though most bear skeleton crews, their warbands long since settled up at the camp... there are

still so many, their sails unfurled as a stark warning.

We're going to have to sail past them all.

The chained prisoners row and row, heaving their weight against the oars. Many are injured, wincing through the effort. They squint up warily as great shadows fall across our ship, cast there by the sails of those longboats we pass by.

"*Góðan dag, Olaf Gofraidsson!*" comes the first shout. Norse fills the air as Olaf returns the greeting. He and his brothers speak and laugh with the crews we meet; one after the other they let us pass.

The younger Cavaliers and infantrymen look terrified. I want to rush to them, squeeze their shoulders, reassure them. I'm not the only one – Captain Llewellyn is seated there among the prisoners, calling encouragement: *follow the pace, come on!* He still retains all the dignity of his station even in shackles.

Every time we pass another ship, I suck in my stomach. But the Viking crews only wave cheerfully at the wolves of Dublin, sending friendly jibes across the water.

I hang onto the bulwark, wide-eyed, until the last of the blockade ships drifts away behind us.

No one apprehended us. We're in open water now, all but alone as we navigate the great curve in the Clyde.

Olaf shouts to unfurl the sails, and the Dubliners rush to obey him. White wool flutters down like the wing of a huge beast, bellies out as the wind fills it. We pick up speed, and some prisoners are pulled back as their oars get swept away by the fast-moving water. The Dubliners laugh and help them upright.

Now that we are alone on the wide curve of the river, the atmosphere on

the ship is slowly shifting. The Dubliners stow away the oars, and the Britons begin looking around themselves, as through bracing for whatever's next. Thrain marches impressively across the deck and helps Captain Llewellyn to his feet, which draws the eye of almost all the Britons.

“Captain,” Thrain hails him. “We should be able to go ashore in an hour or so, once we’ve sailed around the curve of your Renfrew county. We had a place in mind – Inverkip Bay, I think you call it, we could go upriver a little – but if you have any other suggestions for a discreet drop-off point...?”

He isn’t bothering to lower his voice; he wants the Britons to see him taking council with their captain.

Captain Llewellyn thinks on this while Thrain takes the man’s wrist shackles, and conspicuously slides a key into the bolt. The shackles fall away, and the Captain rubs his wrists, still moving with slow intentionality, as though any sudden movement might rile up these suspiciously docile Vikings.

“Inverkip Bay is a good call,” Captain Llewellyn admits at length. “But there is a fishing cove further south that is more hidden. It leads to forested barrowlands. We’ll be able to lose ourselves there.”

“Grand,” Thrain says as he scans the horizon. “There shouldn’t be any more patrol boats out here. Will you help us steer the ship, so we can find your cove?”

“Of course.”

Murmurs rise as Thrain takes the captain to the starboard bulwark, and calls across the water to Olaf. Some of the Cavaliers are looking to their Viking shipmates and lifting their shackled wrists, asking to be freed, too – but Ivar walks among them and stamps down their hopes. *Sorry boys. The*

captains, first, he says. We have no guarantee you know how to behave yourselves.

We follow the large heel of land that is the coastline of Renfrew county, southern Strathclyde. Dense summer forests sweep onward as far as the eye can see. Eormen is brimming with impatience beside me; she aches to speak with our men, I know she does, but we hang back while both Viking and Britons work the sail and rudder together. The seated men share jerky and tough biscuit, speaking in Gaelic together, and it is a sight to see; all these God-fearing Christian soldiers with their rosaries and their wolfsbane-tabards, leaning head-to-head with savage pagans. It is mostly the younger Cavaliers who dare speak to their pagan captors; the elders remain stoutly mutinous, planted there on their seats like so many indignant tree stumps.

Soon the outcroppings of rock and trees obscure us from sight. By then, many of the prisoners have been allowed to come to the bulwarks, leaning there as they look around. As Captain Llewellyn's voice guides the Vikings on, a definite sense of curiosity and hope is in the air. They're realising that the wolves really are letting them choose the drop-off point themselves.

They're realising the sincerity of this friendship.

The secret cove we enter offers a small half-moon beach onto which we can run ashore. Our two longboats crunch along the gritty, pebbly ground as it rises beneath us. Vikings and Britons work together to furl the sail and lower the heavy yardarm. Trust is blooming hesitantly as they work the vessels together, though the prisoners' shackles limit their movements.

And then –

“Oy!”

A voice rises from far across the water.

Ice plummets into my stomach. Eormen and I share a glance, then stare

out at the entrance of the secret cove.

The thin neck of water is no longer empty. A Viking longboat is making its way through, tailing us.

“*Sorðinn*,” Ivar curses as he strides beside us.

“What are they doing out here?” Thrain says. “We’re far past the blockade now.”

“They must be returning from some errand,” Ivar says. “We didn’t even see the arse-end of their ship – when in Odin’s name did they creep up on us?”

“Must’ve seen us entering this place,” Thrain says.

Trying not to pant with the mounting fear, I face them both. “So – so what are we going to do?”

Both brothers share a worried look.

“We need to get the prisoners out into that forest,” Ivar says. “Our best bet would be to make it seem as though they’ve revolted against us, and forced us to run the ships ashore.”

Thrain agrees. Then he turns to Eormen and I. “You two must lead the prisoners ashore. Princess Eormen – now is the time to reveal yourself, I believe. They will follow their princesses.”

Eormen and I exchange a glance. But Thrain only presses a set of keys into my hand and then strides past us, telling us to hurry as he relays the message to his crew. Ivar leans over the bulwark, calls across the water to Olaf, who nods and immediately begins gesticulating and barking orders, as though they had prepared for this eventuality.

Eormen looks about as terrified as me, but she gathers herself, lets out a steadying breath. Then she steps up on the helm, turns to face our Briton forces, and shouts in Brittonic:

“Oy! I hear you’re meant to be the might of Strathclyde!”

The Cavaliers, hearing her familiar voice, turn in confusion. She raises shaking hands to her helmet, and plucks it off. Blond hair flows out, and with it a great murmur rises among our men.

“Princess Eormen! Princess –!”

Captain Llewellyn strides past the others, looking at her in awe. And I can’t help but do the same; she is chillingly beautiful as she stands upright in the midday sun. The captain raises a hand to clasp hers, and she smiles at him as he hails her in a choked voice.

“You’re alive,” he says. “Praise be to God.”

“It’s good to see you too, Captain,” she says. Then, to the wider crowd, she calls out: “Like all of you, I have escaped a dire fate – I stand here now purely by the grace of God, and our precious allies. The wolves of Dublin have brought us here to free us – I know it is still hard to accept, for some of you. But if we are all here, alive and well, is it not a sign that God is with us? If you cannot place your trust in them, then place your trust in Him, who works through the good and the villainous alike.”

Captain Llewellyn throws up a loud *aye!* which several others echo.

“I know you are tired and hurting, but this is our chance,” she shouts, emboldened by their response. “We must act now as though we have overcome our Viking captors – so let us fight them, fight and run to freedom!”

It is a mock-fight that breaks out, the Dubliners all roaring and butting into the shackled Britons. They take it as a game – making as much noise and theatrical gestures as possible. But though the Dubliners crumble easily, pretending defeat, some Cavaliers still take the opportunity to vent their

frustrations. They cannot do much in their shackles, but many still kick those Vikings who've lain down.

"Stop it!" I cry out, but Thrain pins me against the bulwark, protecting me from the havoc.

"*Move! Move!*" Captain Llewellyn yells. Eormen helps him to pull away the vindictive ones. And the Britons turn and jump ashore, still in their shackles. The captains help their subordinates, pulling them through the knee-high water.

Thrain finally detaches from me and barks, "Go with them, my love – *go.*"

"But –" I barely have the time to touch his chainmail, heart racing, as though I could leave him some luck that way. What does he plan to do when that boatload of strange Vikings arrives? Will he and his brothers engage them in combat, and thus leave no witnesses? Is that – is that the plan?

Eormen passes by me, grabs my hand. And we run.

We splash down in the water among our men, and many of them reach to stabilise Eormen. As Olaf's group of prisoners join us, many cries ring out –

"Princess Eormen! The princess is with us!"

Eormen smiles breathlessly at them. And then we're running among our kin, Cavaliers and infantrymen alike making sure to surround us protectively even though they run with their shackled hands drawn together.

When we've passed the tree line, I chance a look behind me; the Dubliners have climbed out of the ships, spacing out on the beach, pretending to be limping or holding themselves around the middle. Thrain and Ivar make a great show of checking on them, while Olaf waves over at the oncoming longboat.

The keel of the longboat crunches along the pebbles, the warband

contained within hopping out into the water. I see Olaf take the hand of their leader and embrace him; he is a brawny thickset man, though he cannot rival Olaf in size.

I've stopped by a tree to watch. Eormen pulls me, trying to get me to follow, but she can't help looking too. Soon many of our men have stopped to watch, safe as we are under the cover of the trees.

Olaf and the other chieftain talk together, gesturing towards the forest. The chieftain nods solemnly, and barks at his warband as they gather. Clearly Olaf has asked them to help track down the escaped prisoners.

The Dublin men are spacing out, almost encircling the others, though they do it under the guise of a friendly welcome. They pat each other, exchange words and laughter, as though they were good friends who had not seen each other for some time.

I squint, try to make out Olaf's expression. Is that reluctance I see, as he lays a hand on his sword pommel? The other chieftain calls a command, lifts a hand to rally his band, and begins to lead the chase. He turns his back on Olaf, trusting him to follow.

There is a hiss of metal as Olaf draws his sword just by an inch; and all the Dubliners respond like so many trained hounds, tensing up, stepping back. The friendly smiles drain away, and I definitely spy sadness in some of their faces as they lay their hands on their axe hilts.

There is a moment, suspended in the still summer air.

Then Olaf sweeps up his sword in a neat silver arc. The blade cuts into the chieftain's neck, ploughing through.

And his head flies clean off his shoulders.

It splashes in the water, the only moving thing amidst a crowd of stock-still, disbelieving men. Then Ivar lets out a guttural war cry, and the

Dubliners close in on the betrayed warband, who are still reeling – still taking in the corpse of their chieftain.

They are completely surrounded. There's nowhere they can go.

Nothing they can do but pull out their axes and defend themselves.

Captain Llewellyn is close behind us; many of our men have crowded around us protectively as they watch the trap close around the newcomers. Norse cries fill the air, confusion and accusations making way for the growled commands of combat.

I dig my nails in the tree bark as I watch the three wolves engage.

Thrain and Ivar are close together, taking on an entire group of Vikings. Both of them have their feet planted wide apart; Thrain has his axe in his right hand, while Ivar's sword shines in the clear light of day, a stark silver-white claw.

Swing – dive – strike. They barge forward with their shields and pluck the lives of their opponents over the wooden barriers. Every so often they regroup, knocking into one another back to back before launching again.

Olaf and Ivar are the only ones with swords. Olaf's is richly made enough to mark his status. He holds it out, a deadly warning, before attacking. He is so concise with his movements; every swing of his sword strikes true, no effort wasted.

He wears a drawn, concentrated expression as he fights. No maddened bloodlust or anger there, though he grows just as blood-spattered as the rest. Only determination... and that sadness, still, in the thin line of his mouth.

“Unshackle us,” come the Cavaliers' voices behind me. “Princess – please.”

When I turn, Eormen is already trying to work the mens' shackles. I hand her one of the keys Thrain gave me, then set to unshackling some

infantrymen myself. As soon as they're freed, they group together and run out to the battlefield.

They're joining the wolves in the fray. They're convinced, then. They fully believe our offer of friendship now.

I watch a couple of Cavaliers pick weapons off the dead before striding in. Olaf takes them under his command, barking orders so they can tell friend from foe. Then I get poked by the shackled prisoners again, so I return to my unshackling duty, trying not to tremble.

One of them is a squat, leering old man. He is one of the most orthodox of the Cavalier captains; Garreth is his name, and he eyes me warily as I take his shackles.

"What is it?" I ask him, too frazzled to even think about how he was the one who spat at my feet earlier.

"They may make valuable friends," he says thinly. "But to be obtained in such a way? You have whored yourself, girl, and you will gain no respect from me."

"Oy! Enough with that!" Llewellyn barks over his shoulder. "You will not address a Briton princess that way –"

Others are grouping behind Garreth, giving his words weight. "Have you thought of why they're fighting?" he says. "They don't fight for us or any political conscience; they only fight for their bitten whore!"

"You dare speak of my cousin that way?" Eormen shouts at them. "Stand *down*, for the love of God!"

Heart pounding, I watch in awe as they all quieten, turning to stare at the darling of Strathclyde.

"Is that what it takes to lose the respect of you fine soldiers?" she snaps. "One bite and you renounce your vows to protect us?"

Silence.

“You are all wondering whether I bear the Viking’s bite too, I expect,” Eormen goes on. “Shall I show you? Will you deign to respect me then?”

Savagely she rips off her helmet then starts unbuckling her armour, even while Llewellyn begs her to keep it on. She hauls the chainmail up off her head and dumps it in Llewellyn’s arms. Beneath she wears a rough hemp tunic with a decorated T-shaped collar; she takes both sides in her hands and pulls it roughly apart, tearing down the front in her vigor.

“Princess, please, it isn’t safe,” Llewellyn stammers, though he does not dare touch her now that she wears nothing but loose hemp that outlines her chest.

“Look at my neck, Captain Garreth,” Eormen commands him, holding open her gaping collar, all but a tear away from being bare-breasted in front of him. “Look at it! Is there a mark there?”

“No,” Garreth says, trying to sound authoritative, though the sight of the darling of Strathclyde holding her collar open for him is getting him all twisted up with discomfort. “There is no bite.”

“There! Am I pure enough for you?” Eormen snarls at him. “May I speak and be heard? Will you do as I ask?”

“Of course, Princess,” Garreth all but stammers, ducking his head into an apologetic bow. “You – you should put your armour on. It isn’t safe.”

Imbued with the purpose of her royal lineage, Eormen stands tall in front of him and the other dissenters while Llewellyn hauls her chainmail shirt back over her.

“It is only by chance and circumstance that I was not bitten,” she says. “Tamsin has sacrificed a great deal to be here with us now, to help us. To help *you*. She has shown astounding courage just to move among these men

and carve vital alliances for us. You will treat her with just as much respect as you afford me! Is that understood?”

I’m cringing as the many dissenting Cavaliers grumble in ascent. *Don’t*, I want to hiss at my cousin, *don’t build me up like that* – it’s only half true, what she’s saying, I certainly didn’t give myself to Thrain purely out of some patriotic design.

“The Irish have alliances with Viking warbands,” she goes on. “It is not a question of forsaking dignity or pride; it is pragmatism. We have wolves at our door, and the only tried and successful method to be rid of them is to set another pack upon the first. You should be thanking my cousin for discovering this. We have made our peace with it, and it is only a matter of time before my father does, too.”

This sends mutterings through the crowded Cavaliers. Eormen takes my hands, places them on the twisted iron system that keeps Garreth’s shackles locked.

“You would call my cousin a whore, Captain Garreth?” she mutters. “Then know it was the whore who had the grace to unshackle you.”

“Forgive me, princess,” Garreth says, decidedly to Eormen rather than me. I keep my eyes on the shackles as I unlock the system. Once they’re loose, I’m only too glad for him to step back and away again.

Many more clumps of Cavaliers surge out of the trees. The dissenters stay. Eormen and I watch as our Briton kin fight back to back with the Dubliners.

I grasp my cousin’s hand, heart pounding harder than ever.

“Thank you, Eormen,” I mutter. She lays a serious look on me.

“Don’t squash yourself in front of them,” she says. “You did nothing wrong, Tamsin. On the contrary, they’re alive thanks to you, and I think that

hurts their pride.”

For all her bold words, she seems shaken, too. Her sky-blue gaze drops down to my neck. She must've seriously considered getting bitten to come here, I know it. That she might have Skaði's friendship was a stroke of luck; she could have very well offered herself to a Viking man to secure herself safe passage.

Some anguished, angry part of me tells me it's a good thing she didn't have to resort to it after all. That way at least, one of us came back from Dál Riata a respectable woman who might be heard by our kin.

The enemy warband is bloodying the cove, many bodies strewn about. Soon enough, they are all dead; Ivar has the last one kneeling at his feet, saying something in Norse that places a strange expression on Ivar's face.

I wonder if it's guilt... or regret. That kneeling position wrenches memories from the back of my mind, making me wonder if... if perhaps they even *feasted* together.

Whatever their past, Ivar only affords his enemy one parting line. Then he ends it without further hesitation. He angles his sword in an upward slash, opening the man's neck. And the man tumbles into the Clyde, his life spewing from the jugular.

Chapter 13



TAMSIN

First Quarter of July

Olaf marches among the men, who are instinctively forming orderly groups in his wake. Cavaliers nod uncertainly at their towering Viking allies as they settle. Olaf waits a moment to have everyone's attention before speaking in a low, commandeering tone.

“Friends. We have bled together now, and you are free of your shackles. I think we have reached a certain point of trust. Are you in agreement?”

Captain Llewellyn throws out an *aye*, which many other Cavaliers echo.

“Let us make this quick,” Olaf says. “It’ll be safer for you to leave here as soon as possible. But first, there are urgent matters we need to discuss.”

Ivar and Thrain stride to reach their brother's side. I follow them. The Cavaliers will judge our closeness, but I can't bring myself to care when I have to pick through bodies to get to Olaf.

Eormen sides with Llewellyn; I am on the side of the Vikings, facing them. To each camp the woman they've pledged to.

“Now that we are properly acquainted, let us re-introduce ourselves,” says Olaf. “I am Olaf Gofraidsson. These are my brothers Ivar Gofraidsson and Thrain Mordsson. You may know us as the three ruling lords of Dublin. Until recently, we acted in the interest of my father, the Viking King of the Southern Isles. Then we found your fabled women – your daughters of Clota, as you call them – and we now act in their interest alone.”

The Cavaliers listen, quiet now, as Olaf lays it all out in an even tone, though he is covered in gore.

“They are sacred to us,” Olaf goes on. “We sought to destroy their sanctuary; now we see the worth of keeping it intact. We want to keep them safe and let them decide their own fates. We are here now to offer a secret alliance with your king, and to bring you warning of what lies ahead in this war.”

He shifts, catching Captain Llewellyn's eye.

“When the full moon comes, my father threatened to send out raiders into your lands,” Olaf says. “But that is not the only threat you will have to face this moon.”

“What do you mean?”

Grimly, Olaf says, “My father's scouts reported that King Causantin is in the north. He has ten thousand spears with him. And he has the full intention of joining my father's raiders and coming down hard upon you.”

My stomach drops. That bastard Causantin is still alive, then... he's still up there.

“So,” Llewellyn says a little shakily. “When the full moon comes –”

“You may be facing twenty thousand men,” Olaf concludes.

A fresh wave of mutterings rises among the Cavaliers. Llewellyn opens his mouth, but the thought of so many numbers flooding across Strathclyde, including moon-crazed Vikings, seems to have turned him speechless.

“If I may,” Olaf calls over the noise. “I would urgently advise you to send men up north immediately to ascertain this, and block Causantin from advancing.”

Llewellyn nods. “We will have to bring the matter to the captains and princes who are heading our main forces, certainly.”

“Well, we only have a week left until the full moon,” Olaf says. “Where has your army retreated to? Is it far?”

“Our rally point is east of here, in the Kilpatrick hills... we should reach them in a couple of days, if the weather holds. But I do not know what numbers we have now. Certainly not twenty-thousand, at any rate.”

Olaf nods. “Tell your princes that my men and I are ready to help you against the raiders. Though I understand this trust between us is young and must be tested further, you must appreciate how little time we have.”

Llewellyn sighs. “Of course. How can we contact you?”

Olaf goes on to tell them where the Dublin pack is located in Dumbartonshire; he looks to me to specify whose houses we occupy, and how we call those sections of the village. I stammer and do my best to emulate Eormen’s confidence in addressing my kin.

They speak then of how to communicate this new alliance to Uncle Arthgal. Olaf points to the fact that we can smuggle messages through our section of camp, though he does not know how to penetrate the fort. Llewellyn waves a hand in the air and says there are ‘known passageways’.

I swallow hard as I follow their exchange. I know those passageways. Secret tunnels in the cliffs that lead up into the fort. I had not even realised

that such knowledge could be so crucial.

Llewellyn concludes: “We will leave a couple of Cavaliers with you to report all of this to our king. The message will be more fairly received if it comes from one of us.”

Olaf agrees, graciously letting them lead the discussion now. The captains all turn to discuss who should stay with the three lords of Dublin and help them smuggle the message into the fort.

Not many are eager to volunteer. But some hands go up; and I’m amazed to find Emrys, hand in the air. He’s staring straight at me.

I cringe at that look of pity he lays on me. I hope he doesn’t think I need protecting from the Vikings; or that he could offer any viable protection whatsoever.

“As I have had the King’s trust for many years now, I will go myself,” Llewellyn decides. Then he nods at the crowd and adds, “I don’t need more than one to come with me. Emrys, you’ll do perfectly, the King knows of your loyalty to the Order.”

The pit of my stomach drops as Emrys comes forward. Llewellyn and Emrys slot themselves among the huge Dubliners, who greet them with nods and pats on the shoulder.

“Now,” Llewellyn goes on, “Who will take over command here and lead our men to the Kilpatrick hills?”

More hands rise. Men shift to let the old grey-haired Captain Hywel come forward; as he is the eldest Cavalier captain, he has everyone’s respect.

But many eyes linger upon Eormen. And Hywel’s do, too.

She shifts nervously in the growing silence. Skaði lays a discreet hand on her shoulder, stepping closer protectively.

“Princess Eormen,” Hywel says with a bow. “We all know that you

would be safer in the fort. But it is a dangerous road through the Viking camp, and your escort would be far too small to my liking. That is why, if I am to take command and travel to the Kilpatrick hills, I would be very honoured to have you by my side.”

Many voices rise in agreement, then. From their cheers, you’d think he’d invited a war hero along; as though Eormen had single-handedly led the mission to sail past the Viking blockade and free them all. She smiles, looking overwhelmed, and bows back to Hywel. When she rises again, her eyes are shining.

“It would be my honour to accompany you, Captain,” she stammers. “I’m eager to see how our men are faring.”

Hywel smiles back at her. “Then I vow to escort you to the safety of our army camp. I’m sure they will be overjoyed to see you there.”

Eormen nods, clearly ecstatic to be invited rather than sent off to be shut away in the fort. Skaði just crosses her arms, looking gruff. While the men go on cheering, Eormen lays a soft, trusting look on her guardian.

“What will you do if I join them?” she asks.

“I’ll come with you, of course,” Skaði says. “Someone must guard you appropriately. And I don’t trust any one of those men to be up to the task.”

Eormen responds with a wry sort of smile. “They sedate themselves to keep their minds intact. They won’t take advantage of me.”

“Princess, they are still men.”

Eormen sighs as though this were a regular argument they had. Then she nods, and turns back to Hywel, who is looking up at Skaði quite apprehensively; she is two heads taller than him. “My friend comes with me,” Eormen says, her tone brooking no argument.

“We should not linger here much longer,” Olaf calls as the noise abates.

“You should set off now, and travel as fast as you can.”

“We will, my lord,” Eormen says, stepping in front of Hywel. Her royal stature grants her the right to do so, but it seems as though she’s eager to take full leadership herself.

Olaf refocuses his attention on her. “Send us a runner as soon as you reach your army. We must establish a communication line between us, above all.”

Eormen nods and holds out a hand. Olaf takes it, bows until his forehead almost touches her knuckles. Then she repeats the gesture with Thrain and Ivar, and though they do not bow as low, a territorial annoyance still rises in me; I try my best to squash it.

“We’re glad to have your friendship, my lords,” Eormen says. “We will be in contact soon.”

She comes to me, then. For a moment she can’t meet my eye; it is painfully blatant that none of the Cavaliers are offering for me to join them. They see how Thrain stands close to me; perhaps they do not dare. Or perhaps they know I am a lost cause. Next to her... it’s difficult to feel otherwise.

Still, my cousin pulls me a few steps away, so we can have one last word in privacy. Everything bubbles up in me, all the conversations I would’ve wanted to have with another woman throughout this fortnight.

“Eormen,” I breathe. “I never had the chance to tell you this, but... I’m...” My face is burning – there’s blood on both our clothes, and she’s in full armour, it’s so bizarre to even talk about this now at all. But who else can I ask? “I’m pregnant.”

Eormen stares at me dumbly for a moment. Then once she has her wits again she asks, “You have the Queen’s Sage, don’t you? I gave you some.”

Breathing out, I stammer, “I don’t know... I’m hesitating.”

“Tamsin.” She places both hands on my head, slicking back my hair. She seems to be searching for words, but in the end all she does is frown and mutter, “Oh, Tamsin.”

“What happens to us under the full moon, when we’re pregnant?” I ask her. “Do we still go into heat? I’ve never... never had that conversation.”

“Your mother neglected you entirely,” she says disapprovingly, and squeezes my hand again. “It is a sort of false heat we endure. The nesting instinct becomes an imperative. When my mother was pregnant and the full moon came, she needed us in her nest every day, and Father had to be with her at night. She would be very upset if we couldn’t be with her. And she’d be so protective over us.” Smiling faintly, she adds, “Almost frighteningly so. It turns you irrational and moody – even moreso than usual.”

I cringe. Just thinking of having a ‘false heat’ that is somehow even worse than the regular heat, in a camped Viking *army* – it’s overwhelming.

“Cousin. It would be easier for you on every account to *not* be pregnant right now,” Eormen insists gently. “And it’s Thrain Mordsson’s child, isn’t it? Why would you keep it...?”

I have a hand over my mark, absently digging my fingernails into my cloak. I know she wouldn’t truly hear me if I admitted that I love him, or that I might want a family with him. She might’ve spoken for me in front of the Cavaliers; she might want to wrap me in her clear white wings of respectability. But I am lost to my own kin. She’s encouraging me to make this decision as though it might redeem me, but there is no redemption for me now – surely she should see that.

“Princess Eormen!” Hywel calls her to him. “We should make haste, Your Grace.”

We both share one last harrowing look, before she pulls me into a tight embrace. She has to break away to join him; duty calling, as always.

“We’ll see each other again soon,” she promises me. “You take care, Tamsin.”

“And you,” I mumble into her hair. Then she’s gone from me, heading to her fate.

I watch them as the Cavaliers all march to the tree line. Eormen is at the front beside Hywel, still intent on leading. She has everything of the warrior princess, minus the actual ability to fight, unless Skaði teaches her. Envy and loneliness pulse in me as I watch her disappear between the trees.

She’ll be all right. I know it.

* * *

I try as best I can to make myself useful in the hours that follow. There are only grim tasks ahead; we must clean up the battle aftermath and set up camp in the trees for the night. Emrys and Llewellyn throw me glances as though they would like to come closer, to help me somehow, but they do not dare when Thrain shadows my footsteps.

In the light of the setting sun, the Vikings begin the arduous task of *carrying* the three longboats into the forest. I watch as several men stow away the masts, then gather on either side of the hull. Olaf is leading one effort, holding the prow.

“*HEFJA!*” he calls, and everyone groans in the effort of lifting the ship. They throw annoyed taunts and commands at one another as they stabilise it.

I can only stare open-mouthed as they carry it across the beach. Another party does the same, and Ivar heads the last party; so that soon, three Viking

longboats are sinking into the Briton forest.

At long last the beach is swept, the last bodies dragged away, stowed at a distance from wherever they're parking the ships. Sunset shines along the oily waters, turning them orange. I drift into the trees with the last of the Dubliners and our two Cavaliers.

The sight that greets us is entirely otherworldly.

Three huge ships lean between the trees, set in a vague triangle. At the foot of the ships, the Vikings are setting down blankets in the twisting moss-covered roots. They're milling around, preparing to settle down for the night. Thrain beckons me over, and I join him gladly.

There are no firepits; all of their efforts have been to make themselves invisible. So we settle into this strange camp, waiting for night to fall so we may disappear entirely.

* * *

Emrys sits apart from everyone during dinner. He's high on a curving root, overseeing our interactions. I'm nestled between Thrain and Ivar as always, too tired to do anything but eat and listen with a half-attentive ear to the Dubliners' banter. Some slip into Norse, perhaps to shun the Cavaliers; thus they shun me too, though I don't mind it. Thrain keeps a hand on me, in my hair, on my thigh, a constant reassurance and a way to keep me included.

I'd be grateful for it if I could not feel Emrys's eyes burning into us. He's examining each one of our movements; how Ivar leans closer to pass me something, how Thrain sometimes presses a kiss into my temple.

I've grown so used to their effortless claims of ownership, their small affections. Now, it's as though I were seeing myself as Emrys sees me; the

sheer strangeness of it all.

I know I should talk to him. I'm sitting beside Thrain Mordsson; it'll require some explanation before Emrys will understand it. If he ever does.

Should I even bother trying to explain it?

After a while he thankfully stops scrutinising us. But then he looks so forlorn, perched on his solitary root. Llewellyn is talking with the Dubliners, getting to know them, answering their questions about the Cavalier Order; Emrys doesn't seem inclined to speak with his newfound allies at all.

Sighing, I push myself up, stabilizing myself on Thrain's shoulder. He looks at me questioningly, so I press a kiss to his hair. "I'm just going to see how that Cavalier's faring."

"You know that one, don't you?" he asks softly. "I saw you greet him back in the pen."

I hum in agreement, cheeks flushing. God, there is such a world of difference between both of those men. I still remember the infatuation I had with Emrys back when I was younger. All those new, forbidden sensations. The idea of stealing away with him, the cursed tanner's son, was the height of thrill.

And now here I am, Thrain Mordsson's wife, with a wealth of questionable experiences under my belt. The idea of finding Emrys to be a *dangerous thrill* seems laughable in contrast.

"We were friends when we were younger," I tell Thrain. "Well, he was more Rhun's friend than mine."

He nods, frowning. There's guilt there; there's been so much guilt in his face ever since arriving. Surely he's calculating how many of the ones he's felled were my friends.

"I'll be right back," I promise him, stroking his hair in a paltry attempt to

lighten his mood. He settles back, tearing at his strip of jerky, still nowhere near a smile.

When I reach Emrys, he looks at me once, then continues to brood and pick at the rosary beads wrapped around his wrist. I sit down beside him.

Here we are. Him, a knight of our legendary Order, trained to be a paragon of Christian virtue, a Briton who places his country before everything else. And I'm sitting beside him, a tainted woman, inviting him to eat with those monstrous allies I've made. The same monsters that used to terrify us both; he's watched them pet my hair and kiss me on the cheek after ripping out men's guts in my name.

"So," he says. "Thrain Mordsson."

I nod, cheeks heating. He manages to place so much judgment into that name.

"He didn't force the bite on you at all, did he?" Emrys mutters. "He was like a damned butcher out there, just like we always heard, but with you... he turns all *soft*."

"Mm," I agree quietly.

Emrys scoffs, then leans back. "I don't know why I'm so surprised, really," he says. "You always did have a penchant for danger."

"I do not," I protest half-heartedly. "My God, if you knew all the things I've seen up in Dál Riata. If I had any *penchant* before, I can tell you I am cured of all curiosity now."

That makes him quiet again. He picks at his rosary, brow furrowed, clearly turning over a question on his tongue.

I brace for some more sanctimonious nonsense, but this time the words that emerge are quiet and pained:

"I've been wanting to ask you. That day... when the Vikings arrived. I

heard Rhun's voice." He seems to be bracing himself before going on: "Is Rhun still alive?"

"Yes," I tell him curtly. "He's in our section of the siege camp."

"How is he faring?"

I'm surprised he even cares. He did not lift a finger to help me drag Rhun from the dungeons, after all.

"Rhun's faring quite badly, actually," I tell him. "He's convinced this whole war is his fault, because he escaped the bogs and invited God's wrath."

Emrys lets out a sigh, leaning back to gaze at the moon.

"Are you going to tell me you believe that, too?" I ask, defensive. "That he's at fault, and that he should die, as per the directives of the Order?"

"This war certainly isn't Rhun's fault," Emrys says. Then he gives a scoff. "Christ, if you only knew. Rhun is far from the first cursed boy to escape the bogs."

His words are like a slap in the face. "What?" I splutter. "You mean there are – there have been others?"

"We learn about it during our training," he says. "We have to keep it quiet, to avoid a panic. But, yes. Of course there are. Many cursed boys have escaped over the years. It's part of the Order's duties to track them down and see to it that they meet the fate God intended for them."

This is so astounding to me that I just sit there, struck dumb and open-mouthed. I was so persuaded that Rhun was the first and only escapee in centuries. But of course – of course there must've been others.

"The Order still believes cursed men should be strictly regulated," Emrys says. "But we do not believe the superstitions about how our borders are protected by the bog sacrifices. It is the Order that protects our borders." He

chucks away a twig. “It is the Order’s failings that have allowed the Vikings to come so close, now.”

I gaze at his chainmail, his precious tabard with the purple wolfsbane flower. *Strictly regulated*, indeed. Anger climbs up my spine as I remember how he obstructed me back in the dungeons, how he told me not to get Rhun’s hopes up. How he completely abandoned my brother to his fate. I know the Order forces Cavaliers to turn on their own friends, that it must all be very hard – but he could’ve done *something*.

“So, what then?” I snap at him. “If you meet Rhun again, will you make sure he *meets the fate God intended for him?*”

Emrys stares at his rosary, mulling over this question a moment.

“It would be my duty,” he mutters. “But I don’t think I could do it.”

I can barely recognise him when he wears that ashen face. I’ve only seen him this vulnerable once before; when he lost his own brother. It seems this war has shaken him enough to rattle his precious values.

Perhaps he doesn’t want to lose another close friend.

“Here,” he says, turning to me and unravelling the rosary from his wrist. “Will you give this to Rhun for me? Tell him he must not blame himself. And tell him...” He frowns, as though forcing out the words past his own strict rules: “Tell him I’m glad he’s alive.”

A Cavalier, saying those words. I would not have believed him capable of them. Perhaps this is the real reason he volunteered for this mission; not because he wanted to protect me, but because it might bring him closer to Rhun.

I press his blood-spattered rosary back into his palm. “You can tell him yourself. Since you’re coming with us back to the village.”

He curls his fingers around the rosary and nods. So I squeeze his shoulder

and leave him to his brooding, picking my way back to my pack.

* * *

There are men silhouetted among the trees, tracing a perimetre. Keeping an eye on the cove. The watch will rotate so everyone can get a snatch of sleep. Some Vikings are already snoring as the evening deepens; others have taken to the ships, while a determined few keep their intense midnight conversations kindled.

Olaf, of course, has joined the first watch. He's been acting every bit the prince since the beginning of this mission. I stare at his starlit silhouette where he stands at the tree line, his broad back to us.

Prince Olaf Gofraidsson. All I can think of while I blink blearily his way is... he's so far away from us. Aloof. Detached. Someone must be focused, of course, to lead us on; but in doing so, he is eternally separate. Unreachable somehow.

"When is that man going to sleep?" Ivar complains to Thrain. "I should take first watch. I swear he hasn't slept since arriving in Strathclyde."

"I can relieve him," Thrain says from above me. I'm curled up in his lap, someone's blanket tucked around me; I'm not sure how I got into this position, only that he's so warm, and I'm so tired.

Ivar gives a small laugh. "I think you have someone to put to bed, first."

I moan in protest as Thrain shifts beneath me. Then his arms have locked around me, lifting me up in my roll of blankets.

"Where do you want to sleep, cariad?" he murmurs. "Here or in the ship?"

“Wherever you are,” I mutter, and he makes a little noise in his throat. His lips come against my temple, hesitating there, a soft caress.

“The ship will be more comfortable, I think,” he decides. Then he rises, a giant plucking me from the ground. I hold onto him around the shoulders as he carries me over to one of the parked longboats, climbing up a stairway of roots until the hull bellies out towards us. I fold my hands over the edge, clamber onboard, and he follows.

The deck creaks under my feet. It’s so wonderfully bizarre to be striding across this deck even as the nocturnal forest bristles all around us. Branches coil out like so many dancing shadows; vines and leaf clusters glint like hanging silver coins in the darkness.

It’s like a dream.

Thrain’s brought the woollen blankets that the Dubliners must’ve offered. There are several men tucked in the corners of the deck, huddled together against the night chill. Thrain takes me to the bows, where coiled hemp ropes mark a round space. My nesting instincts delight in the shape; I take the blankets, space them out as they need to be.

When I look up at Thrain, he’s still standing, smiling softly down at me as he watches me build this little makeshift nest. As though he’s only here to tuck me in and leave again.

He’s still holding back from me.

I frown up at him. “Stay?”

He crouches down, tucks the blankets further around my legs.

“We have to rotate the watch,” he whispers.

“But we’re on a *ship*, in the middle of a forest,” I say a little giddily. His grin widens. “You have to stay. I want to share this with you.”

“Tamsin…”

I've grasped his good hand, kneading his fingers. It's been a fortnight now since he shut the bond, and I can't stand this any more; not knowing how he feels, where he's hurt, why it is that he's looking at me like that.

"All right," he finally capitulates, kneeling in the wool beside me. I grasp him closer, achingly grateful, and he leans into my neck to plant a kiss there. "Only until the next watch."

Chapter 14



THRAIN

First Quarter of July

She pulls me against her in the dark, the love of my life outlined in starlight. Her arms slide around my head, encouraging me to nestle in her bosom.

My chainmail and armour are in a pile beside us. The woollen blankets make a soft world that she wraps us into. Above, the canopy glistens; the wind drags through the leaves, a quiet susurrations.

I've not been this close to her since our claiming ceremony. She lets me press my ear against her chest and count her heartbeats.

Tha-thump.

Tha-thump.

My eyes are closed, the ball in my throat growing.

Gods, I've missed this.

She rakes her fingers through my hair, her breaths quiet in the dark. I do not need the pair-bond to tell me she's missed this closeness just as much.

But I can't keep my eyes closed; I can't relax into her arms after having dealt her so much hurt.

"Thrain," she whispers into my hair. "Please don't shut yourself off from me."

I stare at the mating mark on her throat. What is she doing, this impossible girl, inviting me into her nest after all that's happened? How can she stand me being near her? But she's pulled us into a tangle, her leg wrapped around my waist, stroking my hair as though I had never planted a knife in her heart.

I mutter the words into her bosom; "Why are you forgiving me?"

She breathes softly. I realise then that perhaps she isn't forgiving me at all. Perhaps she only wants this bodily closeness, like what she asked of Ivar the other night; a familiar draught to help her sleep.

"I knew what we were headed for," she whispers. "I know you're with us. You've just proved that to an entire battalion of Cavaliers today. This past fortnight was the hardest part, wasn't it?"

"Tamsin," I sigh, and I'm glad she's wrapped around me so I can pull her closer. "I don't think it's going to get much easier."

Her fingers rake through my beard. "I know it's going to be difficult. That's why I need... I need the bond, Thrain. I need you to open it."

"You don't need this," I tell her hoarsely. "What's inside me."

Guilt is useless to her. Guilt says I was too weak to take another, better option. Guilt says I am a coward, that I am begging for repentance even while she carries me upon her broken back.

"Yes I do," she whispers. "I need all of you."

I close my eyes, frowning into her bosom as the pair-bond thrums between us, pulling at the lock I set on it. To have her wrapped so close

around me makes it all the harder to keep it locked down – especially when I can sense what she’s offering me, the love and softness I hardly deserve.

She pulls at my hair gently, coaxes my head back so she can drag her lips across mine. I breathe in that scent of home, the one she’s wrapped all around me along with the warmth of her body.

“How can you tolerate this?” I ask her. “After the battle for Dumbartonshire... you should be telling me to cut off my hands.”

“I would never,” she whispers. “I’ve already caused those hands of yours enough harm. And you’ll need them to hold me with.”

I dig the fingers of my good hand into her thigh, gliding up to her hip, bunching the shift she wears. She kisses me and I can only whine like a dog, my throat burning, eyes prickling as though they had caught specks of starlight.

“Let me in,” she breathes against my mouth. “Please... please open the bond.”

It was not exactly a conscious process when I shut it off. I couldn’t bear to let her see what pathetic emotions inhabited me; so I twisted myself away without really realising it. Now it is taking all my effort to untwist, to let her coax me back into her arms.

I kiss her, tasting salt and an echo of the forest scents all around us, sap and leaves and secret life. Fingers digging into her waist, I try – try to untwist, to open the floodgates.

Just as it was a sudden, abrupt closure when it shut off, now the release is a heady uncontrolled rush. The two ends of the bond crash together, waves battering from different angles, dissolving into mist around us. There’s pain, deep crimson, mingled with the glittering yearn for peace, for pleasure, the pure *need* for companionship that envelops me whole.

It's vivifying. I'm battered by the strength of it, this connection, and she pants against my mouth as she's swept up in it just the same.

"Thrain," she whispers brokenly, her thigh tightening around my hip. "Please... I need you closer."

Words are all but useless now. I could tell her I'm sorry, but all of my apologies would be small inadequate echoes of what the bond is already telling her. This sensory vocabulary – it's so much more eloquent to express what we mean.

Freya, I love her so much.

The kiss we share is full-bodied, both of us surging into one another. She has me hardening in moments, my cock pressed up against her centre as she claims me with her tongue.

Like a temple, the woods around us demand silence. Her hand moves as a careful paw over fallen leaves, down my front, freeing me in a gesture that is growing deliciously practiced.

I tug her cloak aside with my teeth to better bare her mark. When I press an open-mouthed kiss to it, the bond between us whips into a sweet foam. The velvet of her mourning gown bunches between us as she guides me inside her – and I wish she wore anything else but this, anything other than a homage to death when I seek to give her the opposite, pull her out of that chilling stillness we have been wading through.

But this is where we are; this is where we will be while this war goes on. In a crossroads between grief and pleasure, intensities that begin to blur until one is tantamount to the other.

Her breath is quiet as the wind in the canopy, rushing over my ear. I glide inside her to the hilt, hands full of her velvety body, the arch of her spine, the pure satisfaction of it.

Close. As close as we can get.

The deck smells of river water and wood wax; the wool bears the scents of our pack. With the metal tang of my chainmail, I wonder for a moment at the mingling of these scents, the ones I attribute to warfare now tangled with Tamsin's honey and apples. She ennobles the rest; gives it all a glitter of purpose.

She pulls me close until I'm snug as I can be inside her. I rock a little to better appreciate the way her whole body grasps onto me. We don't move much, rocking together slowly, pausing to taste each other's panting breaths.

To be this close to her... reunited with her properly, at last... this is all I need.

When my knot begins to bulge, her legs tighten around me, keeping me inside her. It grows steadily, pushing against her slick walls. The pair-bond shivers through me as her bliss echoes in my body.

Stay... stay with me. Stay inside.

I could not part from her now even if someone held a knife at my throat.

I tuck my wife against me, her slight body warm against mine, her belly so soft and full. Even as I rock within her now, there is already the seedling I planted here; the thought of it makes me kiss her, long and deep.

I whisper my vows against her mouth, because I can never say them enough, *I love you, I love you so much*, and when she whispers it back I buck within her, breaking into bliss. She tastes the silence of my open mouth as the cry of pleasure stays stuck in my throat.

The thought vaguely sparks at the back of my mind, that this isn't prudent, that if she wants to keep a certain standing in front of those Cavaliers, then accepting such a blatant and copious scent-mark from me is not the best idea. But the thought of catering to anyone's idea of *decency* only

makes me bite into her mark with blunt teeth, angrily claiming the woman they would shun.

* * *

Some time has passed before I become aware of footsteps creaking across the deck. I bristle and push myself up, making Tamsin moan softly; I have her knotted to me, so each of my movements pulls the point of our joining.

Ivar's liquorice is sweet on the roof of my mouth. I stare at the coming silhouette in the darkness, all lean limbs and predatory hunch. He reaches to touch my blanketed leg.

"Thrain," he whispers. "It's your watch."

I falter, the remnants of deep climax still flitting through my veins.

"I... uh."

Ivar waits for an elaboration I'm incapable of giving. My brain just isn't following. There is no way I can possibly get up – for a myriad of reasons, chief of which is a great big blaring *no*.

He manages to catch on.

"Oh," he says, and I can hear the smile in that idiot's voice; "*Oh*. I'm so sorry to interrupt... it's not like we're in the middle of a stealth mission, or anything like that. You carry on."

"Ivar," I growl, unable to string more words into the threat.

"In all seriousness, brother," Ivar says, still sounding like he's grinning from ear to ear. "You keep away from her when Olaf gives you express permission to skip your watch? And now we're in a secret fucking cove, expecting another patrol boat to come sniffing out our treason – and you decide to do this *now*?"

“Sorry,” Tamsin whispers, the enduring hum of pleasure making her languid as she says it. “We weren’t thinking straight.”

“Clearly.” Ivar straightens with a dramatic sigh. “I’ll take your watch then, shall I. It’s not like I needed sleep.”

Tamsin mumbles something into the woollen covers. My instincts bristle at her suggestion, but the pounding pleasure of the knot flattens most other preoccupations, as ever.

“What was that?” Ivar asks.

“You could stay,” she murmurs. “Give your watch to someone else.”

Ivar gives a little *kuh* of incredulity. “You two are unbelievable,” he mutters. “You really think I’d heap my duties onto a poor, unsuspecting Varg who will sacrifice his sleep so I can have myself a good time?”

“... yes?” Tamsin says, and I can’t help snorting. She isn’t really *wrong*.

The sigh that twists from Ivar’s chest seems born of the deepest frustration. “Tamsin. Please don’t torment me.” He leans closer again, his hand feeling for Tamsin’s shape in the crumpled wool. More quietly, he says, “I think this night belongs to the two of you.”

“You always have a place in my nest, Ivar,” she replies groggily, her voice still breathy and intimate.

That makes him go rather quiet.

“Keep warm,” he says, pulling the wools closer over her. “And please don’t do this again. You need sleep, and it’s too dangerous out here to indulge yourselves.”

“Ivar...”

She’s holding his hand, trying to keep him with us. But it’s obvious that he still feels the injury of their last tryst standing between us now.

He leans in, kisses her hair. Then he leaves us both as he melts into the

night again, becoming nothing more than footsteps in the dark.

Chapter 15



IVAR

First Quarter of July

Olaf is standing at the forest edge, eyes on the cove beyond. He is sleepless and immobile as Heimdall, the tireless guardian; except Olaf is no god, and his brain will run out of his ears soon if he doesn't get some sleep. I make my way over to him, lay a hand on his back.

"I'll take it from here," I tell him.

He turns his silver head to me. "Wasn't this Thrain's watch?"

"Thrain's occupied," I tell him with a smirk. "The rudder is stuck in the riverbed."

Olaf's moonlit beard twitches up as he deciphers this. "Wait – are you serious? *Now?*"

I lift my hands in feigned helplessness.

Olaf lets out a muffled laugh, shaking his head. "All right. Well, I'm watching the cove. You can take the forest."

“You won’t sleep at all?”

“I’ll sleep when we’ve returned to the siege camp.”

“I know you,” I snap at him. “You’ll sleep only when you’re skewered on Briton metal. I have eyes too, I can watch the damned cove – so go find a suitably curled root and *sleep*.”

He shakes his head at me with a patient smile. “See to the forest,” he says. “I’ll be fine.”

And thus, my men and I leave silver-bearded Heimdall to his obtuse stupidity and sink into the trees. Loki, between him and Thrain I do not have a single sensible brother to lean on tonight. I shake away the thought of Tamsin’s nest, the woollen softness of it, and her breathy voice inviting me to stay... I would like to have stayed; I would *very* much like to have slept in her arms again.

But on I must go. As I have repeated to myself these past few days; let him have her... let him have her. I know how he is about the slightest scratch or bruise on a woman, even if it is in the throes of sex; I know how deep it runs for him. I must let this grudge of his run its course.

Besides... better to give them this space to properly reunite than risk them huddling miserably at opposite sides of camp again, pining after one another like idiots. I only have so many shoulders to cry on, after all.

Gods. What a piece of work, those two.

My men and I space out, keeping our eyes ahead, adjusting to the dark. The trees sweep past me as I keep an even pace.

I don’t look anywhere else than forward. The darkness between the trees beckons, but I don’t let it pull me in. We must keep to the watch. Keep moving till we’ve spaced out enough –

“Jarl, please,” calls one of my men. It is young Mikjel, his voice shaking

a little. “Could we halt for a moment? The clearing... it’s just over there in the trees.”

My feet crunch into the forest floor as I stop. Fingers curling into a fist, I glance over at him. His grieved face, his pleading manner.

I shouldn’t allow it. It would not be a constructive use of time for any of us. But... though Olaf and I may have the stamina to keep going, to deal with a problem and deem it resolved – I suppose I cannot expect such cool pragmatism from all the men.

“Fine,” I grant him. “A short halt, then.”

And we turn as one, silent and solemn now as we head between the great ancient oaks.

There is a clearing between the trees. Bunches of wildflowers sprout all around, bluebells carpeting the ground. Among them lie the dead, arranged in lines. We dragged them here from the beach, placed them as best we could, but there was no time to give them rites nor consecration.

Those men were our neighbours in Ireland. A fierce raiding party that sacked the chapel of Cill Dara, just west of Dublin. A hearty bunch, and dependable as any. We hosted them awhile before they went on to build their own settlement – and we warred together often after that.

Slowly, my men space out around them. They kneel by the ones they knew, honour them by speaking their names, their fathers’ names, and the ancient clans that begot them.

I stand there, glazed and immobile as Olaf. Watching the faces of my men carefully. It was a cruel thing to have asked of them; but they only seem resigned as they lay their hands on chainmail-clad chests, slick back messy hair.

Old Sigbrand passes me, lays a sympathetic hand on my arm.

“Damned shame,” he says, shaking his head.

“The men all know, don’t they? Why we had to do this.”

“They know, Jarl,” he reassures me quietly. Then he pats my arm. “Take a moment yourself. We’ll keep our eyes open.”

I stare at the rows of dead men. Somehow I still only see necessity. As a tanner who works the skin of lambs, or the painter who takes her pigments from crushed flowers; thus we must close our hands around our own sacrifices, to come to our ends.

But Freya, I know they were not mere animals... they were not crushed flowers.

They were our friends.

I swallow as a lurching feeling rocks me. This is why we should not stay; we cannot move forward if we allow ourselves to bend under grief and remorse.

Ravens chatter in the darkness, some bold enough to brave the night for a taste. I stride forward, jaw clenched, waving a hand at the pests so they might flutter away.

And there... there he is.

Disfigured by shadows, Náttfari, my old friend, whose throat gapes open by my own hand. I know I should not linger – but I find myself crouching beside him, this old feast partner of mine. Beautiful, intelligent boy he was. He lays now on his back, head tilted, half-open eyes glistening with moonlight.

I thread my fingers through his midnight hair, cup his head as though he had laid it in my lap himself.

Gods. Killing those Briton men was one thing; it was easy, perfunctory, as habitual as a blacksmith striking iron. But this... this was far from *easy*.

Olaf and I could never have imagined that it might come to this. Turning on so many of our friends. But we made a vow, all those years ago – we vowed we would give all we had to be worthy of the Vanirdøtur, to pull them back out into the world.

And now we are shown what our dream will truly cost us.

I breathe out slowly, running my thumbs over Nattfari's brow, closing his eyes for him. We found ourselves divided by deep principles, not lack of affection; and to act on principle alone is cold, cold thing.

Freya... how much more will it take? What else am I capable of giving, to satisfy this tyrannical dream of mine?

I suppose only time will tell.

Carefully, I lean over my once-lover and murmur, "May you drink from Heiðrun's mead in the hall of the Allfather, Náttfari, son of Næfbjorn of the Othling clan." Then, lower still: "I'm sorry it had to come to this."

He stares at the stars and is silent.

I press a kiss to the dead man's forehead. Then I straighten up, and stand there for a long time.

I want to send them off. My fingers itch with unspent magic. I stare at the roots of the trees that cradle the dead; I know what runes I could carve there, to protect them on their journey. I know the songs that would carry them away.

But I can't.

Wings flutter heavily in the air. Those ravens are nearby, vexed by our presence. They're waiting for us to leave so they might plant their beaks in tattered chainmail. Suddenly I can't stand the thought of it – those damned opportunists diving as soon as we're gone.

When one of them swoops early, I stride straight to it.

“Get,” I snap, waving a hand. But its fellows see injury in my manhandling of their most zealous comrade, and a dozen of them fly into a swarm, cawing angrily into the night.

“Ivar!” Old Sigbrand has sprung to my side, pulling at my arm, while the others recoil into the trees. I step back obligingly, watching the glints of moonlight on those fluttering wings, trying to ascertain how many of those little bastards there are. They settle in the trees all around, blinking at me with those glassy eyes.

A moment of silence follows. Something shifts in the air, the darkness between the trees coming alive somehow; the men all stand by the trunks, watching warily.

One of the ravens flies in a great ponderous circle around me. And then it lands right on my shoulder.

I let out a breath. My arm drifts out in some strange instinct, as though encouraging it to climb down that way. But its little talons dig into my skin as it settles right where it is.

The significance of it strangles the breath in my throat. Sigbrand is looking at me, eyes wide; he backs away, holds out a hand to the men so they all gather behind him. And I stand there on this gravesite, a raven perched upon my shoulder as though Odin himself had sent his birds, his eyes, to this clearing.

It ruffles its feathers against my neck. Sits there warmly awhile. The wild smell of its feathers, the sharpness of its talons; there is the message of an old god to heed there.

The dead lie in the hands of the gods now. It is as it must be.

“All right,” I mutter. “We’ll take our leave.”

It croaks its response. Then it flutters off me and flies around and around

the clearing in a strangely ritualistic way, as though to clear the space.

I follow Sigbrand into the trees, and all of us back slowly away from the clearing, entranced by the sight of the raven's flight. I know I'm not the only one looking for a cloaked figure in the shadows, the silhouette of an old man with a staff and a patch over his eye.

Branches snap beyond. Again that impression of life throbbing in the darkness persists. And then a growl arises, far too jagged to come from a Varg.

There, on the other side of the clearing – a pair of yellow eyes.

I gaze at the wolf's shadowy shape. He and the ravens have come for the feast; come to the table we have set for them.

My men and I stand there, still enough for him to approach. He isn't alone. There are shapes, more eyes ahead between the trees. So close to us that it is almost a greeting; a sign of respect among hunters.

Thank you for the feast, they say.

Heart thudding, I lead our retreat, backing away slowly. My men follow suit, and the further we back away, the further the pack comes. When we're far enough, we turn, all of us silent and wide-eyed as we take to the trees.

Sigbrand is the first to speak, his choked voice rising beside me; "Wolves, by Freya! See how close that pack came to us? And that raven that landed on you, Jarl –"

"Aye, 'tis an omen if I ever saw one," Orm agrees solemnly. "To have the friendship of scavengers is to be blessed by the gods."

The friendship of scavengers. Ha! If they are my friends then I suppose that makes me their prince – the Prince of Scavengers, lurking out here among the dead with naught but the memory of a girl's kiss to warm me, interpreting omens while better men sleep in the warmth of loving arms.

The others pitch in with superstitious anecdotes, chance meetings with foxes in the woods, or ravens who'd follow them home. They try to see sense in this, too; the gods are surely telling us that we did not kill our kin in vain, that their sacrifice will not go to waste. That it is all as it must be.

But I know the tales better than they do. I know what the ravens say, when they sit in the branches and choose which blood-spattered hero to follow. It is in Helgi's tale that they say it the clearest:

Mark that boy and his bloody blade. He slays friend and foe alike. If we follow him, we will be well fed indeed.

We take to our watch again. Before long Mikjel comes to my side, still pale-faced as ever.

"Is it safe to let those wolves come so close to our camp?" he whispers. "We have no fire to scare them with."

"They have enough to eat," I mutter, still keenly aware of the dark clearing we left behind, where the scavengers are taking their glistening cuts. "They will not bother us tonight."

* * *

The next morning, we must carry our two longboats out to the water again. The third ship, we leave in the forest for the locals to find one day.

Tamsin is amazed by what a feat of strength it is to carry a ship – to her, anyway. The things are hollow and light enough for us, but the men don't mention that. They're flattered by her admiration, and they pick her boat right up even as she sits in it, making her shout in surprise. Voices and laughter rise with the dawn as they carry her out of the forest.

“Don’t worry, Kátr-Ekkja!” they call. “You could be a mouse in the woodworks for how light you weigh!”

So she clings to the prow and lets them make a game of it, carrying her across the beach and into the water. I watch them stagger around, making her squeal. Those same men who stood in the trees with me last night; they smile now as they look upon her.

The rising sun gilds her outline, her fiery hair, as they set her upon the waves. She wears the face of Freya, of our commitment; I see quiet acceptance now in the faces of my men.

It is a moment of consolidation for them all.

There is too much noise and bustle around to allow for much thought. So as the red sunrise blooms warmly overhead, I join Thrain and the men in preparing the ships. We raise the great oaken masts, ready the oars and cordage.

Thrain helps me with inordinate enthusiasm, taking on the heavier loads, commanding the men to give me room. I glance at him as we secure the yardarm ropes together. He’s being exceedingly polite.

“What’s gotten into you?” I ask him.

He clears his throat, wipes his tar-stained hands on his breeches.

“Nothing,” he says gruffly. “Uh... good peaceful night then, was it?”

I cock an eyebrow. Of course; *he* spent his night rather more comfortably than I did. The man’s looking all shameful and furtive as I scrutinize him.

“Wasn’t as good a night as yours,” I tell him, and he starts falling all over himself as he tries to apologise. Smirking, I lift a hand to interrupt him. “It’s *fine*. You’ll just owe me a favour.”

“Look, I’m sorry, brother –”

“She’s your wife. You have all liberties with her.” Loki, he’s wearing

such a serious face. It's like we're speaking of politics rather than this issue of him being knotted to her like an overlarge button stuck in a button-hole. Trying not to laugh, I add, "It's just, if you end up dying because you're stuck to her at the wrong moment –"

That earns me a punch in the arm. "It won't happen again," he grumbles. "So you can leave it alone."

"Oh, I don't know. This place makes a beautiful setting. I might compose a song about it..."

"No – don't you dare."

Together we jump down from the ship. Ahead, the men are washing the last remnants of blood from their armour in the gently lapping waves of the cove. Olaf walks among them, imperious and cloaked, dividing them into crews – our two Cavalier guests are off on the outskirts, staring curiously at our proceedings.

Tamsin is still perched in the bow of that ship, gazing overboard at our pack, half-naked and tousle-haired as they are. Then she looks our way.

"Oh – Ivar! Good morning!" she calls, waving over.

Tch. That girl. I don't know how she manages to pull these easy smiles from me after everything. I gaze up at her, squinting a little in the sunlight.

"All right up there, lamb?" I call back. "Have a good view?"

She squirms in embarrassment. "Don't know what you mean."

I let my eyes trail down her throat to her breasts that she's wedged against the bulwark, caught between her elbows. She reddens, but doesn't lose her grin.

Bashful little thing. She seems in good spirits from the men's mucking around... and from spending the night knotted, I'd wager. Gods, how sweet it

would've been to sink into that woollen nest of hers and be the one who pinned her there.

Thrain passes behind me, knocking into me as a way of getting my attention.

“Go with her, when you're done,” he grunts. “I'll take the other ship.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” His annoyance only deepens as he sees me hesitate. “Just take the bloody ship.”

I tilt my chin up, trying to hide how pleased I am. “You know, this doesn't count as repayment for last night. You'll still owe me one.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he calls back over his shoulder as he marches away with his crew.

* * *

Olaf and I board Tamsin's longboat, bringing with us our two Cavalier guests. She stays with them, helps them don the Viking gear and helmets we give them. They sit at the oars with the others, and they blend in well enough, though they have a somewhat clean and pompous air about them.

Soon the sail is bulging out, the oars are plunging to and fro. Olaf is at the prow, gazing ahead. I stray to the bulwarks, leaning there casually, letting my eyes rest on Tamsin until she flushes and rises from her countrymen to join me.

Her eyes are shuttered as she comes beside me, leans her slender forearms against the bulwark. Both of us turn our backs on the others to face the waves. Like this I can revel in her closeness, the rare privacy we have.

We haven't been alone together since I was buried deep inside her, panting my pleasure in her ear.

"It's, uh... it's a beautiful morning," she attempts.

I grin. "It is indeed."

We venture on some well-practiced grounds of sea-travel and fair weather, as two people who learned the art of conversation in the halls of lords and kings. With the cove steadily retreating behind us, we speculate about whether Eormen and her band might've made good progress on their journey. And all the while I'm staring at her pale freckled arms and thinking of what it was like to have her wrapped so close around me that night... that one single night I had her all to myself.

I wait for a lull in the conversation. Then I stroke an idle finger against her knuckles. Our talk fizzles out; she's pink in the face as she stares at my tattooed fingers, how I brush my jagged knuckles against her lily-white hand.

"I'm glad to see you and Thrain are on good terms again," I mutter.

She wilts with embarrassment. "Oh, *God*," she groans, making me laugh as she hides her face in her hands.

"You forget, I've seen you in far worse states of undress, lamb," I tease her. "Why be embarrassed?"

"Please, no more," she protests. "I'm so sorry you had to take his watch. Did you get any sleep?"

"No. But it's all right. Olaf and I are used to long nights."

The mention of my watch and what it entailed brings a little silence with it. Tamsin stares at the waves thoughtfully, sobering.

"That warband from yesterday... Thrain told me you knew them," she says at length. "It must've been very difficult. To confront them like that."

I straighten as she prods at that closed subject. "We did what we had to,"

I tell her. “That warband operated under the same mindset as the rest of the army – the same mindset we used to have. Fight for honour, take home wives and treasure. The simple mind of the raider.” I shake my head with a scoff. “How simple it used to be.”

She glances up at me. “But surely it counts for something, for you to have known one another. If we have to face any of your old friends again, could you not speak to them? Convince them to help us?”

The waves glitter under the morning sun as I grapple for an answer.

“I don’t think you understand, lamb,” I tell her, brow furrowing. “When you showed us your craze, up there in Uradech’s camp... it changed us in a very profound way. It broke all the certainties we had about you, about raiding, the lot of it. You can’t turn a man away from the beliefs he has borne all his life simply by talking him out of them; he must come to that revelation in his own way. Often it is just a small moment, and the entire world seems different for it.”

She wears a small wondering smile then. “I changed you as profoundly as that?”

“You did,” I admit. “And I was not just another raider, either. I spent most of my life learning all I could about you; I must’ve collected all the materials that exist in the world about your kinswomen. But still I could not grasp the most vital point of it all until you showed me your red eyes.”

She winces then, as though made uncomfortable by the subject of her craze.

“You say there are *materials*,” she says, deflecting. “What materials are those?”

“Oh, there are sagas aplenty... there are treasure maps on crumbling old vellum, ancient relics that used to belong to the last of you... engravings and

illustrations of your beauty...” I grin at her. “Aphrodisiacs said to contain locks of your hair...”

Her mouth squirms. “Christ. So you are a scholar who finally found his subject? Are you going to fill rolls of parchment with observations about me, then? Or start writing an account of all our bumbings into a saga?”

“Don’t think I haven’t already begun piecing together some kennings.”

“They had better be about the good bits, then.”

“Oh they are.” I allow myself to stroke back her flyaway curls, tuck them behind her ear. She flushes as we both think back on which shared memories could be classified as *good bits*.

The deck creaks under our feet as the longboat rocks over the waves. I gaze at her, losing myself as always in her flesh and blood. Gods... if she only knew what a crack it made in my life, to meet her. There was the man who existed before that moment; and then the man who came afterward.

“It’s incredible,” I mutter. “How you cannot go back, once you see things differently. How the answer is always far more simple and profound than all the research it took to get there.” I allow myself to trail a finger along her jawline. “All that time spent studying how to catch you... only to realise there is no real merit to it, if you did not come willingly.”

Goosebumps prickle her skin as she holds herself still for me. Like a wild thing, letting me close. I let my fingers venture lower, to her neck.

“Of course, it’s made everything horribly complicated for us here,” I add. “Really, it would be so much easier if I could just snap a metal collar right here... and steal you for myself.”

She bites her lip, flustered as ever. Then she turns, breaking the contact self-consciously, as though wary of her kinsmen seeing us.

Eventually she murmurs; “*Blessed are those who find wisdom, and who*

gain understanding... that is what our God says."

"Does he? I do believe our Allfather says the opposite," I tell her. "He warns against chasing wisdom, for he has supped on too much of it himself. In his own words:

*A measure of wisdom each man shall have,
But never too much let him know;
For the wise man's heart is seldom happy,
If wisdom too great he has won."*

She's grinning by the time I've finished my haphazard translation to Gaelic.

"Are you very unhappy then? Since you're burdened with so much wisdom," she teases me. "Better to be stupid and happy – is that really what your god encourages?"

I smirk. "I think it's sound advice."

As though on cue, the men throw up a shanty to encourage each other as they pull at the oars; there is no wind while we hug the coastline, and they must be tired and aching. Rough Gaelic rises into the air – *oh row me, bully boys, rowww* – and they bump into Captain Llewellyn and Emrys, encouraging them along. To my surprise, the Captain cracks a smile and joins in, and in sweat and toil the men cast aside their differences as they sing and row together.

Tamsin watches them with delight. "Never thought I'd see the day," she says wonderingly.

"Give that one a pint of something and he might even hit the notes correctly," I add, nodding at Captain Llewellyn, who's warbling as best he can. Tamsin laughs, telling me not to get my hopes up.

We turn again to the waves, and with the men singing behind us, Tamsin allows herself to be bold; she takes my hand, threads her fingers through mine.

Such a small gesture, and yet all I can think of is the way she was tangled around me that night, our legs entwined just as our fingers are now. How beautiful she was in her agony; how soft in the aftermath.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something,” she mutters. “The other night, after the funeral pyre. I shouldn’t have asked you to... I was dealing with some issues.”

Dealing with some issues, indeed. Her blush deepens to see my shuttered expression.

“Do you regret it?” I ask her.

Her plump mouth parts as she hesitates.

“No,” she whispers.

A quiet thrill runs through me. “Did you enjoy it?”

“... yes.”

So much said with so few words. We both stand there, sharing the heady remembrance, a memory of muffled moans ringing between us.

“Whatever you want, lamb,” I tell her. “You can pull me down any dark path you like. But you must shine your own light and tell me where your limits are.”

“I don’t really know,” she admits. “Where my limits are.”

“Perhaps we can find them together,” I offer her. She bites her lip again, and I can’t rip my eyes from that sight.

“Don’t you have limits, yourself?” she asks.

Now that is interesting question. My eyes flicker between hers as I search for answer.

... Loki, but there are no limits to what I would do for her, are there? This mission has only proven that. The words linger on the tip of my tongue; the realisation has opened within me, cavernous and glittering with possibilities.

But it is not a question one answers without some forethought.

“Every man has his limits,” I tell her. “It is generally preferable to have them. But you could say mine are further than most.”

Chapter 16



THRAIN

First Quarter of July

We pass the blockade ships without fuss. But when we arrive at the beach, our longboats sliding along the pebbly sand, a new difficulty awaits us.

Gofraid is waiting there on the sand with a party of men. My stomach clenches in horror at the thought of imminent consequence. But he only holds out his arms and smiles.

“How was Dublin?” he bellows cheerfully.

I feel sick at the very idea of lying so blatantly to him. We all jump down from the ships, Emrys and Captain Llewellyn following us with their heads bowed into their cloaks. Olaf and Ivar go immediately to greet their father; Ivar naturally doesn't have so many qualms about dressing up a completely false story. He is the one who speaks the most, describing our arrival and the sequestering of the slaves.

I stride across the sand, joining Tamsin, who looks just as pale and queasy as I feel.

“I thought you’d stay at least a few days,” Gofraid says, tone coloured with surprise.

“We wanted to be back as soon as possible,” Olaf tells him. The dutiful concern in his words earns him a pat on the shoulder.

“And what of Kætilví?” Gofraid asks over Olaf’s head, glancing at me. “I’d wager it was good to see your mother again, Thrain! What did she think of your bride?”

Tamsin and I share a glance. I’m not sure I’ve ever spoken to her of my mother, beyond mentioning her in passing.

“Uh –” I’m racking my brains, trying to shake the unease.

“She was very kind with me,” Tamsin speaks for me. I lay a hand on her arm to stop her, before she can say anything out of character.

“Yes, Kætilví makes a very fair hostess,” Gofraid says with a laugh. “She did not scare you too much then, princess?”

Tamsin’s eyes on me are shrewd and calculating, as though she’s trying to imagine what kind of a mother I might have.

“She wasn’t as frightful as my own mother,” Tamsin says, which makes Gofraid scoff.

“Then your mother must be a dragon,” he says. He turns back to Olaf. “How is she handling the place in your absence?”

“Masterfully, as ever,” Olaf intones. I try to keep an ear on their conversation, committing as much to memory as I can.

Fuck. None of us had counted on Gofraid meeting us on arrival and asking for details. Olaf manages to lead the conversation well enough, but

still. Ivar slows to join Tamsin and I, and we all exchange a glance that speaks of just how much internal screaming is going on.

Ivar waits for some distance to separate us from the royal pair, then mutters: “Why in Odin’s name didn’t we send a skiff out to Dublin once we’d unloaded? To warn your mother of what we’re doing?”

“We were idiots,” I mutter. “We can still send someone later.”

He scoffs. “Past that blockade?”

“We can send messages to Dublin if we want. No one would think it strange.”

“By Frigg’s *tits*, we should’ve thought of it,” Ivar curses, eyes on his father’s back. Then with a laugh: “This is insane.”

“I know.” I lay a commiserating hand on his back. “Also – please don’t be so elaborate next time you tell a story. Then I have to keep all that yarn in my head.”

He shakes his head at me. “I was babbling.”

“It’s all right.” We stare ahead at Olaf and his father as they stride through the trees together, thick as ever as they rumble in Norse. “I think we’re safe for now.”

* * *

Our pack spreads out in our section of camp again, catching up those who stayed. Emrys and Llewellyn eye what we’ve done with the place, silently striding through the roundhouses and the piles of Viking gear that litter the streets.

There is much to do. Tamsin poses a problem; we must leave her behind while we take to our tasks. Olaf will make sure our camp is sufficiently

guarded, while Ivar and I...

We must get the Cavaliers into that fort post-haste. Their secret passageway is apparently some way off through the forest; we'll have to lead a party of archers to cover their tracks, make sure they aren't apprehended.

I lead Tamsin to Angharad's house and face her a moment. She wears such a brave and determined expression. After what we shared during this improbable stealth mission, I want nothing more than to go with her into that house and not emerge until tomorrow morning.

"It's all right," she tells me. "You go and do what you must. As long as I have the Dublin pack with me, I'm not afraid."

I press a kiss to her forehead. "I should return around midnight."

"Be careful."

It takes all my strength to turn away from her again. Gods, that the night should be over quickly and without incident, so I can join her in her nest. Properly this time.

Ivar and I meet with the Cavaliers, who're nervous and jumpy under their cloaks. We let them stay long enough to eat and take stock of the place; Emrys seems to be looking around for someone. He's too prideful at first to make demands of us, but eventually evening begins to fall, and he knows he's running out of time. We will have to leave when darkness falls.

Emrys comes to me at long last.

"I'd like to request something, my lord," he says. "Prince Rhun – Tamsin told me you were holding him. May I see him before we leave?"

Rhun's name thuds into my gut. I can feel Ivar glancing at me, but I cannot bring myself to meet his gaze. We have all been callous towards that boy. Having him shut away has kept me from thinking about him altogether; it has been convenient for all of us.

But it has not been considerate of Rhun at all. This young Cavalier lad... Tamsin said he was an old friend of theirs. Perhaps it will cheer Rhun to see a familiar face.

“I’ll bring you to him,” I indulge the lad. “But only for a moment. There’s no time for long conversations.”

We lead Emrys to the prison house. Nýr observes this Christian boy sternly as though ascertaining the potential threat. Bravely Emrys stands his ground. So Nýr goes to unlock the door.

I haven’t seen Rhun since I first shut him away, a fortnight ago. I cross my arms, eyes on that open door.

A gaunt, wraith-like figure emerges. Rhun is grey-faced and hunched, his wrists still shackled, the chain connected to his ankles so that his hands can’t rise higher than his waist.

Emrys marks a beat as he takes in the captive princeling. The expression on Rhun’s face as he sees his Cavalier friend is difficult to decipher. His eyes are wide, his chapped lips pressed in a line. He’s staring fixedly as though he’d seen a ghost. Then Emrys marches to him, takes his face his hands. Pulls the prince against him in a bodily embrace. Rhun lets out a breath as they grasp at each other, like two men who believed the other to be dead.

“*Rydych ch’in fyw?*” comes Rhun’s croaky voice – he repeats it first with disbelief, and then his voice cracks into tears. The translation is easy to guess.

You’re alive?

We give them a moment. Emrys speaks in rushed Brittonic, as though lecturing him on something of utmost importance. Rhun holds his gaze, and there is nothing holding his scrawny body up now but that sheer incandescence of being with his countryman. Emrys grasps his hand, twining rosary beads around his palm, as though the beads could give Rhun courage.

Ivar calls for my attention. We cannot give them much more time than this.

“Should we shut that boy away again?” Ivar asks me. “Look at him. He’s been wasting away in there.”

I sigh. “Nýr,” I call out. “Let Rhun stretch his legs, will you? Just while we’re gone.”

Nýr nods, and works to unlock Rhun’s ankle shackles at least. The princeling stays by the prison house, watching with wide fiery eyes as we prepare our journey with the Cavaliers. We offer Captain Llewellyn a satchel of gifts we prepared for the Briton King; looted iron axes and daggers, the most richly decorated we could find.

“Give our warmest regards to your king, once you get there,” Ivar tells them. “Do paint us as a chipper and friendly bunch, won’t you?”

Emrys looks a little green around the gills at this. Perhaps they never imagined they would ever return to that fort bringing *warm regards* from the three lords of Dublin.

“I hope you will have plenty of luck this moon, my friends,” Captain Llewellyn tells us solemnly. Then he clasps us in gratitude. “God’s blessing upon you for saving us, and for offering us the boon of your friendship. I cannot thank you enough.”

“Yes, yes,” Ivar says, patting the man. “Save us some of that luck for tonight. Go on; you’re leading.”

Emrys casts one last look at Rhun over his shoulder, and then we turn away, following them into the trees.

* * *

By nightfall, the woods are pitch black. The Cavaliers have led us all the way across the siege camp, to the riverbank near the Leven Port. It curves around the great volcanic rock upon which the fort is perched. I've taken a lookout spot in the forest, my line of watchers spaced out.

I let my eyes adjust, sharpening my hearing, trying to distinguish what is human in the jumble of nocturnal sounds. There are so many croaking creatures, creaking branches, leaves shivering in the wind.

Ivar's party is so silent I can barely pick them out.

I ease between the trees, trying to squint through the trunks at the riverbank. There's a glow of torches from the ships out on the water; oily orange reflections light up the beach.

I see Captain Llewellyn and Emrys before long. Twin silhouettes, creeping out from the trees. They run along the sand, hidden for now by a tumble of rocks.

They pause at the last boulder. Open ground stretches between them and the cliff face ahead, where I suppose their passageway lies. High above, the fort wall towers, making a straight flat track to the sky, clinging by some architectural magic to the hilltop.

If it's up there that they're going... it's going to be a long, sheer climb.

To be roaming under that great wall like this feels like sneaking under the belly of a huge, snoring beast. I hold my breath as I watch the Cavaliers dither by the boulders. Perhaps wishing each other good luck.

Then they run.

My heart pounds in time with their steps. Hopefully – hopefully – the river guards aren't looking this way. But gods, they are in plain sight, black silhouettes in the night.

“Oy! OY! There!”

Voices rise from the patrol ships. I clutch my bow, but they've ventured beyond my range now. Splashes break the quiet as Vikings drop to the water to take chase.

ZZZIP. Arrows slam into the sand, missing the Cavaliers by a breath. Those remaining on the patrol ship are firing at them.

"Come on," I mutter as I stride through the trees. "*Come on.*"

All too soon the Viking silhouettes splash out of the water, sprinting like hounds after the runaways.

And Ivar's arrows fly from the darkness of the tree line.

The first quiet *zip* hits true, one Viking sprawling to the sand with an arrow in his back. Yells of surprise rise from the men as they rally. Only two have brought shields; the others step behind them.

"In the trees! *In the trees!*" the Vikings call out.

"They're getting away!" another protests. They break into two parties; one advances on the tree line while the other pursues the Cavaliers.

I try to hold back my growl as I watch the men dive for Ivar's section of the trees. But arrows keep coming, halting their advance, until one hits a man in the shin. His friend bends to help him and – *thunk.*

Straight in the neck. The arrow shaft pokes out from the sliver of space between chainmail and helmet.

Ivar has always been a deadly shot.

I'm filled with fierce pride at the sight of his dexterity as he dispatches the small party in moments. The Vikings on that ship are a bunch of arseholes from Wexford – nobody we would've missed. Surely it makes it easier to aim and strike true.

The Cavaliers have disappeared in the tumble of rocks ahead – the remaining Vikings shout to one another as they explore the passages

between, trying to see where their prey has slipped off to.

But they must've found their passageway. They must be safe now.

Ivar has to get out of there before the rest of the Wexford Vikings come looking for their attackers.

I wait for them – wait until the scarpering footsteps and cracking branches reach me. Ivar and his two archers are wrapped in black – I pull Ivar's gangly frame against me, both of us clutching the other's forearm.

"It's me," I grunt at him. "Nobody's around."

"Then let's go."

We run. When we cross our perimeter watchers, we let them know that it's done. It's only when we've reached the first firelit houses of the Dubliners' camp that we allow ourselves to slow. Ivar pulls the black cowl from his face – he's panting, having breathed through that cloth all night.

I clutch his shoulder, trying not to let my glee out too loudly.

"You did it. You did it!"

"I don't know," he pants. "I completely lost sight of them."

"They were at the cliffs. I'm sure they've passed into the fort by now."

He shakes his head, still panting. "Let's hope you're right."

The tension of the evening spills out of me in the form of laughter. I scruff his braid, and he's smirking as he lets me do it.

"That was brilliant," I tell him. "Nobody could've landed half those shots in the dark."

"Eh. Most of it was Orm. Better eyes than me."

He never takes compliments. I shove him and insist anyway. I know most of those shots were his. But he has been somewhat solemn ever since the cove mission; even now he stares up at the glistening torchlight on the fort crenellations, thoughtful and oddly quiet as we stride through our camp.

Some of our men have stayed up to wait at our neighbourhood's main firepit; they've cracked out a few barrels of ale. Rhun is there too, still shackled but just as expectant as the others. When we arrive they all come to us for news.

Rhun looks at me, and I meet his gaze squarely. It is significant, this moment; he has not laid eyes on me since wishing my death a fortnight ago.

"They made it?" he grits out. I nod at him.

"It's done, then?" the men echo. "Eyyy, well done!" They shove cups into our hands, clink them together, and raise them up to the nocturnal fort.

"To friendship," calls a drunken Armod, even as we try to shush him. "To those tiny Christian lads... and to sheer luck!"

Rhun stares up at the fort, too. It warms me to think that he has at least this one good thing to hold onto, now. Nýr passes him a cup, and he takes it quietly.

Olaf is among those sleeping around the firepit. He's sitting on a crate, leaning against his shield, as though he meant to stay awake but succumbed to sleep. Our noise wakes him, so he starts pushing himself up, trying to wave the men out of the way; *let me go, I need speak with my brothers... we need to organise the watch*. But they loop their arms around him, pulling him back down into the fireside blankets and crates as though he were their ailing grandfather.

"No! No watch duty for you, old man," they insist, and he rumbles with laughter as they get him down at last.

"Leave it to us," Sigbrand commands. "And Thrain, your wife is waiting. Our perimeter guard is already set up; I think you've earned a rest tonight, my Jarls."

Those closest to me reach to pat my back and steer me around as they did

Olaf. I just about manage to pull away from their grasp while Ivar stands there, smirking at me as he sips from his horn.

“You sleeping here?” I ask him. “With these mucks?”

He gives a noncommittal hum. “I’d better not leave them alone with the ale. And the Wexford boys will want to notify us of what happened. They’ll be looking for a pack leader to bring it to.” Then, quietly: “You go to her for the night.”

He’s serious now, his eyes dark, not giving me anything of his true thoughts. Surely he still feels he must stay away from her, after I confronted him and let that antagonism fester between us.

I don’t know how to tell him how very far away the whole thing feels, now. I want to wipe that withdrawn expression from his face. It doesn’t suit him at all.

“Look, just come and join us,” I tell him gruffly. “Sigbrand and Armod have the watch in hand.”

He raises an eyebrow. Then, utterly deadpan, he says, “Really.”

It feels strange for it to be this way around, now. “It’s your turn then, is it?” I goad him. “To skulk away and brood, even after she explicitly invited you to her nest?”

His sullenness cracks into a grin. “Brother –”

“If you’d like me to rescind the invitation, I can.”

“No, Freya, let me speak,” he says with a laugh. “I’ll come.”

I squeeze his shoulder. “Good.”

* * *

We arrive at the door to the baker's house together. I can't help casting glances at him over my shoulder. It's downright bizarre; I've never known him to be so quiet and conciliatory, especially when it comes to sharing a woman's bed.

"Brother," I say. "You haven't said a single derogatory word to me all evening. Are you sure you're all right?"

He clicks his tongue at me. "I didn't realise this was also an invitation for you to be an arse."

"You just look a bit... I don't know. Nervous."

"*Nervous?*" he protests. "Says the one who's waylaying us for an age instead of knocking on the door."

Before either of us can do any knocking, Tamsin opens for us, expectant and rosy-cheeked. Her eyes flicker between us a moment.

"Cariad," I greet her, then jab a thumb in Ivar's direction. "I dragged this one from the fireside, but I can dump him back there if need be."

Ivar smirks, arms crossed. "My thanks as always for your generous welcome, Thrain."

"Did you – did you manage it, then?" Tamsin asks us. "Emrys and Captain Llewellyn –"

"Safely disappeared into their passageway," Ivar confirms. "I expect they're probably kneeling before your king now, telling him how charming we all are."

Tamsin lets out a breath of relief. Then she throws her arms around me, holding me tight. When she pulls away again, she gazes up at Ivar, quivering there as though holding back from doing the same.

"I... I made some rosewater," she says, her face reddening. "There should be enough for two... do come in, please."

We duck into the house. There upon the hearth, a small cauldron simmers with soapy water and rose petals; she's prepared soap cakes and racks to perch our armour on. I try to repress my smile as Tamsin bustles, dragging over one of the rickety chairs to give us more places to stack our gear. Ivar and I take to undressing, the habitual unbuckling and unlacing filling the room.

"Rosewater," Ivar murmurs as he bends over the cauldron, letting the sweet fumes caress his face. "Hmm. I don't know, lamb. It's not quite luxurious enough yet. If you'd added some gold leaf, perhaps..."

"You'll take what she gives you," I tell him, chucking a rag at him, and Tamsin's smiling from where she's perched on the bed.

"You're used to taking gold leaf baths, in Dublin?" she teases. "We really did miss an opportunity, to have forgone the full trip."

I sit beside her as I unbuckle my chainmail. "I'll bring you there soon enough, cariad," I tell her. "But do not take Ivar's accounts of Dublin at face value. A skáld exaggerates."

"Ha!" Ivar is pouring the rosewater into two buckets for us, his rag hooked on his shoulder. "What would the warrior amount to, if the skáld did not exaggerate?"

I lay a deadpan look on him. But Tamsin asks for more details of Dublin, and he's only too happy to provide; he sits cross-legged by his bucket and dazzles her with his descriptions while he bathes. So I sit back and watch them both, a quiet contentment blooming in me to see how fast he has her smiling.

"... let's see, so we are in mid-summer," he says. "You call it July, we call it *Sólmánuður*; the sun month. The women of Dublin are all used to us haring off around this time of year and leaving them the run of the town.

Right now they must be spent from a day toiling in the fields, probably harvesting and threshing our oats. I'd say their main occupation at this hour, once the children are asleep, is to pillage our reserves of beer –"

"No! Surely your women don't drink as heavily as you do," Tamsin rails. "They must keep civilized society while they have the place to themselves."

He only raises his eyebrows.

"Did I not tell you the women of Ireland have rather large appetites?" he says, and this seems to spark some prior jest between them, for she blushes and grins.

"What about the current ruling lady who sits in your great hall? Surely she would keep things in check," she ripostes. And she swivels around to me, roping me into the conversation.

I frown at her, heart thudding quite suddenly. "What – you mean my mother?"

"She is the one ruling Dublin while you're away, isn't she?"

The carefree atmosphere splinters. "She is. What about her?"

Tamsin senses my reluctance; her tone holds less cheer as she goes on. "Well... you never did tell me much about her. What's she really like?"

I fold up my chainmail absentmindedly as I let her question float in my mind. Trust her to ask me questions like this in our rare moments of intimacy, where we're finally allowed to relax with one another.

"Is she really as dragon-like as Gofraid mentioned?" she asks.

Ivar scoffs as he slicks back his freshly washed braids. "Of course Father would think that of her," he says. "Kætilví shaves all her hair, wears soot around her eyes, and always has a belt of weapons on. When Father met her, I think she scared him quite a bit."

Tamsin's smile returns. "Why am I not surprised that Thrain would have

a shieldmaiden for a mother?”

“She is not a warrior,” I correct her gently. “She styles herself that way to repel the interest of men. She’s more of a diplomat – in truth, she’s always been very suited to the role of Jarl.”

The words dry up in my mouth. I want to mention how my parents operated together, how they both led our village equally back in Norway. How my father always leaned on her when he went raiding. She acts for us now in Dublin as she always acted for my father; as a steadfast guardian of our home while we are away.

“Is she very strict, then?” Tamsin asks.

“When she needs to be,” I say. “But she is fair, and just. She’s been through enough hardship to know the value of softness.”

I swallow hard, trying to bring wetness back to my mouth. I know Tamsin is only asking lightly, out of benign curiosity. But this conversation always brings back those sparks of helplessness and anger in me, though I know now that my mother is safe, that she doesn’t need me to protect her any more.

The wounds may be covered up, but as soon as I lift the layers from them, I always find them raw and stinging.

I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to decide whether to continue and break the lightheartedness of the evening. Ivar is quiet; we exchange a glance, and there is that solemnity again, rare empathy in his expression. He knows my story. But Tamsin... she has not really heard it yet in full. I hoped she would not have to; that perhaps if I could refrain from telling her the extent of it, then I could exist in her eyes as a man who was whole, without deep gouges inside him.

But perhaps that isn’t entirely fair.

She senses there is something in my silence. So she takes my chainmail

from me, and sits closer under the guise of unlacing my bracers for me.

I'm listening, that pose says.

So I begin the tale.

“My mother, Kætilví Valkadottir... she hails from the southern coasts of Norway. She and my father ruled over a township there, in the snowy county of Vestfold, where I was born.

“Back when I was a child, there were six chieftains who ruled together in Vestfold. It was a peaceful collaboration, with no king or overlord to rule us. But then a pretender-king named Harald Fairhair arrived, and he set about conquering each of the six townships one after the other. At last he came to darken our door, and when he asked us to bend the knee, my father refused.

“So Harald Fairhair retaliated. He burned half our village, and sent my father off to meet Odin. Once he held all of Vestfold in his hand, he decided that he should have the beautiful Kætilví Valkadottir, too. So he made her his personal thrall; his servant, if you will. His slave. He denied her any power or dignity beyond serving him as he saw fit.”

I trail off, staring into the darkness beyond the hearth fire. Those dark, dreary nights are still so real, so accessible. I can still hear it all; my mother, making those sounds of quiet desperation as Harald Fairhair held her down in her own marital bed. And I, still so small and scrawny, unable to do fucking anything about it than hide behind a door and wish for it to stop.

I tried. Oh, I tried to stop it. I wore stripes from that degenerate's belt every day that we endured his presence. It was at my mother's behest that I stayed away in the end.

It's all right, she said. *Put your hands over your ears*, she said.

I'm gritting my teeth, wondering if I'm saying too much, if Tamsin would rather I stop. But she is still slowly pulling at the laces of my bracer, saying

nothing, as though encouraging me to continue now that I'm finally picking at these scabs.

“We escaped him many times, only to be hauled back. Finally, when he'd had enough of us, he branded us as exiles and cast us out. So we found a merchant ship that would take us and sailed to Northern Ireland. But there were slavers on those shores, too, and branded folk rarely escape their eye.

“So it all started again. My mother tried to shield me from our masters, but she let it happen. Like it was easier if she didn't resist. She became someone else for a long time, and I had to take care of her until things got better.”

Tamsin's hand is folded around mine now. I stare at those small fingers as they squeeze my own.

“How old were you?” she asks quietly.

That time is a blur, but I know I can't have been older than ten. “Old enough to learn how to push a blade into a man's gut,” I mutter. “Eventually an ambitious lord named Aed Finliath took me on as a mercenary, and things improved from then on. By the time I was eighteen, I had helped to secure the crown for Aed Finliath, who became the next High King of Ireland, and my mother had been given a position as chambermaid in his halls. So it seemed we were finally safe again. And it was around that time that I was given a mission, to accompany the High King's favourite daughter to Dublin...”

“Oh – you're talking about Vírún? Her marriage to Olaf?” Tamsin says, and I nod. “You knew her for a long time, then?”

“Oh, yes. My mother and I lived in Aed Finliath's halls while I did mercenary work for him, so I knew his daughter quite well. She was always very kind to us,” I tell her. “When this mission came, Vírún took my mother on as her lady-in-waiting, so we could all go to Dublin together. And there,

my mother gradually rose again to become the lady she always should've been. She counseled Vírún in the running of the place, and she took over when Vírún was too poorly. My mother's name is known now in all the kingdoms of Ireland as a lady to be feared and respected; not just because she is my mother, but also because one does not cross her without certain retribution."

Tamsin strokes my knuckles, letting a thoughtful silence settle.

"Your mother must be a very strong woman, to rule an entire settlement by herself," she says eventually.

"She is," I agree.

"I'm sure she's still very beautiful, too," Tamsin adds. The comment makes me frown, though I could not articulate why. It's only normal that a girl like Tamsin would view that as a compliment, though I know my mother would not take it as such.

Ivar wanders over to us, having finished his bathing. He lays a ponderous look on me, as though picturing my mother with her own great X-shaped brand on her cheek, and the stark lines of her face that are so similar to my own.

"I think Kætilví would say a woman need not be beautiful," he says. "That her greatest strengths are bravery and a good seax strapped to her belt."

I allow a smile at that; it warms me to know how intimately he understands my mother. He always treated her with utmost respect ever since we arrived in Dublin. I know she views him and Olaf as family now just as much as I do.

He does not look entirely comfortable as he stands there, tunic held limply in his hands. In Norse, he adds in undertones, "Brother, I can leave you two to your privacy, if you want to talk –"

“No,” I tell him. This time, it is not only Tamsin’s wishes that prompt me to seal the invitation. “Stay.”

He passes by me on his way to the coffers, lays an empathetic hand on my shoulder. A small silence settles, and I can’t help but feel foolish now for having dampened their evening with this.

“I apologise,” I mutter. “I did not intend to dredge up ancient Vestfold history, of all things –”

“I must admit, I’m usually the one throwing around stories of the old country,” Ivar rails at me. “And you’re usually the one telling me to put a sock in it.”

Somehow that manages to restore my mood just enough to want to punch him.

“Don’t, please,” Tamsin chastises us both. She looks solemn as she sits beside me. Quietly she says, “Thank you for telling me this.”

She plainly saw how difficult a subject it was for me. I lean in to kiss her on the forehead, grateful for her attentive silence. I was afraid she would look at me with pity in her eyes; instead she is thoughtful as she lets the story float in her mind.

“Come, let’s get you to bed,” I tell her. “It’s late.”

She and I wade our way into her nest of furs and blankets. For a moment she is intent on my comfort, pulling the covers closer over me, and I want nothing more than to burrow with her and not emerge till daylight. But her face steadily grows redder as she glances between Ivar and I; he’s sat on the edge of the bed, pretexting that his wet hair needs patting, though he is plainly waiting for us to settle before joining us. Tamsin’s cheeks are like a pair of bright red apples as she reclines against the cushions.

Ivar glances at her and smirks. “What is it, lamb?”

“It’s just,” she splutters. Then, more defensively: “Look, I don’t exactly share a bed with two men every other night, do I? It’s just a bit... strange.”

He’s wearing an amused grin as he leans into her. “Strange, is it? As I recall, finding something strange has never stopped you from indulging your curiosity.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” she sighs. “Well maybe I shouldn’t have.”

“You have regrets?”

“Maybe I do.”

She’s squirming too much to be credible; so he kisses her, enjoying how he destabilises her as always. But though he has a spark of interest in his eye, it’s so warm and treacherously soft in her nest. Soon he’s collapsed as thoroughly as I have, letting out a vague huffed curse as the pillows swallow him. And we are all but sinking into the furs, dozing off; our arms are cast haphazardly over Tamsin, who’s holding onto us. Her eyes are still open a sliver, lost in thought as she stares at the hearth fire.

“Cariad,” I mutter into her hair. “What is it?”

“Your mother’s story,” she says. “To think she went from chains to a lady again... to think a woman alone could accomplish something like that.”

“Well, she wasn’t alone, remember,” Ivar puts in sleepily. “Having the great direwolf Thrain Mordsson with you opens many a door.”

I crack a smile at that. “It was not just me,” I add. “It was Vírún and Olaf in great part, and the Dublin pack, too. And you, Ivar.”

He snorts. “I’m not sure I was a very useful individual back then.”

“Well you had *some* uses.”

He lets out an indignant kind of huff, but leaves it at that. I curl my arm tighter around Tamsin’s waist, and as we all seek comfort, Ivar finds my

forearm, hooks around it; so we are tangled, breathing the same air as the fire crackles.

To dredge up the past may have brought pain, but it has also brought this glowing feeling to the fore; this belonging of family. As we are now, it settles over us as warmly as sunlight. I would've thought our first night properly sharing Tamsin's nest would've been far more chaotic, but instead, it is quiet.

It is perfect.

I nuzzle into Tamsin's hair and murmur, "The point is. Once you're well surrounded, that is when things begin to change for the better."

"Mm," she hums sleepily, holding onto us both. "I can believe that."

Chapter 17



IVAR

Waxing moon of July

The moon shines silver-white, waxing ever fuller. With the knowledge of the coming raids, the atmosphere in the wider siege camp is one of feverish anticipation. Father's thousands of warbands take to tuning instruments and whetting weapons, throwing taunts up at the high fort walls while the Cavaliers watch stonily on.

Up there... the Vanirdøtur are all cooped up, awaiting the moon just like we are. They are safe, still, while the gate remains shut, the outer wall impregnable. But Father's warbands all hope to find strays out here in the moonlit countryside; girls they will drag back to camp and parade under the nose of the Briton King.

To think of even one lone Vanirdottir getting dragged into this riotous siege camp full of salivating men... it is unconscionable. An unclaimed woman would not survive.

In the Dubliners' camp, we lean together over firepits and planted spears, muttering about Eormen's progress, and how the poor weather might've slowed her down. We cannot know what our own strategy will be this moon; not until we hear back from her.

Thankfully, her runner only takes a couple more days to arrive.

It is a warm night, all of us sitting around the firepits as usual, sharing dinner. A thudding of hooves announces Thrain, returning from his perimeter watch; with him is a rider, clad in a black cloak.

It is Skaði. She dismounts from her horse, pulls the hood from her face, looking distinctly disgruntled. We make room for her by the fire, greeting her with many a pat on the shoulder.

"All right, Skaði?" I tell her with a grin. "I'm surprised you left your princess behind with only a bunch of Christian men to guard her."

"Don't try to raise my blood, skáld, not tonight," she protests. "The princess insisted that I would not be half as suspicious as some Christian lad wandering around this stinking great Viking camp. All right? Now let me make this quick."

With the point of her axe, she sets to drawing in the wood ashes.

"It took Princess Eormen and I some time to reach the Britons' main forces," she says, tracing the long line of the River Clyde. "We had to cross over at the Glascau bridge, all the way down here. Just north of Glascau, you have the old Roman forts here –" She adds crosses. "– all along the ruins of the Antonine Wall. This one here, Bearsden – that is where the main Briton army was waiting.

"Now, according to them, the only easy roads that lead out of Dumbartonshire and into the east country are through here – the Bearsden fort, and then north of this hilly area, the road that heads up to the Endrick

bridge. So the Britons have decided to split their army and cover what grounds they can.”

“I thought they might,” Olaf grumbles. “How are they distributed?”

Skaði looks grim as she goes on drawing the roads out of Dumbartonshire.

“The Britons have kept two thousand men down here at Bearsden fort,” she says. “They’ve sent another two thousand up here at the Endrick bridge. And the rest – some five-thousand cavalry – they’re sending up north to block Causantin.”

Dread sinks into my gut like a stone.

“So we have two choices, then,” I say as I stare at her wood-ash map. “Either join the boys at Bearsden, or at the Endrick bridge. And in either case, we’ll be standing with two thousand men against a deluge of crazed Viking raiders.”

Skaði gives me a grimace of sympathy.

“The Viking raiders will be scattered, too,” she reasons. “And the Britons are a clever bunch. It’s hilly terrain all around here. Lots of swampland and treacherous places. They have strategies planned out.”

“I hope to Freya they do,” I tell her.

“These old Roman forts,” Thrain says slowly. “Are they inhabited?”

Skaði nods. “All the environing farms and villages have evacuated there.”

“So there will be Vanirdøtur at Bearsden.”

“There will be Vanirdøtur up north, too. There are many strongholds that hold them,” Skaði says. “We just have to hope we can prevent the raiders from traveling far enough to discover them.”

Hope. Hope and luck; we will be praying for both, this moon.

We decide to join Eormen’s lads at Bearsden. Skaði encourages us to use

what little time we have left to craft mercenary gear for ourselves, so the Britons may recognise us, and our own army may not. She hands us the shield she'd slung on her back; it is painted with the insignia of a white raven, the new identity we will wear.

“Make your offerings to Freya, my friends,” she says as we clasp her in parting. “We will need all the gods on our side to pull through this one.”

She heads off into the night again, her horse trotting away into the darkness. All that is left to do is begin our gear-crafting, and break out the mead to wipe away the ashy taste of dread.

* * *

By morning, we have piles of crafting materials ready, hemp and wood that the men are dyeing and hammering together. Word has spread throughout our camp; I even spy Rhun working beside Nýr at a dyeing station, his shackled forearms blackened as he joins in the preparations. Sigbrand has taken on the perimeter watch for us, so my brothers and I find ourselves grouped together at the central firepit, working alongside our men.

“I should fetch Tamsin, so we can catch her up,” Thrain says as he leans back, rubbing a sooty hand to his eye. The shield he is painting rests on his thighs, a half-finished white raven stretching out its wings. He stops a passing Dubliner and asks, “Is the princess still sleeping?”

“Jarl,” says the lad, looking nervous. “She’s, uh... she’s out at the horse pen.”

Thrain frowns at that. “What? What is she doing out there this early?”

“Just checking on the horses for us. She’s been minding a couple of the injured ones. I can fetch her, if you like.”

“Please,” Thrain says with a nod. He watches the lad stride off, then runs a hand through his blond lengths with a sigh.

Tamsin has been restless these past few days, with the full moon so close. We have not spoken about what awaits her at all, nor what kind of role she will have to take on. The subject hangs between us now; full of prickly implications none of us have had the balls to broach.

“She’s been minding those horses ever since we returned from the cove,” Thrain mutters. “She isn’t resting as she should be.”

Olaf smiles as he stitches his white raven on a tabard. “Ah, well... you cannot part a Briton from the beasts,” he says. “You know it calms her to be around them.”

“Yes, let her enjoy herself while she can,” I drawl as Thrain takes his seat. “Let her be spared the thought of how very slim our odds of survival are, this moon –”

“Brother,” Olaf grunts, lifting his seax to cut his thread. “Our odds are not so slim. When we meet with the Briton army, you will have more faith, I think.”

“It’s astounding that you can keep your calm,” I say. “We will be bracing against *ten thousand raiders* –”

“Not quite ten thousand,” Olaf counters. “Father lost a number during our initial push. It is closer to eight thousand, now.”

“Oh, only eight thousand!” I exclaim, making Thrain laugh. “Yes, that’s a trifle, isn’t it.”

Olaf goes on arguing, and Thrain backs my point. I gaze at Olaf’s shining seax as they speak. Something’s been nagging me at the back of mind. With all this talk of the full moon, we *have* to talk about Tamsin... and all that the moon brings out in her.

“There is one crucial thing we haven’t discussed yet,” I start. They both turn to me. “With the full moon upon us,” I say quietly, “Tamsin will be able to enter her moon-craze again. Won’t she?”

Thrain sighs uncomfortably. Olaf’s clear eyes shine with curiosity as they meet mine, and then swivel around to Thrain, waiting for him to answer.

“I don’t know,” Thrain admits, ruffled as ever to have to talk openly about such private matters. “We did discuss it, very briefly. She told me that when her kind are with child, they do not enter a true heat any more. Instead they have a type of false heat; a different version of the real thing.”

“So the deep moon-craze would not be available to her?” Olaf asks.

He shakes his head. “I told you. I don’t know.”

“But say that she *can* still enter her craze,” I insist. “If the issue is to obstruct the raids, we know Tamsin can hold down any amount of men she wants, when she’s in that state.”

Olaf gives a sort of wondering scoff. “She could do so much with that iron voice of hers. I wonder how many of the warbands she could actually hold down at once.”

“Imagine if she could keep the whole camp down,” I add, tilting my head as I picture the glorious scene. “No need for any mercenary gear or midnight rides or any of it.”

Before we can go on speculating, Thrain shakes his head with a sigh. “The problem is, she’s afraid of it,” he reminds us. “I agree, her moon-craze could have an enormous impact if she were to let it loose again. But she is not herself in that state, and I doubt she would accept to let herself go there after the last time.”

I cannot argue with him on that point. We were both there when Tamsin discovered her own carnage; how she had wept and prayed convulsively in

the aftermath. We all know the deep moon-craze is something deeply distressing for her.

We're quiet a moment. I know we are all imagining what might happen. Fear and excitement thud through my veins in equal measure as I picture it.

The truth is, if we set Tamsin loose in the height of her craze, there are chances she could sweep up this entire siege by herself. If we rode alongside her to protect her – it could be carnage on an epic scale.

She could accomplish what we set out to do. Protect the Vanirdøtur; leave their sanctuary intact. But in doing so, she could unleash Ragnarök herself. Tear apart the careful control we have been trying to nurture all this while.

“It’s a bad idea,” Thrain says. “She will never agree to it.”

I glance at him thoughtfully. “Perhaps we should ask her what she thinks.”

“No, I’m telling you. She wouldn’t go there.”

I stare him down. “Don’t decide for her.”

“Brother, we cannot control her in that state. And she cannot control herself. There’s no way of knowing whether we could even pull her back, before she did something we’d all regret.”

“It would be a drastic thing to do,” Olaf agrees. “I have to admit it’s tempting to involve her in that capacity. But...” He gives a deep sigh. “I agree with Thrain. To let Tamsin loose like that... it would place her in far too much danger, as well as all the men.”

Footsteps in the dirt approach; we’re too involved to turn and greet the newcomer right away. I lift my face first.

It is Tamsin, wrapped in a shawl, strands of hay stuck in her hair. She sidles up behind Thrain. From her confused face, she’s heard the tail end of our conversation.

Shit.

In a small voice, she asks, “What places me in too much danger?”

“Tamsin.” Thrain raises an arm, inviting her to sit beside him. But I can see him sweating.

“What were you talking about?” she asks, frowning up at him.

“Princess,” Olaf greets her, recovering far more efficiently. “We were discussing how best we can help your people, under this coming moon. And we were thinking of your potential involvement.”

She nods uncertainly. “All right,” she says. “You know I’m here because I want to be involved. Tell me.”

A silence passes between us. Thrain looks mortified.

“Just tell her,” I bark at him.

Tamsin’s gaze swivels back to him, and he no longer has a choice.

“The full moon is in two days’ time,” he says. “The warbands are going out raiding, as you know. We were discussing how best to obstruct the raiders, and whether you could potentially... help us to hold down the men,” he concludes thinly. “... with your iron voice.”

She bristles. Memories rush through us all of that chaotic night in the Pictish mountains. Blood and violence, beheadings and sex. Two hundred Pictish men, kneeling at her command.

Her face has gone white with fear. Thrain takes her hand, laces their fingers together to calm her.

“You want me to go into my craze? Here?” she asks.

“We were only discussing it; we all know it would place you in a lot of danger,” Thrain tells her. “Far too much danger.”

“But I want to help,” she says, her brow knitted together. Her breaths are coming shorter now as she considers it. “I just don’t know if – I’m just not in

control of my own mind when I'm in that state –"

"Tamsin," Thrain coaxes her, stroking down her arm. "Don't worry. It was only a conversation. We can take care of the raiders ourselves – you don't have to be involved."

She glances up at him with those shining green eyes. Then at Olaf and I, one after the other. The weight of duty is bearing on her now, I know it. She will shoulder this responsibility; she will think that if she does not do this, then the suffering of her people will be her burden to bear.

"Eormen is out there with our army," she says, her throat tight. "I cannot be the one who stays behind because I'm too afraid –"

"Tamsin."

"No, I'm fine, I swear. Just give me a moment and I can – we can talk about it –"

"Tamsin, hush." Thrain pulls her against him; she's breaking into outright panic. "Breathe, *elskan mín*. Just breathe. It's all right."

Olaf and I glance at one another as her husband soothes her. She is hyperventilating; try as she might to push down her panic, she cannot hold it back. Thrain seems buffeted by it; I wonder how much of it he feels through the pair-bond as he holds her, eyes squeezed shut in concentration. Eventually he has her breathing in long, steady breaths, both of them facing each other as she calms.

"I'm sorry," comes Tamsin's tiny voice, clearly fighting back tears. "I wish I was more than this – I'm not brave like Eormen is, I'm not half the woman she is – I'm just so scared all the time –"

"Hush, my love," Thrain rumbles, stroking her hair. "Don't speak so."

I stare at her in disbelief. Not *brave*? How can she even say such a ridiculous thing? There is so much I want to say to her. So much of this

conversation I take issue with. She has faced many terrifying obstacles already. This is the same, surely: she only has to face her fear, in order to overcome it.

“Tamsin, with all respect, you’re talking nonsense,” I begin – but Thrain slams a glare upon me.

“Don’t you start,” he growls.

I squarely meet that glare, amazed that he would even have the *audacity* to slam me down like this. He may be her husband, but he is not handling her half as well as he should be.

Olaf puts down his stitching work and rises. Solemnly he steps over to them, and lays a large jewelled hand on Tamsin’s shoulder.

“Princess,” he intones gravely. “There will be no question of your involvement.”

She pulls away from Thrain, blinking. To feel Olaf’s hand on her seems to have shocked her out of her panic. She rubs at her nose and says, “I’m sorry, Olaf. I don’t mean to act the child. Only, with the cove mission barely past us, and everything ahead... it feels like there will be no end to all this.”

“You need rest,” Olaf says firmly. “You are not acting like a child, princess. You’ve been working just as hard as the rest of us; you’re overwrought. You will stay at the camp this moon.”

This is ridiculous. He may say she is not acting like a child, but both of them are certainly treating her like one. I open my mouth to protest how completely Olaf has shut down the conversation; but the sight of her dizzily catching her breath, kneading her own sternum with the heel of her hand, gives me pause.

Hmph. Perhaps Thrain is right. Perhaps she is not quite ready to face her craze just yet. After all, if it had always been a question of simply asking her

to do it, then we might not even be here at all, navigating all this secrecy.

Show us, Father had commanded her, back when his entire army was still parked in Dál Riata, back when we thought we could hold them there – one girl and her packmates holding back ten thousand. *Show us what it is you can do*.

She'd stared at him, white with terror, and she'd stammered: *I can't*.

Thrain takes her face in his hands, leans their foreheads together. "We are more than capable of handling this moon without you," he tells her. "All right? There are other tasks we will need you for."

She nods. "All right."

"Are you good with a needle?" Olaf asks her, offering one up, and she forces a smile as she takes it.

"I'm passable, but I can do my best."

Keeping my mouth firmly shut, I turn back to my own stitching efforts, driving the needle a little too vigorously into its black hemp cloth.

* * *

The eve of the full moon arrives. Sunset colours shine upon Tamsin's ginger hair as she helps us gather our mercenary gear. Once we've packed it all into a cart and covered it, my brothers and I all come together to say goodbye to her. We cannot risk being around her once night falls, lest we take her scent with us into the forests.

Thrain has been gruff and overprotective of her, trying to detect any early signs of this "false heat" of hers. She told us, with many a blush and stammer, that we should not worry about her, that this false heat should be of no concern to us when we have so much to contend with. But while we group

around her now, I know we all feel the pull of her softness; this sweet-smelling feminine world that we will soon be trading for rain and mud and the roars of combat.

Thrain takes her hand. She squeezes it hard.

“I thought the worst was past us,” she says. “But the worst is yet to come, isn’t it?”

Olaf lays a gentle look upon her. “It will be all right, princess,” he rumbles. “What we accomplish this moon may very well change the course of this war. If we manage to hold back the raiders and halt Causantin, it will mark a decisive victory for your kin.”

She nods, looking serious. “Is the whole camp just going to empty out with the raids?”

“No. The camp needs to remain occupied.” Thrain corrects her. “Those few remaining here will probably feast. So you will have to stay right here, stay with our men. Armod will watch over you.”

She lets out a mirthless laugh. “Christ. If Gofraid wanted to demoralise my people, he could not find a better way than feasting at our doorstep while his raiders ravage the lands.”

She speaks the truth; there is nothing to add.

“I hate to be so useless,” Tamsin mumbles. “You’re all riding out and I’m staying here...”

“It’s better that way. I want you safe,” Thrain tells her. “And I’m sure your brother will be glad for your company. This moon is bound to be difficult for him.”

Tamsin is quiet at that. I watch her cowed expression, still grinding my teeth. I have not said much to her these past couple of days; I know I would only insist on reopening the subject of her craze, and Thrain has been asinine

enough about it. He shadowed her steps so closely that I never got a chance to speak with her alone; he may as well have pissed on his territory, he was so obvious about it.

I let out a sigh. I must force myself to be *soft* and understanding, like my brothers, though it is plain folly to me that we might keep such a formidable force safely shut away.

“You have been far from useless, lamb,” I tell her, reaching to stroke her arm. “The men will be honoured to ride into battle with gear you’ve darned for them.”

She lets out another little laugh at that, as though mocking such a small role. But the touch of my hand makes her lean into me, and then she’s pulling us all into an embrace. Thrain and I loop arms around her, and she clings onto us tightly. Olaf stands aside like a fool, as ever – I jerk my head at him, and several passing men shove him closer to us with jeers of encouragement. Finally he joins us, huge and warm as he surrounds us.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” Tamsin mumbles into our chainmail. “Please. Please come back.”

“We will, lamb,” I tell her. “Don’t you worry.”

Chapter 18



IVAR

Full moon of July

The full moon rises at last, welcomed by the wild howls of eight thousand Vikings.

They have no strict plan. Father allows havoc to begin all around the camp; music rises into the air, and horses are gathered as the raiders prepare. Father himself will stay here in the siege camp; at least we do not have the unwelcome surprise of his broad figure awaiting us in the woods tonight.

My brothers and I march through our camp, fully armoured and trailing horses. The rising rut pumps through our veins. We are leaving behind the elders again, Sigbrand and Armod, to hold down our camp while we're gone; they pat us and wish us luck as we pass.

Rhun watches us from where he stands among the men. He has not spoken much, but those fiery eyes of his have tracked us all throughout these preparations. From the way he steps forward as we pass, hands curled into

fists, I wonder if he might not want to come with us. But he is still scrawny, and still untrustworthy as far as I'm concerned – so he must stay here with Nýr.

We stop by the baker's house while the men gather and mount their horses. I breathe in the night air, trying to see if I can sense Tamsin. But I need not breathe so deeply; her full moon scent is clear as the forest's damp earth, wafting from that thatched roundhouse.

Olaf and I both grow stiff as planks as it reaches us.

Her maiden scent has been caged in by Thrain's claim. Where before it was an invitation, now it acts as a stark warning, that she is *his*, that we cannot approach. It is strong enough to make me step back.

The rejection of it raises my hackles, my rut raging at the loss of that sweet maiden scent I remember – but I know, I *know* it is best like this. It was the reason Thrain bit her barely a few weeks into their courtship.

Like this, she will be safe.

I glance at Thrain, who is doing his best impression of hardy stoicism. Clearly I'm not the only one having difficulties ignoring that scent – not to mention this impending dread in my gut.

“The Bearsden boys had better have some foolproof plan,” I mutter to him. “Some hill-dweller wisdom up their sleeves. Or we will all end the night plastered at Odin's table.”

Thrain scoffs at that. “At least we'll give the old man a good laugh.”

Olaf mounts his borrowed Galloway horse, and we all take the cue to put foot to stirrup.

“Are we ready?” he roars.

“Aye!” the men shout back. He turns his ink-black steed around, leading the way. And the sound of many clattering hooves fills the night air as we

ride out.

* * *

Above us, clouds twist in a wreath around the moon. The thud of hooves crackles through the nocturnal forest. Horses snort, tack clinks, our weapons shiver in their scabbards. All this noise while we are silent, eyes forward, hearts drumming.

Beyond, in the black of night, we can hear them – the other Viking raiders, whooping and howling into the night.

It is still relatively early. We are the only ones to follow this old Roman road thus far. Its cobbles are half swallowed in earth. It is bound for the deserted village of Old Kilpatrick – there it forks off, one path following the ruins of the Antonine Wall into the east, the other heading south.

We take the eastward path, following this patrol road of a bygone empire. The Roman wall is nothing but piles of old stone and grassy ridges, an aged silver snake slithering alongside us in the moonlight.

We ride on.

Eventually the path is broken by tree roots, the forests swallowing us whole. But the horses are used to hilly, uncertain terrain. The ground climbs under us and they climb with it, snorting and huffing. Then in the darkness, we see pinpricks of orange light ahead.

Torches.

Thrain reaches into our cart of mercenary gear so he may hoist up the banner we prepared; a white raven against a black background.

The torch-bearing Cavaliers meet us, grim-faced. One after the other they fold themselves into our party, leading us on. It is a winding way – the

Cavaliers bark at us not to stray from the road they take.

And then, in a swath of torchlight, the way down to Bearsden fort is laid out before us. From this high vantage point, we can see the great Roman fort, red bricks reinforced by native grey stone, a ditch carved all around it. The glorious structure is covered in vines, glittering with torches. All around it stand the many tents of the Briton army.

“*Halt!*” call the Cavaliers, and we repeat it to our pack.

The scent of an unclaimed Vanirdottir hangs in the air, heavy as golden draperies. Already our men have their noses up, some unable to contain their growls.

Just ahead of our meeting spot, a small group of Britons wait on horseback. One figure drops down from her horse and comes forward, followed closely by her guardian.

It is Eormen, shadowed by Skaði. She is dressed in rich plated armour and a royal tabard boasting green and gold stripes. She divests herself of her helmet as she greets us.

“Hail, men of Dublin,” she calls to us. “Thank you for coming. You will be riding alongside me tonight.”

The sight of her in full ceremonial armour makes me raise an eyebrow in surprise. I look her up and down, this Briton princess who I’ve seen in gowns and captivity. Now she stands there imbued with purpose, a sword at her hip, and fire in her eye. I would’ve thought that once she reached their army, her Cavaliers would place her into safety; but clearly she would not settle for a passive role.

Her men move around her protectively. They spent nearly a week traveling with her on foot; clearly they have come under her charm, and allowed her to keep her armour and certain freedoms. There is a fairytale look

to her now; they seem to have propped her up as their mascot, their warrior princess, beloved symbol of Briton dignity. Like those female saints who are forgiven, exceptionally, for acting as a woman should not.

“Skaði! Are you teaching the girl to fight?” I call to my friend in Norse. I doubt the Cavaliers would allow it, but it suits her, for a Vanirdottir to wear that sword. I cannot help but admire her all the more for it, and wonder what Tamsin would look like, cinched up in armour like that.

Skaði takes a heavy step forward. She lifts her chin at me, one calloused hand rocking the axe in her belt.

“I am indeed,” she all but growls. “Metal is the only language that men understand.”

I grin at her blatant warning. It’s purely territorial, the way she crowds behind Eormen. And she has reason to be wary; our pack is restless with their rut.

We must be very careful with Eormen’s heat scent so blatant in the air. Upon Olaf’s gesture, Thrain drops down from his horse, marching over to clasp the princess’s hand and the Cavalier captain’s in turn. He has no issue standing close to her; he is the only claimed one here, impervious to all but Tamsin now.

Olaf and I hold the men back with persistent low growls. Gods, but that maiden scent is a riot of strawberries, making me salivate – I shake my head like a dog, trying to wrangle with my own instincts.

The Cavaliers are all watching us. Seeing how we perform. It is a test – I know there must be many more of them in the trees around us. Arrows are notched upon us, I can feel them.

“Settle,” Olaf and I growl at the restless men at intervals. “You will *settle*.”

Thrain and Eormen speak together in hushed tones. Then he returns to us to lay out her plan.

“The Britons have a contingent guarding the road,” he says. “They want us to guard the hills around it. We’re to go up in the Kilpatrick hills with Eormen, and use her scent to attract any raiders who may try to pass through.”

I raise my eyebrows. “The devout Cavalier Order actually decided to use her as bait?”

“It was Eormen’s idea,” Thrain says. “She took inspiration from Tamsin’s plight among the Picts.”

I grin. It must’ve been an arduous task to convince her Cavaliers to agree; the captain looks sour-faced as he stands beside his princess. But then, from what we’ve seen of her thus far, Eormen seems entirely capable of getting her way.

“All right, men!” Olaf calls. “Time to change!”

The men and I crowd the cart we brought, pulling on mercenary tabards over our chainmail. It is a feat to dress ourselves with Eormen’s heat scent so strong in the air – many buckle their belts with shaking hands. But our mercenary gear smells of strong, acrid dye, and once we take to spreading black silt over each others’ faces, her scent is thankfully diminished.

Thrain smears the silt over my own face, and I close my eyes to relish the grit of his touch, the earthy smell of it. Soon there will be no other preoccupation than this slavering hunger, the eagerness for violence trumping all else.

We will both have to keep hold of our minds if we’re to steer the pack through this moon. Everything depends upon it.

“Ready, brother?” he mutters.

I open mud-clogged eyelids, finding his eyes startlingly white in his own smeared face. He is unrecognisable like this; frighteningly so. A great hulking shape in the dark.

“Ready as you are.”

As we pull together again, a great clattering of hooves and yelled commands from down below draw our attention. We watch from our high vantage point as an enormous formation of cavalry detaches from the Briton camp, torches held high. One resplendent figure rides at the head of the great cavalry charge, his armour glittering in the torchlight.

Eormen stands on the edge of our hilltop, staring down at the party as they gallop into the night. Though she is a little bent and breathless with heat, still she signs the cross upon herself, looking solemn.

“That is my brother, Prince Arlyn,” she informs us. “The crown prince. He’s riding north to meet with Causantin.”

Chills lift the hairs on my arms as the ground trembles beneath our feet, the rumbling of hooves heavy on the air.

Time for us to go and play our part, too.

* * *

It begins with control; an orderly flight into the hills, feet beating a path through the trees. My brothers and I take our positions around our pack, two leading, one behind. Around us, in the quiet of early night, Cavaliers move with similar stealth, following Eormen’s lead as she lays down her scent trail.

There are bogs up here. That is what they told us. If there are red banners in the trees, it means peat is ahead; so we strain our eyes to the gnarled oak

branches around us as we scope the hills. Eormen has us tramping through every gullet and bog we find, before settling on high ground.

And we wait for the Viking raiders to come.

We can hear them. They make themselves known, yelling with mirth, calling for a fight. They blunder through the hills, different warbands roaring across the distance at one another at the tops of their lungs.

We hunch, shadows between the trees. Watching as they follow Eormen's scent trail. They sniff their way forward until they find themselves knee-deep in peat – or scurrying along a gullet below us, showing us their backs.

And we pounce.

Those raiders are not men any more. They are prey. All of my focus pours into the hilt of my sword – the moondust they wear, glimmering on metal – the slightest twitch that precedes an attack.

My pack and I are one big body, moving together. We crunch into these on-comers with one great jagged mouth, full of glinting iron teeth.

In the moon-craze, all is clear. The starry sky above, the wet ground below, and our role within it all. There are creatures, in the tales of the Völvas, whose role it is to destroy; thus, tonight, our role is laid out as surely as if a wise old crone had woven it.

We leave no survivors.

* * *

The first splinter in our control comes in the early hours. There have been many more battles, many small parties of raiders slain; none had ventured far enough yet to pluck loot from the isolated farmsteads dotted around these hills.

At the end of one such altercation, Thrain staggers away from the pack. While our Cavalier allies regroup and Olaf rallies our men, he leans against a tree and stays there awhile.

I follow him, sliding my sword back into its scabbard. “Thrain?”

He turns a little to show he’s heard me. It could be simple combativeness making him shake like that; but he is holding onto that tree as though his self-control were slipping from him.

“Thrain, what is it?”

“Tamsin,” he growls. “It’s Tamsin...”

Gods, not this again – he cannot have his mind bent on his wife at such a crucial time as this. “What about her?”

“I can feel her,” he pants. “Through the pair-bond. Her false heat... it does not feel false at all. It is getting more intense by the hour. And there is this wretched feeling – she’s all alone, Ivar, we left her all alone –”

I reach him, make a fist in his chainmail to hold him steady, keeping an eye on the woods around us. Our men are pulling each other up, wrenching weapons from inert bodies. While this battle may be over, we don’t know when the next will come.

“She will have to handle it,” I tell him. “We need you here. Oy – look at me. We don’t have time for this.”

“If you could only feel what I feel,” he insists, claws digging into the tree bark. His eyes are far away. “I should be with her... she needs me –”

“You must shut the pair-bond,” I snap. “You hear me, brother? You can’t go chasing rut fantasies while we have thousands of bloody raiders coming after us –”

“I can’t stay here, Ivar – she *needs me* –”

“Your men need you!” I bark. “We all need you out here –” But he

pushes against me, snarling, eyes on the woods, the path that would take him back to his wife.

I shove him up against the tree. He struggles – huge as he is, he could easily overcome me. But here under the moon, his instincts recognise me as the elder Varg, the one to whom he owes respect. My growl rattles in my chest, our silt-clad faces close enough to feel each other’s breaths as I hold him there.

Ten years ago, when he first arrived in Dublin, he was still just a pup. And I was the pack leader, alongside Olaf. His instincts have never forgotten it. Though we may butt heads as equals in daylight, though he has won many battles of will recently – under the moon, he cannot help but submit to me.

“Thrain.” I sit his name upon him, as I would an unruly pup. His red-speckled eyes hold mine. Gods, it is intoxicating as ever – to hold such a powerful man by sheer force of my will. “I need you. Do you hear me? So you will shut the pair-bond. Now.”

He struggles a moment, gripping at my tabard. Then he squeezes his eyes shut, and bows his face into my neck as he concentrates. Like this I’m engulfed in his scent; leather and spices and acrid sweat.

Loki. We have not shared this proximity under the moon in a long, long time. He hasn’t needed it; he has not completely lost control like this in years. Except when we were in Uradech’s camp, of course – he became little more than an animal then. And how glorious that sight had been. Naked and glistening with sweat, blond curls matted, eyes spitting red... he had tried to kill me in a variety of ways, and between him and our red-eyed goddess, I had never been so aroused in my entire life.

He pants against my ear, breaths hot against my skin. He’s growing stiff, and so am I – still I hold him firm, not letting him slip away.

“Is the pair-bond shut?” I grunt.

“It is.”

I slide my hands around his head to pull him back, fingers sinking into his hair. Hard to draw away, now – the rut is pounding through me, dizzily so. I must shake away those images, memories we both share of faraway summer nights, when we were both young men under the moon; and I would pin him down under me while he sweated and writhed through his craze.

This closeness between us, it is a pattern we broke, a pattern we never really speak of any more. But gods, he has lost none of his potency. The full moon has me scenting him, basking in him, though I know I should be steering him right.

“Brother,” I manage. “Are you with me? Can I count on you?”

He lets out a breath, not much closer to sanity than I am. But we don’t need too much sanity this moon; only a precautionary amount.

“Well?” I insist.

“You have me,” he growls, and that sends a thrill of delight through my gut.

* * *

Inevitably, some raiders find their loot. We are there to catch them as they blunder through the hills with their treasure slung over their shoulders; sacks of grain, floppy-necked geese, stolen weapons. And finally, near midnight... a warband crosses our path with a Vanirdottir in tow.

Thus far the Cavaliers have been orderly enough; they sip from their wolfsbane bottles, they blow their whistles to keep their formations. Eormen

has stayed at a safe distance from the violence, laying down her scent only to retreat again; she watches from the trees as the men fight.

But in that moment – when she sees the raiders’ silhouettes, and hears that high-pitched cry of fear – she breaks out of her royal stasis.

“Is that a girl?” she calls. “Did I hear a girl’s voice?”

“Princess, stay back,” her Cavaliers advise, but she is locked on now, hound-like. Just as driven as Tamsin with moonlight in her eyes.

It is a Vanirdottir all right, crying out for help in the darkness. We bear down on the men that have her. Olaf’s voice booms to keep us in check, the Cavaliers shouting their own commands. There aren’t many raiders; they are barely a scouting party. I sweep one of them into a sword-fight, and upon turning, I see the lass in question.

She is a tiny little thing. Gangly as a filly, bright white in the gloom. Her dress is torn, her eyes are wide. But before any of us can reach her, one of the wayward raiders scoops her up and tears away between the trees.

The girl’s piercing scream tugs us after her, a silver thread we follow through the darkness. The Cavaliers stay behind to finish off the scouting party.

Eormen runs with us.

I shake my head, jaw slack, hairs on end as her maiden scent clouds about us. It should be Tamsin – Tamsin running with us, red-eyed and magnificent – I know she’s capable of it. We should not have left her behind. Next time, next moon, I will take her along myself. Just the thought of it has me grinning, eager as a dog – she could’ve had that scouting party on their knees in moments.

We’ve lost the Cavaliers now, but we cannot afford to wait for them. The lone Viking leads us straight to the rest of his warband, who are helping

themselves to a ramshackle farmhouse in a clearing.

When I see them, my mouth runs dry. The warband counts a *lot* of men. But Olaf does not stop.

We crash into them, Skaði and Eormen with us, swords raised. Skaði is yelling advice and warnings – it is Eormen’s first time actually participating in battle. Her gauntleted hands shake on her sword hilt as she spins around, caught in the fight.

I watch her a moment. She teeters between fear and rage as she parries successive blows, eyes wide. I watch those eyes, wondering – will the bloodlust come upon her, too, like it did Tamsin? What strength awaits that girl, if she lets the craze rise in her?

She strikes into her first man, blade slicing through his tattered leathers. And I see it – a glint of red in her eye, no more than that. She staggers back as though disoriented, blinking hard to regain her wits. Expediently she signs the cross on herself, says a prayer for the one she felled. And then another adversary crashes against her steel, and she keeps to her rigid codes of combat, a student applying a beginner’s rigour. Her teeth are gritted in concentration, and I know somehow, that she is too full of her godly righteousness to let her craze arise any more than that.

It grows too dangerous to wait and see if she will discover it. She parries with bad form, trying to apply herself so rigidly that she leaves herself vulnerable. She cannot hope to stand against all these warriors with only Skaði to help her.

“*Brother!*” I bark, and Thrain is upon me at once. Together we flank her. He has a bloody axe in either hand, and with the craze upon him, he wields his left hand as though it had never been pierced – I recognise his style far better now, like this.

No mercy.

We slice a bloody perimetre around us. But there is no end to the men who pile upon us. It isn't before Thrain and I are crouched together over a dozen kills, panting hard, that we see the insignia on their shields properly.

A large black bear.

“Oy,” Thrain hisses urgently. “This is Grímbjorn’s warband.”

The name drops through my stomach like a stone. “Oh *fuck*.”

We grab at each other. Grímbjorn is a giant, one of Father’s closest advisors – and he’s bound to be close by.

I whip around, looking for Eormen – she’s managed to snatch the girl out of the roaring crowd of Vikings. She’s crouched over the petrified little thing, stroking back her hair, ascertaining her state.

And just beyond them, at the edge of the clearing – an enormous hulking shape approaches.

“*Eormen!*” I roar. “Take the girl and *go! Run! RUN!*”

Eormen does not wait to be commanded twice. She finds Skaði, who hoists the girl upon her back, and they run together as though pursued by a true pack of bears. We all make a corridor for them, shouting them on.

The rut makes it hard to think, hard to plan. Grímbjorn’s men outnumber us two to one; we cannot hope to take them all on and survive.

We have no choice but to run at Eormen’s heels. If we can just lure Grímbjorn’s men to some deep bog where we may regain the advantage—perhaps we stand a chance.

I see no better option ahead.

Olaf grabs Thrain and I by the scruffs of our necks, and we pelt after Eormen, our men following. Yells and trampling feet behind us tell us they’re following closely.

“What now?” Thrain calls out.

“We lure them to the bogs,” I call back. “Eormen! There are bogs nearby, yes?”

“Yes, but – I don’t know where exactly!” she calls, panting. “Look – look for red scarves, and follow the streams!”

We do as she says. Soon enough, the earthy smell of peat blooms around us. Peat and blood. She points overhead, and we find a long red scarf fluttering in the branches of a high oak.

“*Come on!*” Olaf calls in encouragement.

We run flat out, catching each other when we trip. *Stick to the trees*, Eormen calls, because the roots hold the earth. The sickly smell of stagnant mud sticks to our nostrils.

We stagger into a misty clearing. Several wide round pools of bogwater reflect the moonlight. Everywhere, pink heather bushes give an impression of solid earth.

And there – a great standing stone looms over the bogs. It depicts a featureless woman holding out her arms, as though welcoming us here. She is covered in ancient spiral etchings and moss.

Thrain goes rigid at the sight of that statue. He hisses at me as I pick my way towards her.

“Ivar, no. *No.*”

“What?”

“We can’t stay here. Not here.”

But we have no choice. Grímbjorn’s men are coming, and if we manage to get on that platform at the statue’s feet, we’ll be on solid ground. We can fire at them from there.

While Olaf leads the women ahead, I manage to teeter my way through

the heather. Once at the statue's side, I pluck the bow from around my chest. Some of our men follow – the others spread out between the trees, spears and bows in hand.

“*Where are you...*” comes a low, gravelly voice. “*Where are you, you mercenary scum?*”

The mist is getting thicker and thicker. Out there, that great black shape approaches. It is a man wearing a bear's hide, holding two large axes in his hands. He's splashing through the bog, tall enough to stride uncaring through shallow pools. Around him, his men stagger and wade about with difficulty, pulling each other free of the deeper places.

“There you are,” comes Grímbjorn's growl.

Trembling, I raise my bow. Arrows fly, my men firing and throwing spears their way. Grímbjorn's raiders splash into the peat with yells of pain. But Grímbjorn himself is wearing so much metal and hide, the projectiles only bounce off him.

He picks his way around the pool. Thrain is calling out to me, *brother, brother*, but I can see nothing else now but that humungous hulking figure. He steps onto the platform. He sweeps away the others.

And then he's on me.

He grasps me by the throat, drags me up the stone front of the statue. I fight his grip as best I can, but the man is monstrously strong. He plucks off his helmet, tiny eyes like a pair of blood-red beads. And he leans in to scent me.

“You wear the smell of young maiden cunt,” he growls. “Working with the Britons, are you? Reaping your just rewards?”

He spits in my face, and wipes away the silt with his free hand. I can do nothing but rasp for breath and kick at him, squinting through his chokehold.

His eyes widen with surprise.

“Ivar Gofraidsson? Is that really you?” he sneers, and then clucks his tongue at me. “Running around with the Britons, are we? Well, well. Gofraid should’ve known you can never trust a bastard.”

Eyes popping out of my skull, I squint over at the treeline – Thrain – *Thrain* – my lips open around his name, my brother – there is nothing else than this screaming to survive.

Thrain is already trying to reach me, treading heather. He manages to sneak behind Grímbjorn. Axe in hand, he swings.

Thunk. He hews into Grímbjorn’s flank as though the man were a tree trunk. A grunt of pain, a twitch of the fingers – Grímbjorn lets me go and turns around. I can only grasp onto the statue, slipping with blood, smearing it over the stone.

Thrain is fighting him, and I’m still spluttering for breath. Freya – Freya protect him. I need to unsheathe my sword. But my throat is crumpled to nothing, my hand shaking too much.

“Freya,” I rasp as I hold onto the statue’s bloody outstretched arm, trying not to collapse. “Help us – *help us.*”

Grímbjorn slips as he tries to parry Thrain’s attack. And as the giant turns on himself, he falls backward, as though the mist itself were pulling him. A great *splash* greets him, the milky bogwater swallowing him whole. Eyes wide, he tries to reach for something to haul himself out.

Thrain grasps a discarded spear and plants it deep in Grímbjorn’s gut. Then, absurdly, like a washerwoman trying to hold down a ballooning sheet in a bucket of water, he tries to hold Grímbjorn down in the bog. He snarls as he pits his full weight against the spear.

I scramble forward to help him, and several more Dubliners join us. We

push, and push, until the giant is submerged, last breaths bubbling to the surface. He thrashes, and we hold until he is still; until nothing can be seen of him except one boot sticking out of the bog water.

All around us, Grímbjorn's men are trying to rush to his aid, trying to attack us. But they lose their footing, gargling for help as they sink. We turn, ready to fight, but the bog seems to be sucking them down inexorably. The more they thrash, the more they sink, and their noises slowly bleed away. Soon there is nothing but eerie, misty stillness.

Nobody moves for a long time.

Then finally Thrain wraps a warm arm around me, coaxes me away from the statue and mutters, "Let's get out of here."

* * *

We run all the way up to the dry peak of a hill. A huge solitary oak gives us shelter; Olaf is there with the women. We turn to watch the dark treeline we escaped from. Nobody speaks, the chill of the bogs still inside us. All of us expect more raiders.

Dawn is rising, a silvery promise on the horizon. The forest has grown silent. Then – something moves down there at the forest edge. Thrain starts forward, rigid as a hunter as he tracks whatever it is. He reaches for his axe and, with a yell of self-encouragement, throws it bodily across the distance.

A great *SMACK* followed by senseless squawking fills the air. We all stare, taken aback, as a group of pheasants flap and splutter their way out of the trees. One of them is stuck there by Thrain's axe, wings jutting at odd angles.

Somehow that breaks the tension completely. Someone lets out a little nervous laugh, and then it builds until the men are all laughing uproariously. Thrain drags himself back to us, wearing an embarrassed grin, and they reach up for him, scruff his hair. *Do you think you got it, Thrain?* Olaf teases him. *Maybe you should throw another axe? I think I saw it twitch!*

The dawn continues to rise, stealing away our Varg strength and that of the raiders, promising a temporary reprieve from combat. We fetch the pheasant so we can cook it. Finngeir takes it and wiggles it at Thrain, pretending to scare him, and Thrain bats it away while the others go on laughing. There is a certain point where horror turns to absurdity, where one can do nothing but break; we're setting up a fire when Mikjel starts spluttering over Grímbjorn's fate. *Did you see how his foot kept poking out? We had to dunk the great Grímbjorn Glóinsson like a chicken that's too fat for its cooking pot* – and Thrain finally cracks at that image, bending over, and there is no sense to the belly laughter that takes us all.

The dark forest all around us may be full of mist and bogs and death, but up here where the dawn kisses the oak leaves, it feels safe. Up here we are warm and alive and together. We wipe our hands in the dew and cook the fat pheasant over the fire, and in this desperate gladness for the dawn, we are closer than family, closer than brothers. Streaked with dirt and exhausted, we all grin senselessly at the fact that our luck held; we are alive, we are alive.

The Cavaliers have not found us yet, so we loiter in the brightening daylight, many stretching out to rest. Thrain casts glances at the girl we rescued; she sits apart from us all, grouped with Eormen to eat, while Skaði patrols to keep the distance intact. The yearning in Thrain's face is painfully obvious as he watches Skaði protecting her woman like this, while his own mate is far from him.

That is all we are missing. Tamsin; our Kátr-Ekkja. I know all the men feel it just as I do.

The sun finally rises over the horizon. It casts long spears through the mist, caps the hills and treetops with gold, until the landscape gleams. Thrain and I sit there, half-dead with fatigue, staring at the spectacle.

“How is she now?” I ask him. “Tamsin.”

“Hrmp.” He takes a moment, turning inward. “Better now. The heat spell is past.”

Lightly as possible, I add, “You should have more faith in her, you know. She would’ve been a great help this moon.”

He gives an impatient sigh. “I wondered how long you’d take to bring up that wonderful idea of yours again.”

“Don’t pretend she could not hold her own out here.”

“Ivar,” he warns. “It isn’t a point of discussion.”

I sigh, and rock forward so I can look him in the eye. “I know you want her safe. And I know she’s afraid. But it is not by shutting her away that you will build her confidence.”

He lays a tired look on me. “And how would you build her confidence? By throwing her out into these wild hinterlands, to face thousands of crazed men?”

I hold his gaze squarely. “How else would she realise what she’s capable of? If we do not have faith in her, then how can she have faith in herself?”

He scoffs at that. But when he sees how serious I am, his smile slowly fades. Those clear blue eyes flicker uncertainly between mine a moment. Surely he can imagine it; surely he knows, he *knows* I’m right on every level. But he breaks away, shaking his head, though I can see those doubts he harbours in the lines of his face.

“We can discuss this later,” he grits out. “I’m starting to get feeling back in this damned hand of mine.”

I shift to face him with a smirk, accepting his obvious deflection. We work together to unfold his hand, stretch out his arm, a routine that is fast becoming familiar. He tilts his face away to relieve his muscles, and I see it; the ring of teeth, the mating mark peeking over his chainmail.

For a moment I allow my eyes to linger on that red circle she bestowed upon him when she was wild and feral, and I let myself wonder... way across these hills, how Tamsin might’ve fared tonight; how the dormant beast in her must toss and turn as it waits to be released.

Chapter 19



IVAR

Waning Moon of July

The zest of the first full moon night fizzles to exhaustion as the day grows brighter, bringing with it our dishevelled Cavaliers. But it is not over. Father's raiders will keep scouting for the full six days of this moon – so we must keep to the hills and stand guard.

It is in these moments, when we are tired and aching in the daylight, that we are most in danger of letting our guard down. We take to strict watches, allowing a few hours of sleep here and there.

There are still raiders everywhere. They crawl through these hills like an infestation. Many times we chase them far out into the moors, woodlands we do not know. I run with my heart in my mouth, hoping, hoping we will not lose ourselves. We *cannot* let anyone slip through the net we and the Britons have cast.

Night and day; combat and relief. We save many more women, both human and Vanirdøtur, and Eormen grows hardier with each battle she bears through. There are scant few moments of true calm, but we manage to find them, still – leaning against one another to catch our breaths, mending each other’s gear or binding wounds. Thrain steps aside sometimes when we sit at a rest stop. I see him touching his neck, and it’s easy to guess what’s on his mind.

“How’s our Kátr-Ekkja?” I ask him, and the rest of the men lean into the idea of her – Tamsin and her sweet-smelling hair, her clean skin, the embodiment of everything we crave while we’re out here in the muck.

Thrain gazes out at the hills, bathed in sunset colours as they are, wearing a small smile. He closes his eyes as he accesses the bond, concentrating a moment.

“The camp feast is just beginning. There’s music,” he murmurs. “... she’s dancing.”

We try to see if he can sense what tune it is, if he can hear it through the pair-bond and hum it. And though the exercise proves difficult, we manage to hum along with him as he pieces it together.

Finally the very last night is up. The Cavaliers are panting and haggard as we are, their chainmail tattered, their tabards bloody. We congratulate each other with back-pats and nods, sharing accounts of battle as we head back down to Bearsden fort together. It is hard to know how we fared this moon – we haven’t had any word from Endrick bridge, nor from the lads who went up north. We can’t even guess what things have been like at Father’s siege camp, either. Up in those hills, we were far from everything.

Dawn illuminates the old Roman fort. Eormen leads us down the hillside, shuttling along the last of the women and girls we helped her steal back from

the Viking raiders. Many women linger at the fort's lowered portcullis; they hold out their arms, and our protégées run to meet them.

I watch them a moment. Freya. That small one we saved tonight, who's all wrapped up in a Cavalier's cloak... she can't be older than twelve.

Looking at her, suddenly I understand. Why this country might be so harsh with its Vyrgen men. That girl is a tiny little thing, and yet her scent tells me that she should be coveted like the rest.

Surely those laws were placed by mothers, like those old women upon the portcullis, who would not have their daughters hurt. I hate to see their expressions as they stare at me and my pack, holding the small girl in their midst. I want to tell them, *of course I would never touch that child. Freya heed my words, I would never do such a thing.*

But they would not believe me. They equate me with Father's bands of animals, and it grates my nerves.

We are offered a campfire where we may burn our white raven gear and wash ourselves. Some Cavaliers are posted to supervise us, which is infinitely amusing, as they try their best to remain formal only to stare with blushing insistence at every patch of tattooed skin we uncover. Eormen takes council with her captains, and for a moment, there is an odd normalcy to this; our alliance becoming entirely unremarkable.

It is almost midday when we hear a great clatter of hooves, and a voice yelling through the trees.

“Sister! Sister!”

Eormen wheels around. My brothers and I stand there, half out of our clothes, blinking around blearily as a cortège arrives. That boy in his resplendent armour gallops through the camp, flanked by a small party of

soldiers. His helmet bears a golden band around it, his tabard striped with the gold and green of royalty.

Arlyn. The Briton crown prince.

He clatters down from his horse, strides to Eormen and promptly sweeps her up in his arms. She laughs and says, *Arlyn, you're back!*

"I've just got back from the north," Arlyn says. Then he steps back and casts a sweeping glance around, pulling in his captains. His gaze lands on us, and though he is panting and dishevelled, he still stiffens. "Is that the Viking warband you told me of?"

"Yes," Eormen says. "The men of Dublin. They helped us secure the hills."

Arlyn makes his decision in a heartbeat, and throws up a merry hand. "Come!"

Olaf steps forward warily. The Cavaliers pull us alongside them until we surround the royal pair.

Prince Arlyn takes the time to clasp our hands, to ask for our names and nod at us in turn. He catches his breath a moment, and then offers us his report.

"My men and I found Causantin's army up north. Ten thousand spears, just as you said. When we got up there, he was encamped on a hillside, and he was already dealing with some inner turmoil. So we sprung a surprise attack on him – and his army split down the middle! A huge number of Pictish rebels broke off from him, so we banded together with them – their leader styles himself as Uradech, prince of some lost Pictish kingdom."

My brothers and I all exchange a significant glance. Just to name the man seems to summon his silhouette among us; huge and gold-clad, his face

painted blue, his eyes eerily fixed upon us. It is the first we hear of him being alive at all since taking our leave of him.

“Uradech finally got his thumbs out his arse, then,” Thrain grumbles to us in Norse. “He certainly took his time to revolt.”

“He probably waited to have the Britons to back him,” I tell him. “His own warband was tiny, and he wasn’t sure how many allies he’d manage to scrape.”

Prince Arlyn interrupts: “I’m sorry – you know this man?”

Olaf steps forward. “We met Uradech, earlier this summer,” he explains. “He is a proud Pictish warlord who rejects Causantin’s claim to the throne of all Alba. He planned to infiltrate Causantin’s army and instigate a rebellion there – so we helped him to hide among Causantin’s men.”

“Well, *we* did not help him, strictly speaking,” Thrain corrects him. “Tamsin is the one who helped him.”

The reminder of Tamsin’s involvement lights a spark in Arlyn’s bright blue eyes. He turns back to his horse, saying, *that reminds me!* And he returns with a satchel that he offers us.

“Uradech spoke very highly of Tamsin,” he says. “He wanted me to pass this along. A gift for her.”

I raise my eyebrows at Thrain as he takes the soft leather satchel. It is forward indeed for a renowned warlord to send gifts to a claimed woman. Still, Thrain ties it grudgingly to his belt.

“Will you give Tamsin thanks on my behalf, too?” Arlyn says. “She has made such alliances for us. It may well be what wins us this war. In any case – we do not have Causantin’s ten thousand spears to fear now. My men are holding our position up there; he is too weakened to pass through.”

Eormen bends over, sighing with relief.

“So Causantin’s power is broken, and not one Vanirdottir was stolen this moon, either,” she says. “Gofraid’s army might’ve won the first battle, but this moon – this moon has been our victory.”

“Yes,” Arlyn agrees, and they are both giddy as they face us. The crown prince looks as though he wants to drag Olaf into a hug, too. “I cannot thank you enough, my lords. The information you’ve brought us; the help you’ve been. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.”

“Well, now,” Olaf begins gruffly, but then the boy finally strides forward and all but clanks against Olaf in an armoured embrace. Olaf is grinning wide as he pats the boy’s back in return. “It is our honour to serve the women of this sanctuary. But Your Grace, we have to depart soon. We have to head back to our camp.”

“Yes, of course,” Arlyn says, slightly manic with joy as he shakes Olaf’s hand. “You’ll tell Tamsin, won’t you? Tell her it is thanks to her – it is she and her excellent friends who will win us this war.”

Chapter 20



THRAIN

Last Quarter of July

Tamsin – I want nothing more than to go straight to her. But my brothers and I must attend the post-moon council, just like the rest of the raiding Jarls.

Gofraid is in a state of outrage. I have rarely seen him like this; he usually roars and stomps about, but here he is seething, silent, as though slowly filling with steam. He is making a headcount in his royal tent, trying to see who survived this moon, who has anything to show for it – and who has any word from Causantin.

Of course, no one has seen either hide nor hair of Causantin. Gofraid is growing red with rage as each Jarl returns and spouts the same story of Briton resistance and their own relative empty-handedness. Many men sacked empty villages and farmsteads, bringing back livestock and treasures, but none returned with the Vanirdøtur they sought.

“I cannot believe Causantin did not come,” Gofraid growls as more Jarls keep arriving, dragging themselves with all the energy of men who’ve spent seven full days and nights raiding. “Where in Odin’s name did that man get to? Did he lose himself in some damned bog? My scouts told me he crossed the northern border with his army at full strength. He was meant to come. *He was meant to come.*”

Olaf manages to keep a smooth face, standing there all important-looking with his arms crossed and sacks of loot at his feet. Ivar is fully invested in his yarn-spinning, as ever – he speaks with the other Jarls of a certain white raven mercenary band, speculating with them about possible Danish involvement.

I cannot speak for the dryness in my mouth. I am no good at this lying business.

Eventually Gofraid turns, barking at his closest Jarl: “Ögmundr! You will send more scouts up north. See where the *fuck* Causantin has got to. Without him, the Britons and their mercenaries will block us at every turn; we must be far more cautious from here on out.”

To my intense relief, Gofraid is too fixed on this issue of Causantin to question us any further. Though he claps a glare upon Olaf at one point, he does no more than that; there are too many men to handle, and the aftermath of these raids will take some management. He waves us away, ending the meeting with a rough command:

“All of you! Get back to your camps and start counting your men. I want to know how many we lost by tonight. I want our entire perimetre bolstered and solid as can be. And *no one* goes wandering out of our perimetre without my knowing about it. If we are to win this siege alone, we must tighten up this camp as our first priority. Go!”

And the tension in my gut finally releases.
I can go to her. Finally. *Finally.*

* * *

I do not hear the banter of the men as we pass into the Dubliner's camp. I barely even see them, their smiling faces, the mugs of beer they slosh around as they greet our returning party.

Tamsin, where are you? I throw out the question into our pair-bond, follow the pull of her presence as though a golden sash were tied about my waist, stretching ahead – between these men, these houses, these trees. *Where are you?*

She's so close. So close now.

All this moon I felt her loneliness, like a chasm had opened between us. And to be unable to cross over and hold her – to be unable to reassure her even as she curled up all alone in her empty nest, in the vastness of our absence –

Here. A long feast table spreads around our neighbourhood's central firepit; many smaller tables have been dragged outside to form it. Bread and cooked venison weigh down the wood, a sort of post-moon feast that the men are putting together for our returning party. Fresh fruit are being brought in baskets, casks of ale rolled along.

And there she is. Hand outstretched, she's calling out to Armod, who has a sack of apples in his hands.

"No, no – those are the ones I set out for the horses!" she tells him.

"By Odin, I cannot bring back forage without you taking half of it to the horses," Armod complains. "You do know the men have to eat, too!"

“The orchard yields enough for three armies, Armod,” Tamsin calls back, making the men laugh – they pat Armod on the back amiably as he turns, shaking his head.

Then she finds me in the milling crowd. The smile she wears fades, as though her relief had melted away everything else.

“Thrain,” she breathes.

The men cheer as I stride to her, but she is all I hear, all I see. She comes at me, all but leaps so that I catch her and hold her tight against me. *Gods*, the warmth of her body; she’s here with me at last.

“Tamsin,” I sigh, and she gives a little whimper as she clings onto me around the neck.

“You’re back,” she says, a crack in her voice.

“I’m here. I’m here,” I tell her, though the assurance comes far too late; I repeat it as though to make up for every night of her heat I missed. “I swear to you, I’m not leaving you again.”

Somehow we fall onto the nearest bench, and I have her in my lap while she holds onto me. I want to look at her properly, to ask how she is, to have her tell me everything she’s been up to this moon – but first. First. This.

Olaf’s voice rises over the noise of the men: “Oy-oy! I need to count you all. Father’s orders. So will you all sit down, please. Armod, how many are on perimetre watch?”

Tamsin twists, breaking away to look in his direction. Everything inside me lurches to have her pull away, but I let her, just so I can look at her freckled face, how she smiles giddily in his direction. So many details that were lost to me this moon.

“I’m just going to see him,” she says. “But I’ll come right back.”

“Go, my love.”

She scampers between the men in Olaf's direction as though ready to throw herself into his arms, too. But just as he turns to face her, she checks herself. Goes shy. He smiles at her, his silvery beard lifting, so she grasps his gauntleted hand at least.

"I'm so glad you're back safe," she says. "You're all right?"

"I'm fine, princess. You're the one who prepared this feast for us?"

She nods. "I had to hide some of the casks and salted things while the moon lasted," she admits. "Only thirty of us remained here but I swear, thirty men under the moon can eat their way through an entire mountain."

Olaf chuckles. "Oh, I know your suffering intimately well. You saved an admirable amount of food, considering."

Nibbling on her lip, Tamsin turns as though looking for someone. "Isn't Ivar with you?"

"He was... he should be somewhere around here."

Frowning, I cast about for Ivar, too – and find him a few benches away from me, leaning to speak with Orm, as though he passed by Tamsin without stopping to greet her at all.

Hm.

Excitement flutters through the pair-bond when Tamsin sees him. She strides between the men, confident at first, and then faltering again as she nears him. He notices her presence, but resolutely does not interrupt his conversation for her sake.

She waits, indignation bristling the further he makes her dither there for him. Then when he glances at her again, she finally bursts out, "Aren't you going to say hello?"

He turns to appraise her properly with a certain coolness about him.

"You seemed quite occupied," he drawls. "But as you've resurfaced.

Good morning to you.”

A hook of hurt pulls at the bond. Oh, that knob-head – he’s jealous, isn’t he? He’s actually petty enough to punish her for coming to me first?

“Good *morning*?” Tamsin echoes. “I – that’s hardly the way I would greet someone I haven’t seen for a whole week.”

“Oh?” A smirk curls his mouth. “Why? Did you miss me?”

“You – actually, I didn’t,” Tamsin counters, flushing. “Not in the slightest.”

Ivar just laughs at that. Then, as they both have many Dubliners pulling at their attention, they resolutely turn their backs on one another to receive the respects of the men.

I catch Ivar’s attention, throw up a hand to say, *what are you doing?* But his eyes are dark and inscrutable, and he does not spare me more than a glance. The men are being noisy, questions abounding – *what happened out there in the hills? What of Causantin?* So he turns to the table at large, and calls out a command;

“Everyone, sit! We have much to tell you of this moon.”

* * *

The whole table is buzzing by the time we’ve relayed the moon’s events. Olaf completes his headcount and rides out to inform his father, so the men all discuss our hilltop adventures in hushed voices, excitedly recounting how many Vanirdøtur we saved. Exaggerations abound, as ever. Our elbows are on the table, Dubliners leaning into one another with eager grins – Rhun is among them, listening intently.

Eormen really wielded the sword? And Causantin – they successfully blocked Causantin!

Tamsin sits beside me, eyes sparkling. She keeps asking us to recount her cousin's exploits, and I know there is something of envy in her, though she shows only pride in Eormen's chosen path.

"So where do we stand now?" Sigbrand asks at long last. "We have helped to tip the scales in the Britons' favour – is it enough for them to regain the advantage here?"

"The Britons have regained a very significant advantage, I'd say," Ivar proclaims – he reclines a few seats away from Tamsin, a horn of mead in hand. "Everything will depend on how Father decides to move forward, now. Without Causantin, he is distinctly diminished; I'd wager he will hunker down here to protect what assets are left to him."

Olaf returns while the table conversation is still going strong. A hush unfurls as he dismounts from Alsvithr and comes to join us. He takes the cup of mead that Ivar offers him, then, keeping his voice carefully steady, he speaks.

"Six thousand men remain in Father's army," he says. "He has lost a rough half of his initial strength. And the raiders who returned brought with them a bog fever – it is running rampant through the camp."

Several Dubliners bang their cups on the table with victorious zeal. Spoiled raids, a major ally gone missing, and fever to top it all off – Gofraid has been dealt a major blow, indeed.

Armod rises to clap Olaf on the shoulder. "I can't believe this, but I think you're actually going to manage it," the greybeard says. "You're going to dislodge King Gofraid himself, and his *whole army*, without even raising your voice to the man – let alone your sword!"

“That was the intention,” Olaf says modestly, “though Freya has borne us through thus far with an abundance of luck.” He does not seem as excited as everyone else; I know it wounds him to work against his father, though he is driven to do it out of principle. “Let us hope Father will understand that he is in muddy waters,” Olaf adds. “And that he will choose to leave this place like any rational man would, rather than spill any more blood in fruitless pursuits.”

The others are too cheerful to follow in his solemnity.

“To Olaf!” Sigbrand calls, raising his mug in a toast. “To well-laid plans —”

“To the Vanirdøtur!”

“And to Freya’s favour!”

“Don’t start shouting,” barks Ivar. “For the love of Frigg, be quiet —”

But the men are rising and cheering now, patting him, patting Olaf, and me too – so we let them toast us, until Olaf is ruddy-cheeked and smiling, and even Ivar’s broodiness has cracked into a grin.

It turns into a full day of chatter, music and celebration. The men brush off our warnings, pretexting that they are simply happy to reunite with Tamsin, and that Gofraid’s order to sit tight is a perfect excuse to prolong idle play. Still, we snap at them to keep it down. While the rest of the siege camp may be indulging in their own raid prizes, they are still sore from a dissatisfying moon, and the absence of women.

Tamsin has been brimming with some question she hasn’t yet asked me. The sun is setting by the time she musters up the courage to do it. Musicians are grouping by the firepits; we sit in relative privacy at the vacated long table when she finally asks.

“So... you mentioned that Uradech helped to break Causantin’s forces,”

she says. “Did you hear anything more about him?”

Vague territorial annoyance rises in me to hear his name on her tongue. But I knew she would ask.

“As far as I know, he’s well,” I tell her. “He must still be up there with Arlyn’s men, protecting the northern border. He passed along a gift for you, actually.”

She tries to temper her excitement, but she still leans forward eagerly as I take the pouch from my belt. Ivar drifts back to the table to refill his horn; he watches with a curious eye as Tamsin opens the pouch.

Some kind of cylindrical object slides out, wrapped in a red hemp ribbon. Tamsin pulls the ribbon free, twisting it around her fingers in a way that has me swallow back a growl. The object is in fact two pieces of carved wood, with Ogham lines slashed across them.

Messages, surely.

Ivar tilts his head as he contemplates the sight of the archaic lines of Ogham. He has similar lines tattooed on his own wrist, courtesy of Uradech’s Picts.

“I can’t read this,” Tamsin mutters, frustrated. “Oh,” she adds, turning the longer piece. “Oh, wait... this one has Roman letters, too. I think this one teaches how to read it!”

“Let me see,” Ivar says, sitting beside her. We all lean together, both of them forgetting their earlier spat as Tamsin turns the alphabet stick. It is a laborious process, identifying letters and trying to translate the message with it. By the time Tamsin has it, her face has grown quite pink.

“What is it?” Ivar asks her with relish. “What does he say?”

“Perhaps it is a private matter,” I grumble, though I want to hear it just the same.

“He... he says...” She fiddles with the red ribbon some more. *“May this message find you well, Princess Tamsin of Strathclyde... I hope to see you wear red in your hair again, one day soon.”*

Both Ivar and I exchange a glance then.

It could not be a more eloquent double-meaning. An encouragement; a vindication of what Ivar has been trying to tell me all moon.

“Here, let me,” Ivar says, plucking the ribbon from Tamsin. “He’s right; this is a lovely colour on you.”

A growl emerges from my chest as he reaches into Tamsin’s hair to braid the ribbon there. He cocks an eyebrow at me.

“Or perhaps your husband would rather I didn’t,” he says. As though he could shame me – as though it were a mere question of jealousy!

“Place the ribbon if you want,” I grumble. “I have no qualms with a mere ribbon.”

But it is not a mere ribbon and we all know it.

Ivar makes a long, thin braid just behind Tamsin’s ear, and ties it off. He does it slowly, casting glances at me, as though he knows he’s pissing me off by doing this. Then, while Tamsin is quivering there in the symbolism of it, he pushes up again.

“I’m sure you will want to make up for lost time with that obtuse husband of yours,” he says curtly. “I’ll be seeing you.”

“Ivar!” I bark at him. Then, reverting to Norse: “If you have a problem of some kind then spit it out already. We succeeded this moon without needing her craze; why do you have such a weed up your arse about it?”

He only scoffs, then lopes off, plucking up his tagelharpa so he might join the musicians.

Tamsin fiddles with the ribbon, frowning after him.

“He’s been like that since you all returned,” she says. “Maybe I did something, or said something –?”

“It’s not your fault,” I growl. “Things simply did not go his way. That’s all this is. He’s angry that when it comes to you, he does not have the final say; he cannot force your hand, nor mine.”

She fiddles with the red ribbon, twined as it is in her new braid. It catches my eye, and I follow the line of it with a frown.

“Ivar believes I am holding you back,” I admit. “By keeping you here, not pushing you to come with us this moon. But I didn’t mean to hold you back, Tamsin, I just... I wanted to keep you safe.”

“I know,” she says, squeezing my hands in hers. “I’m grateful you did. I don’t know if I’ll ever be capable of entering the craze again.”

I cup her face, leaning into her. “The good news is, we don’t have to think about it any more,” I murmur. “Not tonight, anyway.”

“Mm.” She rubs her lips along mine. “I think we’ll find much better occupations tonight.”

I’m smiling as she kisses me, long and deep, stirring what we could not satisfy this moon. Soon she’s pulling me from the bench, headed for the baker’s house.

Of course, as though in a deliberate move to make himself visible, Ivar has chosen a spot right in front of the baker’s house to play music. He and several others are pounding out a lively tune, their gazes vague as they concentrate on each other and the beat. Tamsin falters as we come to the door, staring his way, and the yearning I see in her only fans my annoyance.

“I... I would’ve liked to invite him, but,” she says, flustered. “Do you think he’d even want to come?”

My feet fumble to a halt. “You wanted to invite him?”

She averts her eyes, her cheeks dyed a deep red. “Well... would that be all right?”

It takes a moment for her meaning to really sink in. When it does, it drags through me with the weight of an anchor.

This will not be the same chaste dynamic as last time. She wants us both tonight; her yearning glows in the bond. And though I know she and Ivar have been intimate, there is quite a difference between knowing about it and seeing it right in front of me.

I swallow hard.

“Fine,” I grunt. “I’ll fetch him then, if you want him.”

“But if he doesn’t want to come –”

“Oh, he’ll come. He’ll count his damn blessings and he’ll come,” I growl. “Let me deal with him; you get inside, get warm.”

Ivar is entirely involved in his song; he makes me wait, nodding his head to the rhythm, deft fingers sliding along the strings of his tagelharpa. Finally, once the others are finished and leaning together to piece together the next tune, he deigns to lift his chin to acknowledge me.

“What?”

“What do you mean, *what?*” I snap at him. “She wants you. So. Come on.”

He’s taken aback by my bluntness. For a moment we both stare at each other like a pair of halfwits. Then he says, “She wants me? In what capacity?”

Odin, give me patience – this idiot will test me to my limits.

“She wants your company,” I tell him curtly.

“Company. What kind of company?”

“Just – company!”

His eyes search mine. Gods, it is not some complex play on words I'm laying before him – he must hear what I'm saying.

“She wants to make up for this moon,” I elaborate gruffly. “With both of us.”

A slow, curious smile spreads on his face. “I see,” he says. “And what is your opinion on that?”

Those black eyes flash at me as he plays whatever game this is. He seems genuinely curious, still. As though open to anything I may suggest; as if this were just another of the many propositions he receives under the moon.

I breathe in and out slowly. “... I will tolerate it. If I must.”

His grin only widens. “Grand. Very noble of you. Well, I'll let you two get reacquainted first, shall I – give it a few songs.”

And he returns to his playing, pretending carelessness, though it is so blatantly obvious that he is still covering some kind of wound, some petty jealousy he will never admit to. The sound of his tagelharpa rakes across my ears, surely covering the sound of my own grinding teeth as I turn, headed for the house.

Chapter 21



THRAIN

Waning Moon of July

Tamsin's nest is saturated with scent. Musky honey and sex, so strong she may as well have had a true heat. It clouds my mind as I walk her back to the bed.

Freya... to think we have the whole night ahead to do as we please.

She keeps her eyes strung to mine as I slide my weapons from my belt, let them fall to the ground. Then she reaches to help me with the belt buckles. Leather zips between our palms, the belt clatters to the beaten earth floor. Her breath hitches at the sound, a smile blooming on her lips.

“So – will he come?” she stammers. “Ivar?”

“Loki take that man,” I growl. “Who knows.”

“What did he say, exactly?”

I cup her face in my hands, lean my forehead against hers. Just this small contact and already her whole body is arching up for me, her breaths coming

short.

“That he’d give us some time,” I murmur.

She moans as I kiss her, gripping onto me, and we are lost in that kiss for a long time. Gods, she’s on me like a starved animal – pressing herself against me, making small noises of delight that have me hardening to steel. I stroke up her back, hands splayed wide, feeling her every quivering curve.

She is the one who draws back, panting, as though reining herself in.

“Wait... I don’t want to just...” She struggles, still foggy and unfocused. Finally she manages to mumble, “It would be rude to just do as we like, and have him arrive in the middle of it.”

Freya have mercy, she cannot mean to deny herself – deny *us* – just for the sake of that halfwit. But she looks up at me, imploring.

“Thrain. I don’t want him to come in and find us locked together again,” she mutters, and I can’t help but crack a smile at that. “We’ll never hear the end of it otherwise. He’ll compose a song about it for certain.”

“Hrmph.”

“Is it all right if we wait for him?”

“... I suppose.”

She offers to take off my armour and undress me, to make up for the aberration of having to *wait*. So I sit on the edge of the bed, let her tug off my chainmail, belt and tunic, leaving only my breeches. She grins as she kneels between my thighs, still fully clothed. The wash bucket sits beside her; I watch, like a tortured man might, as her little hand squeezes the washcloth in the water.

She’s still smiling wide as she starts to bathe me. She leans close, fingers following the contours of my torso as if to relearn every ridge, every soft place.

I cannot take my eyes off her. That expression she wears.

It is pure yearning.

Gods, she is so soft and warm between my thighs... but she forces herself to remain on-task, rubbing the washcloth over me. My cock is bulging against my laces; her little hand comes to pluck them, slowly, methodically, as though it were simply part of her bathing duties. Both of us stare mindlessly as she frees me, and my erection lies heavily against my stomach, rosy and leaking. I keep my hands firmly planted in the mattress behind me so I might heed her wishes.

She wraps the washcloth around my erection, and I bite my lip, breathing deep and slow. But she is cursory, moving over me to give me the full bath, even coming down to my feet. It would be easier if we spoke, if we made this less of a heady ritual, if she'd stop *staring* at every part of me like that – how in Odin's name does she expect me to keep my hands off her?

She rises again, eyes traveling up my nakedness. I grip her by the arm before I can stop myself, and we both lean in at the same time.

“Don't,” she breathes against my lips. “Please – don't.”

“Tamsin,” I murmur. “I know you've been starved for this. You don't have to deny yourself.”

She hesitates, trembling as she holds onto me. She can't meet my eye. Then she leans in so she can whisper in my ear, as though she cannot tell it to my face:

“I... I've craved this so much. You have no idea.” Goosebumps prickle my body as her breath ghosts over me. “I've craved your knot for seven days and seven nights. There was no relief, however much I might've tried to satiate myself. So if you touch me like that, if you... if you kiss me like that... I won't be able to let you go until the whole night is past.”

Grappling for sanity, I manage to croak out: “You realise those words make it ten times more difficult to resist you?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to torment you,” she says, and I can only laugh. “Will you just lay with me until he arrives?”

With great difficulty, I let her climb up into the nest with me, laying with her in the furs. She drapes the covers over us, and Loki, that smile she wears as she does it – I swear she will be the death of me. She tucks herself around me, holding my head against her velvet-clad bosom, and I growl for her so we may both calm a little.

Ivar’s tagelharpa sings on, its elegant voice arching all around us. I can visualise him so clearly, fingers gliding over his strings, grinning as he makes us *wait* for him like this. I close my eyes, focus on the way Tamsin’s fingers comb through my hair, and soon the warmth of her nest pulls me away from anger, away from all frustration, until we are drifting together into dreams.

* * *

I’ve no idea what hour it is when he arrives. I blink awake to near-darkness, the hearth burning low.

Buckles clink and clatter. Ivar is walking around the hearth, a liquorice stick in his mouth, casually unbuckling his gear. As I watch, he tugs off his belt, his tunic. The richly woven fabric sweeps up his naked skin; reveals his waist, his lean abdomen, the tattooed line of his spine.

He is so nonchalant as he throws his gear aside. Plucks at the laces of his breeches one-handed, as though it were the easiest thing in the world to come here. To accept her invitation.

He sits entirely naked on the edge of the bed, rubs a washcloth over himself. Water trickles down the dips of his body, and I find myself staring at the play of firelight over his shifting musculature.

Gods, has it always been so easy for him? To move like that, to be so comfortable in his own skin? I remember... those first feasts in Dublin; the way I had stared and stared at him, this tattooed skáld walking among the revellers, always wearing that smug, self-assured smile. He'd let so many people touch his nakedness while I could not let anyone so much as look my way without needing my seax in my hand.

It's strange to think of that time. Back then, I wore the scars and bruises of a mercenary lad, worked to the bone, never touched by another man in that way. I sorely needed guidance, just like every young Varg; I needed to learn how to control my anger, my rut, the urges that came with maturity.

Ivar had his eye on me from the very first Dublin feast I attended. He took me on without giving me much choice in the matter. And the things he showed me... I did not know what pleasure was, then; so he laid those deft hands on me and taught me.

It is something we all go through. An elder Varg teaching us obeisance and control. And once it is done, we must fold the experience away, those years of intimacy, that necessary guidance. Boys grow into men and the sticky, gasping process of it is never mentioned again. But that deep awareness of one another, those memories of pain and bliss and firelight...

Are they returning to him now, as they are to me?

He straightens. Turns to glance at Tamsin and I. A faint territorial growl builds in my chest as he leans back into my mate's nest; so he stops, eyes glinting in the dark as he watches me. Tamsin's still curled into me, clutching the pillows, fast asleep.

“Didn’t think to find her still dressed,” Ivar murmurs with a grin.

“She wanted to wait for you,” I grumble at him.

That has him pause a moment, as though in disbelief. Then he lays a hand on the mattress, shuttered eyes still strung to mine. Seeking my permission to come closer.

Loki, why does he not speak any more than that? My heart pounds, my hands are sweaty, nothing is clear. And yet he sits there, wearing nothing at all save for that knowing in his eye, as though he is fully confident in his role tonight. To steer us both, as he always does with his partners under the moon.

Jaw clenched, I tilt my head aside in an invitation. He is here for her, above all; perhaps there is no confusion within him, no strange bubbling of the past.

He reaches down, runs his fingers down Tamsin’s cheek. Coaxes her onto her back, so that she stirs and mumbles. He gazes down at her, as though drinking in the sight of her asleep and vulnerable between us. Then he shifts, leaning closer to her like a wolf over his prey; his body is stretched out beside her, his half-hard cock against his thigh.

“Maybe you should wake her,” he tells me. “Properly.”

Gods, does he even realise the wanton display he’s making of himself? Between his languid nudity and Tamsin’s innocent, oblivious figure, it is hard to know where to look.

We may have agreed to share her, but... we never once spoke of sharing one another. If it is even on the table.

I move down her body, pressing kisses along black velvet, trying to ignore him. She stirs, opening her thighs for me sleepily – I draw back her skirts, kissing my way down tender skin.

“Thrain,” she sighs. “Not without Ivar...”

He smiles down at her, so obviously flattered.

“I’m here, lamb,” he says. She blinks up at him in surprise, and he kisses her, plunders deep enough to make her moan.

With a flicker of annoyance, I nose into her curls, lick her firmly so that she moans louder still.

“Wait... wait... oh, *Christ*,” she whimpers, squirming in embarrassment to wake so snugly ensconced between us. She wraps her arms around Ivar’s shoulders, trembling as I bury my tongue in her juice-slick folds.

“Ivar,” she sighs. “You came...”

“Of course. You didn’t have to wait for me.”

“I wanted to.”

He clicks his tongue at that. I know he’s deeply pleased, though he will never admit it. He sinks into her mouth again, as I do between her thighs, and for a moment there is nothing but her delighted noises, her body arching between us as she pulls her pack to her.

He tugs off her layers of clothing, sheer linen whispering across naked skin. Once her breasts are bare, he licks up to her nipples, sucks on them hungrily. She gasps and grinds against my mouth, close to climax already.

It crashes over her, and we bear her through every tremor. Ivar wraps a hand around his erection, stroking in long languid movements while she trembles through it.

The sight thuds into me. He has no sense of modesty whatsoever, does he – gliding those tattooed knuckles over himself, right there next to me –

“Please,” Tamsin begs, reaching clumsily for both of us, as though she doesn’t know who to choose first. “Please...”

“Take what you want, lamb,” Ivar murmurs roughly.

She kisses him long and deep. Then in a blur of grasping hands, she takes

hold of me, rolls me onto my back. She covers me with kisses, working her way down till she takes my cock into her mouth. And even as I lie there in a stupor, one hand tangling in her hair to guide her – I know he is there beside me, watching in the dark, so close this time that I can barely breathe.

His eyes climb up my body. He is lingering; looking at me with a focused interest he has not shown me in years.

Loki, what am I meant to do with that – his black eyes meet mine, and I glare at him, a huffed whine in my throat.

What is it that you want from me? The question burns on my tongue.

He seems to be wondering the same thing.

Gods, but we never shared this intimacy without it being a lesson he pounded into my bones – is that where this is headed? That kind of rough discipline, a carefully orchestrated scene he will claim mastery over? Back then he spent many long hours breaking down the walls I had erected, working me into obeisance. In the end it was always when I was finally in that deep place of submission, of acceptance, that dawn came to interrupt us. And we'd stop, and I would have to grapple with normality again – a return to daylight, to dignity, where a man does not beg for release nor nuzzle into the steady hands of his master.

There came a point where all he had to do was place a hand on the back of my neck, and I'd drop into that deep quiet place. I remember, how he would murmur his flatteries in my ear, those promises of his, that there would be no end to these moonlit delights as long as I did as he asked, as long as I could be good...

But then it stopped. It had to stop, he said. *You have perfect self-control, Thrain*, he told me. *You don't need me any more*. It had hurt, far more than I will ever admit, to see how easily he could move on and turn to others.

Who did he think he was, to dictate what I needed?

His hand is drifting up my body now, almost experimentally. Then it comes to rest over the hollow of my throat. I let out a breath as he invites himself right into my space, leaning over me.

I close my eyes. Bask in his liquorice scent. Gods, the promise of guidance he brings, the strange calm that blooms... how is it that these things can come back so easily?

His lips are slick with Tamsin's saliva. He waits on the brink, both of us feeling the pattern of the other's breath. *What are you doing*, I want to growl at him, I want to push him away, shout at him – *you are the one who taught me to fold away my desires, to be grateful and not ask for more, to not look at you like this any more* –

He kisses me. I can only moan, grasp onto him, open my mouth for him as he freely gives what he forbade me long ago. Tamsin throats more of my cock and I'm close, so close, with his tongue in my mouth, the aching familiarity of him –

I try to hold back, I *need* to hold back – Ivar and I, we've built a solid brotherhood since then, one that is free of any fraught sexual dynamic, we should not return to this – but I can't, Freya, I *can't*. I burst into Tamsin's mouth, and she swallows the stream that covers her tongue, pumping me slowly with her hand as though to squeeze out every last drop. Ivar draws back from me like an artist observing his handiwork. He's *smiling*, smug as ever as he watches me come down.

Oh, I see what this is. I know what he's doing. This is about control – it is always control, with him. All day he's been frustrated that he cannot have his way with Tamsin; that he cannot have his way with me. This is simply his way of reclaiming control over us both.

When he leans in again, I bite down hard on his lower lip. He only grins to find me so combative. It isn't really a kiss we share; more like growling into one another's mouths.

Tamsin fidgets. She's watching us, her hand still looped around my messy cock, wearing a glazed expression of helpless arousal.

Have you lain with a man, yourself? She asked me that once, all innocent curiosity. If only she knew.

"Come," Ivar says, lifting a hand to her, like a lord inviting his lady for a dance. "Let's put you where he wants you."

She's wearing a giddy smile as she lays her hand upon his. And he has her straddle me, sit her weight upon my softening cock. I dig my claws into her thighs, holding her there with a grunt of satisfaction.

Ivar kneels behind her, the mattress sinking under his weight. He cups her breasts, teases her taut nipples. She grinds against me while he pleasures her, all but massaging my cock so that it stiffens again, making me sink back into the cushions.

"You've been so good, lamb," he purrs in her ear. "Waiting for me even when you're as wet as this." Fingers pinching and rolling her nipples, he adds, "I think good girls should get what they want. What do you say to that?"

She's gone limp against him now. His hand wanders down between her thighs, and a thrill bristles through me as his fingers cup the head of my cock.

"Lift yourself up for me, lamb," he whispers.

She closes her eyes as she obeys him. I can only stare, mindless now as he notches my cock against her entrance.

"Lower yourself onto him for me," he murmurs. "I want to feel how deep he goes inside you."

Tamsin is only too eager to obey.

Her silken walls part around my cock. I throw back my head, groaning as she swallows me down at *last*. Ivar's fingers are parted around our joining, feeling the glide of my girth within her.

"That's my good girl," he murmurs in her ear.

My growl sputters without me controlling it. I need to rut her, to pull her onto my knot, to claim her in front of him. Prove to him that I'm not that damned pup any more, that he can't just do as he pleases with the both of us. He watches me over her shoulder even as she rocks her hips against me, his black gaze a blatant provocation.

We converge around her; his fingers dance over her sensitive spots while I pummel her, and she is lost between our fervent persistence. She comes with a voiceless scream, Ivar and I both staring at that face in an amorous daze.

"Please," she begs. Ivar lets her go and she collapses over me, holding herself up on her hands. "Please... I need your knot."

"And you'll have it," I growl as I ruck up into her clenching, pulsing insides.

"But I... I want him, too... Ivar," she pants. "I want you both... is that all right?"

Ivar looms over her, smug satisfaction on his face again. He lays a possessive hand along her back, perfectly positioned behind her for what she's suggesting – but she can't mean *that*, she's never experienced it, nor even seen it as far as I know.

"You'll take us both one day, lamb," he purrs. "But we'll have to prepare you for it properly, first."

She makes a small noise of confusion. That's not what she meant, I know

it. I slick back her hair, kiss her forehead. “You want him first?” I whisper. “So you can take my knot after?”

She hums, nodding. I glance over her shoulder at him, trying to quell the burst of indignation that I might have to leave him room to take over.

Slowly, carefully, I slide out of her sex. She grips me hard, not wanting to let go, and I can only bite my lip as I force myself to do it.

He hardly waits to take my place.

She gasps as he squeezes past my cock, without a single ounce of respect, and glides inside her. He curses in Norse as he seats himself to the hilt. For a moment he savours it, then picks up steadily to a merciless pace. She moans into my neck as he pounds into her, his claws digging into her hips, her body shaking with each slap of impact.

“Jesus – *Christ*,” she gasps, and she’s invoking him over and over as Ivar guides them both towards the peak.

I make a fist in my wife’s hair, bare her neck and bite down on my claiming mark with blunt teeth – I need her to know she’s mine, *mine*, even as Ivar pounds his pent-up need into her. She’s surrounded by our growling, our clinging hands, two Vyrger clashing to claim their Vanirdottir.

I watch him as he tilts his head back, mouth dropping open. His cool façade breaks as the force of his own climax overtakes him.

“*Odin*,” he breathes. That is all he says – finally, she has defeated that tongue of his.

He bends over her back as his climax burns out, one hand disappearing to knead his knot. I reach up, take him by the jaw, my thumb skidding over his lip and feeling the sharp edges of his teeth.

Beautiful, arrogant ass.

“You’re done,” I growl at him.

“Give me... just a moment,” he pants.

“No.”

Tamsin moves, prompted by our aggression. In the shift of bodies, my cock slides against Ivar’s as he exits her; his seed drips down us both, leaking from her twitching entrance. I push up against that puffy opening, slide inside, finding her stuffed with his cum and pulsing from deep pleasure.

My knot is aching already. She moans as I give her a few slick thrusts; I don’t make her wait any longer for it.

She welcomes the knot, her muscles stretching around me before snapping tight around the base. *Gods...* this... I needed this just as much as she did. Her breaths are squeaky and spent; her eyes are squeezed shut, her face wet with tears. I pull her down so that we may lay on our sides, Ivar taking his place behind her as I rut my knot inside her.

He watches over her shoulder, taking in the sweaty rutting of our hips, where his scent-mark is mingling with mine. When I reach the peak at last, it’s his hand I feel stroking up my pectorals, his fingers closing around my throat in a familiar gesture. He squeezes, adds depths to the blackness of climax. And he steals what little breath I have, until the bliss makes me skirt the edge of a complete black out.

* * *

Tamsin is splayed over me afterwards, entirely boneless. I drift for a while too, before blinking to awareness again as the mattress shifts. I glance around – that idiot had better not have left in the night to pursue his brooding.

But he’s still here, on my other side, sitting up against the headrest. His knee is drawn up, and he’s chewing on a liquorice stick as he stares into the

dim hearthlight.

The first thing that springs to my mouth is, *what in Hel's name was that?*

I bite back the words, and try to open more civilly.

“It didn’t have to be like that,” I grumble at him.

He shifts. “Hm?”

“It didn’t have to be a whole performance. A three-part battle plan to see me vanquished.”

He gives a huff of laughter. “I was only providing what she asked for.”

I shake my head. “You could’ve also just…”

“Just what?”

“Just… been with us.”

I can almost hear him smirking at that.

“I was not aware I was somehow magically elsewhere than with you.”

“Oh, for the love of Freya.” I shift towards him to better see him. “It’s been a *good day*. The men are in good spirits, the Britons are happy, there’s even good ale left over. And Tamsin missed you. You could let yourself enjoy it instead of brooding and making everything – complicated.”

He scoffs. Then he twirls the liquorice stick in the darkness, ponderous as ever.

“I suppose I’m waiting for the tide to turn,” he mutters. “We’ve been lucky. Far too lucky if you ask me.”

“You just don’t like it when things are straightforward,” I grunt as I lay back in the pillows. “Maybe this – this victory – it really will be as straightforward as we hope. Gofraid will pack up and leave, the Britons will shower us with rewards for all our help… and we can finally go home.”

“Maybe,” he says, but I know it is just to indulge me. Though I may say the words, there has been nothing straightforward about this moon; nor this

strange night; nor the way he touched me. I can still feel the grip of his teeth in my lip.

But he does not seem about to mention it. So I slump there, a hand vaguely resting against his thigh, as though to make sure he does not leave. And even as I drift away, still I know he isn't asleep; he sits, and ponders, and keeps his thoughts to himself.

Chapter 22



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of July

I can't quite get it out of my head. The sight of them both. How they touched each other like they had done it for years.

Thrain is a snoring lump buried in pillows the next morning. Ivar is sitting beside him, reclining against the headrest. Their faces may be turned away from one another, but they are close enough to lean against one another in their sleep.

I lay there in my nest, blinking at them a while.

I always thought that what Viking men did together was born of unfeeling necessity. That any intimacy was deemed casual, with no romantic implications. Most of the Dubliners act that way, anyway, under the moon.

But last night... last night was not *casual* for those two, was it?

They've always been so close. I thought it was just brotherly affection. But maybe I've just been naïve about it – blind to what has been staring me

in the face all this while.

I swallow past my dry throat.

Is it even allowed to ask about these things? How would I even word it.

Have you always been... more... than friends?

No – it's not my business. Is it? Does sharing a bed with both men give me the right to poke around their past?

Christ. It's barely morning, too early to try and guess at what the custom might be here, if there even is one. I push myself up with difficulty, find my shift in the mess of furs, tug it over my head. When I turn, they've both moved, roused by my wriggling around; Thrain has turned to face Ivar, whose arm has fallen around his shoulders quite naturally.

Some strange feeling thuds in me. All moon I craved them; and upon their return, I pulled them in gleefully, made demands of them. But in satisfying myself, I never stopped to wonder if I might not be complicating what brotherhood exists between them.

Perhaps I should leave them to deal with this aftermath together.

I try to disentangle myself, but the pull and tug of covers rouses Ivar. His tattooed hand reaches out sleepily, grabs my arm, and pulls me right across Thrain's body. I let out a yelp of surprise, falling across him so that he wakes with an *oof*.

"Where do you think you're going," Ivar drawls as I push myself up. They're both all warm and foggy with sleep – and Ivar wears a wide grin now that I'm half in his lap. "And what's this? *Clothes?*"

Thrain grumbles, "By Odin's beard, a man cannot have a single morning's sleep." But for all his apparent grumpiness, still his arm snakes around my waist. I'm laughing as they grab hold of different parts of me and press kisses where they can.

“We should really get up,” I protest.

“In a moment,” Ivar insists. “It’s barely dawn as it is.”

The spell of the nest swallows us up again as we linger together. I keep all my questions to myself, and as they bestow their lazy attentions upon me, they royally ignore one another; you would not think anything significant had happened between them at all.

* * *

Outside, the Dubliners are just rousing themselves from their long night. We find Olaf asleep by the dying firepit at the junction of our little neighbourhood.

The morning sunlight gleams on Olaf’s chainmail and his cropped white-blond hair. He’s lying against a crate, thick arms crossed over his chest, mouth open as he snores. Around him, men are crouching and cackling to themselves as they balance things on him – he has a pile of round cheeses like a little tower on his forehead, and some stone kerns on his knees and elbows.

I catch my burst of laughter with my hand. Ivar snorts at the sight, similarly trying not to wake him – but when Thrain comes out, his bark of surprised laughter does it.

Olaf startles awake and sets off an avalanche of cheese and pebbles, to the roaring laughter of his fellows.

“Bunch of cocks,” he curses at them good-naturedly.

“You had to wake him,” Ivar moans, slapping Thrain’s arm.

“He shouldn’t sleep out here,” Thrain counters. Then striding to Olaf, he squeezes the man’s shoulder. “Today marks a whole month since we first

arrived; have you even slept in a proper bed in all that time?”

Olaf gives a sort of sleepy *harrumph*, twisting around to look at us. “You know I prefer sleeping under the stars,” he says.

It is a tactical deflection. All the houses around us are occupied, bursting with paraphernalia and loot. Clearly he’s opted to sleep out here where it doesn’t smell like a sweaty packhouse.

When he sees me, gives a little bow. “Oh – good morning, Princess Tamsin.”

“Um – good morning.”

My cheeks are burning. All these formalities when I wear his brothers’ blatant scent-marks – and I don’t even want to think of how our scents are filling our own packhouse.

“You must be exhausted,” I stammer. “If you want, I can clean up a little –”

He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t want to intrude on your nest, princess.”

“You’re not intruding. You’re welcome in my nest, Olaf. I’m sorry it’s just not very...” *Fresh* is what I want to say. Christ, who’s going to do the laundry if I’m ever to invite the three of them in there? It’s a silly thought, but – do men even pay attention to things like that during weeks of siege warfare? I don’t even know how to *do* laundry – do they?

He lowers his chin. “Thank you, princess,” he rumbles. “But I’ve slept enough.”

With a groan of effort he pushes himself to his feet. We all follow him to the long breakfast table, the Dubliners greeting us jovially. Norse jibes fly across the table, some clearly teasing us for last night, so I sit between Ivar and Thrain and try to make myself scarce.

Thrain goes quiet at one point. I follow his gaze and find Rhun not too far

away, shadowed by Nýr as ever. He's cutting bread, resolutely not looking our way.

"How was this moon for him?" Thrain asks me. "I'm glad to see him participating in the camp organisation. I wondered how he'd fare since we let him out."

I let my eyes rest on my twin. I thought I could be there for him this moon, but he still won't talk to me. He's made the effort to come out, to look at this war in the face, but he still sees only enemies around him.

I swallow back my frustration, try to find a way to word it. "This moon has been... complicated for him," I admit. "Once he heard that you were out there fighting alongside Eormen, he was restless about staying here. He's been trying to build up the strength he lost, doing drills and such with Nýr. But honestly," I add with a sigh. "I don't really know what he hopes to achieve. He doesn't trust any of you any more."

Olaf wears a knowing expression as he observes Rhun. "I understand completely," he says. "He sees what we're doing, and he appreciates the significance of it. But he has not forgiven us for that first day."

"Yes," I agree quietly. "I don't know if he can."

Olaf nods solemnly at that. I look down at my loaf of bread, swallowing hard.

"I have to admit," I manage, "Rhun wasn't the only one who was restless. It was very hard to stay here while you were out there fighting for us."

Olaf looks at me then, his expression gentle. "You played a vital role in holding our camp, princess. Don't underestimate your own importance."

I smile at him, but we both know he's saying pleasantries. "Do you really believe it will be enough? What we've done thus far?" I ask him. "Do you think Gofraid will leave?"

That has him grow silent and thoughtful. He stares down the table a moment and then heaves a sigh.

“I will be frank with you,” he says quietly. “I don’t know if it will be enough. I have weakened and intimidated him; I have done all I can without directly confronting him. I’m counting on him to be reasonable... but you’ve seen my father. He is not exactly a paragon of reason.”

I let out a laugh at that, and Olaf smiles grimly with me. But there is no amusement in his face; only melancholy.

“I don’t want it to come to swords, and open betrayal,” he admits. “I never wanted to cross my father in that way. So I am hoping, with all the optimism I can muster, that this will be enough.”

It’s the first time we’ve really talked so honestly about the heaviness of his duty; I see then, the enormity of his burden. The reason he has been so aloof, so careful and driven. He is straining so much to preserve his father, and end this war with tactics rather than open revolt.

I lay a hand on his gauntleted arm. I wish there was something I could do to ease his burden. But for now we can do nothing but wait; wait to see what Gofraid will decide to do.

Halfway through breakfast, news comes. Mikjel, one of the perimetre watchers, returns with his crew and strides straight for his three pack leaders.

“Jarls,” he pants.

All three of them raise their heads to him. A hush ripples through the table. Rhun and I look up too, swept up in everyone’s anxious anticipation.

“Gofraid wants an audience,” Mikjel says. “Just the three of you, my Jarls, and the hostages. Princess Tamsin and Prince Rhun.”

Olaf asks, “Is he calling for a general council with his own men?”

“No. It’s a private audience, I believe.”

Olaf lifts his chin, jaw clenched. I glance at him, trying to decipher if this is a good or bad sign. But he and his brothers wear the same hard expression now, as though bracing grimly for any eventuality.

“Then let us prepare to meet with him,” Olaf rumbles.

* * *

Rhun and I are riding side by side for the first time in ages. It gives a strange impression of normalcy. The clink of tack, his posture straight and effortless, as though he were not carved lean from his ordeal; as though there were no deep grooves around his wrists.

In truth, there is nothing normal about this midday ride.

Olaf is leading us through the enormous Viking camp, Thrain and Ivar bringing up the rear. We pass banners declaring different warbands; snarling dragons, antlered monsters, great pagan symbols that loom over us in stark black and red lines. Rhun holds his head up, ignoring the greetings and jeers that are hurled our way.

Eventually we come in sight of the King’s Garden.

And a new abomination awaits us.

At first I take them to be strange-looking trees. Then I realise they are bodies, planted on high poles in the King’s Garden, in plain view of the fort. They’ve been arranged almost like crucifixes; the dead still wear their Cavaliers’ tabards, torn and flapping.

I moan in horror, shrinking before the sight.

Gofraid... Gofraid ordered that. He just planted them out there to be feasted on by the crows.

“Oh, he’s angry,” Ivar mutters as we all look in their direction.

“Yes,” Olaf growls. “He knows he’s weakened. But he does not want the Briton King to know it. He wants everyone in that fort to believe he is still as fearsome as when he first arrived.”

“A classic move on his part,” Ivar drawls as though unimpressed.

Thrain rides closer to me, his boot clinking against my stirrup. “Don’t look at them, cariad,” he says. But neither Rhun nor I can rip our eyes away.

It’s a display. Gofraid put our dead on display.

We come to the great royal tent he had erected in the central square. White and green banners frame the open entrance, sporting that humungous hammer. We dismount, and the waiting guards escort us inside.

A wide space greets us, furnished with tables and woven mats, military paraphernalia scattered everywhere. Around the room, Southern Isle Jarls loiter, all of them seated pell-mell on benches and furs.

They all shut up and stare at us as we come in. I step closer to Thrain.

This isn’t good. This can’t be good.

“My King! Your sons approach,” calls one of the guards.

Gofraid straightens, but does not turn around. The sheer size of him has my mouth go dry. Sunlight gleams on his bushy white mane, his gold trappings, the weight of the decorated weapons at his belt.

“Give us the room,” he growls, his hands still splayed on his table.

Ivar’s right. He sounds furious.

Olaf stands protectively before our little group as the Jarls all file out of the tent. The guards unfurl the leather flap of the tent entrance, shutting out the slanting sunlight.

We’re alone with the Viking King now.

Olaf turns, nods at me encouragingly. Then he looks to his brothers, and all kindness erodes to make way for the hard, single-minded Jarl.

Let me do the talking, his expression says.

He leads us across the tent until we're close enough for an audience.

"Father," Olaf says levelly as he brings us to a stop. "You summoned us?"

"I did indeed," Gofraid grits out. He turns around slowly to appraise us, his eyes coming to rest on Olaf. "I thought it might interest you to know, my son, that I sent out my scouts this morning. They are headed north to ascertain what kind of nonsense has occurred up there."

Olaf shifts, joining his hands behind his back. Gofraid stares him down in deathly silence. I can almost hear Ivar and Thrain's gear creaking as they lean towards their elder brother, ready to come to his aid – but Olaf's stance is strong and clear. *Let me handle this.*

Gofraid takes a heavy step forward, beard bristling.

"The issue is, I already know what I'm going to hear when they return," he growls. "They're going to ride back here, and speak one name to me. *Uradech.*"

Olaf turns his head, showing his father his neck.

"It is probable," he says, his tone low and repentant. "I'm sorry, Father. I am the one who let Uradech live, and now we must face the consequences. We made irrational, moon-addled decisions up in Uradech's camp; I have already told you we regret making those choices –"

Gofraid slams a palm against his table. "And what do you want me to do with that *regret* of yours? Butter my fucking toast with it? Causantin would've given me *ten thousand spears*. And now all he's given me is a headache –"

"I know."

"You know. You *know.*" Gofraid steps closer still to Olaf, and Ivar

twitches forward – but Olaf gestures with two fingers against his lower back. *Stop*, that gesture says. “I swear to you, Olaf,” Gofraid growls. “If you were not my eldest son – if a mere Jarl of mine had done what you have done – there would be severe retribution.”

He leaves a pause then, as though to let us imagine what *retribution* he means.

Judging by the bodies on pikes outside, I don’t even want to think about it.

“However,” Gofraid goes on, and to my horror, those beady eyes swivel to rest on me. “Try as you might to take it all upon yourself, my son, I also know that you did not make those decisions alone. You have always been loyal to a fault – all three of you have – until a certain Vanirdottir graced our presence.”

Olaf bristles, as though protesting that his father might switch targets. I try to hold the Viking King’s gaze, heavy as it is.

“Therefore. Here is what I propose,” Gofraid says. “Since it is largely our *princess* who put us in this ballsack of a situation. Then let it be the princess who helps us to deal with it.”

“How?” Olaf asks, his tone still carefully neutral.

Gofraid thankfully turns away from us, walking around his table so that he may stand on the other side of it from us. He lets out a long sigh, ringed fingers splayed on his maps.

“What I need right now is time,” he says. “I have this wretched bog fever running rampant through the camp, and many wounded men. I need time for them to heal and gather their strength. Thanks to the raids, we have plenty of food and livestock to see us comfortably through the next few months. So what I need now is the assurance that the Britons will let us be.”

Olaf raises his eyebrows. “And how do you propose to obtain that assurance?”

Gofraid throws a hand out to gesture at Rhun and I. “I have not yet made use of my Briton hostages, have I? We have many dead Britons still piled around the camp; so this is what we’re going to do. Tamsin and her brother will take them to their sacred burial grounds out east, as a ceremonial gesture. That way, the Britons may take a few weeks to honour their dead, and we can heal our wounded.”

“You want to ask the Britons for a temporary truce,” Olaf resumes.

Gofraid lets out a breath that is almost a growl, as though it pains him to even hear the word *truce*. But he nods. So Olaf asks him how he envisages this plan; and clearly, from Olaf’s calm tone, he’s glad that this summons did not lead to any more dire point than this. But as they go on talking about strategy, Gofraid’s words resound in my mind.

Tamsin and her brother will take the dead to their sacred burial grounds.

He says it just like that, as though he expects us to go along with it? As though it were not horribly painful for us to see our own dead – as though we did not just view the cruciform figures hanging beyond, in the King’s Garden? *God*, the absurdity of calm discussion while the dead hang out there –

I see myself hurtling at Gofraid, bunching his tunic in my fists, yelling in his face – *take them down, you filth, you monster, take them DOWN* –

“...I will organise an escort for her, of course,” Gofraid is saying.

“Beg pardon, Father,” Olaf says sharply. “But if Tamsin is to go out beyond the camp perimetre, we will escort her ourselves.”

“Certainly not all three of you,” Gofraid growls. “Do you really think I would risk sending all three of my sons out there into the wilderness? After

the bloody barrage we faced this moon? Thrain will go, and I will handpick a worthy escort to accompany him. And you will *not* fight me on this, Olaf.”

Olaf’s jaw clenches, his neutral façade cracking.

“In that case, I want to meet the men you choose,” he says. “We may speak of it again once the dead have been gathered, and everything made ready.”

Gofraid scoffs. “We may speak of it again, but my stance won’t change, Olaf.”

Olaf steps back then. A silence settles, wherein both Gofraid and his sons observe one another, giving each other room to speak. Thrain’s arms are crossed; Ivar has a hand on his sword hilt, looking serious and involved. Both are clearly still respecting Olaf’s decision to lead.

“Is that all, then?” Olaf asks at length.

“It is,” Gofraid says.

Olaf bows low at the waist.

“Thank you for your clemency, Father,” he says, clearly still working hard to keep things peaceful. “We will of course help to prepare the dead, however you see fit to gather them.”

“I’ll have them brought here, to the main square. If you have any carts and horses to spare, I could use some more.”

“We’ll bring the necessities.”

The discussion unwinds to base pragmatics. Distantly I know this is a *good* outcome – if the mighty King Gofraid wants to ask for a parley, a truce, it means he knows his own weakness. He is trying to save his position in any way he can.

But my heart is racing as the meeting comes to a close, and neither Rhun nor I have even said anything at all. My brother is gazing at me from behind

my men, and that fire in his eye burns me.

He's been shut away, and so have I, in a way – shut away behind fear, behind this all-consuming impression that there is nothing I can do, that all of this is far too big for me to even attempt to wrangle with it myself.

Are you just going to let your men speak for you? That is what his eyes say.

“We’ll take our leave, then,” Olaf says with another low bow.

“Sire,” I blurt out. “Can I ask something?”

Olaf glances at me in surprise, as do the others.

“Ask away, princess,” Gofraid invites me, throwing an open hand my way.

“When you say you will gather the *piles of dead* you are burdened with,” I grit out. “Does that include those men on pikes?”

Gofraid lifts a bushy eyebrow. “Obviously, it does not.”

I glare at him, breathing hard. “If you want me to go out there and parley for you, then you’ll take down those men.”

“Tamsin,” Olaf says in an urgent undertone. We’re done here, we can go, I shouldn’t rouse Gofraid’s wrath – but now that I’ve let out my piece, I cannot stand down.

I’m tired of staying back, saying nothing, when those are *our* men out there.

“Princess,” Gofraid says with a scoff, as though I were a child making a ludicrous request. “I’m sorry. I know the sight must wound you. But I will not.”

He’s made his decision; there will be no bargaining. That much is clear.

Rhun’s eyes are so sharp and painful as they bore into mine. *Well?* I hear his intent as though he’d spoken it: *are you going to fight him?*

All moon he's looked at me with that horrible question in his eye. That judgment. That distance he's chosen to keep.

Are you still my sister?

Heart thrumming, I stare back at him.

I am. I'm with you, Rhun.

I turn back to Gofraid, hardly feeling my body as I stare right into the Viking King's beady eyes.

"Did you never stop to think that there is a reason your men are succumbing to the bog fever in such great numbers?" I ask him. "That there is a reason everything has unraveled under your feet?"

Olaf and his brothers shift around me. They're gazing at me, waiting to see where this is going – waiting to stop me.

"Perhaps it is because your gods do not look kindly on your enterprise," I tell Gofraid. "You must know that Freya sees you. Freya sees everything you do to her daughters, everything you do to our families. And everything you intend to do just as well."

Freya, Clota; a lady of many names, Thrain once said.

Somehow I know what to do to intimidate him, as though Clota had whispered it in my ear. Now that I've invoked her, here in the sanctuary she built, it's as though she had slipped into step beside me.

My hand moves – Ivar's seax hilt is right there next to me. I slide out the blade.

"Don't you have a story where we all turn to trees?" I ask Gofraid. "You want us so badly that you'll burn the grove even as you walk through it. You hope for ripe fruit but you'll taste nothing but ash."

Gofraid is silent, his chin tucked in, looking solemn and a little wary as I lift one open hand and the seax together. Biting my lip, I slash a shallow line

in my palm with a gasp of pain, let the blood spurt and drip to the floor. Then I crouch down, press my bloody hand to the beaten earth floor and close my eyes, calling Clota forward so she might help me as she always has.

“Revered ancestor,” I hiss. “Let this man rot where he stands, like the bodies he refuses to bury.”

It’s as though I were moving through a dream; I feel like if I looked up, Clota would be crouching with me in the Viking King’s tent, her body a blur of skin and shadow, her smile sharp and crooked, antlers rising from her wild black mane.

I’m faint as I straighten again. My hand shakes as Ivar takes the seax back. Rhun stabilises me while I turn around, and there is such vindication in his face as he falls into step beside me. No one speaks; a superstitious silence hangs in the air as I start walking towards the tent exit.

“Wait,” comes Gofraid’s voice. “Wait, princess.”

We stop and turn. Gofraid’s worrying his temple with two fingers, frowning at me. If I didn’t know better, I would say he looked a little afraid.

“Fine,” Gofraid says, slapping his palm against the table. “I will take those damned men down. But let me be very clear. In the coming days, you will do exactly as I command you to do. You may have been labouring under the illusion that you may take what liberties you like, out there in the Dubliners’ camp. But let me remind you now, that while you are here, you are ultimately under *my* command, princess. Never forget that.”

I hold his gaze, heart thudding. It’s the first victory I’ve ever won against that man; I can’t push my luck. So I lower my eyes, and bow my head.

“I won’t, sire.”

Chapter 23



IVAR

Waning Moon of July

It's grim work, preparing the dead for travel. There are the few dozen that Father took down from the pikes, and the rest that were piled around camp, all of them carted to Dumbartonshire's main square.

Still, my men and I take to the work without complaint. Many of the Dubliners are quietly cheerful, viewing this as the last dreary stretch of work before this war comes to an end. Even Olaf is tirelessly driven – he will not allow Father to push him aside from this mission. So he involves himself as much as he can in the work, though it mostly involves wrapping bodies in hemp and lining the stacks with pine branches to ward off vermin. He sends a runner to notify Eormen of our plans; she sends back her assurances that we will be well met at the burial grounds. She calls the place by its name; *Bryn Cysegredig*.

Hallowed Hill.

Tamsin and Rhun are solemn, as expected. We have them work with the horses, training the more skittish ones to pull our carts. They haven't worked closely together since arriving here; it's good to see them on speaking terms again. And there is something to be said for the sight of them both, two Britons moving effortlessly around the beasts they have such mastery over.

Father wants us to be ready by the new moon. The days pass slowly with only these morbid tasks to accomplish. But the evenings at least are lively enough. Our Dubliners play music and games around the firepits, already speaking of their wives back home, and what they plan to do once they return. As though Father's imminent plea for a truce were the first step of surrender.

I cannot bring myself to play. I worry, and worry, that we are being too hopeful. Tamsin drifts between Thrain and I, and I know she is just as preoccupied as I am; she's thinking ahead of the mission that yawns before us all. Neither of us are comfortable with the fact that it is Father pulling the strings, this time.

She makes a quiet request one night, pulls me away from my somber contemplations. All pink and lovely, she invites Thrain and I to join her in her nest again. It's clear that she needs to quiet her mind, just as I do – so our nighttime ritual blooms.

Before long, Tamsin cannot fall asleep unless she is insensate with pleasure, perched on Thrain's knot while I hold her close. And while I will never turn away her invitations – we are all aware, I'm sure, of what prompts this closeness.

Fear. The helplessness that comes with being dragged along by fate.

But that fear is so blissfully blotted out when we are together. There are moments, in the quiet of early mornings, where it vanishes entirely. I'll wake

before them, take them both in. Thrain's relaxed face, the way he makes fists and grunts softly when he's dreaming. The rise and fall of Tamsin's chest, the way she lays her hand over mine to keep it lodged around the plumpness of her breast.

While I know we cannot be sure of the outcome that awaits us; while I know they have true belonging, and I only have permission; all of that ceases to matter in the stuffy silence of those mornings.

I lay there, ensconced between them, prolonging the mindlessness for as long as I can. Indulging in fantasies that one day, perhaps... when all of this is over... perhaps this simplicity may just be what awaits us.

Then daylight comes, spearing through the fantasies as we are pulled our separate ways again.

* * *

One such morning towards the end of the week, while Thrain and I are outside with the wash bucket splashing ourselves awake, Tamsin strides out with the hemp sheets all bundled up. She looks like a woman on a mission. Both of us straighten and stare at her quizzically. If she managed to pull those sheets out from under the clutter of furs, that means she broke her nest apart.

She stops as she comes between us, looking at me with a determined face.

"I know this is silly," she stammers. "But do you think there's any way I could wash these?"

I grin at her, straightening though I'm still half-naked and dripping with wash water.

"You want to wash your bedsheets? In the middle of a siege camp?"

“Well – can I?” Tamsin asks. “It’s just, Olaf has been working so hard, but I haven’t seen him get a proper night’s sleep beyond his fireside naps.”

Thrain and I share a glance. There’s no way we would be able to take the same liberties with her come nightfall if we had Olaf taking up all the space in the bed.

Tamsin’s cheeks flush; she’s noticed our glance, she knows what we’re thinking.

“I’d be fine to sleep without all of that,” she stammers, though we all know that’s not true. “It’s just, if Gofraid allows all three of you to come with me to Hallowed Hill, then you should all be properly rested for the expedition. It’s only two days away, now.”

Freya bless her. She doesn’t even know how sweet it is for her to be taking such cares with us.

She goes on: “If he doesn’t want to share the bed with me I’ll just – sleep by the hearth, I don’t mind.”

“Come here,” Thrain grunts, taking her by the shoulders to squeeze her against him. “We can just drag him to bed tonight. You didn’t have to break apart your whole nest.”

“Well, it was getting a little saturated,” she says with a wince.

Saturated. Ha! I take the sheets from her, press my face into them to get a good long sniff, which makes her give a wail of dismay.

“Oh, Ivar, don’t –”

“Mm,” I hum in approval. “Delicious.” She’s squirming with embarrassment as I hand them back. “I only smell the two of you. Infinitely preferable to this camp stink. Do you smell this, all around us right now? Firewood and dirty Viking men in close quarters. Those sheets are flowers and honey in comparison.”

Thrain shakes his head, not particularly pleased that I might be literally airing our dirty laundry like this. But surely his instincts are sparking just like mine are; our scents are tangled in those sheets, and on some primal level, it is preposterous that she might wash it all away.

He cannot quite look me in the face, still. That first night she pulled us both into her nest, he and I returned to the language of wolves – with her between us, it was inevitable that it might come to claws and teeth. He knew that, surely. He is the one who bared his neck to me, who insisted that I join them in the first place.

And so I came. What, exactly, did he think was going to happen?

Though we continue to share her bed, I have not touched him in that way since. I know we are a pair of grandiloquent bastards who find meaning in everything – but it seems obvious to me that she only wants to be comforted, and that our nights are simply play. Still, we have work to do, and I cannot have him shying away from me on account of some obscure misunderstanding – so I leave him be, and we both focus on her instead.

“I have to wash them,” Tamsin mutters, still fixed on her idea. “I can’t just... Olaf doesn’t deserve to sleep in month-old sheets...”

“She’s not going to budge, is she,” I drawl at Thrain, who grins.

“Probably not.”

“Where are you taking water from?” she ploughs on. “There’s a well behind the miller’s –”

“I’ll fetch the water,” Thrain tells her, kissing her head. “Go with Ivar to fetch the rest. There should be a trough somewhere you can use; and I think they were gathering wood ash near the central firepit.”

I catch his eye. He’s giving me time with her again; leaving me his space, still playing the courteous Varg who has his claws neatly retracted.

“Wood ash,” she echoes him. “Right. Why would we need...”

I laugh as I take her wad of hemp and chuck it over my shoulder. “Is this the first time Your Grace has washed her own laundry?”

“Shut up,” she grumbles as she falls into step beside me.

“I’ll show you how to do it. You must soak the wood-ash, first...”

* * *

It occupies her for the whole day. We all sleep in the furs around the central hearth that night, piled up like dogs; I wake with a crick in my back, but I don’t complain.

The steps of the process have long waiting periods, and she’s determined to follow everything to the letter. She prepares her ash-water as I instruct her, then takes out all the furs to pat dust from them, insists on sweeping the house with the rickety broom.

Dubliners pass by Angharad’s house and smile to see such a rare domestic sight as a woman taking care of her house in the middle of a siege camp. They come to her with their dirty tunics, laughing; Thrain and I bark them away.

Olaf is oblivious, of course. It becomes known among the Dubliners that she’s preparing the house for him, and they all snigger around him, throwing jokes that fly over his head, delighting in keeping the secret from him.

When Tamsin takes to scrubbing the large hemp sheets, it’s a sight to see; a Briton princess with her sleeves rolled up, hair tucked back in a headscarf, sitting on a stool and scrubbing her sheets in a water-filled trough. Both Thrain and I tease her about her dedication and arm strength – she glares at us, red-nosed and red-handed, refusing our help.

Olaf can't help but notice something's going on when he passes by the house at midday. He finds us helping her nail laundry lines between the thatched roofs. He stops and stares as we flap out the wet sheets with her and arrange them along the lines.

"What in Odin's name?" he mutters. "You're – doing *laundry*?"

Tamsin flushes red. I step forward, glancing at Tamsin in an offer to drag my elder brother away until she's ready to explain. But she slicks her messy curls from her face and bravely turns to Olaf.

"I thought you should sleep in a proper bed tonight," she says. "I know you've been working hard as always, but you need to sleep, too. So I thought... I thought I'd wash the sheets. For you. If you wanted to sleep in the house."

Olaf stares at her as though she were speaking the language of the Jötunn.

"Not with me," she amends quickly. "It's just that... well you need your strength, all three of you. So you should all sleep in a properly made bed."

She's rambling and she knows it; her cheeks are getting redder by the second. Olaf lifts a fist to his mouth, trying very hard not to smile and failing miserably.

"Princess," he intones, a half-hearted protest. "You didn't have to do that."

She can't look at him any more; she's wiping her hands nervously on the rag she wears as an apron tied around her dress. "If you'd rather not then I understand, that's absolutely fine. I just thought it'd be nice."

I hope Olaf can't see how wide I'm grinning. Odin, the face he's making – I haven't seen him so ruddy-cheeked in an age.

Olaf reaches for her hand, long ringed fingers sliding along hers. He lifts it up between them, and Tamsin's nervous rambling fizzles out. He gazes

down at her reddened knuckles, his expression soft. Beyond his attempted stoicism, he's deeply touched – any fool could see it.

“Let me bring dinner, then,” he says quietly. “I had the men place traps around the forest, I'll be checking them later. We could do with something that isn't dry.”

Tamsin smiles at last. “All right. Yes. That'd be good.”

He glances at Thrain and I, lifting his chin, as though denying the fact that he's going all soft as porridge in front of her.

“I can't believe you let her do all the work,” he says. “If I catch her scrubbing anything else I'll dunk both your heads in the wash water.”

“She wouldn't let us help her!” Thrain protests, and Olaf cocks an eyebrow at him.

“And you couldn't overcome a girl that's half your size?”

“You know we can't,” I tell him, laughing. “And you couldn't either if you were in our place.”

He turns back to her without trying to disguise his smile this time. Then he brings her hand to his lips and kisses her reddened knuckles. She bristles, gnawing absently on her lip as he maintains eye-contact.

“I'll see you all tonight, then,” Olaf rumbles as he lets her go.

She tucks her hand against her chest. “A-all right.”

* * *

Come sundown, the village of Dumbartonshire turns golden in the lights of the firepits. Everyone eats outside as always, loud masculine voices filling the air. Patrols roam the edges of the village; Olaf delegated his duties at last,

though he's constantly looking over his shoulder and responding to the questions of passing men.

It is a casual dinner; we're all still in our chainmail, as always, but the four of us and a few Dubliners sit around the pot of rabbit stew, telling stories to make Tamsin laugh.

When the time comes to retire, Thrain and I glance at one another. I know we both expect the same thing: that Olaf will back away now that he's faced with the issue of intimacy.

He hasn't shared a bed with a woman for a long time, even just to sleep. We all know the very idea of sharing that level of intimacy with Tamsin isn't something he's ready for yet – but he must feel pressured now to do so. One does not refuse a gift such as Tamsin gave him.

He stands in the doorway of Angharad's house, looking in. Tamsin built her nest anew; sheepskins circle the central hearth, pine branches are tied to the rafters to add sweetness to the air. The bed has been beautifully made, fresh hemp sheets tucked around the thick hay mattress, soft furs cluttered on top.

It looks like a nuptial chamber. A nuptial bed. The thought strikes me instantly – I know we must all be thinking it. Olaf stands there, breathing softly as he struggles with himself. So I barge past him, purely to break the impression of sanctity.

"I'm stuffed," I announce as I sit by the hearthstone. "I don't know what Orm put in that stew but I'd wager he thickened it with wood chippings. Let me get this fire started... since we let it run out *again*."

"We'll all be asleep by the time you manage it," Thrain tells me, wresting the steel piece from me. "I'll do it."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "Just call me incompetent, while you're at

it.”

We bicker pointlessly some more, purely to fill the house with noise and put Olaf at ease as best we can.

“Um...”

Olaf turns to admit Tamsin. She smiles up at him and eels past, dropping down beside me.

“Let me start the fire,” she says. “You all take your armour off.”

With the clatter of metal and the stacking of bracers and chainmail, the tension relaxes. I’m the first to lay back in the bed, divested of everything but my breeches.

“That’s it,” I groan as her nest swallows me whole. “I’m never getting up from this bed.”

“Good! You had better sleep now,” Tamsin calls to me from where she’s sitting by the hearth. “Gofraid wanted us to meet with him at the crack of dawn.”

I glance over at her as she and Thrain get comfortable by the hearth. She leans, blowing on the fire, painstakingly trying to save the tiny flicker of flames from fading out. It hits me then, that she is trying hard to construct this scene for us; turning the house into a sanctuary for her pack.

Precious little thing.

Olaf finally sits on the edge of the bed. He’s pretexting that he needs to properly stow away his belt and bracers, but it’s an excuse; I see how reverently he touches the furs of her nest.

“Come on,” I call to him. “Stop dawdling or I’m not leaving you any room.”

At that, he finally lets himself ease back into the bed. The hay mattress crumples under his great mass, and I have to grip the pillows so I don’t roll

into his side.

“*Olaf*, you great troll –”

But he is supremely unconcerned by how the whole bed is capsizing towards him. He just sighs with pure contentment.

“Ah, Freya,” he groans. “I’d forgotten what a mattress feels like.”

“And he’s already taking up all the room,” I moan. “This is why I never share with you any more.”

“Any more?” Olaf laughs a weak, tired laugh. “Last we shared a family bed like this was so long ago. I don’t think I even had a single hair on my chin.”

“What? When was that?” I huff, leaning back against his flank. “You’ve had a beard for as long as I can remember. Even little Olaf had a beard that’d make Odin jealous.”

Olaf’s laughing again, all tension eased at last. Our banter barely lasts much longer before he’s dozing off. I try to shift for comfort, turning so I can see the others.

Thrain and Tamsin are sitting in the glow of the fire, apparently tactful enough to leave us the bed. She’s smiling to herself, casting glances up at Olaf, who’s turned into the pillows and furs like a man with no concerns in all the world. Eventually, when they believe us both to be asleep, Thrain leans closer to her.

“Thrain,” she chastises.

“Are we staying down here?” he asks her, breathing against the shell of her ear. “Alone?”

“Yes, but – don’t. You need to sleep too.”

“I seem to recall you having needs of your own come nightfall. Shall I drag Ivar down here with us?”

“No – never mind all that. Let him rest,” she says, though she’s adorably flustered. “And you. Lay down and go to sleep.”

“I bend to my wife’s commands,” he teases her, and there is nothing but arousal in the glare she gives him.

Thrain settles down with his head against her thigh. I watch sleepily for a while as her fingers thread through his long hair, and as my eyes steadily close, I let myself drift into this peace she’s carefully woven for us; the calm breathing of my family, and the crackle of fire lulling us all to sleep.

Chapter 24



IVAR

New Moon of August

“We have to take all our chances,” Tamsin insists.

Thrain is immovable. “No. There’s no way, Tamsin.”

“For God’s sake, will you let me protect you in the one way I can –”

“No.”

They’re both outside, their voices drifting into the house. I finish buckling on my belt over my chainmail and exit to join them, yawning. I’ve not slept so well in a long, long time. Though we’ve had the pleasure of sharing Tamsin’s bed, the last few nights have not exactly been *restful*, seeing what it takes for the princess to quiet her mind.

“What is it, what are you two yapping about now.”

Tamsin turns to me, looking exasperated. There are dark rings under her eyes; she didn’t sleep as well as us, that much is obvious. I wonder if she slept at all without us to nestle between.

“I want to ask Gofraid if I can ride at the front of our procession,” she says. “If I’m conspicuous enough – if I ride at the front with a truce flag of some kind – I just want to make sure it all stays peaceful.”

I raise my eyebrows. No wonder Thrain’s pissed.

“We will not dangle you at the front of the line like a human shield to hide behind,” Thrain growls.

“It isn’t like that!” she insists. “Since Gofraid is sending me out there with God only knows what kind of Southern Isler riff-raff – we need to encourage everyone to stay civil. And I’m the one who’s best placed to act as mediator, here, between Gofraid’s men and Arlyn’s.”

A clink of metal and creaking leather announces Olaf as he ducks through the doorway. The morning light is just as silvery bright as his beard, which is flat on one side from sleeping on it. He looks as well-rested as a cat in sunlight.

“Morning,” I greet him with a grin.

“Hrrmph,” he grunts in return, scratching at his lopsided beard. “I was listening to you all. And I have to side with the princess, Thrain.”

Thrain’s eyes widen. “Brother –”

“Just think about it. It’s much better than Vikings riding into their burial grounds first. Surely it’s more appropriate for the Briton princess to lead us – and I’m sure my father will appreciate that fact, too.”

Thrain runs an agitated hand through his hair and sighs.

“I know you’re worried,” Olaf says. “But we’ll make her as conspicuous as we can. A symbol nobody can misinterpret.” Then he looks at Tamsin, that softness from yesterday returning. “You’ll ride Alsvithr,” he says. “A tall white horse will act as a good call for peace.”

Both Thrain and I stare at each other, then at him. Tamsin doesn’t

know... doesn't know the honour he's giving her. To let her ride Vírún's horse.

Still, she must've noticed just how important that beast is to him, because she straightens and meets his gaze with awed surprise.

"That's... are you sure?"

"I'll lead him from the ground," Olaf tells her. "So he doesn't misbehave."

* * *

Tamsin rides at the front of our small party as we make our way through the siege camp. The great white beast snorts and throws his head, but Olaf holds him firm enough as we approach the main square.

Many men from different warbands are already milling around Father's royal tent, strapping on their weapons, readying their horses. They straighten when they see us, conversations dying out.

They're all staring at Tamsin atop her white horse. Many are superstitious, and the sight of a Vanirdottir riding into the square pulls their faces around, makes them stop in their various endeavours.

Her long ginger hair is loose, fanning over her back. She has taken to her status of symbol quite beautifully. She is as Sól herself, sun-bright, carried along by her steed while the wolves follow at her heels.

The silence that follows in our wake is delectable. This – this is the authority she can wield. I hope she sees it from where she's perched, though I know she must be scared.

Olaf pulls us all to a stop, glances around with a frown.

There are a lot of men gathering here alongside their Jarls. I see his misgivings – from what we understood, Tamsin’s escort was not meant to be quite so large.

An enormous figure ducks out of the royal tent. All of us turn as Father steps out among us. The midday sun shines on his chainmail and furs, wind whipping at his cloak. He is fully armed, axe and sword hanging at his belt.

“Father,” Olaf greets him uncertainly.

“Son of mine.” Father comes to clap him on the shoulder, then affords Thrain and I a knowing sort of look, as though he expected the three of us to insist on escorting Tamsin. But instead of rebuking us for it – he only turns toward the readied carts and horses. “The princess has arrived. Make ready to leave!”

The Jarls all around us spring to action. Horns sound in the air, and beyond the square, a great bustling of men begins; warbands spilling from their sections of camp like a great mud slide.

Ice drops into my belly. I glance at Thrain, who looks just as befuddled. This is not an escort any more – more like rallying a whole battalion of men.

What in Hel’s name is Father doing?

I open my mouth, but Olaf lays a hand on my shoulder and steps ahead of us, taking control of the exchange. It is probably for the best; he’s doing far better than me at schooling his face to emotionless flatness.

“Father, wait,” Olaf says. “What’s going on? You aren’t coming with us, surely?”

“There’s been a change of plans,” Father says simply.

“So you’re coming?” Olaf asks again while Father marches along the square, eyeing which Jarls have arrived, and which are still on their way.

“Of course I am,” Father says. “Since all three of my sons will insist on

protecting their woman like the stubborn mutts they are, how can I not?”

“Father, I must protest,” Olaf says. “If you wanted a peaceful parley, then you cannot send a large escort, and much less come yourself. As soon as the Britons see you, it will only encourage them to attack.”

“Then let them attack,” Father growls. “If they truly believe they have weakened me, if the idea fortifies them enough to attack us – then Odin hear me, let them come. I want to see the face of the princeling who dared dispatch my Jarls this moon. I want to see him raise his sword to me.”

“Father, please,” Olaf says, grasping him by the arm to stop him. “You *are* weakened. This entire endeavour is so we can buy you time to recover. Don’t do this.”

But Father only smiles, his great beard curving upward.

“My scouts returned last night,” he says. “Most of the Britons’ forces are still up north as we speak. So if the Briton princeling does not behave himself – if he wants to sit his balls on the table and act like he has the upper hand, here – it will be my pleasure to knock him from his pedestal.”

Olaf glances at me, and that spark of panic I see in his eye is the same that’s leaping around my stomach.

By Heiðrun’s great *tits*.

Fuck. *Fuck*.

Father pats Olaf on the shoulder, then strides onward until he’s reached Tamsin. She looks aghast from where she sits upon Alsvithr. Rhun is staring intensely as Father approaches, and there is that familiar fire in his eye as the Viking King lifts a meaty hand to greet them.

“You are absolutely ravishing as always, princess!” Father calls. “Might I assume that you will do us the honour of leading us?”

“I – I will,” Tamsin bravely says, though the escort she was meant to lead

has quadrupled in volume, and is still growing. “I will lead.”

Father’s mangy dogs all send up a cheer at that. I grit my teeth, trying to sift through what arguments I may bring, but Olaf has already said it all.

It is too late. Father has complete control of this expedition, now.

“Then please,” Father calls up at Tamsin. “Lead the way.”

* * *

“We should do something,” Thrain mutters to me. “Turn back. This will not end well.”

“We’re trailing half his fucking army,” I mutter back. “I’m not sure there’s anything we can do.”

“We must find a way to warn –”

“*Hush.*”

We are marching close behind Tamsin and Rhun, the procession behind us now pullulating with Southern Islers and other warbands speaking raucously amongst themselves. Once past the perimetre, Father calls for us to stop – he orders a great number of them to remain in the trees and start digging out firepits.

They’re to remain ready and available if ever this parley were to go wrong.

There are thankfully far fewer of us from that point on. The forest road is spindly and treacherous as ever. Up and down the path goes, threading between fields of wheat and rye. Birdsong and the chatter of men is all we hear for a while.

All of us hold our shields at the ready, keeping tight ranks as we watch for movement in the trees. The Britons have scouts out, watching us – I can

feel their eyes on us. For all the friendship we have shared thus far, having the Viking *King* with us changes everything.

There's no knowing how they'll greet us now.

The air grows heavier as we climb up the forested hill. Their burial grounds are in a clearing, high on the hilltop, studded with standing stones of different shapes and sizes.

Old bones lie under this earth. I can feel the weight of history here; the chatter dies down as Tamsin leads us out of the tree line and up onto the hill of the dead. Father's men follow us, treading sacred soil as they space out among the standing stones.

The Britons should be here to meet us. But they aren't. We are utterly alone, save for the whistling wind.

“Unload!” calls Olaf. Thrain and I diligently repeat it, so that those few Dubliners who came with us get to work. They unclasp the carts and netted contraptions from the horses, piling the dead together. Tamsin circles us, still atop Alsvithr, as though intent on protecting us.

Then a horn sounds.

Tamsin has drifted closer to my brothers and I while we work; we all glance over at the tree line ahead of us.

We see them before long. Spaced out in the trees, Cavaliers in their black tabards. Some are mounted; many bear those deadly longbows. Their arrows are notched and aiming right at us.

I breathe out slowly as I count them. Odin, we built this friendship with such painstaking care – but now that we are basically presenting them with this chance to end their war, this chance to bag the Viking King himself – will they even attempt to spare us?

Or will they see us as mere collateral damage?

Arlyn himself rides out into the graveyard. His Galloway steed snorts, jet black and gleaming under the midday sun. He wears that gilded helmet I recognise, the green and gold stripes of a prince. Several Briton warriors flank him as he rides closer; one of them is slight enough to be Eormen, concealed behind her helmet.

“Greetings!” Arlyn calls. His voice is tinged with surprise as he says, “Am I correct to assume I am speaking to Gofraid Hroarsson, King of the Vikings?”

Father straightens to his full height, which is considerable. Behind us, his men come closer, treading barrow dirt so they may back their king protectively.

“Greetings to you, boy!” Father says. “You are indeed correct. I take it you are one of King Arthgal’s many sons?”

“I am Arlyn, crown prince of Strathclyde,” Arlyn retorts acidly.

“Ah! It’s a pleasure to meet you face to face,” Father says. “We have come for a parley.”

“A parley,” Arlyn echoes. He barely looks at the dead men we have brought. He has eyes only for Father. From behind the golden visor of his helmet, I see a gleam of opportunistic zeal. “It would have been judicious, perhaps, to leave your men at the edge of our graveyard – to not have them soil our burial grounds, if you wished to make an honourable gesture.”

It is an obvious cue to have Father tell his men to fall back. But he does not.

“I do apologise,” Father responds instead, perfectly genial, though his hand rests upon his sword hilt. “We only meant to make ourselves conspicuous, so you may properly appreciate with whom you are speaking. If

you would like to hear our terms now, I would be glad to lay them out for you.”

A silence stretches, in which I can hear the strained breath of every man on this hilltop.

Then Prince Arlyn turns to face Tamsin. And he speaks directly to her in Brittonic.

I glance at her, white-faced as she is atop a nervous Alsvithr. I squint as I try to parse out what they’re saying. The prince sounds confused as he gestures toward Father, mentions the word for *king*. And some distortion of the verb *to give*.

The meaning appears to me, huge and blatant as Ymir’s bones.

Have you come to give us the Viking King?

Tamsin shakes her head. I stare at her, straining for meaning.

No. No. Please. We only came for the parley.

But Arlyn will not relent such a prize. Of course he won’t. Out here, Father is away from the heart of our camp; he appears more vulnerable than ever. It’s the perfect occasion to spring upon him. If I were in Arlyn’s place, I’d have probably done the same.

I glance at Tamsin as she goes on speaking. She must tell him it’s a trap – that Father’s true numbers are beyond in the trees, waiting for his signal. Arlyn cannot attack, he cannot fall for this show of weakness.

Because as it stands, there’s no telling where the chips would fall if they face one another now.

“I would like to hear your terms, then,” Arlyn says, switching to Gaelic again. So Father lays his hands on his hips, and speaks plainly of the bog fever, and his request for a truce.

It seems that Arlyn has chosen caution for now. I breathe out, glance over

at Olaf, who stands near Father's side. He meets my eye, and I try to put the question to him through sheer force of will –

If this all goes to shit, whose side do we fight on?

Olaf makes a small hand gesture. *Wait.*

My eyes flicker between him and Father. *Will you raise your sword to him?*

Olaf's hand moves again. *Just. Wait.*

While Arlyn and Father go on speaking, movement catches my eye. I find Rhun stepping quietly between the standing stones, passing behind the bristled line of Southern Islers. Everyone else's attention is fixed on Arlyn and his men; nobody's paying attention to him.

I frown at him. He seems to be simply joining Tamsin, to take part in the conversation. But there is this look on his face...

No. There are far too many hardened warriors here. Surely he's not stupid enough to act on his own.

The negotiations continue, Arlyn debating with Father over the terms of the truce. Then, leaves rustle, branches snap – I glance over at Rhun again. He's swerved off-course.

He's running.

I start toward him, hand flying to my sword in alarm. Several others turn their heads to follow his flight. It's happening too fast for anyone to react more than that.

A ring of metal hisses as Rhun unsheathes a seax from his belt.

He's headed straight for Father's back.

A million things rush through my head at once, like a stream bursting through a dam. All the times I've imagined this – doing as Rhun is doing, running straight at my father with a naked blade – *let him do it*, hisses

something dark and malevolent in me, my grandmother's voice in my ear, *redeem yourself, redeem your mother's honour* –

I can't. I *can't*. He took me in – he's my father, even if it means belts and blood, even if it means shame, isn't that just the territory of fatherhood – I only have a breath to decide, and it bursts out of me before I can stop it.

“FATHER!” I shout at him.

He turns just as Rhun leaps at him. The boy clings onto his back, seax brandished – if Father hadn't turned and lifted his arm over his head, he would have metal stuck in his jugular.

“RHUN!” Tamsin shouts. “Rhun, NO!”

Like ice shattering, the frozen moment collapses into chaos. Men lunge forward to pull Rhun off Father's back.

Then Prince Arlyn gives one loud rallying cry – “COVER THE PRINCE!”

Arrows fly. Both Tamsin and Eormen's voices rise, calling for peace, but it is far too late now. Arlyn's Cavaliers aim at me with barely a moment's hesitation – Thrain pulls me after him, our shields raised above our heads as we close ranks around our Dubliners. Even while Rhun clings to his back, Father shouts at his Southern Islers to run out and meet the Britons – so the fight begins.

Blood slops from the cuts Rhun managed in Father's arm. The Dubliners pull him down at last, and Father turns to his attacker. He backhands Rhun so hard that the boy flies back, crumpling into the barrow dirt.

I run to him, breath stuck in my throat. Father hit the boy hard enough to fracture his skull. But Rhun's pushing himself up regardless.

Shield over my head, I grab Rhun by the arm and heave him up.

“Don't be a fucking idiot!” I shout at him over the cries of battle and

thunking arrows. “He’ll destroy you – him and all of his men!”

“I don’t care,” Rhun hisses through a bloody mouth. “All the better if he does kill me. As long as I can kill him first.”

Then a Briton shield impacts mine – and I wrench away from Rhun as I parry the oncoming attack.

Chapter 25



TAMSIN

New Moon of August

The graveyard devolves into chaos. Olaf tries to lead me away, but I can't tear my eyes from Rhun. As soon as he's back on his feet, he goes straight for Gofraid again. Seax in hand, steps wavering a little from the blow he took.

He doesn't stand a chance.

"RHUN!" I shout at him again as Alsvithr paces and writhes under me. "Please stop, STOP –"

Gofraid is well-surrounded enough to be able to lock eyes with my brother. I watch, horror-struck, as that mountain of a man slides his decorated axe from his belt.

He's going to engage my brother.

"Princess! You have to go!" Olaf calls to me, but I can't move, can't do anything other than hold on as Alsvithr twists about nervously. Then Olaf

staggers back against Alsvithr's flank with a grunt, and my head swivels around. He's engaged two Britons at once – one of them glances up at me.

“Come, Princess Tamsin!” he shouts in Brittonic. “Come to our side of the hill, there are more Cavaliers waiting –”

Olaf throws them off his sword in an elegant swing of his arm, lifting his shield again to parry.

“Ride back to the camp, Tamsin!” Olaf roars at me. “There are Dubliners at the perimetre, it's not far from here, you'll be safe!”

I can't move.

All I can do is twist Alsvithr's reins, staring in horror.

Metal clashes, cursed men growl at one another. Olaf is set upon by yet another Cavalier, swords flashing. Blood arches, spatters on the ancient standing stones that sprout from the hillside.

Don't kill him, I want to beg both parties. I want to scream at them to stop.

What in God's name am I meant to do?

“Princess!”

Alsvithr throws up his head and backtracks in fear as the men bear down on him again. They crash into his flank, Olaf's bulk heavy against my leg. There's a grunt of pain – several hands grasp my arm, trying to pull me down – then Olaf brushes them all aside and heaves himself up behind me.

I see his sword swing, a silver arch in the air beside us, pulling blood from a man's neck. Then he's kicked Alsvithr, and we plummet across the graveyard, down into the forest road again.

I twist – I need to see Rhun, I need to see what's going on – but Olaf's arm is curved around my body, reins bunched in his hand, steering Alsvithr in

harsh pulls. I'm stuck against his huge body – and he wears his shield on his back, blocking my field of vision entirely.

“Hold on,” Olaf barks. “There are men pursuing.”

I can only obey, heart hammering hard enough to bruise. It's a mess of trotting and Alsvithr kicking out in protest as Olaf guides him one-handed through the winding road. The smell of smoke is billowing through the forest – Gofraid's reserve forces are setting fire to the trees, running to join the battle with yells of encouragement.

Back to camp. We just have to get back to camp.

I fix my eyes ahead, trying to cling to that simple objective. Olaf's sword hangs by my right thigh, suspended at our flank, ready to bite into any attacker. I try not to look at it, but I can feel it there, its sharp edge near my leg, the blood that covers it.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Breathe. Just breathe and hold on.

* * *

The perimeter is chock-full of waiting warriors. We ride past – Olaf barks something at them in Norse, but we don't slow down.

I can breathe again once we streak past the first few houses of the Dubliners' camp. Men are clustering, shouting up at Olaf. We're the only ones who've returned.

“Olaf! What happened to you?” comes Armod's voice. I turn, half blind from the blur of panic, find him next to us along with several more Dubliners.

“Get the princess... to safety first,” Olaf grunts. There's a thinness to his voice. When he shifts behind me, I realise something hot and sticky is

clinging to our clothes.

At first I think he must be dismounting behind me. But he isn't.

He's falling sideways off the horse.

I turn, crying out senselessly, *Olaf, Olaf*, as if that could prevent his fall. Armod reaches up – several more men grab hold of their chieftain, help to pull him off. I try to grab him but he's far too heavy for me – the men take him, lift his shield from him and help him to kneel in the grass.

I dismount. There's a red streak of blood down Alsvithr's saddle mat, dripping down his white coat.

No. This can't be happening.

"It's just an arrow," Olaf mutters hoarsely. "In the thigh... on the left. I broke it."

'Just an arrow', and yet his breeches and leg bindings are completely crimson on one side. Armod curses as he feels up the leg, then he barks in Norse at the others as he hoists Olaf's full weight onto himself. There's the scuffle of many feet as the Dubliners run to fetch what they need.

Olaf's up on his knees, groggy and confused, arm around Armod's shoulders. Rushing around him, I see the broken arrow shaft, sticking diagonally through the back of his thigh. It's awkwardly placed enough to not allow an easy resting position on the ground.

"I can stand," Olaf protests, though he's too groggy to even push away from Armod. "It's fine, I'm telling you."

"Stay still, Jarl," Armod barks at him. Then he turns to me. "Princess – can you see if it's gone clean through?"

"Don't make her do it," Olaf growls, but the camp is a chaos of Dubliners rushing about, arming themselves and yelling for news; there's only us.

"I can do it," I mutter, kneeling behind him. I reach under the hem of his

chainmail shirt, prod at his thigh. I start at the shaft of the arrow, making Olaf grunt. Gently as I can, I follow the curve of his muscles, feeling for an exit.

“There,” I blurt as a bump rises against my fingertips through the breeches. “I can feel the tip here.” My hand’s roamed to Olaf’s inner thigh. The thought that he’s got an arrow right through his muscle makes bile climb in my throat. It must hurt so much.

Olaf frowns when he feels where my hand is. When I remove it, he sees how my reddened fingers drip with his blood. He sobers, then, as though realising that this is no small scratch to be taken lightly.

“It’ll be fine,” Olaf says to me, forcing a smile though he’s growing white. “We just need to wait for the others to arrive, and then we’ll take it out.”

“We need to hurry,” Armod insists. “The Britons put dogshit on their weapons. I’ve seen wounds like this fester faster than Níðhöggr’s mouth, Olaf, we have to take it out right now –”

“Armod,” Olaf warns, pressing him with a look. “They’re coming with the clean linens. We’ll just wait a little.”

“But *Jarl* –”

“I’ll bleed out if you just yank it out now!” Olaf barks back. “You’ve seen how it’s placed. We need to do this properly. Carefully.”

He’s trying to appear unshakable for my sake, I know it, but his tensed expression shows how much pain he’s in, how much he’s trying to cling to consciousness even through the haze of blood loss. The others finally arrive, laying out a hemp sheet on the grass. We coax him down onto it, folding his injured leg up. He grits his teeth throughout. Armod unsheathes his seax and cuts a small hole in Olaf’s breeches, then tears the seams along his inner thigh, ripping the hole wider.

The tip of the arrowhead is visible, poking out of a messy, oozing wound. There's blood everywhere. I've got my hand over my mouth as I watch Armod mop up the skin around it; more thick red blood just keeps gushing out. Are they really going to just –

“Ready?” Armod says to another Dubliner who's crouched by Olaf's leg, linens and compress in hand. Armod wipes his hands, then tries to get a firm grip of the arrowhead.

“Princess,” Olaf pants as he squints through the pain. I'm kneeling by his side, staring wild-eyed at the proceedings – he's tilted his head to face me. “Don't look at this. Go to the house, get yourself out of harm's way.”

“I'm not leaving you,” I tell him. His gloved hands are gripping the knotted leather of his belt; I take one, bringing it up to my chest. “I'm staying right here.”

His silver eyes are heavy-lidded as he holds my gaze. “You shouldn't have to endure this.”

“Neither should you,” I breathe out. “I got so caught up in the parley, I didn't think to watch Rhun – he's been so vindictive since our audience with Gofraid, I should've known –”

“We all knew that Rhun... wanted to avenge himself,” Olaf says. “If there is anyone to blame, it should be me... for not keeping a closer eye on him.”

“You cannot control everything, Olaf,” I say with a miserable laugh. “Though I know you try your hardest to.”

He smiles along with me. Then Armod pulls – taking advantage of the moment's distraction – and Olaf's head tilts back, growling through gritted teeth as the arrow is pulled out.

Blood pours in thick spurts. They're quick to place the hemp compress

against it. Armod hurries to bind large strips around Olaf's thigh, tying the compress tight against the wound, so tight it must be painful.

Olaf's hand is crushing my fingers – then it relaxes. He breathes out, blinking up at the sky, looking dazed.

“That's done it,” Armod says. He leans over Olaf. “You with me, Jarl? Oy, look here. I know she's prettier than me, but give me a chance.”

“I'm looking at you,” Olaf slurs, blinking up at Armod. “I'm looking... right at your ugly mug.” His eyes are closing.

“Oy, you stay with me, Jarl – look at me!” He slaps Olaf's cheeks, but Olaf's blinking groggily, like a drunkard about to fall asleep. I squeeze his hand, call his name, but it's no use.

He's out cold in moments.

“He's going to be all right?” I ask Armod. “Isn't he? He'll be all right?”

Armod's bloody hands are shaking, perched as they are on Olaf's rumpled chainmail. He lifts one to rub his forehead, leaving a red streak.

“I don't know,” he says. “When was he injured?”

“It was just a moment ago,” I tell him. “The Britons attacked us at Hallowed Hill. We weren't so far from the perimeter.”

“And the madman went riding with a wound like that?” he mutters to himself, shaking his head. “Still, while the arrow was in there, it would've obstructed the blood flow. But a wound in the thigh like this... you lose a lot of blood very quickly. I don't know what to tell you, princess.”

I stare at Olaf's face, so pale now. Armod holds two fingers above his mouth, feeling his breath.

“He's with us,” he says to me bracingly. “He's strong as a Jötunn, this one. Probably has more blood running through his veins than a draft horse. I'm sure he'll pull through.”

Familiar voices and many tramping feet fill the buzz of panic. Everything's happening so fast. An arm clamps around my shoulders, Thrain's scent in my nose making me turn into him, bringing the relief that at least he and Ivar are all right.

“Olaf – *no* –”

Ivar crashes down by his brother's side, and the look of sheer terror on his face sends guilt spearing through me.

“He's still breathing,” Armod says. “Arrow wound in the thigh, clean through – we took it out and bound it. Now if we could just get this chainmail off–”

I watch Ivar pull at his brother's belt. My hands stay gripping Olaf's as though we were two figures in marble – I feel like if any single one of us moves away from him, he'll come apart.

Thrain eventually coaxes Olaf's hand from mine. They lift his arms, pull the chainmail shirt up and off, revealing the thick decorated tunic he wears beneath. No blood to be seen there, at least.

“Let's get him inside,” Armod says.

Together the men all crouch around the large hemp sheet upon which Olaf is lying. They lift him in tandem, the sheet acting like a hammock of sorts. All of them shuffle towards Angharad's house.

“What do we need to do?” I ask Armod, hurrying after them.

“Right now we need to get him nice and bundled up,” Armod says. “If there are furs in there, princess –”

“Yes, there are plenty!” I rush ahead of them to help. They haul Olaf into the bed, into the sheets I washed for him – I help them cover him, until he's wrapped up in soft warm fur and pillows.

“Keep him warm, keep an eye on his wound, make sure it stops

bleeding,” Armod says. “If we did this right, it shouldn’t take long.”

“We need to get back out there,” Thrain says, his voice hoarse. “The Britons haven’t reached this part of camp yet, but we need to strengthen our perimeter. Ivar – Ivar!”

“I’m staying with him,” Ivar mutters, eyes fixed on his brother’s face.

“No. I need you,” Thrain barks at him. “There are too many men to manage –”

“Fuck off,” Ivar growls through gritted teeth. “I’m staying with him.”

“*Bacraut*, don’t give me that, we have a wide open flank right now!”

“I’ll stay,” I offer them. “Please, me and Armod can stay.”

They both look around at me, and I nod at them, filled with fierce determination to at least fix one thing in this disastrous day. Thrain takes Ivar roughly by the arm and yanks him away from Olaf’s bedside.

“Send someone to us,” Thrain calls over his shoulder. “If anything changes.”

“Wait,” I call as they cross the threshold. “Rhun and Gofraid – what happened?”

“They’re both alive,” Thrain tells me. “We dragged Rhun back here. Someone must’ve locked him up by now.”

I splutter a sob of relief. It’s too much – too much anxiety screaming in my mind.

“We’ll return as soon as we can,” Thrain adds. “Armod, you stay with her!”

“I will, Jarl.”

Once the house is empty except for me and Armod, the old man sits by me on the edge of the bed, staring down at his pack leader, drawn with worry.

I clasp his bloody hand with mine, and he pats my knuckles with his gnarled fingers.

“I’ll send for someone to fetch water, if that’s all right,” he says. “So we can start cleaning up.”

I try to answer, but my throat is too tight. Everything’s gone wrong. *Everything*. I turn, flinging my arms around the old man, and he embraces me with a little huff of surprise.

“Princess,” he soothes. “Don’t you worry, now. It’ll be all right.”

“We were so close to agreeing to the truce,” I breathe into his shoulder. “We were so close. We could’ve walked away. If I had just watched my brother –”

“It isn’t your fault, princess,” Armod tells me, patting my back. “We’ve been very lucky so far. But there are many moving parts in a war like this. Every moment is a risk.”

I make a fist in his tunic, eyes darting.

“Princess,” Armod insists. “I know what you’re doing. Retracing all the steps you could’ve done differently. Don’t torture yourself with such an exercise. We are here, now – it is already difficult enough to contend with one reality.”

I nod, trying to heed him. But I cannot stop the thoughts from racing in my mind, clambering back through time.

If I had only done things differently... if I had taken better care of my pack, tried harder to appease my brother, involved myself *more* somehow... I just didn’t do enough. So often I sat in the security of the camp while everyone else went out there to wrangle with our fate.

I swallow hard.

If... if I had only had the courage to enter my craze, last moon...

Then perhaps none of this would've happened at all.

* * *

We keep Olaf mostly covered as we work, lifting the sheets over the places we unwrap and clean. First the leg bindings have to be removed. Besides from the compress, nothing tight should remain, Armod teaches me; the blood must be allowed to flow freely.

Olaf can't move; can't protest any of this. I'm torn between wanting to help, and the impression of unveiling his intimacy without his consent. I unlace his leather shoe, baring his foot; then unwrap his calf, holding the weight of his healthy leg as I pull the wrapping around and around.

The shimmer lights me up as I slide a hand along the bare, hairy skin of his calf. Swallowing, I wonder – is the shimmer weaker than before? Will it progressively die down as he grows weaker?

His breeches hang loosely over his legs once the wrappings are gone. Armod stops and waits, as though allowing me space to continue. Oh, of course – Olaf's breeches are laced tight around his hips.

I swallow again past a dry throat. He wouldn't want me to, would he? It feels like such an invasion of his privacy. I turn away, squeezing a cloth in the water bucket.

"I'll start cleaning," I mutter. "Carry on."

Armod moves tactfully, reaching up to loosen his chieftain's laces while I sit by Olaf's bared injured leg.

Streaks of blood curve around the swell of his muscles. It's such a stark sight. I set to cleaning it, scrubbing away patches that are beginning to darken

and dry. When I get to his thigh to clean around the compress, again the impression of invasion makes me falter.

“Good,” Armod praises. “Keep going – that way we’ll see much more easily if there’s any fresh blood.”

I nod, and glance up at Olaf’s peaceful face as I slide the washcloth above his knee. Something sparks in me – possessiveness, almost, an impression that nobody else should touch him here, even in a situation like this.

God – what kind of thought is that? It’s completely silly. A mindless instinct, surely born from what strange magic binds us. Shaking it away, I set to work along his thigh. Without all the blood, he almost seems like he’s sleeping... and nothing more dire than that.

* * *

“Where is he – *where’s my son!*”

Gofraid’s roar rises into the evening. Armod and I have only just finished washing up when a great pounding on the door has it shaking on its hinges.

Armod swivels around to me. “Princess –”

“It’s all right,” I assure him, stepping to the door. I faced that man down once already – I shouldn’t be afraid to open this door.

I let him in. Gofraid’s so huge that he has to fold himself under the doorway and stoop under the rafters. His great bushy white beard is bristled with fury, as are his beady eyes. Without sparing us a glance, he strides straight to Olaf’s bedside.

“He’s alive, my King,” Armod says. “He’s breathing. He lost a lot of blood.”

As huge as he is, Gofraid seems to shrink as he kneels by the bed, laying a hand over the furs. I watch with a heavy heart as he reaches to stroke Olaf's cropped hair with that huge battle-scarred hand. He mutters something in Norse, to Olaf perhaps, though the man is pale and motionless as before.

Gofraid goes on in Norse, raising his voice, directing questions at Armod. His vassal responds in kind, both of them pushing me out of the conversation. I linger by the water bucket, nervously squeezing blood from my rag, until the Viking King decides to get up again and march towards me.

Still he does not look at me. It's like he's so angry that he can't bear to. I wait for him to say something, anything, but he only grabs my arm and pulls me after him toward the door.

“Hey – !”

He drags me out of the house without further ado. It's no use struggling against him – he has the strength of an ox.

Armod follows sheepishly, calling after us, “My King, the Jarls expect her to stay here –!”

“Then they'll be disappointed,” Gofraid barks at his vassal, and he drags me along the dirt road between thatched roofs, pulling me through Dumbartonshire.

We attract gazes from those Dubliners who're holding down our camp, but they don't dare to raise a hand to their king. I can't find anything to say – he is a huge mountain of a man, his sheer presence strangling the words in my throat.

We arrive at last at Osian's house, where Rhun's being kept. A strange contrary sensation pulls at my gut; eagerness to see if Rhun's all right, and fear as Gofraid's motive becomes painfully clear.

He wants to lock me up, too.

“Your Grace,” I stammer, trying to open some kind of dialogue. But the sound of my voice only makes him stop and turn, letting me feel the full heat of his discontent.

“What?” he thunders. “You have something you want to say to me?”

I swallow hard. “What – what happened out there? If you’re back, does that mean –”

“I slammed down your cousin’s pathetic little attack,” he growls. “His men are all burning now, as is any hope of truce we might’ve entertained. And he ran, like you Britons do – like the cowards that you are.”

His words are like a kick to the stomach. “Arlyn’s still alive, then?”

“I sent my Jarls on his trail,” Gofraid says. “So I imagine he won’t be for much longer.”

I try to catch my breath, try to hold the panic down.

“You encouraged him to attack us, didn’t you?” Gofraid snarls at me. “When you were speaking in Brittonic. What did you say to him? And don’t you dare lie to me now, princess.”

“I didn’t encourage him,” I stammer. “I was trying to convince him to agree to the truce. I swear to you –”

But he doesn’t believe me; he isn’t even listening to me. He goes on in a deep rumbling growl: “I thought you possessed enough intelligence to understand the purpose of that meeting, and what we were all risking. I thought you cared about keeping the peace, if only for the sake of your husband, and the Dubliners who seem to revere you so much. But you don’t care at all, do you? Your only purpose here is to sabotage me, and never mind what it might cost.”

“You seem to forget,” I seethe back at him, “that *you’re* the one who came with us, and endangered us all with your presence. Olaf himself asked

you to stay back at camp. Don't you think you're accusing me now just to rid yourself of the blame?"

He stares down at me in pure disbelief.

"You have the *gall!*" he roars, making me shrivel up and gasp under the pressure of his cursed voice. "You have the gall to say that to my face, when Olaf is bedridden! You're laughing at us, aren't you – my son lies half dead in his own damned blood and you're *laughing* –"

My throat burns that he might even think that. "Your Grace, I'm very far from laughing," I insist. "Olaf – Olaf is pack to me –"

"Don't use words you don't understand," he growls. "I sat at your claiming ceremony and I thought I was witnessing something precious and authentic. A meeting between Varg and Vanirdottir, the first in centuries. But now I realise you've only ever been heartlessly manipulating all three of my sons and using them to your own benefit. First that Uradech nonsense, and now this – pretexting that you need their protection, only to place them under your cousin's sword."

"That isn't true –"

Gofraid reaches for me, takes the velvet collar of my dress, and *yanks* me forwards so that I almost stumble against his great gut.

"My sons are my life," he hisses. "Do you understand that? You may be who you are, you may be one of Freya's brood, but I know when a woman is spinning yarns for her own design. So you will stay here, with that foolhardy brother of yours, until I have need of you again. And you will not come anywhere near Olaf until he wakes."

He barks at the Dubliners to open the door. They spring to obey. The empathy in their gazes gives me hope; if they are the ones guarding the door, then surely imprisonment won't be too difficult to bear.

I stagger inside, into the dark. The door slams shut behind me.

“Rhun?” I cough out, trying to feel my way to the stones of the central hearth. Metal shackles clink and clatter; Rhun isn’t much more than a scent and a shape in the dark.

“Tam, here,” he croaks.

“Rhun, you’re all right?” I crawl until I touch him, pat his legs, his shoulders, his head, feeling for an injury of some kind.

“What... what happened?” he mutters. “What’s going on out there?”

“I don’t know... Arlyn’s on the run. Hopefully Eormen’s with him. I think Gofraid’s warbands are securing the camp perimeter.”

Rhun looks like he wants to ask more details, but he’s too weak to make more effort. He’s groaning in pain as he shifts closer to me, so I coax him down until he can rest his head in my lap. I stroke back his hair carefully and he shies away when I touch one part of his head. I should be angry at him – but he’s so fragile and hurting.

“Sore there?” I ask him. Touching his face, I can feel bumps and split skin, surely from where Gofraid whacked him. “Here, too?”

“Yeah... everything’s spinning,” he says. “And the light hurts my eyes.”

“I’m not surprised. Gofraid hit you so hard.” I try to scoop him into the gentlest of hugs. “Why did you *do* that, Rhun? What were you thinking?”

“Almost managed it, didn’t I?” he says, and I can hear him smile as he says it. “Could’ve killed the King of the Vikings.”

I bite back what I want to say – that he broke everything, *everything* we’ve been trying to achieve. The secret alliance we’d formed, the painstaking trust we’d built between Dubliners and Britons.

All gone because of his anger. His grief. But then he never really believed in the idea of an alliance, of being able to lean on one another.

He has only ever wanted revenge since the day they locked him up here. And next to the muddle of my own feelings, I can't help but see some nobility in it – how he held onto the purity of that sentiment. Unforgiving, uncompromising rage.

“You were mad,” I tell him. “Completely mad to do that. Leaping at Gofraid in the middle of his own troops.” Nuzzling his hair, I take in his scent, focusing on this gladness – that at least he's still alive. “Brave little brother,” I mutter.

“It wasn't bravery,” Rhun says with a scoff. “It was win-win. If he died, so much the better. But if he killed me...” He goes quiet. “Then perhaps God would come back to this land,” he mumbles, like he knows I'll scold him for it.

I hold him closer against me, grinding my teeth as a ball bulges in my throat. He was throwing himself at his own death, then. God's sacrifice turning his face to the sky.

Or maybe it isn't even about God. Maybe this is just about suffering, and finding a way to end it.

“You have to stop thinking like that,” I mutter. “I told you already. It won't solve anything.”

“Won't it?”

“No. We were actually getting somewhere – I know you don't like to hear it, because you hate every single Viking out there. But we were. You should never have thrown yourself at Gofraid like that.”

He lets himself weigh against me, his pointy elbows lodged in the crooks of my body. I rock him gently back and forth, and he starts sniffing in the dark, like he doesn't want me to hear.

“Didn't Emrys tell you the same thing?” I mutter. “You dying won't

solve anything. It'll just make me mad at you. So you have to stay alive. All right? You have to stay alive for me.”

One stroke of my hand over his cheek and I feel his tears; I wipe them up into his hair, stroking through his matted curls.

“Promise me you won’t do something so reckless again,” I whisper. “Please.”

His shackles weigh against me as he hugs me back.

“I promise,” he mumbles.

I close my eyes, rocking us both, soothing us the only way I know how. Then, to my surprise, the will to envelop Rhun in warmth and softness comes out in a scratchy, rumbling blanket of noise; a purr, hot in my throat, pooling warmth in my chest.

He stiffens at first, then relaxes against me as it soothes him.

“Didn’t know you could do that,” he says.

“I didn’t know either until recently.”

“Arienh’s mother could do that, too... she was always ashamed of it when it came out.”

“Really! You never told me that.”

“Yeah. She said it was animal-like and that a proper lady should never do it. For some reason. I always thought it was nice.”

“Maybe that’s why I never even knew about it,” I wonder aloud. “Has Mother ever purred like this?”

Rhun scoffs. “Can you imagine Mother purring?”

I can only join him, smiling sadly as the image of our austere mother materialises in the darkness. “No,” I admit. “I really can’t.”

I rock him, the purr making us both hazy like we’ve basked in too much sunlight. Little by little, the dark prison house isn’t quite as foreboding. I purr

until my brother's sleeping in my arms, breathing softly, and I can only stroke his hair and be achingly grateful to have him safe in my arms.

PART TWO

THE RIDE OF RHIANNON

Chapter 26

IVAR

26 YEARS AGO

Vestfold, Norway, 844

The caverns were carved in the cliff of the fjord. Beating waves marked the rhythm of day and night. It paced our heartbeats, our footsteps, the beating of pestle and mortar as the women ground their potions.

This is no place for a child of sorrow, my grandmothers would say.

They said the caverns were not my home, though I had lived there all my life. They said that I was the reason for my mother's condition, I was the weight upon her that kept her from healing. Sometimes, when they picked her up from where she'd fallen and lovingly nurtured her back to health, I heard them talking in hushed tones.

“Why did you keep him, *sæta*?” they asked, and she would whimper and sob until they changed tack. “Let us bring him down to the village. You're in no state to care for him. And what if he reveals himself to be one of Loki's brood?”

But my mother would shake her head violently. “Mine,” she would rasp.
“*Mine.*”

“He’s the reason you can’t even walk, *sæta* –”

“No,” my mother would snap. Then, with difficulty; “Not his fault... not his fault.”

Sometimes, my grandmothers led me out into the village on their own errands. And they’d leave me there in the central square, promising they’d come back by sundown. But they’d never come for me. I’d be stranded there by Frothi Hængsson’s goats, waiting, hoping that this time they hadn’t lied.

The crones hoped someone would take pity on me. Sometimes, women of the village did; they’d give me supper and let me sleep in their houses. But they’d always take me back to the caverns. That was where I belonged, they said. We don’t want to upset your mother.

There were boys in the village who found me a curiosity. The Völva’s son, shaggy-haired and half-wild, rags on his bones. Some would be too afraid to approach a boy who lived in the heart of Völva magic and all its strangeness. Others thought it made good sport.

Do you have women’s parts, too? Is that why they let you live up there? They’d give chase, wanting to verify their claims. They were certain the caverns gave me misshapen parts, that surely I was hiding a tail, that perhaps my body was some uncanny mixture between human and animal.

Old women and cripples; those were the creatures that inhabited the caverns. Both were beyond human. The air around them buzzed eerily with multicoloured remnants of the Bifrost, their lined faces telling of arduous journeys between worlds, deep knowledge they had gleaned from secret places.

My mother would climb down from the caverns and come for me.

And the boys would scarpers before her.

She brought silence and fear with her, always. My mother wasn't quite of this world any more. Blessed by the gods, they called her. She couldn't speak in anything more than shouts and huffed, garbled words. Her eyes would stay unfocused, her right side always crooked and stiff, half of her face stuck in permanent stasis. When she held me, she would pull me against the crooked angles of her body. I loved her brittleness, and the scent she wore; it was as though she scooped me up into a jagged bird's nest where I was always safe.

So sad, some of the village women would say when they saw her. *She used to be so beautiful.*

Blessings always came disguised as curses. Such was the saying. My mother's unfocused eyes saw things that others could not. Villagers came to the caverns for her advice; women came so she might bless their swollen bellies. When came the full moon and the equinoxes, she would sit and rock back and forth, and the old women of the caverns would spin prophecies from what garbled lines came from her mouth.

One day my grandmothers tried another tactic. "We'll send you to do something only a little boy can do," they said to me, coaxing and cajoling. "You know of the dwarves who made Thor's hammer, and the golden armbands of Baldr, and Odin's mighty spear? You're a good boy, you remember the stories well. We need a cauldron made of dwarven metal. Except we can't go out to find the dwarves... because only little boys can find them."

They showed me where to go. They loaded me up with food and tools to make fire and camp out in the wild. "You have to go far, now," they said, pointing out at the forests that stretched beyond the village. "The dwarves stay away from human settlements."

So I went.

I was imbued with purpose. Somehow, stupidly, I thought that they were finally giving me a chance; that by doing this then perhaps I would finally earn my place among them. They held magic in their hands, and though it frightened me sometimes, it was all I aspired towards; to feel I had my place among them, these women who had reared me.

I survived, somehow, through the forest. They'd often brought me on collecting missions, fungi and herbs and trapping, so I knew the forest well. But I was still a small child, all alone this time, and it was sheer luck and Loki's favour that kept the wolves away.

Days and nights passed. I tracked the dwarves; whenever I found gleaming metal in the ground, remnants of past battles, I took them to be signs of dwarven crafting. And then at last, after my food supplies had dwindled to nothing – I came across a hunting party.

A father and his son. They were tracking deer. I stayed quiet as I could, following, watching.

The father was a huge mountain of a man. Bristling white-blond beard, braided and studded with metal rings. He wore fur and woven-wool ribbons along his tunic, silver ornaments on his belt and around his arms, so colourful and rich that he could only be royalty. And his son was the same – fair-haired and robustly healthy even as a young adolescent, a jewelled belt cinched at the waist, a sword scabbard made of red dyed leather and gold hanging down his leg.

Dwarves. They had to be dwarves.

The boy had a bow in his hand. His huge father stood behind him, watching, muttering encouragement as the boy drew the bow as much as his young arms could.

The arrow flew; a rumpling of leaves told us the deer was felled. The father clapped his son on the shoulder with a laugh.

“Good boy! Perfect. You’re getting so good at this, you’ll be stronger than me come next season. Let’s go and see if it’s a clean shot.”

The boy smiled proudly at his father, and they both strode away. Like an unkempt wildling, I followed, heart thumping as I tried to work up the nerve to interrupt them. They glowed with their precious metals and their happiness; there were no fathers in my world, and I could not help but envy what I saw.

It was when they were crouched by the deer that the young boy noticed me. I’d made noise in the bushes; he looked between the trees, found me hiding there.

“Father, there’s a boy,” he said, pointing.

The father drew himself up, squinting toward me. I couldn’t move for fear; I clung to the tree trunk, staring stupidly. Once he found me, his eyes turned kind and he coaxed me to come forward.

“I’ve not seen you in the village,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“... it’s Ivar, Jarl.”

“Ivar what? Who’s your sire?”

My mouth moved around empty air. The kind man waited for an answer I couldn’t give. “No one,” I told him. As that seemed to give him pause, I blurted, “Are you dwarves?”

The man looked at his son and burst out laughing. “No, my boy, we aren’t dwarves. We’re from the township of Lagarvík just over there. I am Jarl Gofraid Hroarsson, and this is my son Olaf. Where have you come from, boy?”

“From Ula, Jarl.”

“Ula?” He stared at me. “All alone, on foot?”

“Yes, Jarl. I was tasked to find the dwarves.”

There was a seriousness to his manner now that I had stated the name of my village. “By whom were you given such a task?”

Now had come the moment where I would reveal myself to them. I knew I was something unpleasant compared to them both, and I was loath to admit it.

“The Völvas, Jarl,” I said. “Who live in the cliffs of Ula.”

Jarl Gofraid Hroarsson kneeled by me then, his bushy eyebrows drawn in a frown. He slicked back my scruffy black hair to better see my face. Then he stared down at the pendant I wore over my tunic.

“Can I see that?” he asked me, and I nodded. He lifted the leather cord, rubbed his thumb over the bronze pendant.

It was a small bronze statuette of Freya. I had always worn it; it was a gift from my mother.

The sight of her gave the Jarl such a pause I thought he had turned to stone. Then finally he roused himself enough to let go of it.

“How old are you, boy?” he asked.

“Seven summers, Jarl.”

“Seven,” he echoed. “Seven years already...” He tucked the pendant into my tunic where he would not have to look at it.

“You know this boy, father?” Olaf asked from where he stood, frowning at us both in confusion.

“I know the wisewomen of Ula are not to be refused,” the Jarl said, straightening up. “What do they need, that they might be looking for the dwarves?”

“A cauldron made of dwarven metal,” I said.

“Ha! Is that all?” He shook his head. “Well, you’re in luck, my lad. I happen to know the dwarves. Come with us and we’ll have it done for you.”

So I went with them to Lagarvík.

The luncheon feast we had there in Jarl Gofraid Hroarsson’s great hall was nothing like I’d ever experienced. It was resplendent, cups made of silver at every table, plates of cooked venison and wild boar shining with their honeyed glaze. Mead and laughter flowed, and I thought that surely they were lying to me; surely this could only be the hall of a dwarven king.

“Here,” the Jarl said, wrangling a fat bearded man over to where Olaf and I were sitting. “Here’s a dwarf for you! How about it, friend? Can you make this young man a good, strong cauldron of dwarven metal?”

“Yes, yes, I’ll do it,” grumbled the fat man. “As long as someone’s paying.”

“I’m paying, you stingy ass.”

“Are you really a dwarf?” I asked, overjoyed – the man smiled at me, scruffed up my hair, told off the Jarl for telling fanciful tales. But I believed it, and Olaf only persuaded me of it.

Being an only child, Olaf was all too happy to have me around. I was to stay for the two days it took the dwarf to make his cauldron. Olaf dressed me in his own clothes, which were far too big for me since he was fourteen and huge already; we cinched them with belts and managed anyway. He took me out into the village to show me around, introduced me to the boys who were his friends.

That night, I was made to sleep in the great hall along with the thralls who worked there. Olaf stayed with me, sitting with me in my panelled-off corner, and asked me to show him my pendant.

“I thought I recognised this,” he said. “It’s taken me all day to remember.

A woman gave you this, right?”

“My mother did,” I told him, and he took on a grave expression then that made him look every bit the younger version of his father.

“Was your mother’s name Ósk Ranogdóttir?”

He spoke it as though it were a dark secret.

“Yes,” I said, surprised. “How do you know that?”

“I remember her,” he said excitedly. “Ivar – I think you’re my brother.”

I frowned at him in alarm. And then he told me how this smiling son of a dwarven king might be in any way related to a scrappy little creature like me.

The marriage between his parents was not a happy one. Olaf’s mother had issues carrying to term. She had been pregnant many times, but her children never survived. As the Jarl was well-loved by his men, they were anxious for him that his wife would not give him an heir. Perhaps she was cursed – or perhaps she simply had an ill disposition.

So Jarl Gofraid Hroarsson took her to the reputed wisewomen of Ula.

The Völva who received them was a young woman named Ósk Ranogdóttir. She was reputed to be extremely efficient with fertility problems. She claimed to be directly descended from the last known Vanirdottir – she wore a pendant around her neck to keep Freya’s favour close.

Ósk always wore a black frayed cloth over her face when she received people. That way, the Jarl never saw her face when he brought his wife to be examined. He assumed Ósk must be crippled in some way like the others, and that was that.

The potions worked well enough for his wife to carry Olaf to term and rear him. But every child that came after him was sickly and did not live very long. So they returned again and again.

Years passed. They brought Olaf along, and Ósk was glad to see him so healthy. By then, the little family had a good, intimate relationship with Ósk. Then one day, while Ósk was preparing a potion, Jarl Gofraid Hroarsson caught a glimpse of her face. And he realised she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He fell in love with her at once. He asked whether Ósk might want to come back with him to Lagarvík as his second wife. She was young, she had ties to the Vanirdøtur of old – it was evident that she would give him heirs.

But of course, a Völva does not belong in the hall of a Jarl. So she declined.

Such as it were, the Jarl still sought consummation... and she fell pregnant.

It was a difficult time, Olaf said, remembering it with a frown. His mother was very jealous and agitated. Due to Ósk being pregnant, it seemed inevitable that she would come to the hall of Lagarvík to rear the Jarl's child. Jarl Gofraid Hroarsson would not be refused, and he made arrangements to receive her. Olaf was impatient to meet his brother... and then everything went wrong.

Ósk gave birth too early. It was difficult, and she suffered greatly. When her son was born, it was at the cost of her mind and body. Rumours abounded that the Jarl's wife had poisoned her – and thus, the Jarl drove away his wife, and forbade anyone to speak Ósk's name again, for he was too heartbroken to hear it. He never took another wife, and never sought out the wisewomen of Ula again.

“Why?” I asked when the tale had come to a stop, and my throat was hot with anger. “Why has he never come to visit us, then? If that's true?”

“I told you. He's too heartbroken.”

“You say that like she’s dead,” I insisted. “But my mother’s still alive. She’s not mad. She just needs help sometimes.”

Olaf had nothing to say to that. After a moment of trying to find the right words, he took both my hands and held them tight.

“Does he hate us?” I asked him. “Does he hate me?”

Surely he did. After all, my grandmothers said I was the reason for all of our bad luck. Perhaps the Jarl thought the same, that I was the reason my mother had suffered so much.

“Of course he doesn’t hate you,” Olaf said.

When the cauldron was made, Jarl Gofraid Hroarsson placed it in a cart and told the dwarven metalworker to take me back to Ula. He and Olaf stood with me by the cart, and I stared at them and tried to imagine them as my family. I kept silent of course; Olaf had sworn me to secrecy, as his father hated to speak of the past.

Jarl Gofraid Hroarsson looked at me, and looked at me, like he wanted to remember every inch of my face. He stroked back my hair and then patted me on the shoulder.

“Good lad,” he said. “If those old crones send you out in the forest alone like that again, you go to your Jarl’s hall and you tell him about it, all right? You’re far too young to be travelling alone.”

“Yes, Jarl.”

“Good. Go on, now. Safe trip to you.”

The cart trundled on into the forest. We had journeyed far from the last houses when Olaf came sprinting after us, panting like a dog, shouting *wait, wait!* He caught up with the cart, hopping inside with me, wearing a wide grin.

“I’m going with you, little brother,” he said. “So I know what path to take

when I want to visit you.”

It took us two days to arrive at the foot of the cliffs. As I expected, my mother was rushing as best she could in the passage through the rocks, eager to see me. Olaf and I took the cauldron between us, lugging it along, and I felt so proud of having accomplished my mission.

Then my mother fell in the rocks for rushing – we both sprang to help her, the cauldron clattering on the ground. She had tears running down her face as she gripped me, her shaking fingers digging in like claws. She hugged me tight and rocked me back and forth.

“It’s all right, mamma,” I soothed her. “I’m back. I found the dwarves!”

“Oh, Ivar,” she croaked. “Ivar... Ivar.”

“Hello, Ósk,” Olaf said. He was putting on a brave face; I could tell the sight of my mother shocked him. I could only wonder what she’d looked like when he’d known her.

She gazed up at him, eyes slanting away as always. Her hand came up, crooked and shaking. Olaf stared at it, frowning in concentration as he forced himself forward. He was trying not to appear scared. She touched his face.

“O...laf. Olaf.”

“H-hello,” he said again, cupping her hand as though he could stop it shaking. “It’s good to see you.”

“Let’s pick up the cauldron,” I told him, pulling out of my mother’s grasp so I could go and fetch it. But Olaf was looking between my mother and the cavern in some sort of state of bewilderment.

“I remember it being a lot bigger than this,” he muttered. “Is this really where you live, Ivar?”

Hearing the concern in his voice, I wished I could give another answer. “Yes. I do.”

My grandmothers were watching from the entrance of the cavern. That a Jarl's son might've come to their door didn't oblige them to give any kind of welcome. Ranks no longer applied when one came to the caverns. Here were two boys with a cauldron; so they pretended, for a moment, that there was no greater significance to this meeting.

Olaf looked, and looked, until his bewilderment turned to anger.

"Ósk," he said, taking her hand now with both of his. "I know my father doesn't like to think of the past. But he can't just let you stay in a place like this. You should come back to Lagarvík with Ivar. To live with us. This place is dangerous for you."

My mother looked at him, then, and her eyes stayed fixed. It was dangerous for both of us to stay here; she, who couldn't walk properly, living among these jagged rocks. And I, the scorned child whom she couldn't protect, who wouldn't survive much longer if the crones kept trying to get rid of me, sending me to find either foster parent or death.

She must've understood this, because she began rocking back and forth, blinking as she did when deep in distress. I came back to her to hug her, because I never liked seeing her in that state. She hung her head against my shoulder, giving a mute wail.

"I'm sorry," Olaf stammered. "I know it's... I know you must have a lot of bad memories. But it's been a long time, hasn't it? I know I can persuade Father. You both deserve better than this."

"Olaf," she wailed into my shoulder. "Olaf."

As she kept on rocking, I soothed her, stroking her long black hair. Olaf looked more and more regretful and ashamed as he watched us.

"Sorry," Olaf muttered, glancing at me. "I... maybe I overstepped my bounds. I'm sorry..."

“It’s fine,” I told him. “She just needs a moment.”

When she’d calmed, she reached up, took my hand and joined it with Olaf’s. She squeezed them together, looking between us both from where she sat in the rocks.

Then after a long time, she whispered, “Yes.”

Olaf raised his eyebrows. “Yes? You’ll come, then? There’s enough room on the cart –”

“Him,” she amended. “Yes.”

I looked at her, heart thumping. I didn’t believe what she was saying – what she was implying.

“Mamma,” I protested. “But I need to stay with you.”

She shook her head painstakingly, still squeezing our hands together.

“Yes,” she said again, and tried until she managed to say the word, “Lagarvík,” and then, “Be safe.” She squeezed our hands so tight it was beginning to hurt, and repeated it again; “Safe... safe.”

Perhaps I only began to realise then, just how much danger I had been in. Wandering the forest alone. The sight of my mother’s own fear drove it home. She hated that she couldn’t protect me; she was doing this so that I would have a better chance at growing up.

Olaf was torn between joy and concern as he realised what it was she was accepting to do.

“We won’t be very far,” Olaf said, glancing between us. “We’ll come visit all the time. Right, Ivar?”

I felt ashamed of the excitement that burst in me at the idea of living with Olaf – actually living with him in that huge adorned hall, with all its laughing men and women.

“Mamma,” I said, swallowing hard. “Are you sure about this?”

She nodded, her whole body rocking into the movement. And I, like the eager, starry-eyed child I was, accepted wholeheartedly what Olaf was offering. We followed my mother into the cavern, where she packed what meager belongings she wanted me to take with me. The old crones were overjoyed for me, which was their way of congratulating themselves for finally getting rid of me.

I hugged my mother goodbye, and left her with the cauldron made of dwarven metal. She stood at the mouth of the cavern, watching me go, black hair pulled by the wind. And I thought, surely now with me gone, perhaps she'd start to heal.

“We’ll be back every month,” Olaf told me. “To see how she’s doing. How does that sound?”

I sat in the cart with him, heart pounding so hard that I could barely register what he was saying. He held onto my sweaty hands, wearing an encouraging smile.

“Hey. Little brother. It’ll be all right.”

“What if your father doesn’t want me to live with you?” I muttered.

“He’s our father,” Olaf corrected me. Then with a grin he added, “Doesn’t matter what he thinks. I’ll make him say yes.”

Chapter 27



IVAR

PRESENT DAY

First Quarter of August, 870

Keep the fire hot. Keep him covered and clean, change his bandages, inspect the wound.

Olaf is lying there like the stone kings in Christian chapels. White, peaceful, an illusion of solidity. But there is no life there. Underneath the peel of stone, within the darkness, his heart beats – but there is no other movement.

There is just this quiet.

He isn't dead. I have to keep reminding myself of it. I'll cup his neck, feel his pulse. Alive. He's alive. He's alive.

But for how long?

I've never seen him so weak. Recumbent like this, thighs open when his wounds receive treatment. It's a position of complete surrender. Complete

vulnerability. He depends on us entirely to live.

I just have to eat, and keep watch, and wait. And then wait some more.

It'll be over soon.

... one way or the other.

No. There is only one way this can go. He'll open his eyes, cough and lean over, chastise me for worrying. He'll raise his eyebrows when I tell him I've been caring for him as a woman cares for her babe in its swaddling clothes; he'll chase me through the camp for submitting him to something so humiliating.

I'll tease him about it. It'll strengthen the brotherhood between us even more. It'll be something we survived together. Something to reminisce over at dinnertime.

The Cathalain women come to place runestones on him, to burn bundled herbs and open their hands and chant. I know their chants; not all of them, they have some of their own making, but I recognise the work nonetheless.

Sometimes I take issue with the way they do it. I know my mother would've mixed ash with honey rather than oil. I know my grandmothers would've placed their hands on the body differently.

I know, technically, what to do. What my mother would've done, and the women from the caverns. Their work won them renown because it was so efficient; they would rid men and women of decade-old pains, they would cure fevers that had decimated entire villages. They did things that couldn't be explained otherwise than by magic and the favour of the gods.

I say nothing. I keep to the basic healing arts, all the while collecting their materials and keeping their things tidy. I stay in my place, as ever I have.

But gods, it's been a week and he still hasn't woken up.

* * *

Sometimes, Father comes. He sits beside his eldest while I mix my poultices, prepare fresh linens, press cold wet compresses to Olaf's face. Often he watches me work. I wonder if it brings back memories for him; this dark, cavern-like room, the pestle and mortar in my hands. He asks me whether there is any improvement. And I remind him as I always do: *we can only wait and see.*

Any anger he might've felt towards us about Uradech has disappeared. Instead he sits there, wearing the weight of his concern in a way I've rarely seen before. It makes him look far wiser and more ancient than he really is. He speaks to me in a low rumble about the wider camp, and how slow this week has been: he smacked down Arlyn's men so thoroughly that the forests and hills are empty now. All remnants of a Briton barricade have disappeared. So he's settled comfortably in his camp again, taking this time to reinforce his perimetre and care for his wounded.

I listen, mouth clamped shut. I know Thrain is out there on our perimetre watch, keeping his eyes open. While I care for Olaf, he holds down our section of camp, walks along our perimetre in hopes of seeing Skaði's silhouette in the trees. We've had no word of Arlyn or Eormen's fates – so we wait, and wait, for some clue of where we stand.

The moon steadily waxes to its first quarter. And still we are in this limbo. While it rises in the night sky, I sit alone by Olaf's bedside, staring down at him, chewing hard on a liquorice stick. I wish I could shake him awake and ask him the question that has been sitting on my tongue, on my chest, heavy as a grindstone.

Where do we go from here?

Thrain comes in as the evening deepens, bringing me dinner. I barely stir until he's right beside me, sitting down on the crates I'm perched on.

"Oy." He nudges my elbow. "Have you eaten at all today?"

I grunt, staring down at the bowl of stew he's holding out for me. I can't remember the last time I ate.

"I'm not hungry," I tell him.

Thrain gives me a knowing look while he sets the bowl aside. "Ivar. You cannot survive on liquorice sticks alone. You have to eat. You've been cooped up in here this whole week – the men are worried about you."

I glance at him. He's armed and ready for the night watch; his chainmail glistens in the hearthlight. Suddenly the futility of it all hits me – he's going out there again to wait for word from the Britons, but what if we never hear from them again? Whether they're dead, or whether they've decided to leave our friendship in tatters, it comes down to the same.

What if the alliance that Olaf worked so hard to build truly has collapsed?

My throat is hot as I stare at Thrain's belt of weapons, his readiness implying some form of structure, some adherence to a plan. Except we have no plan. We have no certainties any more.

"Ivar?" Thrain prompts me.

"I don't know what to do," I let out, and my voice is thin, hoarse from disuse. "I don't know what we're doing any more."

He hears how tight my throat is; he wraps an arm around me, pulls me into an embrace. I grasp onto his chainmail, eyes resting on Olaf's inert form.

It has always been Olaf, coming up with the plans, pulling us forward. In truth he has dragged me forward by the scruff of the neck my whole damned life. Without him... I don't know where I'd even be.

I don't know who I'd be.

Thrain draws back, cupping my head.

"I'm going on my watch," he says. "If Skaði does not come to me tonight, then we'll discuss where to go from here."

I sigh. The impression of futility still lingers; it feels pointless to even speak at all. In the silence, Thrain presses a kiss to my forehead.

"We did not spend a month working so hard for it to come to nothing," he says. "What's that saying you used to tell me? – however grim a man's fate, remember that the Norns always weave with a purpose in mind?"

I let out a dry laugh. "The Norns weave for their own amusement."

"Still." He squeezes my shoulder. "Have faith. You cannot lose your head, brother – I can't very well do this alone, can I?"

I nod at him, wish him well on his watch. And he leaves me to the company of the crackling hearth, and the whistling breaths of a half-dead man.

* * *

I've dozed off when the door slams open. I startle, twist around to find Thrain marching through the threshold. The dawn hasn't yet risen, the wider camp is still quiet with sleep – but there is fire in Thrain's eye as he strides toward me.

I sit straighter. "You have word?"

"She came," Thrain breathes, and takes out a pouch and a parchment sealed with clay. It's stamped with the stylised horse head of Briton royalty. "Skaði came to see me."

“Thank you, Freya,” I mutter, and we both rush to kneel by the hearth, so we can tilt the parchment into the light.

“She wouldn’t say anything to me,” Thrain goes on as I break the seal and unroll it. “Just pressed that in my hand and told me to return with our answer as soon as I could. She’s waiting out there in the trees now.”

We both lean over the parchment. There is no formal address, no hint of the desired recipient. I read the scrawled Gaelic under my breath:

“On behalf of my brother... I am writing this present letter to apologise formally for all harm and casualties that occurred at Hallowed Hill.”

“It is Eormen, then,” Thrain says. “Writing on Prince Arlyn’s behalf. You think that means he’s dead?”

I tilt my head. “We’ll see if she mentions him. She says: *with respect, you did not warn us that the Viking King would be accompanying you. My brother saw a chance and took it. We sincerely regret what happened that day at Hallowed Hill...*”

Thrain gives a little disbelieving laugh. “Saw a chance and took it, indeed. What else does she say? Is it just a long groveling apology?”

“It looks like it. Though we hardly deserve any largesse on your part, my brother and I want to assure you that we still seek your friendship... so Arlyn is alive, then. Let’s see, yadda, yadda, more apologising... ah, here we are. We are rallying the men that remain to us, in preparation for the moon, though we are few. If you are willing to continue to work with us, we would like to hear what the Viking King is planning this coming moon. We would also like to smuggle food into the fort, if you are willing to help us in this regard. As a token of good faith, please accept this potion recipe...”

Thrain proffers the pouch. I take it, spill the contents on the sheepskin. A small scroll skitters out, as do a bunch of plant cuttings.

“... it is what we use to treat fever, including the affliction that may arise from the bogs. You may find these plants in our forests. It is our sincere wish that your men do not suffer any more harm. With respect... E.”

I want to laugh. After the absolute debacle of Hallowed Hill – after we waited on tenterhooks for some sign of life on their part – this missive is nothing short of pathetic.

“In a nutshell: *sorry, here are some plants, feel better?*” I resume, and Thrain snorts.

“They are begging for our forgiveness,” he says. “It sounds as though they barely have a few hundred men left down here.”

“Yes. The rest must still be stuck up north.”

“If that’s the case, then what can we feasibly do, if we work together as we are now? They are weakened, and so are we.”

I let out a sigh as I turn over the parchment, staring down at the blank space where we’ll write our reply. I am the one who’ll write it; Thrain cannot quite hold the charcoal stick with his left hand.

We both stare down at it as we decide on what to say.

“What else can we do than forgive them?” I mutter. “We’ve worked too hard for this friendship to just tell them to fuck themselves.”

Thrain rumbles in agreement. “At least Eormen protested her brother’s actions,” he ponders. “I think we can trust that her word is sincere.”

“I suppose,” I grunt.

Thrain’s face is drawn. “I don’t like this. After everything that happened. To just forgive them so lightly...”

“I know, brother. But I don’t think we have any other option.”

I do not say what burns at the back of my throat. *It is what Olaf would’ve advised that we do. Keep the peace; stay on our original trajectory.*

We give it succinctly: our formal forgiveness, and a thank-you for the potion recipe. We let them know of Father's plans; that his men will not budge from his siege camp this moon, as he is still busy with his sick and wounded. We end with an offer to meet for further discussion. I read over our reply, then I hand Thrain the rolled-up message.

To have a secret missive from Eormen had filled us both with purpose; but now that we've resumed the situation, that purpose seems to melt away again.

It's just like Thrain said: what can we even hope to accomplish as we are now? Smuggle food into the fort, and – what? Sit on our arses while we wait for something to change, for one king or the other to make a decision?

I lay a heavy gaze on Olaf's recumbent form. We will have to forge our way forward somehow. It all comes down to me, now – without Olaf, I am the eldest, the one who must take on all responsibilities.

Without Olaf, I become Father's crown prince. And what a farce that is.

Thrain turns to shrug on his cloak. When he's ready to leave, he squeezes my shoulder affectionately.

"Today," he says. "He'll wake today."

* * *

But Olaf does not wake that day.

One of the elder Cathalain comes to join me in the morning, once I've finished bathing him. Her name is Yngvor, and she is all wild grey curls and wrinkly eyes so shrewd I try to avoid finding myself in their path.

She's noticed how I keep the place stocked for her and her kinswomen's rituals. Nothing escapes her: I think she knows who I am, where I was raised,

who my mother is. The Cathalain count several Völvas among their number, and she is one of them; one need only look her in the face to realise it.

There is no hiding from her.

“Ivar Gofraidsson,” she greets me.

“Yngvor of the Cathalain,” I greet her back in clipped tones.

I disdain having her around us. Too many memories, too many secrets we’re trying to keep. Völvas like her bow to no authority; they are ever a grey, unpredictable party. Whatever they know, whatever their visions tell them, they keep it to themselves. Let it inform their own decisions.

I take advantage of her herbal knowledge to ask about Eormen’s potion ingredients; she validates the plants, naming them yellow dock and wild garlic among other things, and we prepare it together. I have a feeling she has something to say to me. But in the manner of seers, she waits for the right moment; waits for me to blunder around until I inevitably set off the lesson.

I know her damned tactics. I refuse to play into her hands. We care for Olaf together, and she oversees my application of Eormen’s poultice. She silently judges the manner in which I work, the way I help Olaf drink the broths I prepare for him.

I know she’s judging it all. She wears that small approving smile when I get things right. And when I don’t, she simply takes over the task, shows me benignly what she would do. And I watch, pretending I am not stowing away every last piece of information she offers, and we don’t speak a word throughout.

Oh, I will outlast the old woman. I have outlasted and outlived many of her kind.

When it comes to the burning of herbs, the chanted healing spells, I let her take over as I always have. But this time, after preparing bowls of dried

bunches, she sits back and stares at me.

I stare back. Try not to snarl at her. It takes me a moment to realise I'm holding onto my mother's pendant, fiddling with it nervously; I make myself let go of it.

"Why do you stop here, son of Ula?" she says.

The appellation sends a shiver down my spine.

"Your arts are not for me to know," I say, echoing the old crone's voice that lives in my head.

"This? These healing arts? They are common *fjölkyngi*," she says. "These songs are known by many men. Many Jarls and learned warriors in this camp chant with me. But you – you, whose bloodline has more potency than all of them put together – you will not."

I let out a breath. Old bony fingers tighten around my shoulders; voices crowd my head. I try not to let her see how my pulse races – how my skin heats as though expecting the belt.

"This is not any kind of forbidden *seiðr*," she says. "There are many arts a man may learn without shame nor stain to his character. Why do you deny yourself the rest? I know you're already proficient at protection spells –"

"Oh, do you?" I snap. This woman – explaining *fjölkyngi* and *seiðr* to me as though I had not been born into these things. "I've performed no spells of any kind."

She lifts an eyebrow. "The shield you made for Thrain Mordsson wears such a potent repellent spell that even grass will not lean towards it."

That robs me of my response. I just painted the damn thing; I had no faith in my own ability to give those runes any potency. And she's saying it wears an active spell? That I could perform such a thing even by accident?

The impression of having broken some primordial law shivers through

me. I'm worrying my pendant again; I make myself drop my hand.

"Listen, child," she starts, lowering her voice. "Olaf's mind is gone. He wanders in other realms. He is lost. But there is a song we may sing to bring him back. The spirit-wanderer's *galdr*; you know it, don't you?"

I make myself hold her gaze, my mouth pressed in a fine line.

Of course this would be the solution. The Norns are laughing, those old wrinkled hags, as they let their bony fingers walk along my thread.

Yngvor leans closer.

"My women and I could sing it," she mutters. "But you know it is your voice he would hear. You could bring him back, son of Ula."

"No."

"Why not?" she asks, eyes aglitter. "It is entirely in your capabilities."

"It isn't my place," I recite through my dry mouth.

"Because the women of Ula forbade you?"

I try to answer, but nothing comes out.

She knows she speaks the truth, doesn't she. Of course she knows. She sees it all, she angles that smile at me and she is smiling at all the ages of my life, the young trembling boy as well as the seething, silent man.

"There is gold in your hand, and yet you would wander as a beggar," she says. "You are used to keeping your palm open, letting the gold fall out. Thus you let go of what you desire most. But it is a waste of your mother's legacy to keep all that knowledge stored in here."

She reaches towards me. I watch her, amazed by her sheer audacity as she pats that gnarled hand against my mother's pendant, where it lays over my heart.

I catch her wrist to pull her off.

"You will rein in your familiarity, old woman," I hiss at her.

“You have the blood of Ósk Ranogdóttir,” she insists. “Honour it. Speak the songs she taught you, before it is too late.”

I speak my dismissal through clenched teeth: “Get out.”

So she turns and leaves, carrying with her a smile that says this conversation is not over.

* * *

Thrain comes knocking not long after. He must’ve crossed paths with Yngvor, or otherwise heard something of our exchange; he seems thoughtful as he lays his shield against the wall. It’s the lunch hour, the outdoors is drenched in the scent of cooking. I can only wonder how long he’s been standing out there.

My blood thuds in my ears as we exchange a glance.

We’ve only spoken once before of my childhood in the Völvas’ caverns. The memory of that night is still vivid in my mind. It was a full moon night in Dublin; both of us laying in candlelight, sweat-slick and sated. I had invited him to my quarters for once, to be alone for the night. He’d traced the lines of runes that ran down my back, and I found myself telling him about my mother in some bout of post-coital honesty.

I did not have to swear him to secrecy. He recognises a secret when it’s bestowed upon him. Only Olaf and a handful of elder Dubliners know the story, and they don’t spread it either.

After all, it is a shameful tale.

“So,” Thrain says as he passes me. “I thought I was getting better with my off-hand – but that woman says I have no merit after all? That I have my shield to thank?”

I scoff at him. “You are getting a lot better,” I tell him. Then, steering firmly away from these topics that make my heart race, I ask him: “Did you see Skaði off safely, then?”

“I did, but don’t change the subject,” he protests. “What that woman was saying –”

I glare at him. He sounds brisk and hopeful – as though Yngvor had delivered a solution to all our problems. But Loki, he should know better than this. The scant few times we have spoken of magic, it has only ever been at my initiative.

He finishes, faltering: “– you, uh, know of a way to help Olaf?”

“I don’t want to discuss it with you,” I grit out.

He struggles a moment, frowning. But he recognises the boundary, the one I have always upheld. So he nods, though I see how it frustrates him.

“I apologise, brother.”

He lifts up the sack of lunch he brought, so we sit and delve into the bread and dried meat. I stay tensed as we eat, waiting for him to try some other tactic, since he seems so enamoured by Yngvor’s idea. But he’s silent, thoughtful. He mentions at long last that the afternoon watchers are gathering, and that it would do me good to get some fresh air.

He has a point. I’ve barely been outside all week long, and all this pacing around Olaf’s bed is turning me irascible. When he pushes my sword scabbard in my hands, I accept it; as much as it irks me to leave Olaf’s side, Thrain is more than capable of guarding him in my stead.

“You know...” Thrain begins, watching me buckle on my scabbard.

I wait for him to continue. This time he can’t quite meet my eye.

“While you’re out, perhaps you should take the opportunity to see Tamsin,” he says. “You haven’t been to see her yet, have you?”

My gut clenches to hear her name on his lips. We have both taken cares not to speak it lately; Thrain flew into such a rage when he learned that Father had thrown his pregnant wife into the prison house. He visits her every day, I know he does; he bears her scent, always. If he had his way, he would've pulled her out of there from the start. But she insists upon respecting Father's orders. She wants to repent, to prove that she is not the wily enchantress he made her out to be... or something of the sort.

I breathe out slowly. It is not just for Thrain's sake that I haven't spoken her name. It always summons the same images to my mind; Tamsin, galloping away with Olaf, her face white as she looked back at us. Tamsin, bent over him where he lay bleeding, holding his limp hand tight against her chest.

"No," I admit. "I haven't been to see her."

"You can't still be angry with her."

I sigh. "I'm angry with everyone."

Thrain lays a deadpan look on me. I know it isn't fair to be angry with her. But the loss of Olaf has turned me into this mad wounded thing, and thinking about her only makes it worse.

Thrain says, "You know she already places enough blame on herself."

Of course she does. The Christian girl taking the blame. I know it isn't her fault, that her fool of a brother acted alone, I *know* it. But it changes nothing to try and reason with myself.

Thrain goes on in a tentative tone: "I know there are things you can't discuss with me, about *fjölkyngi* and *seiðr* and the rest. But... perhaps you could discuss those things with a Vanirdottir."

And there it is. Gods, he does not know when to leave it alone, does he? I get up, turn my back on him to firmly close the subject.

“You said the men were waiting, so. I’m going.”

Thrain calls after me, stubborn as ever: “She was asking for you!”

I breathe in and out again, ignoring the bittersweet spark that bursts within me. As I stride onward, I call back over my shoulder at him:

“She’ll be disappointed, then.”

Chapter 28



IVAR

Waxing Moon of August

Thrain has some delightful simplicity to his character. A certain bluntness with which he blunders through life. He wears what he feels right there upon his face, so that there can be no shadowy ulterior motive, no hidden layer of rot that festers inside him.

He makes these suggestions to me with complete honesty. He means well, I know he does. *Why don't you simply apply these solutions to our issues?* Perhaps it all truly does appear so simple to him. A problem: a solution. A wounded man needs to be sung back to life; so we should sing. A Vanirdottir needs a pack; so we should provide.

Simple.

But it is not simple. None of it is *simple* in the least.

My jaw is clenched all throughout my watch. Wind fills the branches overhead as we stride through our perimetre checkpoints.

Are you very unhappy, then? Tamsin's teasing voice is in my ear. *Better to be stupid and happy like the rest of us; is that what your god encourages?*

I would not call Thrain *stupid and happy*, but... well. There is some element of that, when it comes to her and the pack. Everything boils down to what is best for those he loves most: that is his only preoccupation.

It is a good quality for a pack leader. By rights, I should have the same priorities that he does; I should not allow myself to get bogged down like this in hesitation. But when I imagine just *doing* what needs to be done – heal my brother, visit my Vanirdottir – my lungs shrivel, and my body seems to shrink as though returned to the helplessness of childhood.

I'm staring blindly ahead of myself as the memories crowd me. The darkness of the wood morphs into the caverns, their great black mouths swallowing me whole. I can see the old wisewomen again, milling around sagging tabletops as they work their spells. Each table hosts bowls and vials that glitter with all the secrets of the world. I can see the boy I used to be, running between their legs. Apprentices who are barely any older than him are working, taking instruction. He watches. He learns. Once everyone sleeps, he goes to the table himself, tongue sticking out in concentration, scrambling to apply the lessons. There is a dead raven on the table. The boy burns the herbs, he speaks the song under his breath, the song to bring back dead things. And it works – it works – he sees a flutter of wings, the blink of a glassy eye.

Then there's the slap of a gnarled hand upon his wrist. A hard yank away from the table, his knobbly knees knocked against stone. The punishment; the humiliation.

Do you know what you are? You are a selfish parasite. Your mother only keeps you because she cannot pluck you off; you are like a tic growing fat on

her goodness.

You have taken everything from her. Do you want to take even more?

No? Then don't you dare touch any of this.

Another scene opens before me as we skirt the riverbank. In the slanting afternoon sun, I see a hall glittering with the wealth of a dwarven king. That boy again, grown to a young teenager now, hands blackened with soot. He did not mean to start the fire. (He did entirely mean to start the fire.) All the dwarven king's horses are gone. The fire has grown out of control; it should not be possible to burn so hot. Was it a spell of some kind? Of course not; of course not. (It was a spell, spat with spite, but it was not meant to burn so hot; it was not meant to hurt anyone.)

The dwarven king wants to leave Norway. The dwarven king wants to go to the British Isles. But to leave Norway would mean the boy would never see his mother again. The dwarven king has sympathy, but it does not stay his hand.

I took you in. I gave you my name. And this is how you repay me? How is it that you manage to ruin everything you touch? Mark my words, boy: you will have nothing. You will amount to nothing. My name is the only thing you will ever have that will gleam with any worth.

Later the dwarven king will say that he spoke in anger. That he loves his sons equally. He will embrace them both and assume the trouble is past.

But the boy hears what he has always heard. *You are an affliction. You bring nothing but bad luck.*

So the boy begins to collect things he can keep in secret. A stash that can never tarnish nor be confiscated. These things are immaterial; they are memories, stories, scraps of knowledge he stores and repeats to himself.

Repetition only strengthens his grasp of these things until he can have the confidence that this, at least, is something that no one will take from him.

Sagas. Myths. Fantasies. They are small worlds he holds in his hands. They are invisible; they weigh nothing; they can't break. They can't be whisked away.

The boy grows into a man. The man hungers and thirsts, like all men do. He chases after a fantasy and, against all odds, finds it. And the fantasy is a wide green land under his feet, the fantasy is a girl who smells of honey and apples. She has weight. She is breakable. She can be taken by someone else.

She is taken by someone else. Inevitably. And the more he tries to hold onto this fantasy, the more everything begins to crumble between his hands; even those pillars he thought were so immovable.

You will have nothing, says the cacophony of memories. *You only ever ruin what you touch*. And they are louder, so much louder, than the softly spoken words of a well-meaning blue-eyed man.

* * *

The winding path that leads back into Dumbartonshire brings my men and I close to the prison house. I know it's coming; I can spy its slanted thatched roof, the flowers sprouting from its ridge turned silver in the evening light.

I've passed in front of that house this past week, ignoring it. But now with Thrain's words echoing in my mind, I can't help but slow down.

The three Dubliners guarding the prison house perk up to greet us. I stare at that ramshackle little door as their voices chime over my head.

Nýr tells me what both Britons had for dinner, how they're doing; Rhun's recovery is going well, though he's still suffering headaches. Tamsin has

been helping them to take care of him.

I barely hear any of it. Tamsin... Tamsin's just beyond.

Nýr sees me staring at the door, debating with myself. He lays a hand on my back.

"She'll be happy to see you, Jarl," he says.

I let out a long breath. I can't go on avoiding her, stewing in senseless anger like this. Thrain's right, I have to just... just face her, once and for all.

My feet lead me to the door. Mutely I watch as my fist lifts to knock. There's no response; it's getting late, perhaps she's sleeping. I open it slowly, trying not to let it creak too loudly.

The sound within that room grasps me by the guts.

She's purring.

The Dubliners all turn, probably feeling the same yearn to crawl under that soft blanket of noise. I shut the door behind me, possessive of that sound, not wanting them to enjoy it.

I lean back against the door, blinking as my eyes adjust. The fire's burning low; she's turned the whole place into a secondary nest, furs on the bed, sprigs of sweet-smelling herbs and rowan berries here and there. Tamsin and Rhun are reclining in the furs by the hearthstone. He's got his head in her lap, and she's sitting against the wall, leaning over him, purring for him. She seems almost asleep, nodding a little, her arms loose around his head. The vibration fills the air so that I feel compelled to join them.

She learned how to do it consciously, then. She's doing it for her brother.

I stare at her as that purr soothes the knots of tension and sorrow in me. The Vanirdottir's purr... our stories say she only offers it to those she cherishes most. It is a primal instinct, possessive, protective. I should not be hearing this; it isn't intended for me.

I tilt my head back and appreciate it nonetheless. Just for a moment.

To think she is not even chained, and yet she hasn't taken a step out of this house all week. It only drives home how much she wants to make amends. It's so very Christian of her, it just irritates me. I know full well that she's just trying to survive, trying to do her best even as she stands with one foot in two warring worlds.

"Tamsin," I whisper.

She wakes, lifting her head little by little. Blinking up at me, her grogginess makes way for sharp awareness.

"Ivar," she breathes. There's fear tightening her face; it makes her purr stutter.

"Come," I tell her. "Let's go outside."

She frowns. "You know I'm not allowed –"

"Just for a moment. I'll bring you back in afterwards."

She opens her mouth as though to defend her choices like she does with Thrain. He always gives her options, asks what she wants to do. But I'm not going to do that. I've noticed, during the nights we've spent together, that she likes to bend to my commands; there's a certain abandon in it that she may have a taste for.

Communication always seems easier when there are fewer words and choices involved.

She eases Rhun from her lap and into the furs, then brushes herself down as she comes to me. Her purr has all but vanished, and I ache for it as she reaches my side.

"Just a little while, then," she insists.

"That's what I said."

The general hollow state I'm in gives me a strange impression of

freedom. I haven't touched her without Thrain present in a while. Now my hand moves by itself, fitting naturally around the back of her neck as she exits the door before me. She bristles, but allows it.

A starry night blooms behind my eyelids. I let it fill me with its sparks of pleasure as I lead her out, to the general surprise of the Dubliners.

Nýr steps forward. "Jarl, we thought – the King mentioned –"

"Fuck the King," I growl, and they don't push it any further after that.

* * *

I lead her through the trees, beyond firelight. Into darkness and privacy.

Once we're far enough, we come to a stop. She gazes up at me in wordless confusion as I walk her backwards until she's pressed up against a tree. Moonlight glints in her eyes, just like ours, giving them a wolfish reflection.

She's waiting for me speak. My hand rises, knuckles grazing down her cheek. Then my fingers find her throat, wrap around it, and she lets out a shaking breath as she lets me do it.

Loki, but it's pointless to cherish any of this, isn't it? All these precious things, these glittering favours I scavenge and hold onto so tightly. She wears Thrain's mark on her neck, while Olaf wears the stranglehold of death around his own throat – and I am reminded that they are not mine to keep, they cannot be mine to keep, they can only slip between my grasping hands like everything else and there is nothing, *nothing* I can do about it.

"Ivar, I'm sorry," Tamsin whispers after a heated silence. "I'm so sorry. Thrain's been telling me how Olaf's doing. I know it means nothing to

apologise, but... I wish I could've done something to stop Rhun. I wish none of this had happened."

My hand clenches tighter still. She trails off, eyes fluttering shut. Then I lean in, scenting her at the crook of her neck, defiance kicking up in me.

"Purr for me," I whisper under her ear.

She sniffs, nods, then closes her eyes and frowns in concentration. And the purr... that delicious vibration reverberates in her chest, pulling me into her. It's an embrace so deep and complete that I lose myself in it. I wouldn't even know what to compare it to. Perhaps my mother's arms, the faint memory of them; that irrational feeling of all-encompassing safety and trust that a child can have towards the one that cares for them.

It's all right, that purr whispers. It's going to be all right.

I sigh against her neck, revelling in it. It's so hot, pooling over my body like a warm bath.

"Ivar, I –"

"Hush," I hiss against the shell of her ear.

There hasn't been a single night I've spent with her where I haven't given her commands, spoken all throughout, making it play rather than something deep. I don't like the solemnity of silence between lovers. What is shared is always too raw, too profound somehow. More than sex but a ritual, locked eyes and joint minds meeting on an equal level.

Scent, skin and the hum of instinct – that is what she shares with Thrain. That is all they need to meet at the deepest level. I've always stayed at the surface of play and pleasure, accepting the allowances they offer; staying in my place.

But right now... I don't have the heart for play. I'm already somewhere deep and dark that I can't climb out of.

I don't need either of us to say anything. I don't need her to self-flagellate in the various ways she's found. I just need to taste it on her mouth; the salt of her guilt, the sweetness of her honesty.

She gives a quiet moan when I kiss her, biting her plump lower lip, rolling it between my teeth, sucking gently. Then less gently. It's been so long. I lap at her mouth until I sink into that wet heat that tastes of honey and apples. She clings onto me, the purr vibrating along our tongues, along each point of contact; her fingers wrapped around my chainmail, her thighs as they part around mine.

If there were words to say, we substitute them with bite-marks, weave them like cherry stalks between our tongues. Her purr takes on a different quality as I kiss her and kiss her again. It takes on rich dark notes, arousal adding a velvety weight that has me hardening, forgetting anything but my need for this, for her, the peace it brings to be with her.

I hoist her up against the tree; she wraps her legs around my waist, holding on, brushing down the bristles over my ears where I've been neglecting to shave my hair. We breathe together, slick lips nudging against one another. Salt and saliva; I'm not sure the tears are hers alone.

Whatever happens, at least... at least I'll still have Thrain...

... and her.

For however long the Norns have granted us, anyway.

The thought makes me frown, bite her again, kiss her harder. Freya, but I don't want to bargain like that. I don't want to settle on a version of the future where those of us who survive lean on one other to remember those we've lost.

I want to share this with Olaf. All of this. I want to see him dance with Tamsin again. I want to see her wash the bedsheets for him and have him

blushing and stammering like a little boy. I want him to experience the tenderness of her purr, without a wine-soaked muzzle this time to deny it to himself.

I want to see him... the face he makes... when her belly's round, when the both of us have to own up to the fact that we're in this together, regardless of how difficult it is to feel worthy or ready. However many problems we may have to overcome in our own thick heads, to accept simple happiness – as long as our pack stays together, I know we can manage it.

Tamsin pants against me as I break off. My throat's burning too much; a soft whine escapes me, and she kisses it away, soothes the tears from my cheeks, the worry lines on my forehead.

“Ivar,” she sighs, and the sound of my name on my Vanirdottir's lips weakens me as ever.

It is a concerted fall; both of us follow the grain of the wood downward until the great curved roots greet us. And we breathe together as the darkness envelops us in its secret fold.

* * *

Always, with her, these moments feel as though I had stepped into some liminal space, a bridge between the realms. The black roots of the tree curl around her, huge and snake-like. Her little hands grasp onto those shining coils as she steadies herself, straddling me in the darkness. The bark breaks away and glitters on her skin like so many scales.

She unbuckles my belt, letting my weapons clatter among the roots. Then she moves to tug my chainmail off. I let her, mindless – I don't care what she does with me, as long as she stays close. Then once she's dropped my

chainmail beside us in a flump of metal, she gathers me up in a hug, holding me tight around the shoulders. Like she'd just wanted to feel me against her properly, the warm shape of her body fitted snug against my torso.

I close my eyes as I hold onto her, sink my face in the crook of her neck. I can't bring myself to break this charged, heady silence. So she does, her soft voice rising amidst the lull of crickets and the breeze shivering through the branches overhead.

"I missed you."

The words drop through me like the glint of coins in a wishing well. I cup her cheek, draw back so I can look at her. Her eyes flicker up to meet mine, and through the vespertine haze, she seems tentative. Hopeful, perhaps, that my anger might've passed.

"Thrain kept me updated about everything," she adds, "but it isn't like seeing you in person."

Tch. "I should've come sooner," I murmur.

"It's all right. I know you've been very busy." There is a hint of teasing in her voice as she adds: "You're always making me wait for you, as it is."

Somehow she manages to pull a grin from me. I lean in, kiss the dimple in her cheek. So she turns to catch my lips properly, and it is a while longer before we break away to speak. She's solemn again, nudging her nose against mine.

"I'm tired of being shut away in that prison house," she mutters. "Rhun's better now, he doesn't really need me any more. So I wish I could be with you, helping to care for Olaf."

"Mm," I hum appreciatively. "There's a problem, though. Father has been in and out of Angharad's house quite often. So it would be difficult to sneak you in."

She lets out a frustrated sigh. “How is Olaf?”

“Still the same.”

Her little hands travel down my chest, flattening the creases of my tunic. “Thrain told me you’ve been watching over him day and night. How are you? Have you been eating more?”

I scoff, wondering at the fact that Thrain told her even this much. “Is this why you want to join us at the house? So you can make me broths and force-feed me?”

She grins. “Someone has to take care of you.”

“Thrain is already enough of a mother-hen. I won’t have you adding yourself to the pile.”

“He tells me you’ve been working alongside the Cathalain,” she says. “It must be hungry work. The potions and the... the spell-crafting, and bind-runes, and all those medicinal arts.”

I raise an eyebrow at the question I hear in her tone. “You’re not very subtle, lamb.”

She flushes. “What? I’m only repeating what Thrain tells me.”

But she wears her curiosity so blatantly. Not only is she frustrated to be left out, she also wears that fascinated air when she speaks of our healing arts. Like she’s been waiting all this while to ask me about it.

Of course. She is a Vanirdottir; of course she might feel a pull to magic, though she knows little about it. As aggravating as it might’ve been for Thrain to push me to her door... he was entirely right. It is somehow far easier to speak of it with her, for whom magic is a birthright.

Sighing, I indulge her: “The Cathalain have been chanting and crafting potions, indeed. But I do not participate. Thrain knows that. Even when I take issue with what they do, I let them work as they will.”

“Do you not correct them, if they’re wrong?”

I can’t help but laugh at that. She sounds like Thrain, making it all sound so terribly easy.

“I told you. I don’t meddle with their craft. And besides, the spell they’re preparing now is far too difficult for someone like me, even if I did want to meddle.”

“What spell is that?”

The thought of it bristles my spine. Tamsin is looking at me expectantly. So I turn it over upon my tongue, trying to find some way of explaining it.

“Do you remember what I told you, about how a man should not let his mind slip away from him?” I ask her, speaking quietly now. Tamsin nods. “Well, they say Olaf’s mind is gone. He is adrift in other realms. So someone has to go out into the realms to fetch him.”

She’s wide-eyed as she tries to imagine this.

“It is one of the most difficult spells to accomplish,” I say. “It is very deep magic.”

“Didn’t you tell me only gods and sorcerers could do that? Travel bodiless through the realms?”

“That’s correct. You have a good memory.”

For a moment we sit, Tamsin’s eyes resting on my pendant as she loses herself in her imaginings. The bronze statuette rests on my tunic, glinting in the moonlight.

Instinctually my hand rises to wrap around it as she stares at it. As though she were Yngvor, shrewd-eyed prophetess, reminding me of what this pendant means. What my responsibilities are. In this moment’s silence, I can almost hear that old crone’s voice again, rough and hoarse in the quiet.

You know it is your voice he would hear.

You could bring him back, son of Ula.

“What’s wrong?” Tamsin asks me quietly.

I lick my dry lips and speak. “Yngvor, one of the elders... she invited me to participate in the spell.”

Tamsin looks awed. “And will you do it?”

Such a simple question. Somehow they are the wisest. The ones I find most difficult to answer.

Cold prickles over my body. My brow furrows as a dozen different answers spring to my mouth. But how can I even begin to explain my reluctance to her? If I could only paint her a picture of the childhood that lays behind me like scorched earth, a dark stretch that left its stains upon the soles of my feet.

“Isn’t magic in your blood?” she adds. “Surely a witch’s son would manage to travel through the realms.”

“Let’s just say no good ever came of me touching my mother’s arts,” I manage.

“Really?” She says it like she finds it hard to believe.

“Oh yes. I was ever a blight upon her.”

“Why do you say that?”

I open my mouth, try to find some way to begin that story. But the tragedy of it suddenly seems far too bleak, when she is so warm in my lap.

“Perhaps you should get me drunk and ask me that again,” I tell her with a sardonic smile.

She frowns. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want –”

“Oh, but it’s a banal story, really. Every tavern drunk has some similar misery to splay out, if it might win him some sympathy.”

“Ivar,” she chastises, brow furrowed.

My brashness wanes. She will not let me eel away like that.

There is no pretty way to tell the tale, and though I try to find some way of wording it that is not crass, all that comes out is the stark truth: “I was forced upon her.”

I cannot look at Tamsin now. I don’t want to see the look on her face. I try to go on hurling out more words, more of an explanation, but I find that I no longer can – they are too heavy, too inappropriate, like great writhing beasts heaving out from my mouth. So I take a breath, and try to set them down more carefully.

“As a young woman she could cure the worst fevers of the age. But after my father... visited her, and after she had me, she could barely bring a cup to her own lips without help,” I say. “The best thing I ever did for my mother was leave her be. Her and her craft alike.”

The silence is barely breathable afterward.

“You say you were a blight upon her,” Tamsin says tentatively. “But did she agree with that? Did she say that to you herself?”

Ha. Trust her to touch the issue with a needle.

“Well... no. She didn’t,” I admit. “That’s the mystery of it. Despite all the hardships she suffered, all the sacrifices she had to make for my sake. She was always good to me. She still taught me everything she could.”

My throat is growing uncomfortably tight. I want to stop, stop talking about this, but those questions have always haunted me. Why she chose to keep me; why she even tolerated me at all, instead of giving me to the forest as the crones had always encouraged.

But there has never been any answer, other than the tightening of my mother’s arms around me, the gesture imbued with animal protectiveness. No words to explain the depth of her own feeling.

Tamsin runs her fingers along my tattooed neck as she stays close. Quietly she says, “If your mother thought you were worthy, then perhaps you should trust her judgment.”

The words slice into me. I stare sightlessly at the woods ahead, then let my gaze wander up to the bright silver moon, as though staying still and quiet might staunch the wound.

“It’s quite remarkable, how deeply you can cut a man without any blade in your hand,” I murmur at length. She starts to apologise, so I shush her with a soft smile. “No, you’re right, lamb. Only it’s something I’ve wrestled with for a very long time.”

She wraps her arms around me again, somewhat apologetic this time. We stay like that awhile, sharing body heat, until the cold edges of this conversation begin to melt.

“I think you should try the spell, at least,” she mumbles into my neck.

“Tamsin,” I protest. “Even if I had any kind of practice, which I don’t – it is still an extremely difficult spell, like I said. It’s way out of my league.”

“Maybe you should have more faith in yourself,” she insists stubbornly.

I’m grinning now. All this while I thought I would be the one to give her that advice; and yet here we are, roles reversed.

She’s still tensed against me; she’s not finished. “If I were in your place, I’d do it, whatever the difficulty,” she says. “I already passed up a chance to act. And now we’re in this mess, and I wish I’d made different choices. I wish I’d pushed myself harder.”

She can’t mean... she’s talking about her craze? She actually regrets not going into it? I draw back so I can look at her, eyes flickering between hers, and then down the long red line of her braid. It certainly makes for a poignant parallel; both of us balking before our own capacities. But as much as I want

to explore that sentiment of hers, I have a feeling that the subject of her craze will be a long conversation. Now isn't the time.

"It's getting late, lamb," I tell her. "I should walk you back."

"Wait," she protests, holding onto me. "Isn't there any way I could help you? With the spell, or with anything else? I'd like to help if I can."

I stare at her, caught off-guard again. I had not even imagined pulling her into this.

"You want to help me with a spell? You, a Christian girl?" I rail at her. "I thought you'd be afraid to dabble in the devil's work."

That ruffles her feathers. "You said these arts were Freya's domain. And she's not particularly evil, is she?"

"No. She is... complex."

"Well then. I'll dabble."

From the way she's fidgeting and averting her eyes, I can tell this isn't just about magic or the specifics of the work, for her. She's concerned for me, and she wants to help bring Olaf back in any way she can; that much is obvious.

Still. Just the notion of her being with me if I'm to accept Yngvor's invitation... strangely, it's like opening a door, letting in the light.

Of course she could help me. She doesn't even know just how potent a Vanirdottir's presence could make any single spell. I could give her the words of the spirit-wanderer's *galdr* and her own mind might float away to Jötunheimr like a gust of air.

She meets my gaze defiantly as my hesitation endures. The sight of that familiar steely determination of hers sends sparks of panic and excitement in my gut.

"Let me help you," she says. "That is, if there's anything I can do."

No amount of teasing will steer her away now, I know it. I trail a finger along her jaw, take in the seriousness of her expression.

“You speak of stepping into these shadows of mine,” I murmur. “But you aren’t nearly afraid enough. If you follow me down this path, you must understand that the risk is as great as the potential gain.”

Her brow furrows. “Didn’t you step into my own shadows, once?” she says quietly. “We’re pack. That’s what you said that night. I’m here for you, too... whatever it is you need.”

Freya, every word that comes out of her mouth drags me that much closer to giving in. But to feel that yes steadily building is sickening; it’s banging around my ribcage like a captive bird.

The truth is, there is no other option, is there?

I have to do this.

I *have* to do this.

This is my duty. My brother’s life on the line. And maybe, if I have her with me, maybe...

Maybe I’ll manage it this time.

Chapter 29



IVAR

Waxing Moon of August

The next morning, a deep-bellied cauldron sits on the hearth in Angharad's house. Tamsin and I are cross-legged in the furs, unpacking herbs and bundles that Yngvor has provided for us. The place has been transformed; all around us lies the paraphernalia that the Völva and her kinswomen brought us. Wide deerskin drums, robes made of stitched pelts, and sweet-smelling bouquets of all kinds.

Thrain had to go and get permission from Father so Tamsin could be released to help me – it was very grudgingly granted, but granted nonetheless. She's beside herself with glee now as she and I bend to Yngvor's instruction, both of us turned to febrile apprentices as we work. Even when I argue with Yngvor's methods, she follows as best she can.

Once Yngvor is gone, she finally dares her own questions. "Sorry," she begins with a nervous smile. "But how do you pronounce that word? The

way you call your magic.”

I help her along: “It is *fee–yule–king–ee. Fjölkyngi.*”

She tries until she has it. I never tire of hearing Norse in her mouth, however mangled she makes it. Brightly she asks if there are specific disciplines, so while I grind down a bunch of roots, I reach back through the years to find my mother’s knowledge.

“We have two main branches of magic,” I tell her. “*Seiðr*, and *fjölkyngi*. *Seiðr* is the art of divination and curse-casting. It is a woman’s art, and very dangerous; most men dare not touch it.”

Tamsin tilts her head. “By divination, you mean scrying old bones and entrails, that sort of thing?”

I smirk at that. “Is that how they do it in your Christian order?”

“Oh no, no. But that is how they do it in our old folk tales.”

“Hmm. Well... *seiðr* involves a little more than that,” I say, deciding to put it diplomatically. She does not need to know just now, that the rituals surrounding *seiðr* are wild and cruel, and often performed either in the sweaty molasses of sex, or in the roaring heart of the elements.

Images of my mother flit through my mind. The jagged rocks, the spray of the sea. Her knees bruised, her back bent out of shape. The trances she would go into; the sound of her voice, terrible and deep, a shredded flash of the divine.

“I’m not here to teach you *seiðr*,” I tell her, straightening my back reflexively. “I couldn’t teach it even if I wanted to. Now, *fjölkyngi* is the word for regular magical lore that anyone can study. It involves all the elements, everything around us that lives and breathes, as well as the rites that surround death. A practitioner may learn to blunt metal, to speak with animals, to bring down the rain or sing the dead to the next realm.”

“Like the Cathalain did, at the pyre?”

“Yes. What we’re going to attempt here uses the same tools. But it is more difficult. To travel through the realms when you are neither dead nor a god, requires some finesse. You must throw out your mind while your skin remains tethered here; we call this practice ‘spirit-wandering’.”

Tamsin is enrapt, hanging onto my every word.

“Have you ever done it before?”

Have I, indeed. I try not to let her see how the question burrows uncomfortably within me.

“I’ve only ever attempted it once,” I tell her. “Spirit-wandering involves a song, which we call *galdr*, and I know it well enough. But the ritual surrounding it is complex, as you can see. And the last time I attempted it...”

I’ve not spoken of that abysmal failure in a very long time. Even just to bring it up now makes beads of cold sweat run down my spine.

“What happened?” she prompts me.

It takes me a moment to string the story together. “... in war, you come across many occasions where emergency forces your hand,” I tell her. “When I was younger and freshly arrived in Dublin, I got reckless. I decided that the lives of my men mattered more than whatever sanctions I’d been given. Many friends of mine were lost, and none of us could manage to bring them back. So I tried... I drank the potion, took up the drum, and sang the *galdr*.”

I watch that lithe hand of hers as she sets down long flower stems in neat lines. Shadows flit between her fingers; beyond the hearthfire, the rest of the house seems to melt into black void. She waits for me to speak, until her curiosity gets the better of her.

“And then?” she asks.

“I don’t know if I could explain it to you,” I say through a dry mouth. “It

was like falling out of my body. Falling through the ground... through the sky. No sense of north or south, up or down. I was completely lost.”

“But where were you? What did you see?”

My eyes flicker around the room as I bring back those sickly sensations.

“I remember some kind of... red land,” I say, thinking back on it as a half-remembered dream. “There were stones floating above red sand. Gateways in the middle of nowhere. Great black branches covering the sky... so thick you could’ve built cities up there.”

Tamsin stares at me in fascination.

“But I was alone,” I tell her. “Completely alone. There was no one to help me out of there.”

“How did you get back?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “It was like walking along a corridor and the floor gives away. You don’t know where you’ll end up next. So I fell through the floor again and this time the place I landed was Midgard, right in my tent. It was nighttime and three days had passed. And I was in my body again.”

That shivering feeling of falling out of myself is pulling at my guts, like hands made of air separating what’s inside me. I sit back, breathe in and out some more. Her scent helps to ground me; with the waxing moon, it’s getting deliciously musky.

She’s quiet as she goes on imagining that red realm. I glance at her, trying to detect any hint of fear. “So?” I ask her. “Have I dissuaded you from attempting this yet?”

She meets my eye. “No,” she says stubbornly. “But... there isn’t actually any chance of being permanently stuck out there in the realms, is there?”

I gaze at her a moment. I wonder whether I should push the danger of it upon her more, rather than indulge her interest and reassure her. Once again,

we'll be meeting under the stars to do a very reckless and desperate thing.

“There is a chance of getting stuck, indeed,” I tell her. “But we won't be alone. We'll have the Cathalain with us. And if the legends are anything to go by, and you take to this magic like a fish to water, then we have nothing to worry about. You'll probably drag both Olaf and I back by the scruffs of our necks.”

She grins. “I doubt that. You're the one who knows all the theory; all I know is what you've just told me.”

“You'll see it for yourself, once we're out there,” I tell her, and chuck a thumb under her chin. “Come. Let's continue.”

* * *

We work, and we work. Outside, the sun rises, peaks and descends again; the day rolls by without us. Once the potion is lidded, we leave it on a low simmer. Yngvor returns to judge it, questions us on how we prepared it, criticising me as ever for wanting to cling to my mother's techniques – *it will make the journey very hard if you do it this way, she says, especially for a novice, and a male one at that.* She tells us to make a few modifications before leaving again.

I glare at her until the door shuts upon her silhouette. A *novice*, she called me! When I began my life cradled between pots of preserved animal parts and the herbs and scythes of wisewomen. But it is as she says; there is no way around my physical inexperience other than to bite my tongue and get back to work.

“I say this with all respect,” I mutter as I pick up the knife again. “But honestly: fuck that woman.”

“Ivar!” Tamsin protests. “Isn’t she your teacher?”

“She is not my *teacher*,” I say on a scoff. “She is a neutral third party, a prophetess, and a pain in my arse. Would you pass me those bark pieces?”

“You have no respect for anyone,” she quips as she passes me the bowl. I raise my eyebrows at her.

“I have respect for you,” I protest.

That makes her grin. “Mm. Maybe a little.”

We fix what needs fixing, then leave the potion on a simmer again. While we wait, we drag out the instruments. Tamsin takes Yngvor’s wide drum, while I pull my tagelharpa into my lap. She stares at my hands, pink in the face, as I draw out the melody for her. Once it is firmly in our minds, we move swiftly to the words of the chant.

She’s adorably shy as she sits there, trying to concentrate and overcome her own self-consciousness. But the afternoon is progressing; both of us are growing more nervous by the hour. Though she is meticulous, applying herself admirably, the many sentences full of vowels she isn’t used to are proving a challenge.

“No, no. Put your jaw forward,” I advise her, hand open in front of me. “Say it again. *Nætrelding eda dægr.*”

“Nerrtrelding eda –”

“No, listen. It’s *æ*.” Again and again she tries, and I correct her. “No. Stop worrying about rolling your ‘r’s, and just – loosen up a little.”

“For God’s sake, you want absolute perfection!” she exclaims. “I’m saying it exactly like you. I swear I am.”

“No you aren’t. You’ve got that royal grandiosity going on,” I tell her, and she splutters in protest. “Just loosen your jaw. Imagine you got concussed by a tree branch.”

She laughs. “I don’t see how you’re meant to do that.”

“Don’t be afraid to open your mouth a little more,” I tell her. We share the exact same glance at the exact same time. “Not that you should have difficulties there –”

“See, what did I say!” she protests, whipping my thigh with one of the rags. “You have no respect.” When I try to speak she overrides me, saying the phrase several times until at last she says it right: “*Nætreliding eda dægr.*”

“Ah!” I hold up my hands in triumph. “Yes, that was perfect. See? You have it.”

“I had it the first time. That was no different,” she says, still rosy-cheeked and impertinent as ever. Gods, but she’s riling me up with that glower of hers. She still wears my scent-mark from earlier, glistening upon her mouth, and it is very hard to ignore when we’re sitting so close.

I give her a sideways glance, trying to temper myself. “I’m quite certain you’re never so mouthy with Thrain.”

“He doesn’t bring it out in me like you do.”

That makes me grin. “Brat.”

“Tyrant!”

I cannot stop myself from reaching for her then, sinking a hand into her hair and balling it into a fist. Her spine straightens, her chin lifting as she lets out a breath. Her pupils are wide in the dim light of the hearth, and it is so delicious to look into that black gaze and see what awaits us when her heat next comes upon her.

“In any other context, lamb,” I growl at her, “I would not let you speak to me like that.”

“Oh?” she asks, defiant as ever. The corner of her lip twitches up, her eyes falling to my mouth. “And what would you do about it?”

The sigh of restraint that leaves me is almost a hiss. Right then I'm sure she feels the same rush as I – whether it is pyre smoke or the waft of potion, there is somehow nothing more potent than these moments, this desperate clinging to life.

I allow myself one indulgence; we cannot start this now, there is no room to resume our earlier intimacy. But I may indulge myself, I think, with one kiss. I lean in to catch her lower lip between my teeth, squeeze it hard enough to make her wince. Then I suck on it, tasting her slowly and methodically until she's squirming where she sits.

“You are an undisciplined little miscreant,” I murmur, “who begs for correction.”

She flushes. “I don't believe I've begged for anything yet.”

“Yet,” I echo her, relishing the word. “The moon is almost full.”

We both linger there, enamoured with the idea of it, that silver disc that will steal away all thought and worry. And then we must part again; she only has half the chant properly, and we don't have long until the potion is ready.

“Again,” I command her. “From the start, I think.”

* * *

By evening, her pronunciation is crystal clear, and the potion is done. Thrain comes knocking once we're pouring the finished potion into a pot. Tamsin's nest has become a musky little world that smells of sweat and the slow simmer of magic; when he opens the door, it is as though he punctures it, lets in clean air.

“You all right in there?” he calls in.

I glance up and find my brother's face in the doorway, haggard as mine, though somehow he wears it well. Even in the blue fields of Hel he'd still manage to be unfairly handsome. Something lights up behind his eyes as he takes us in; he smiles a small private smile, the first I've seen in days.

"Yngvor mentioned you needed high ground," he tells me. "I secured a location for you in the woods."

I nod in acknowledgment. Then he opens the door wider, and Yngvor herself strides in to judge our work one last time. She sees how Tamsin and I are both flushed with effort, the air ringing with remnants of music. I turn away from those shrewd eyes – no one wants to know what a prophetess thinks of one's fraught relationships.

She finally gives us her approval of our potion. Then she drifts to Olaf, leaning over him to check on his state. The silence she leaves only makes me bristle, thinking hard on whether I've asked all I needed to ask.

Thrain kneels beside Tamsin, running a tender hand down her back. His eyes are on the empty cauldron, the decorated pot that contains our potion. His brow furrows.

"You're sure it's safe for her?" he asks Yngvor. I half want to laugh – *now* the man has misgivings? He's been so eager to see us perform magic, he never once thought to ask about the dangers before now, nor what the *galdr* entailed. Then again, he was respecting that old boundary, as an outsider to this world; he was giving us the room we needed. Yngvor glances at him.

"It is safe," she says. "I took into account her state when preparing the ingredients. The potion poses no danger to her, nor the child she bears."

Tamsin cringes a little, as she always does at any mention of her pregnancy. She shares a look with her husband, touches his hand with an encouraging smile.

“I’ll be fine,” she says.

Though Yngvor’s authority as a Völva would be enough to sway any man, Thrain still does not seem entirely pacified. He takes both Tamsin’s hands in his.

“You take care, all right? If you feel discomfort at any moment...”

“I hear you. I’ll be careful.”

I stare at Yngvor’s silent figure awhile longer, trying to think of my own questions. Finally I ask her, “That’s it, then? You’re sure you have no further instructions?”

She nods. “The son of Ula knows what must be done.”

Tuh. The absolute certainty of the seer. There’s nothing that pisses me off more.

“Have you foreseen all of this, then?” I snap at her. “Does it all end in disaster?”

She turns, lays those wrinkled eyes upon me and says, “The son of Ula should know better than to ask such things.”

Chapter 30



IVAR

Waxing Moon of August

Father faces us as we exit the house. He stands, camped on those tree-trunk legs, thick arms crossed as he lays eyes upon me. Ósk's son; about to go out and wreak havoc with the gifts he inherited.

We never speak of this. Neither of my mother nor the gifts she left me. Even when my raging fire burned down his stable and half his hall back in Lagarvík, still he placated me with silence and that bushy frown. I wonder, quite often actually, whether he thought he deserved it.

I hold his gaze. We say nothing, as per our wont. There are things we share, bonds too heavy to break. We both love my mother; we both love Olaf. Thus we must reach around one another to honour those we love.

Tamsin and I join Thrain's party, and Father files into the house to stay with Olaf. He comes close enough to clap a hand on my shoulder, some

fatherly gesture that's meant to say: *my son*. Perhaps. Or: *here's some more weight for your shoulder to bear*. That, more likely.

I walk on with the procession and don't afford him another glance.

Our group files through the village. The moon is a round droplet in the night sky, shining along the rocky path. Five elder Cathalain will perform the chant with us; Yngvor leads the way with a long staff in hand, sumptuous furs and pelts from all different kinds of animals dangling legs and tails from her.

The place Thrain picked out for us is in the heart of the forest. A small stream trickles down from an outcropping of rock; young, thin trees crowd the area, roots coil about the earth. Tamsin and I climb to the highest point of the rocky promontory while the elder women form a circle around us in the trees. Thrain and his men guard us at a small distance; he cannot help but cast glances at us to see what we plan to do. He's wearing some eager, childlike expression of sheer excitement that he fails to hide.

To think I have lived with him in Dublin for a decade and never really shown him this side of me. I was born into this world of pelt-clad women and murmured magic; I've never taken anyone into it like this.

Now I'm taking both him and Tamsin with me tonight.

The elders hold out their hands and begin to whisper. Just with that, the layering of their smoky voices over the nocturnal backdrop, and already I feel goosebumps pricking my skin. My senses are so strained that I can hear the creaking of the drums, the brush of their cloaks against the rock.

Yngvor goes to each woman, handing her the cup from which they drink our potion. Tamsin lays a hand on my back, leaning close.

"I don't know if I can do this," she murmurs.

"Don't you start with that," I tell her. "I'm the one that's ill-suited to this.

You're a Vanirdottir; this will be a breeze for you."

"You're joking," she breathes, staring at me with a sort of mute panic. "I barely know what I'm even doing."

"Nonsense. You have all the tools in hand."

"But what if I mess everything up? What if –"

I cup her by the neck, firm enough to quiet her.

"It's going to be fine. As long as you and I stay together, we'll be fine. All right?"

She lets out a breath, gives me that hard steely look of hers, and nods at last.

The elders go on whispering as Yngvor brings the cup to us. She has me drink first, three gulps; to Tamsin she gives only one. Still without speaking, she draws a hair from Tamsin's braid and coils it around my wrist; then does the opposite, one of my black hairs around Tamsin's wrist. Finally she takes out a bone needle, and pricks the tip of Tamsin's finger. The scent of her blood is sweet on the air as it pearls upon her fingertip.

"Take the blood of Freya upon your tongue," she instructs me.

I do as she asks, bringing that little hand up to my mouth. Tamsin's eyes are strung to mine as she lets me crush that bloody pearl upon my tongue.

Her potency, vivid as a crushed raspberry, fills my mouth.

Yngvor returns to the circle of Völvas. They pick up their drums, as does Tamsin. I take my tagelharpa and sit, both of us turning to face the direction of the village.

We breathe, collecting ourselves. The Völvas' murmurings stop. Tamsin stands tall and proud beside me, bearing the perfect poise I showed her. I kiss my pendant, then take my bow, position it. And I draw out the first note.

It is a long, low complaint that breathes in and out, in and out. Yngvor

strikes her drum, adding a heartbeat to this rasping repetition. And the women all follow.

The air tightens and coils around me. I feel my legs are planted in muddy water as the drumbeat and the intentions of the *galdr* thickens everything around us, seeping through the trees, a slow landslide.

The elders begin the chant first. Then my voice joins the rest, and Tamsin's along with me.

Shivers run through me as the different timbres weave together and merge into a many-layered voice. We speak these archaic vowels, dragging them out, only occasionally coming up for air. Our breathing espouses the song until every exhale is sung; every inhale has us lift our heads, take in deep lungfuls of the forest's sap-filled sweetness.

We close our eyes and ease into the song's main phrase:

Return, return, return to us.

To hear Tamsin speak these ancient words; to see her stand alongside me in this forest, with her purpose shimmering in the air...

We sing and sing, and the trees stand witness as the son of Ula and his Vanirdottir weave a spell for the first time.

* * *

The first sign of departure is a squirm in the stomach, as though something were swimming in there. Invisible hands shuffle through my insides, like fat fingers in a dice cup trying to fish out the die. My bow slips from my grasp. I bend to retrieve it, and the world bends around me.

Oh... yes, this is how it went. I breathe in and I know that when I breathe out, I will lose my mind; it will fly out like shreds in the wind. I need – need

it to be a controlled exit. *Controlled.*

I glance around to Tamsin. I have to turn my head around so far until I see her, like an owl making the whole rotation. She's deep in concentration, her hand beating the rhythm by itself; but her body is going limp. She falls slowly, gracefully to her knees beside me, still banging that stick at her wide drum. I know how that feels, how keeping the rhythm is as instinctive as breathing now – *thrum, thrum*, goes the ceaseless heart.

Tamsin. Tamsin. I need to stay with her. Stay – stay with her. My tagelharpa slides from my lap onto the ground, and I reach out – there's so much air between us somehow, my arm stretching into it, a brave traveler disappearing into mist. She beats, and beats, and beats the drum, unfocused eyes skating over my palm.

“Tamsin,” I slur. “Ta... come. Take... my hand, take...”

“I don't,” come the sounds from her drooping mouth, “I don't feel so good.”

The stick slips, the drum thrums over the ground. Her palm is warm against mine, a downward motion; a slap that weighs like a stone. And then our joint hands are falling, and we are falling after them. The rocky ground underneath us turns to grey water, gulping us under. A leg, a hip, a curl of ginger hair.

We fall.

Everything rushes past us like wind. Whether it be solid ground or open sky; we are as ghosts passing through, colours whipping past us. Her hand is in mine, golden threads wrapped around our wrists glowing like hunters' tokens in the woods, showing the way back.

Blue, deep and royal, opens like a yawning mouth around us. I pull her closer until we're locked in an embrace; perhaps merged, or perhaps we were

always one.

I open my eyes, strain my eyelids.

Where is this... where are we?

Voices flutter on the air around us. A host of crackly elder tones, of wrinkled hands drumming, drumming.

Point the direction, son of Ula.

Olaf. That's right. We're trying to find Olaf. Trying to find... I close my eyes and picture him, that kingly face, that man I love, that boy who saved my life.

My brother. My brother.

Ground rises abruptly – a giant's teeth in my back. I let out an *oof*, and we roll and stagger to our feet, hands joint. A mountain range; a pink sky overhead, filled with the massive boughs of a tree. Tamsin wanders – my arm stretches out after her.

Don't go far, I tell her, I beg her. Don't let me lose you.

She turns her head, and the sunlight gleams on her hair, on her skin, as though she had opened her mouth and swallowed it. She might be smiling, but I can barely distinguish her face now.

Thrum, thrum, goes the drumbeat. It holds us here, grounds us, lets me survey where we are. These high jagged peaks... wrong. It's wrong. He isn't here, and there are footsteps, entities who've noticed our presence.

The ground cracks and shudders. *Tamsin*, I shout, *Tamsin, come*, and I scoop her up against me. *We have to run*, I tell her, *run to the edge*.

Hands held tight, we run – she screams – and we glide off the mountain peak, feet skimming air, tracing looping lines in the nothingness. She throws an arm around my waist, laughing madly, and I hold her tight.

Falling again. The long graceful boughs of Yggdrasil guide our feet,

delivering us to the next place. And a roar of voices greets us; a shredded sky opens overhead, red streaked with black smoke. We roll into a battle scene, thudding against some broken war chariot pulled by thickset horses. Armies wearing gold and silver crash together – gleaming silhouettes against a stark red backdrop. The *thrum* of the drums meld with the crashing of weapons, an apocalyptic beat; the sun hangs overhead, red as blood.

No. Not here either. We run – we run – we sink through the ground. And another sky yawns around us, a swirl of storm clouds, and this time – my blood heats in my veins, my eyes open on the clouds all around us.

This. It has to be here.

He's here, I yell to the hags that carry us forward. *He's here!*

We pierce the clouds and find an ocean below us, angry and writhing, glittering like a gored beast. Upon its heaving waves is a single solitary ship, trying to brave the storm. And it is no ordinary storm; there are beasts in those waves, long slender bodies, pointed snouts. The sea foam solidifies into the shape of a horse, eerily resembling *Alsvithr*, and it kicks up the waves in its stampede.

We turn like dancers in the sky, struggling to place our feet under us. That ship is so small and there is such a vast amount of sea to fall into – but Tamsin holds me tighter, guides me through the air. She does it easily, as though she were threading a needle.

Our feet find solid wood, the deck of Olaf's ship. When she is the one guiding us, the landing is graceful, light. We find Olaf working with a shadowy crew; the man is engrossed in his tasks, holding onto one of the mast's stabilising ropes, shouting commands as the deck rocks under our feet.

Trim the sail! he yells. *Sheet it in starboard!*

Odin, the sound of his voice. He's here; he's speaking, he's alive. I want

to laugh; maybe I am laughing, standing there in a storm with only this frayed canopy of ropes and hemp to protect us.

Unthinkingly I step into his commands, following the shadowy crew. We pull and tug our way across the deck, rope to rope, stern to helm. Finally we reach him.

Olaf! I can barely hear my own voice above the storm. *Olaf, you ass, turn around!*

He does; his eyes skim over us. But there's no time for reunions. The waves tilt, *hard*, and we're dangling from the ropes again.

Help me get over that wave! he yells back at me, and promptly returns to directing the crew.

Has he even recognised us? Does he even realise that this isn't Midgard at all?

I pull Tamsin to the mast, tell her to hold on. Then I stagger to the prow, slam a hand on the wood for stability, and trace a bind-rune in the air – spelling Aegir's name.

Just like the *galdr*, this too I have only ever known in theory. The words that fall from my lips, addressing the god of the sea and his tempestuous daughters, I have never spoken with intent before now. But as soon as I intone them, here in this roiling, glittering realm, my intention bursts out – and the daughters of Aegir heed me. The waves recoil, rising only to flatten gently again without crashing over us.

Immediately after I've spoken, the beast in those waves rears in disgust. He has lost his allies; I have stolen them from him. He rears with a shriek, and the rising water lifts us with it.

Tamsin! I yell over my shoulder. *We need to get him out of here! Get him!*

Eyes on the water, I mutter under my breath, trying to contain the sea's fury. Tamsin is with my brother – I hear her trying to persuade him, trying to get him to listen.

No, he says. *No. There's land ahead. We need to reach it.*

What is the fool saying – even here in this dream-like place, he'll play the patriarch full of certainty. My feeble magic is nothing to the beast that shrieks in the water – we have to get him out.

Grab him and go! Fly! I yell at Tamsin as I skirt the bulwark to join them. She tries, wraps herself around his huge arm even as he steers the rudder.

He's too heavy, she cries back. *He won't let me –*

He wants to stay. He's grounded here for some reason, convinced that this is where he should be.

I glimpse the land he's trying so hard to reach. It's nothing more than a mirage, a glittering beacon we glimpse with every shard of air that cleaves the waves.

It's so far. No time to get there.

I yell one last request to the daughters of Aegir – to hold down the beast, to let us pass. The waves rake back sharply, strangling the beast they contain. I turn, make a fist in Olaf's chainmail. If I have to drag him, kicking and raging all the way back to Midgard – I will.

NOW, I call to Tamsin. Each holding one of Olaf's arms, we drag him to the bulwarks and step off, eyes to the sky.

Flight is little more than the rush of hope beneath my feet – *let me up, let me up*. The drumbeat pulls at us, higher, higher. I point my intention towards the forest, the place we left from, I have to believe we're going to make it – Tamsin is all but floating, Olaf's wrist clasped against her chest. I knew she'd excel at this. She's an absolute natural.

Then a shriek tears through the air. Waves rise higher than ever, curling into one another and crashing together, the foam speckling my feet. I glance at Tamsin – she’s higher than me, more nimble than me, dragging Olaf upward. She’ll make it. I know she will.

Go! I shout at her. *Take him back.*

She only has time to turn her head to look at me. And then the beast snaps at my heel, drags me down – so I let go of them, lest they get dragged with me.

And I fall, plunging down into the water until blue cedes to black.

* * *

Everything is cold. I’m upside-down, moving ever downward. The thread at my wrist extends in a glowing golden line that disappears in the blackness. It is my link to Tamsin – but I can’t tug on it, or I’ll endanger her.

Movement rocks me – the beast is prowling. From time to time I see a glint of blue light tracing the lines of its huge body.

What is that grotesque thing? It feels familiar somehow. As I float down here with it, the heat of recognition shivers in my blood. Just like I felt with Olaf.

What is it? What does it want? Perhaps it is Olaf’s *fylgja*, his follower, the creature that shadows his footsteps in daylight and dreams alike.

Or perhaps it is my own death. Surely one recognises one’s own murderer. I wonder if Náttfari felt this, somehow, in his bones – that deep unfathomable attraction to death itself.

From here I can’t hear the drums any more. Only my own heartbeat.

So it is... so the punishment comes. In a way this consequence is reassuring; I had been waiting, fearing a punishment for daring to perform magic, and now it has justly arrived. At least if I'm to die, it will be on the heels of one small success.

As long as they make it out of here. My brother... and her.

I lay a hand over the glowing thread. The strand of her ginger hair. I should unravel it – rid myself of the doubt that this link might hold her to this realm, prevent her from going back. I never did ask all the questions I should've asked – I don't know all the intricacies that come with experience.

But still. I should unravel it. Just to be sure.

I pluck a finger beneath it. But selfishness keeps me from severing it – it is my last link to her, my Vanirdottir, and I can't... I *won't* let her go so easily.

And then in a glorious rush, there is heat, there is a flood of bubbles and light. Her hands fold around my wrists – closing around the link I have not yet severed. Keeping it intact.

She drags me up, drags me to the surface, and there is nothing else but her warmth, the safety of her body. I cling to her and dare to hope, and water breaks over our heads like a blessing – and we are free from the clutch of darkness.

* * *

Air. Gods. *Fresh air.*

I'm coughing out my lungs, wrenching myself to a sitting position. Someone's arms are around me – many voices clamouring.

I blink water out of my eyes – except there’s no water to clear. I’m dry, completely, which is an aberration. Hard stone cradles my body, trees bristle in my line of sight. The smell of sap is all around me, and that wine and cloves – Thrain, Thrain is holding onto me, and Tamsin too.

We’re back. We’re back. She did it.

The sickness in my throat reminds me of what an utter nuisance it is to have a body. Thrain’s voice is in my ear as he holds me upright.

“Breathe,” he says. The sounds I’m making are ludicrous. Each inhale sets off a loud rasping note, and each exhale another one, as though I had a pair of horns in there rather than lungs. “Breathe. You’re all right.”

“I... know,” I pant against him. “I’m abs... solutely fine.”

He lets out an indignant kind of laugh and pulls me into an embrace. Tamsin’s saying something behind me, but I’m too overwhelmed by them both – wrapping me up in their warmth.

By Aegir and all his foamy daughters. I was ready to die. I was going to die, I was so sure of it, but...

I’m smiling mindlessly against Thrain’s shoulder, one hand over Tamsin’s where she’s holding me around the waist.

We managed it. We plummeted through the realms like a pair of rogue skipping stones, absolutely reckless, and we somehow managed...

I push myself out of their embrace so I can look at her. Tamsin’s kneeling there, her eyes a little bloodshot, pupils wide as she gazes at me with relief.

Her gladness seeps away as she braces for my question.

“Olaf,” I manage. “Did you get him out?”

Her expression turns to fear. My stomach plummets to see how she shrinks with reluctance.

“I... I tried,” she stammers. “He was so heavy, he was too heavy for me.

He didn't want to leave. And you were – you were gone, and so – I put him down on that piece of land, and then I came back for you –”

Every one of her words drags down my insides.

“*What?*” I burst out. “Don't tell me you left him there?”

“You were drowning!” she counters. “I didn't know what to do – I just wanted to get you back to safety.”

“We traveled there for him!” I shout at her, panic clawing through me. “We went there to save him, you should've secured him first –”

“I couldn't just leave you behind!”

“*You should have!*”

“Ivar!” Thrain bellows. That cold tone pulls me down from the heights of panic, and I realise the hurt and broken expression Tamsin's wearing. I turn to face Thrain, finding all his gladness gone, too. “How dare you take that tone with her?” he says with deadly calm. “This is the first time she's attempted anything like this. I know you are always after perfection, but you could not expect to have a perfect first run.”

“Brother, with all respect, you don't know what you're talking about,” I snap at him, but he's undeterred.

“Couldn't you just go back to fetch him?” he asks. I can't help the bitter laugh that bursts from me.

“Couldn't we just go back?” I mock him. “You really think it's as simple as that? We just drink a potion and take another stroll down the fucking branches of Yggdrasil?”

He cloaks his hurt with a mask of disapproval. “I know this isn't my territory, but there's no need to take that tone with me, either.”

I can't understand how he can sit there and be so reasonable. I just saw Olaf, my brother, I was just with him – to think we left him behind makes me

want to tear up the very earth until I can find him again.

“You’re right,” I mutter as I push myself up. “We should go again, never mind if we have to twist through all the realms a second time. Yngvor! We will go again.”

The Völvas have gathered nearer to us. They’ve seen everything; they were with us, guiding us, though clearly they could not help Tamsin with the final task. Yngvor strides to meet me, her fur pelts obscuring half her face.

“You will not go again as you are,” she intones. “You must stabilise yourself.”

“Stabilise myself!”

I turn, readying to barrel into that damned old hag; but Thrain gets in my way again, so broad and stable, and I break against him like water against rock. My legs won’t even carry me, I’m shaking so much.

“Calm,” he rumbles, and were it not for his arm around me I would’ve crumbled. I grit my teeth, making fists in his chainmail.

Olaf... Olaf is still out there. We just *abandoned* him there, whatever that cursed realm was. We need to go back, we need –

“My Jarls!”

A voice rises from the trees. We turn to find one of our Dubliners a little further down the forest, hollering up at us.

“I’ve come from the village,” he calls. “It’s Olaf. You should come back.”

“What is it?” Thrain asks even as ice trickles down my spine. “Has he woken up?”

The lad’s mouth parts as though hesitating to answer. Then he repeats, “You should come to see him. Now.”

Chapter 31



TAMSIN

Waxing Moon of August

Back at the camp, the Dubliners are all frenzied. They rush through the streets of Dumbartonshire, calling to one another. I have to run to keep up with Ivar and Thrain, heart in my throat as we cut through the warriors. Once we reach the baker's house, Gofraid's voice comes booming over the flux of excitable men: *back, all of you! Get out and leave him some air.*

“What is it? What's happened?” Thrain barks at the milling men. One turns to us, his eyes shining with excitement.

“Olaf's woken up.”

The words kick the air from my lungs.

He's awake. But *awake* can't mean truly conscious. If his mind is still lost, then perhaps all we managed to do was rile him, stir his body into some mockery of life.

Ivar leads the way to the house, his face set and stony. I feel I'm still half-floating after the *galdr*, but everything is so real, so immediate, the noisy chaos of it all is like a splash in the face. Behind us, the Cathalain drop away and melt into the night so only the Dubliners and Gofraid remain.

The old king stands by the foot of the bed, barring Olaf from sight; Sigbrand is sitting at the bedside. I can hear his agitated voice:

“It’s all right, you’re all right – calm down, Jarl –”

“How is it this much more swollen than yesterday?” says Armod from the other side of the bed.

“Go see if anyone has any of that moonshine left,” Sigbrand barks at one of the Dubliners, who rushes out. “We’re going to have to cut in again.”

Heart pounding, I try to skirt around Gofraid so I can see Olaf for myself.

He’s laying back against piled pillows, head rolling, eyes squeezed shut, panting like a wounded animal. Ivar pulls Sigbrand out of the way so he can kneel at Olaf’s side and clasp his hand in a firm grip. Olaf’s injured leg is folded up and bared; the bandages have been unravelled, revealing the state of his wound.

Oh, Christ. The arrow wound is puckered, angry shades of red and purple, a red halo spreading around it. Thrain told me they’d been cleaning it diligently, giving him what they could to fight off the infection, but it still looks so horrid. And his fever... God, he’s so hot to the touch. He throws his head left and right as though he could shake off the clamp of heat.

He’s taking such ragged breaths. His eyes aren’t really open; they’re flickering, as though he’s halfway out of a nightmare. He’s so weak like this. Nothing like the robust, three-hundredweight giant that Ivar and I tried to wrangle from that stormy realm.

“Can you hear me, brother?” Ivar asks him. He’s trying to hold Olaf’s

head firm, press a cold wet rag against him, but the man's tensing up so much. Choking on air.

I sidle around the bed to join Armod, who's holding Olaf's wounded thigh up against his chest.

"What can we do?" I blurt. Then, glancing up at Gofraid; "Can I... would you allow me to help, sire?"

Gofraid lays a long look on me, his face as white as his beard. Then finally he affords me an approving flick of the fingers. The others are soon back with moonshine, and I hold Olaf's leg firm while Armod washes the wound.

"We have to cut in a little," Armod tells me. "Let him bleed out what's poisoning him."

Thrain goes to the shelving to get a bowl, hands it over to me. I glance up at them for instruction, bowl trembling in my hand. Armod has me position it while he makes the incision.

Olaf hisses and groans with pain through the proceedings. We carefully place one of the readied poultices, bandage up the wound. Gofraid watches over us, his face drawn, perhaps waiting fruitlessly for some sign that his son may come back to himself soon. But surely that cannot happen tonight.

Not when his mind is still gone, and his whole body is burning hot.

Slowly Olaf calms. Gofraid barks at the others to leave, and then it is just him and the four of us crowding the little house. I stay by Olaf's injured leg, keeping his knee against my bosom so he doesn't dislodge the new bandages, all but holding his thigh against me as he writhes. Ivar's at his shoulder, feeling his forehead.

"Fuck, he's burning up," Ivar grits out.

"This fever has to break soon," Thrain mutters. "If it does not break

tonight...”

Those words fall through me like heavy stones.

“We have to go back,” Ivar mutters through clenched teeth.

“You can’t,” Thrain insists. “You heard Yngvor. You need to pace yourself.”

Ivar lets out a sharp, angry breath. I can’t stand to see him like that. I wish there was something I could say, something I could *do* – but his shouted accusations are still ringing in my head, clenched painfully around my heart. If I’d just managed things better...

We’re silent for a beat as we watch over him, this huge powerful warrior, lying back in sweat-soaked sheets. Then while I’m still hugging Olaf’s bent leg against myself, the yearn for peace and nurturing swells in me in a familiar pattern. I make a little noise, catching Thrain’s eye.

“Do you think I could...?” I ask.

Thrain considers me a moment, eyes growing dark as he catches on. I’ve purred for him several nights now, in the privacy of his evening visits at the prison house. He’d return from his duties, left arm aching, and I’d wrap myself around him to purr until the last sparks of pain had gone.

Ivar realises what we’re talking about. When Thrain looks to him in a silent question, he grudgingly offers, “Well, it can’t harm him.”

Gofraid steps in; “What are you talking about?”

It’s always so hard to meet his gaze. And to speak of something as intimate as the purr with him is just repugnant. But, needs must.

“I found out how to purr,” I stammer. “How to do it consciously.”

Gofraid’s expression is hard to read; he’s still mistrustful of me, but in the face of such a blatantly mythic ability, he can’t help but be curious.

“If you think it can help,” he rumbles.

Thrain and Ivar glance at me. They know the purr is something I've only bestowed on those I care for thus far, and Gofraid does not fit that category.

"You'll have to step out, then, Father," Ivar tells him curtly.

Gofraid stays and glares at us just long enough for us to understand how very exasperated he is by this. Then finally he uncrosses his arms and strides out of the doorway.

"Call me back if anything changes," he barks on his way out.

I sigh, expelling my nerves. This is one thing I can do, at least – one thing I know I won't muck up. I lean over Olaf. Slide my bare hands over either side of his face, and let the purr spill from me.

"Calm," I murmur to Olaf. "Calm... I want you better. I want you to heal..."

As Olaf's eyelids flicker, we can see nothing more than the whites of his eyes. Then his body stops convulsing, his breathing coming more easily, and there is not much more we can do than hope it'll hold.

* * *

We don't get any sleep that night. It's the first I spend with all my packmates again since my imprisonment, but none of us are glad for it; Olaf needs tending to while he battles the peak of his fever.

And Ivar's prickly silence is unbearable to sit through.

We watch over him. We make him drink, we cool him down to the best of our ability. He mutters deliriously sometimes, his body spasming now and then.

Ivar paces, pinching the bridge of his nose, mumbling to himself as he sorts through the remedies he knows. But everything has been brought in;

there are so many herbs and potions and paraphernalia piled around the bed.

Eventually there's nothing else to do but accept to wait.

While I go on purring by Olaf's side, Ivar sits with Thrain, who's keeping the hearth lit. Both of them are somewhat languid from the rolling notes of my purr, but even that can't soothe them much while Olaf's stillness endures.

"I shouldn't have even tried the *galdr*," Ivar says, staring fixedly at the fire.

"Hush," Thrain says, leaning in to squeeze his shoulder. "You did what you could."

"Well it wasn't good enough, was it?"

"Ivar."

Ivar hisses out a sigh, fingers coming to smooth the creases in his brow.

"What if we just made things worse?" he mutters irritably. "*Fuck*, I should never have..."

"Stop," Thrain rumbles. "You should get some air. The firepit outside is lit; I think some of them are cooking food. Tamsin and I can watch him."

"No. No, I need to stay."

"Just go, both of you," I call out to them, because I can't bear to hear Ivar's fidgeting feet, his tight voice, all of that distress that weighs on the air. "I'll call you back in if something changes."

I'm glad to hear how firm my tone sounds. I sound like somebody sturdy and reliable, just like they've been toward me. They've done so much for me, and all the while I've managed to be absolutely *useless*, especially at the most crucial moments.

Both Thrain and Ivar seem stunned to silence for a moment that I might sound so bold. They both get to their feet, and Ivar comes closer, his liquorice scent clouding me.

Please don't, I want to beg him, *please just go, please don't look at me*. If he looks too closely at this illusion of strength then it'll crumble, I know it. But he lays a hand on my shoulder, and a ball forms in my throat that he might seek to reassure me.

"Tamsin," he says. Those fingers rise to my jawline, where they smear the teardrops that were gathering there.

Oh, God – I'm crying again, really? I hadn't even realised it. I jerk away from his hand, wiping furiously at my eyes, still unable to look at him.

"Lamb," he insists, and that word tugs at my heart. "I shouldn't have shouted at you earlier. I'm sorry."

My brow furrows as I wipe the last streaks of wetness. Why is he apologising? I'm the one who left Olaf behind.

Ivar leans over me, presses a kiss into my hair.

"You brought us back," he murmurs. "I told you that you'd be good at this. You were exceptional tonight."

"No I wasn't," I wheeze out. "You were counting on me and I went and mucked it all up –"

"Hush," he says, his lips hovering by my temple. "Listen to me. What we did tonight was the most difficult *galdr* of all. And you skimmed the skies as though you'd done it all your life. I'm proud of you, lamb."

God's *bones*, he can't just say something like that, not when my nerves are all frayed. I'm wiping at my eyes again, because it's such incredible praise from someone like him. To see him in that forest, a cloaked skáld with his enchanted tagelharpa, that ancient language rising from his tongue – that, *that* was perfect. But I can't believe his praise, nor his forgiveness, not while I haven't truly earned it yet.

"Please just go," I insist. So Ivar strokes my hair one last time, and they

finally leave.

* * *

Olaf is calm and peaceful as I go on purring for him. I wipe away his sweat, make him drink. And as I gaze at him in these quiet early hours, I can't help but picture him where I left him, out there in that strange realm. I imagine him pushing himself up, leaving a trail of footsteps in that white sand.

What was that place? Which of their realms was it?

I take in his graceful profile. The prominent brow, the strong nose. Blond lashes so pale against his cheeks. His white-blond beard curls around his mouth, thick and soft, though a little matted and messy now compared to usual. His widow's peak arches elegantly over his forehead.

He was so steadfast and adamant. So heavy in my arms. It was so real, all of it – like a lucid dream that Ivar pulled me into, that we experienced together. He hasn't told me much about their realms, besides from...

Oh, Christ.

What if that place was Hel?

My pulse gallops at the idea. Something was holding him there, perhaps...

Perhaps the hope to see Vírún. His wife.

That must be it. It's so obvious now that I think of it. Of course an incentive of that kind might weigh him down so much. The weight of the dead around his ankles. If that really was Hel's shore then I have to go – I *have* to go back and fetch him. It has to still be possible somehow.

The Völva might've forbidden us, but I can still taste the acrid notes of the potion on my tongue, and the *galdr* still lingers in my mind. Maybe I

don't need more than that to sink back through the ground.

You are a Vanirdottir, Ivar told me. *This will be a breeze to you.*

If one of my countrymen saw me perform such a spell, he'd call me a witch. But I've fallen too far to feel the grip of those accusations any more. I've fallen through rich red skies, through glittering oceans. I'm still picturing it now, those mountain peaks, those open skies belonging to other worlds.

Nobody ever mentioned that the fall might be so beautiful.

Timidly, I lay a hand over Olaf's heart. The steady *thrum* is so reassuring. I lean over him, lulled by it as I linger in this proximity.

That thrum reminds me of the Völva's drum. It's precisely the same kind of rhythm, deep, steady. Continuous. I start to whisper the words of the *galdr*, and it's mostly wishful thinking at first, a way to soothe myself more than anything, that at least I'm trying.

But then, little by little, the room begins to waver. The bed feels almost slippery under me, as though it were losing its substance.

A rush of excitement fills me at the familiar sensations – it isn't as potent as it was in the forest, but I feel oddly ready. As though the door were still open, even so many hours after the ceremony.

It's mad – it's *mad* to go tumbling through the skies of foreign worlds without Ivar holding my hand. But the chant is flowing from me now as continuously as Olaf's heartbeat, and I'm determined this time. I know how it feels to turn to the sky and wade my way back. Slowly, my knees sink through the bed, and I let myself fall away so I can meet him... wherever it is he's gone.

Chapter 32



OLAF

Waxing Moon of August

I'm standing at the prow of my ship, watching the cloudy sky, lifting up the sun stone to find my direction.

But I know that where I'm going, there is no harbour.

No land to find.

Even as I hoist the sail, I know I'm going nowhere. It is an old habit, woven into the strands of my muscles. Hemp ropes sliding along my palms, the weight of a woollen sail, the salt of the sea breeze.

We return to these habits for comfort, even if it's pointless. Like the rocking motion of the ship, like the waves of the sea, back and forth. Back and forth.

One day I opened the doors of the great hall of Dublin and there was no voice calling back. No answer to the expectation of movement, the blur of blue fabric, the long hair that always smelled like woodland berries.

I opened those doors again and again, but there was nothing beyond.
Nobody to return to.

The doors, the hall, the empty space of a doorway; it becomes a
reassuring habit to check them. Like the sea breeze, they whisper, *maybe*.
Maybe.

I know I can never return to you.

But maybe I'll see you. Out of the corner of my eye.

Maybe you'll return to me.

* * *

We sail for a very long time, my crew and I. So long that I forget where it
was we set sail from initially. What port did we leave from? Was it Dublin or
somewhere else?

It doesn't matter. Out here, the sky and the blue horizon comprise the
whole world.

We hold our rigging together through storms and lightning, through
rolling black waves that have us racing down on a perfect vertical before
lifting again.

Then long, oily flats, no wind. Muscles straining, we pull along towards
nowhere, towards hope and the maybes that hold us all taut like the telltale
ribbons hanging from the sail, like the ropes that have become part of our
bodies, extensions of our arms.

There is something in the water. We all know it; it's a strange, tender
companion. Sometimes we see its coat glittering in the sunlight, and it is the
most beautiful thing; I'll skim the water with my fingers to stroke it. But

sometimes it becomes enraged, and it bucks and kicks up a storm that has us scrambling for our oars.

Days and nights scroll by. My lips are chapped. I can't remember the last time I had food. But we don't need it out here. We need only the strength of our arms, and the strength of our hope.

One night a drumming arises; the thunder morphs into a repetitive beat, *thrum, thrum, thrum*. It rains and rains, a supernatural storm, so dense we can barely see in front of us. And there is a voice... a familiar voice on the air.

Return... return... return to us.

The storm kicks up so hard that I doubt we'll make it through this time. The creature is enraged, moreso than I've ever seen. It pierces the surface of the waves sometimes – its great head is like a skeletal horse, trailing seaweed. We hold, shouting orders to one another, this shadow crew and I, as we try to make it.

Then I see it through the slanting sleet.

There's land on the horizon.

I can't breathe for the joy of it. The drumming goes on, that voice insists, warning us away from that treasured shore. But I ignore it. I don't feel the rain or the cold any more; I'm steering with all my might, yelling orders.

"Trim the sail!" The crewmen dangle from port to starboard. *"Sheet it in! Harder! Harder!"*

We have to make it through. At least point the prow in the right direction. But the waves and wind are ferocious. Ropes snap as we try to pull at the sail, and we are twisting like driftwood, up and down.

"We're taking water!" I yell, grabbing a bucket to throw out what keeps sloshing in.

It doesn't matter if our landing is a splintered crash into the rocks. As

long as I can get there. That elusive, tantalising shore.

Something glints through the storm, like a firefly. It grows bigger and bigger, until at last it reaches us. Two human silhouettes step onboard; one tall and dark, the other like sunlight whipped into the shape of a girl. She eclipses everyone around her. She comes to me, wraps herself around my arm, tells me *come, come*. And a senseless moment ensues, of twisting and drifting, of many hands grasping me as thunder roars and rain pours down my body. I fight them with all that I can.

Let me down... let me down... let me down.

* * *

I open my eyes and the rain has stopped. There's land, blessed land cradling my back. Lifting my head, I find that we've arrived in pieces. Wooden planks and curls of rope litter the sand. I'm alone, lying just as broken as my ship.

A little way away, the sea creature is dragging itself from the blue blanket of water; bones and fur and seaweed. It is a grotesque birthing, an ever-changing shape that is like someone's idea of a horse slowly taking shape. It drags its misshapen hooves along the sand, shrinking and changing with every step, its coat losing its grime until it shines white in the sunlight.

The horse snorts, throws his head around, and I realise it is Alsvithr standing there on the sand. Now that his legs are normal again, he comes to me in his regally cadenced gait, lowers his head to rub his nose against my face. I hoist myself up on his back and let him carry me onward.

He takes me up into forests and sunlit lands that are aching familiar. I have the distinct impression of being held; being safe as long as I sit astride

my horse. As long as I don't set foot onto these lands. He's guiding me; I am a visitor here.

A gleaming river coils on our left, and he skims it with his hooves. I recognise the Liffey; I would recognise it by sound alone. It is the river that bore me into maturity, whose currents paced my life for so many years.

Dublin is ahead.

Alsvithr bears us through empty streets until I'm in our courtyard. Though I'm dripping water, broken and bloody, every step dries me, closes my wounds a little further.

And there, by the doors of our great hall...

Gods. It's you.

Is it true? Is this real or is it a dream? I have dreams like this sometimes. All this time, I'll tell myself, all this time – perhaps everyone was mistaken, perhaps you had simply gone away. Not died, but left, covered your tracks with some convoluted explanation. I'll never remember it by the time I wake, I'll only remember that swell of elation, that yes, you're here, you're fine – how silly of us to believe that you were gone forever, when really you were here all along.

But now you really are here. And all the time that was robbed to us cascades over me in a shower of riches. We have time again. We have time to do anything we want.

I can look at you. You're so real. You're there; you're smiling.

I slip down from Alsvithr and stride up to you. Take your hands. Your face. These angles against my palms, they're real too, as though all the silver dust that I gave to the wind had recomposed itself, turning first to glass and then skin.

Ivar used to say you were plain, that you weren't fit for the brother he

thinks so highly of. And I don't know what that oaf saw, but you were always beautiful to me.

Angular jaw. Hawkish nose. The face of a queen. You have a mole under your right eye, and thin lips that stretch wide when you smile. You have the same rich black hair as Ivar, and you'd copy his style sometimes, braiding along the line of your skull like a warrior, though you'd run screaming from spiders.

You've styled it differently now. Where have you been while we thought you were dead? What experiences have you had? Already I'm jealous of the places you've been without me, the people you've met without me.

I don't know where to start. But it doesn't really matter, because we have so much time to talk about it.

First, I lean in to kiss you.

And I kiss you again and again and again until I know I can't ever forget it, what you taste like, the way your mouth fits against mine. I walk you backwards through the doors of the hall we built, until I have you pinned in our marital bed, laughing and pulling me down into the curves of your body.

You may be alive again but I'm not taking any risks.

I want to remember everything.

* * *

Hurts. My leg... *hurts*. Burns. Like Loki's snake is dripping poison on it. Where is my wife – where is the woman who'll hold a bowl over me like Sigyn over Loki, catching the poison – I roll my head and it all blurs again.

The bed is empty. The sheets are rumpled, bloodstained. It was a dream, wasn't it – just a dream like always.

You're not here, you're not here, you'll never be here again.

Isn't it ironic, my love – I'm lying like you were, in a bed like this, blood on the sheets, blood on open thighs – I hate that I can't remember you any other way than like that, the way you were just as you died. It makes no sense; we had ten years. Dreams will give you back to me as you were in laughter and joy, but while I'm awake, you're only ever white-faced and pasty; you aren't yourself, you're whispering last wishes to me, holding my hand.

Olaf. Your breath cool against my ear. *I'm sorry... I'm sorry.*

It was a boy, they tell me, and I can't speak, I'm lying there as ten years all drain away, as everything we built collapses, all the lovingly placed scaffolding for the future breaking inwards into chaos.

What am I meant to do with this limp hand I'm holding?

What am I meant to do now?

Olaf, you have to drink. There's someone propping me up, a bowl nudging against my mouth. Beneath me the ground sways. Light... there's so much light in this room.

There... a door. I need to get out of here. Out of this room that stinks of death, where all that remains of you is an absent silhouette in rumped sheets.

I wrench myself away. To the door. Perhaps I can follow you, wherever you've gone – perhaps if I hurry, I can find the path you took.

Outside, the sky is cloudless and blue. Alsvithr waits in the courtyard. I know he'll show me the way again, just like he did before. There is a ringing in the air, a sparkle of something unreal, a sweet smell of pollen.

I follow him through Dublin's main square, out beyond in the fields and forests. I lift an arm to shield my eyes from the sunlight as his cadenced steps clip-clop along the path.

There's something different about these fields now. As though I were seeing them from a different angle. Same place, different realm. I was so focused on you before, I hadn't realised how empty this place is. Except out there in the forests... there is music, eerie, otherworldly. Silhouettes flit between the trees as though they were dancing in joyous rings.

“Olaf?”

The breeze carries your voice to me. It's rich and deep, pulling at my chest. It's all right, I tell myself, it's all right... you just got up before me. Up with the sunrise, as you always have.

I turn, find you walking out of a thicket in your blue dress, black hair hanging in a long braid over one shoulder, streaks of silver sparkling at your temples. You're smiling that wide, lovely smile. One hand holds up your skirts, and in the other...

You're clutching a little hand, a little boy, who's scurrying after you.

Joy swells in my chest as I watch him pull away from your grip, calling out to me, *Pabbi!* I crouch down and you let him go, and he *runs*, though it's a little lopsided and clumsy.

That can't be our boy. He's so big already.

He runs into my arms and I cradle his warm little body, his scruffy black hair against my cheek.

“Little prince,” I call him. “You're getting so tall!”

“You're still here?” you say, tilting your head.

I look up at you. I know, somehow... that ringing in the air, that music... this isn't Midgard. This is someplace else, and I'm not sure whether you're alive or dead as you stand there on this too-green grass.

“How is he already this big?” I ask you. “It's not been much more than a year since...”

Reality is far, far away. Not painful; just facts.

“Time is different here,” you say. “This is the realm of the aes sidhe.”

I straighten up, hand on my son’s head as he clings to my leg.

“The land of the Fair Folk?” I ask, and you nod.

I remember those tales you told me, of a fair people who live in a neighbouring world. There were places in Ireland, mounds and forest clearings, where people would go and slip out of time. They’d come back with a long white beard, or loaded with riches. Rumours told of entire armies that had disappeared in such ways.

You would have us avoid those spots at all costs, even during war. Ivar had teased me for following your advice. But Ireland was your land; it made sense to follow age-old laws.

Our little prince wanders off to chase after a dragonfly, and you watch him go, still smiling. Then you step closer, blue skirts skimming the tall grass.

It is an ungodly ache to stand and look at you, and know this can only be temporary. I am a guest here, I can feel it; I’m not meant to stay.

“Olaf,” you say, looking at me softly. Gods, I want to touch you again. “What are you still doing here?”

The answer is obvious. “I was thinking of you.” It’s what transported me here. The knowledge sits in me like the spontaneous laws of dreams.

You place your hands on my cheeks, and I close my eyes. Those hands... cool, smooth. Just as solid as last night. I’ve grasped your wrists before I can stop myself.

“Vírún,” I sigh.

“You have people waiting for you,” comes your chastisement, though it is softly spoken. “You can’t linger here. It isn’t safe for you.”

“But I want to stay... I want to stay with you.”

“You can’t, Olaf,” you tell me, firm this time, the Lady of Dublin laying down her command.

Pulse. The pain in my thigh robs me of my breath as I stand there. You’re doing it – staring right at me with those hazelnut eyes, making me more aware of my body.

“You can’t stay,” you tell me, and your voice is rich with emotion as you add, “I don’t want you to stay.”

“Why not?”

“You have a lot of things to do.”

“I’d rather be with you,” I whisper, so close to you now, your scent mingling with the sweetness of fae air. “And our son.”

“No.”

Pulse.

I grit my teeth as my thigh burns white-hot.

“Are you angry with me?” I ask you.

“I am. You don’t belong here. I don’t want you here. Do you understand?”

Pulse. It burns so much that I can’t hold back a groan of pain. You take a bold step, pushing me back against Alsvithr. I grip his mane, climb on his back – I can’t stand up any more.

“There are people with you right now who need you,” you tell me, and the more you speak, the more Alsvithr writhes and protests, pawing at the ground. “Go to them. Be with them. You have a whole life ahead of you, my love.”

“Vírún –”

“Go back,” you say, and you throw out an arm towards Alsvithr’s

hindquarters. He shies violently. Fingers in his mane, I hold on as he side-steps and shakes his head, indignant, throwing out a long mournful whicker. He doesn't understand. He doesn't want to leave.

There's light shining beyond, in the thicket. It's that silhouette again, the girl with the sun in her chest – Sól herself, descended from the sky. She is a glowing figure in the trees. Alsvithr approaches her in his nervous stepping about, and she comes forward, hands cupped under his nose. Her light glows upon his white coat as he calms, sniffing her fingers.

She turns to acknowledge you, and you face one another from across the glittering grasses.

“Take him back,” you command her, your tone brooking no argument.

Sól glides up, straddling Alsvithr in front of me. Then she turns him around, coaxes him to a gallop. The world of the Fair Folk disintegrates around us into sweet, glittering pollen and the faint memory of sunlight. I swipe through it, sick with worry, calling after you.

Vírún! Vírún – !

You need to give me a chance to redeem myself – I can't leave with you angry at me.

But you're gone... it's all gone.

* * *

With consciousness comes the deluge of pain, burning hot through my veins. I'm breathing like a dog, writhing against someone – there are arms around me, holding me tight.

“Calm,” she breathes, panting. “Calm. You're all right.”

That girlish voice... I know that voice. She was Sól, the glowing rider atop Alsvithr... the voice that carried me through the storms.

I'm digging my fingers into her shoulders hard enough to bruise. Gods, this room, there's so much light burning my eyes. She eases me down against soft pillows, presses something cold on my forehead, and I can only groan brokenly with relief. Words are so hard to form with this thick, dry mouth.

"Here." The girl made of light leans closer, tilts the ridge of a cup against my lips. Cold water trickles blissfully down my throat. I lift my head to drink more, and she supports me, cupping the back of my skull.

"You were gone for a long time," she says. "Lie still. Rest."

Her words wade through the sludge of my mind. I try to keep my eyes open, fixing them on one thing at a time.

When she sits back, I notice she wears the sleeves of her shift unbound and loose so that the fine linen covers her hands. When she touches me, she does it through that fine layer.

Seems an odd thing to do. Is this... Midgard? Am I truly back? Or is she one of the Fair Folk, to be attired so strangely, and to glow as she does?

If I am still among the aes sidhe, then maybe... maybe I can catch up with Vírún – find out why she's angry at me, and fix things.

"Where is she?" I mutter, trying to sit up again. "Where are they?"

"Hush. Sit back."

"They were just outside." The words take so much effort now, compared to earlier. "They were just outside that door."

My throat's growing tight as she gently pushes me back down, coaxing me back against piled pillows and soft fur.

If I map out my footsteps from that door, I know there's a siege camp beyond stuffed full of Vikings that smell of woodsmoke and sizzling meat. I

know there are no lush plains... no still, sparkling air, only grey changing weather and wind that whips at our clothes.

I know... I know they aren't out there.

"It's going to be all right," says the woman beside me. Her voice is soft, empathetic. The kind of voice you hear people use on raving madmen.

"This is Midgard," I manage, choking out the word. My jaw is so heavy. My body's punishing me now for the surge of movement; I feel I've used up all my energy just to sit up.

"Midgard," she echoes. Then she goes on as though reciting a lesson: "Yes... that's the realm of men, isn't it? Yes, this is Midgard."

I close my eyes. Midgard... wretched Midgard is why my body weighs as much as boulders lashed together, why everything hurts.

She dabs that blessed cool cloth against my neck and collarbones. My attention focuses on the touch, pulling away from the black maw that is poised to swallow me whole.

Midgard... where I know for certain that they are not.

"Where did you think you were?" the girl asks softly.

"The land of the Fair Folk," I mutter, and I can almost smell it as I utter it, that sweet golden air. "I was there... just moments ago."

"Oh," she says with a touch of awe. "We have a name for that land here, too – we call it Annwn."

A ringing persists in my ears as I recall the images. "Vírún calls it the realm of the aes sidhe."

"So that was... you were with her?"

"Yes." If I speak about it then the memory acts as a balm, deepening the impression of closeness, as though they were on the other side of the bed. "Vírún wore the blue dress she always wore for Bealtaine. And our boy..."

Just to think of that tall, running boy makes me smile. “He was so big. He shouldn’t have been so big. But time flows differently there. That’s what she told me.”

There’s something warm around my hand. The girl’s fingers are wrapped around me through thin linen.

“What’s his name?” she asks.

“He has two names,” I tell her. “One Irish and one Norse. His Irish name is Niall... but we would call him by his Norse name, when it was just us. Nóri.” The name cannot be said without smiling. “It means little one.”

It always seemed more fitting than placing a dusty old Irish king’s name on a little boy. Niall was a traditional name of Clann Ui Neill; he would grow into it, in time. He was the only one that Vírún carried all the way to term; we shouldn’t have named him, but we did. I’d put my hands on her belly and whisper it to him, that I was proud of him for being so strong.

I want to try and explain all of this, but all of my words have dried up.

“Nóri,” the girl says. “That’s lovely.”

Little one... little bundle of cloth. The boy running through the tall grass, the one she names now as though he existed – he has never set foot in this world.

There’s water on my face. My arms weigh the same as a drenched, rolled-up sail; I pull them up and up, endlessly, until I can finally wipe my own face, one small bit of dignity, hiding my tears from this girl.

It’s been... a year. Just over a year. Why does it still hurt so much?

Why do they still feel so close?

The answer to that is easy. Because I want them there... I want them close.

Just outside that door.

I'm weeping now like a child in front of this girl – Odin, I should be better than this, I shouldn't wear this grief like some ostentatious feather cloak for all to see. I've learned to tuck it away. It's necessary. There is no point in rolling around in this pain and reaching for something that isn't there.

But, gods... I'm trying to stop, but I can't.

She's leaning over me, this girl with her long sleeves, huddling around me in an embrace as I try to breathe and clamber my way out of these sticky feathers. I clutch her closer, the warmth of her body reassuringly solid. She's real... she's alive, and it's so good to have her against me, another person who won't fade away with the vanishing rays of the sun.

"Sorry," I gasp into her torrential hair. The spasms in my chest leap and settle, and I wait a moment before repeating it; "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise," she says. "Never apologise for this."

I hold onto her as air returns slowly to my lungs. Some distant part of my rearing tells me this embrace is too long for decency, that surely I should let her go, that she expects me to let her go. But I want to stay in her warm solidity, and she's making no move to deprive me of it.

"I bear the same curse as my father," I tell her, pulling it all out strand by strand. "Ten years married... no heirs. We put our wives through so much pain and dashed hopes... pushing and pushing until it all broke apart."

She's silent for a beat, putting together what it is I'm saying. I expect her to understand; it is all pouring from me, every little piece of the story, though perhaps I'm not telling it in a way that makes sense.

"Vírún... she died in childbirth?" the girl asks in a very small voice.

I nod into her hair.

"Well... there's always a risk, isn't there?" she murmurs. "No woman is

unaware of it. You don't strike me as the kind of man who'd *push* your wife if she wasn't in agreement."

Some warped, bitter form of laughter leaves my throat. Vírún was so determined; that is what makes it hurt so much. "We should've just fostered a child," I mutter. "It didn't have to be mine... she didn't have to risk her life. She had always had difficulties. But she wanted to try again."

I can see her now, turning to me, those hazelnut eyes glowing with a coppery shine in sunlight. Always a hint of melancholy in them, even when she smiled. *I want to please you*, she'd say.

You always please me, I'd tell her, pressing a kiss to her temple.

"I'm so sorry, Olaf," the girl sighs; her throat has grown too tight for any more words than that.

I breathe in the earthy notes of her hair. That scent is so reassuring somehow. I know that scent... I know her. It's on the periphery, the frayed edges of this feathery cloak, if I could just climb out. I'm close now... close to stepping out into consciousness.

She draws away, her warm solid arms slipping from me. And I look at her, blinking as the light dims. That heart-shaped face, those freckles smattered around her eyes, dotted around her mouth... her green eyes are averted, a smudge of wetness where her empathy must've spilled.

I know her; of course I know her.

"Tamsin," I whisper.

She angles those shining eyes at me, a small smile crooking the edge of her mouth. Suddenly something hits me – this bed, this is the bed she made for me with so much painstaking care, the nest she allowed me to sleep in. And now I'm bleeding all over it.

"I'm sorry about the sheets," I manage, and she gives a small surprised

laugh.

“Don’t even think about that,” she says. “You had a fever, but it’s broken now. You should drink some more. Here.”

I watch her scoop water from a bucket, twisting in her black velvet mourning gown. Velvet... that’s why she was so soft.

“How long have I been gone?” I ask her, not much voice left now. She brings the cup to my lips, supporting my head again. I’m glad she does it; my arms have flopped onto my stomach and I’ve no idea if I can lift them again.

“I’m not sure. About two weeks, I think?” she says as I try to drink without choking.

Two weeks that I’ve been unconscious... is that all? It’s a chore to try and remember my place in this world, what’s out there, what our priorities are. Wasn’t there something urgent we had to do?

“What’s been going on?” I manage weakly. “You and your people –”

“That isn’t for you to worry about right now,” she says. “Ivar and Thrain have been running the Dublin pack. We’ll tell you everything as soon as you’re better. It’s all been quiet recently, so you can rest easy.”

She helps me reach the end of the cup, and each gulp of cold water seems to restore some clarity to my mind. I’m so tired, but at least now I’m sure of where we are; I remember why my thigh burns, why I’m so weak.

I stare down at the bandages around my thigh. Whoever’s been taking care of me must’ve had an arduous job if they had to sustain me for two weeks.

“Tell me they didn’t place me in your sole charge all this time,” I rasp. “That would’ve been far too much work.”

Tamsin smiles again. “Ivar and Thrain have been watching over you, but it’s mostly been Ivar. Every moment that he could spare from his duties, he’d

be here with you.”

Affection for my brother swells in me. I feel like I haven't seen him nor Thrain for years and years. But even as I start to ask her whether she can bring them here, exhaustion snuffs out the words. Talking is so taxing somehow.

“I'll fetch them for you,” she promises, reading my intentions on me. Then she shifts, biting her lip as though holding back from adding something else.

I watch her, resting my eyes on that beautiful freckled face, waiting. Now that all that chaos has been pulled out of me, I feel strangely lightheaded, empty, deep exhaustion bringing with it the reward of silence.

“We have tales about the Fair Folk here, too,” she says quietly. “When we want their favour, or when we want to invite them for whatever reason... we place honey-milk and cakes outside for them to find, as a tribute.”

That transports me back through time. I'm smiling as I remember similar scenes. “Vírún used to do that,” I say quietly. “Honey-milk or wine, sometimes.”

Looking down at her lap, Tamsin swallows and then says, “Would you like me to do that? For Vírún and Nóri?”

Though the gesture pulls that cloak closer around my shoulders again, I'm too tired to feel anything else than gratitude, and tenderness towards her for suggesting it.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Sweet cakes for him... wine for her, if you can find some.”

“I'll do that, then.”

She squeezes my hand. I try to follow her movements as she pushes herself up and goes to the door. Her voice drifts in after a while – *Thrain!*

Ivar! He's back!

I'm smiling as I hear them come. *One at a time*, Tamsin says, laughter in her voice; taming my brothers somehow, as she's learned to do. Ivar is the first to reach my bedside, and he crumples beside me, a blur of black, his strong arms scooping me up against him as though I were a limp sack of grain.

"Olaf," he bites out through a tight throat.

"*Easy* – you'll squeeze the life out of me," I wheeze, and he laughs.

Chapter 33



IVAR

Waxing Moon of August

It is not an easy waking. Olaf is foggy and unfocused as we try to speak with him. When we try to bend his leg and show him his wound, he falls into incoherence, head digging into the pillows as he gasps with pain.

Thrain and I do our best to tend the wound while he's conscious – it's less swollen now, but it's still ugly. He pants through it, fingers grasping the sheets, grumbling to himself.

“*Gods* – couldn't you wake me once it was healed?” he wheezes.

I glare at him. “Oh, I'm sorry,” I snap. “Next time we save your life we'll try to do it at a more convenient time.”

He manages to grin. But he's not allowed to joke about it. Not yet. Not while I still want to clutch onto him, make sure he stays right here, lays down his roots properly in Midgard again.

It's the amethyst hour before dawn, but the Dubliners have all woken one another with the news. Many of them are milling around outside, looking in, wanting to greet Olaf now he's awake. I walk out, let a few take my place while I look for Tamsin.

I know she's been off on some collecting mission with Armod; I find her by the bread oven, just outside Angharad's house. She's arranging a cup of wine and a platter of apricot-studded sweetbread there. When Armod tries to take a piece, she swats him away.

"No! I said it's not for you," she chastises, making the old greybeard smile.

I stare at the plate and cup, stupid with exhaustion. But before I can ask her about it, a great shadow looms between the houses.

Father darkens our path. The air tightens with his presence; Tamsin bristles up, one hand clutching the stone ledge behind her. But he barely pays her any mind. He glances over the heads of the Dubliners, focused on Olaf's recovery, like everyone else. When he hears Olaf's voice, his great silver mustache arcs in a smile.

Then he turns and lays those shining eyes on me.

"You managed it, then?" he asks gruffly.

Flashes of heat and cold run through me. It's such a point-blank question.

I nod, trying to school my face to flatness. He lets out a small wondering laugh, shaking his head. Then he steps right up to me and fairly hauls me against him, one huge arm clasped tight around me.

I'm braced there, eyes open, staring at his bristly beard, his thick muscular neck. Something inside me, that child with rags on his bones perhaps, makes me curl my fingers in his tunic. There was a time when I craved this, his affection, his praise. We're both giddy with the same

gladness, and for a moment I could almost believe that we're simply a father and son, revelling in it together.

"You always did have Freya's favour," Father grumbles. "Bless you, lad."

I close my eyes, brow furrowing.

Then he peels me off, pats me heavily enough for my feet to sink into the mud, and turns to march into the house. Still reeling, I watch him as he calls over the heads of the Dubliners – *oy-oy, let me pass, let me at him!* And when he embraces his eldest, a great cheer rises into the early morning quiet.

Tamsin sidles up to me. Father's presence chafes us both, but this night has been *very* long, and she seems just as glad as I am for it all to be over. I let myself look at her, that soft expression she's wearing, exhausted but content.

"My father thinks I saved Olaf," I say slowly, "but I have a feeling you're the one who did something. Didn't you?"

Her mouth twists into a kind of pout, her usual tell when she's trying to hide something.

Finally she admits it: "I went again. Out in the realms. I could still taste the potion, so I think it had some lingering effect. And when I started the chant, I felt like the way was still open—"

"Wait, wait," I interrupt her, baffled. "You sang the *galdr* again? All by yourself?"

To my amazement, she nods.

"But how did you manage it?"

"I laid a hand over his heart," she explains as I stare at her in fascination. "It was the same beat... it grounded me in the same way."

Freya, this raw affinity of hers is just unreal. I knew the Vanirdøtur had

potency, but she makes such a difficult spell sound disgustingly easy.

“I can’t believe you went alone,” I chastise her, though it is envy more than anything that makes me say it.

“I know it was dangerous,” she says quietly, staring at the ground. “And I know this is your territory, and you were so gracious to take me into it. But since I let you down... I just wanted to fix everything.”

“Tamsin,” I protest. I don’t even know how to tell her – does she even *realise* the level of difficulty she just faced? And to pull Olaf out of there, and still have the energy to walk around as though she’d just taken a dip in a pond! I can only laugh in wonder. “You have no idea what you’ve just done.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she says again, frowning. “I promise that next time the need arises, I won’t go anywhere without you –”

“I should hope not,” I say. “I thought I had things to teach you, but it seems like it’s the other way around. You have to show me how in Freya’s name you managed to float away like that. I want to see exactly how you did it.”

She looks up then, realising that I’m complimenting her rather than chastising. A small smile pulls at her mouth.

“You aren’t angry?”

“I am angry,” I tell her. “I’m absolutely furious that it comes to you so easily. Nobody accomplishes that on their second try.”

She gives a surprised laugh at that, says some humble nonsense. For all her smiles, I still have that stone of guilt in my gut, the image of her tears last night. I cup her face, thumb lingering along her jawline as I try to say it again.

“I’m sorry about last night. I was an ass with you.”

She just smiles and says, “It’s all right. You were just worried.”

Thrain comes out of the house, long hair spilling messily over his shoulders, the bags under his eyes just as deeply etched as mine. And when he sees us, he lumbers over, looking like a man with a purpose. Oh, I know that early-hour look of his. I brace for it – but he still squeezes the air from my lungs as he gathers us both up in a bear hug. Tamsin laughs as she’s caught between two huge stinking men.

“Armod and Sigbrand offered to take over the camp for the day,” Thrain says. “I think – and I don’t want to speak too soon – but I think we *might* have a chance to get some sleep now.”

* * *

Tamsin’s nest is like a soft world we disappear into. A year might’ve gone by when I finally stir from the deep blackness of unconsciousness – my body is cradled so comfortably by the furs and soft linen.

I rub my eyes, pushing myself up. Olaf is right there in front of me, fast asleep, breathing in and out steadily. I turn to glance over my shoulder. Behind me lies Thrain, his huge presence comforting as he sleeps.

Tamsin is pottering quietly around her nest, heating water on the hearth, neatly arranging the gear we dumped. She stops pottering a moment, and I spy her simply looking at us, a contented little smile on her face.

The sight thuds into my chest. A Vanirdottir, gazing upon her chosen pack. I can feel the implicit claim of the gesture as surely as if she’d wrapped her hand around my wrist.

“Tamsin,” I murmur. “Come here.”

She jolts in surprise to see I’m awake. “Oh – I didn’t mean to wake you. You sleep. I was going to go and check on Rhun –”

“Just come here a moment.”

Smiling shyly, she lets me pull her between Thrain and I. Thrain huffs in his sleep, his arm coming automatically around her. And we're all in bed together, the four of us, perhaps for the first time. Our little pack.

The delight I can see in her face glows within me as I contemplate her, nestled between us like this. I rub a finger over her lower lip, and she lets me trail down her neck, over her cleavage. The way she arches lazily makes me bite my lip, my cock already stiff to have woken in her company. When I sidle down to her breast, flicking at her nipple through the velvet, she flushes and groans.

“Don't,” she whispers. “I'm sensitive.”

That only riles me further. “Are you now,” I purr as I pinch her hardened nub tighter still. She gasps and wriggles in protest, effectively waking Thrain, whose hand roams over her body with interest.

From that point on, she knows she's in trouble.

“Please,” she sighs as he nuzzles into her hair and joins me in teasing her. “Olaf – he's right there –”

“Shh,” I hiss against her mouth. “You don't want to wake him now, do you?”

The glare she gives me is entirely defeated by the arch of her back, and her needy panting as she grips onto us. I let my hand wander until I'm dragging up her skirts, gliding into the warmth of her bare thighs. When I slide a finger along her slit, I find her sticky with arousal, and so achingly inviting.

“Lamb. You're soaked,” I hiss, making her blush madly. “You've missed this, haven't you? Lying between us like this. Falling asleep with Thrain's knot deep in here.”

She bristles as I trace the length of her inner lips.

“I’ve missed it, too,” I breathe. “More than you know.”

She lets out a needy whine and leans in to kiss me. Between Thrain and I, she doesn’t take any time at all to shatter. She tries her best to contain her sounds, and afterwards she twists between us, sweaty and panting as she lies on her back to recover.

“You’re both terrible,” she protests, though she’s pink and shining now with contentment. Tomorrow, the full moon comes at last; surely that’s why she’s so sensitive. Even just my breath upon her neck gives her goosebumps.

She insists on pushing herself up again, her arms trembling a little. Thrain’s eyes are puffy with sleep as he blinks at her, trying to hold her there. But she extracts herself eventually, giving us each a kiss before she heads off again to care for her brother.

“Sleep,” she insists. “You both have so many nights to catch up on.”

I’m grinning to hear how adamantly she defends her right to care for us. Thrain turns, grumbling sleepily as he casts an arm over my waist, searching for warmth now that she’s gone. And as I lay there, drifting again, it’s so easy... so deceptively easy to believe we each have our place in this pack, in this dynamic; and that it is not any more complicated than this.

Chapter 34



TAMSIN

Full Moon of August

Olaf isn't exactly a picture of health, but when he hears the full moon of August is upon us, he refuses to rest any longer. He has his brothers prop up the cushions for him so that we can take a council right there in his sickbed, without so much as taking a moment to enjoy the lunch we bring him.

"I've rested too long," Olaf tells us as Ivar tries to persuade him to leave the catching up until later. "The full moon is here; we need to discuss what our plans are."

"We can manage another day without you, old man," Thrain tells him.

"You were almost *dead*, Olaf," Ivar adds, but Olaf only raises a hand to quiet them.

"Tell me where we stand."

I sit on one of the crates around the bed, listening hard while they turn to tactics. They discuss Eormen's letter; she and Arlyn only have a small host of

men now, gathered out there in the hills somewhere. Meanwhile Gofraid is holding down the siege camp and the river blockades, tending his rampant bog fever issue. In short, neither party is about to be making any moves.

Olaf becomes glazed sometimes, asks us to repeat, frowns in concentration as he listens. I've never seen him so unfocused and dizzy; but he manages to hang on.

“So Arlyn and Eormen are on standby,” he resumes. “We don't know where they are?”

“They're close by,” Thrain says. “From what Skaði told me, Eormen and Arlyn are keeping an eye on the siege camp. I expect they don't want to leave us unsupervised under the moon.”

Olaf sighs, lifting a hand slowly to rub his face. Every movement, every word from his mouth seems to be costing him tremendous effort.

“And Arlyn's five-thousand cavalry... his cavalry is still up north?” he asks. “Surely he'll want to call down reinforcements soon.”

Thrain crosses his arms. “It'll depend on the situation up there. If they can afford to spare any men.”

“Of course.” Olaf leans forward, shifting in the pillows. “It would be good to make ourselves visible to Eormen's lot. We should try to arrange a meeting with her and Arlyn so we can talk –”

“Are you joking?” Ivar snaps. “I'm not arranging any friendly meetings with that boy. He is the reason you're bedridden. He betrayed us once already. Fuck Arlyn.”

Olaf lays a deadpan look on his brother. “You said he regretted his actions. That he apologised and said he values our alliance –”

“Those were Eormen's words. I would not trust that boy to pass me a shit-filled bedpan without trying to kill me with it.”

Olaf coughs out a laugh. “All right,” he says. “I hear you. But if they’ve extended their apology, then it’s vital that we reconnect with them. Arlyn is the crown prince – it serves our purpose far better to have him as a friend.” He looks at Thrain. “Did Skaði mention when she’d be in touch again?”

“She did not. But we agreed on a meeting point.”

“You’ve set a permanent watchman there?”

“I have. It’s discreet.”

My heart’s beating faster and faster as I follow their exchange. They’re just going to be pursuing the same direction as before. Placing all of their weight into the rickety net of friendship – a net that has broken wide already.

No. I won’t let them be the ones to take all the risks again. I’ve... I’ve made my decision.

“We could try something else,” I manage to pipe up.

All three of them turn to me. Olaf and Ivar look surprised that I might be pitching in. But Thrain – he feels the fear surging up in the pair-bond, the way my heart’s accelerating to a full gallop.

“Tamsin.” He comes to sit beside me, offer me his support. But I shake my head at him, kneading my sternum – if I don’t say this now I will lose my nerve, I know it.

“I don’t want to just sit back and let you do all the work again,” I stammer. “I want to take full advantage of the moon, this time. If I show Gofraid what I can do, won’t that make everything simpler? If I intimidate him badly enough that he finally accepts to leave – then you’ll be spared all this strategising and the risk that comes with it. Won’t you?”

Olaf is looking at me very seriously now. Ivar seems all but lit up by the prospect, gazing at me steadily with those rich black eyes.

“You want to go into your craze?” he asks with reverence.

I meet his eye. “Yes.”

Thrain clasps my shaking hands between his. I swallow hard, taking deep breaths to try and slow my racing heart.

“What would you propose to do, once the craze has you?” Ivar goes on, still keenly interested. “It would open all sorts of possibilities for us.”

“I... I hadn’t thought that far,” I admit. “If the goal is intimidation, then I suppose I could hold down Gofraid’s men with the iron voice? As I did Uradech’s?”

“Mmm.” Ivar seems to be luxuriating in the images that conjures. “You could indeed.”

“Ivar, please,” Thrain protests. “We’ve talked about this. To expose her to the wider siege camp in such a way would put her in considerable danger –”

“Just, if you would,” Olaf interrupts, raising a hand to silence us. His snowy brow is knitted as he thinks hard on my proposal. “Let us consider it seriously this time, at least. Last you used the iron voice, Tamsin, you held down two hundred men. Father’s army boasts near six thousand. I think we can all agree that even in the best case scenario, you will not be able to hold down the entire camp.”

I hang my head. “You’re probably right. But even a small number would still make for a persuasive spectacle, wouldn’t it?”

“It would. It’s a very significant thing you’re offering to do. For all the warbands to witness your iron voice... it will no doubt have a very large impact,” he says. “But if we’re to do this safely, we would need to formulate a plan.”

Fear lurches sickeningly in my guts as he speaks.

He’s accepting. He’s giving me permission to do it.

I’m sweating buckets into my dress, but with Thrain holding onto me, I

manage somehow to stay focused on the discussion. We all agree that it needs to be a peaceful demonstration. Piece by piece we imagine the scene together: Thrain and Ivar would accompany me through camp, and I would make the warbands kneel one after the other, until my plea for peace reaches the King.

Thrain's hands remain tight on mine all throughout. His expression is taut; he isn't happy at all, especially as he can feel every tremor of my panic. But he sees the value of what I'm offering to do.

Once we have a general trajectory laid out, my throat has closed up; Thrain has to help me recover my breathing. I wipe at my face, hunched over as I follow his rhythm. Inhale, exhale, I'm *not* going to die, I'm *not*... this panic, if I just sit with it... it'll pass, like it always has. I will *not* let it master me like it did last moon.

Ivar comes around the bed, lays a warm hand on my shoulder. "We'll stay with you all throughout, lamb. We'll help you nurture control."

He's still incandescent with purpose, still looking at me as though he cannot rip his eyes away. His intensity right then is too much to bear, especially as I can hardly breathe right as it is. I turn to Olaf instead.

"We're doing it, then?" I ask him. "Tonight?"

Olaf is solemn as he considers it. "I don't think you should rush into this," he says. "You have only ever experienced your craze once, princess. I'm sure some practice would not be amiss. Take some time tonight to see how you feel; perhaps you had better see how this first night goes, before attempting the actual plan."

* * *

Thrain and Ivar escort me outside for some fresh air. I stop by the bread oven to take in great gulps of it, chin tilted up as the afternoon sun glows on us.

I'm really... going to do this.

Ivar is lingering close to me; I blink up at him, foggy in the aftermath of my panic. He says nothing for a moment, only lays that look on me.

"That took courage," he murmurs. "The hardest part is done now; agreeing to do it at all. Now we face the rest together."

I knead my sternum some more, trying to appreciate his words. "I don't know. Maybe it's a terrible idea..."

"Far from it." He raises my chin so I might meet his eye. "You restored my faith in myself, so let me restore yours. This is the strongest strategy we have; I know we can manage it. I know *you* can manage it."

I smile, letting his praise spark warmth within me while he leans in to kiss my forehead.

Thrain is standing close by, eyeing the Dubliners beyond as they take their lunch. His arms are crossed tight as he ruminates.

Oh, he's not happy about any of this.

"Thrain," I call to him. "If this works, it'll save us all a lot of trouble. You know it will."

"Hrmph," he acquiesces. "We've left out a significant detail, though."

"What?"

Still without looking at either of us, Thrain says, "How we'll do it, exactly. How we'll push you into your craze and keep you there."

Ivar smirks. "Isn't it obvious? You two will make the most of her heat tonight. It's not like you haven't done it before."

"*Ivar*," I splutter. Christ, does he have to be so blunt? We might be in a relatively secluded corner, here by the bread oven, but *still*.

He just raises his eyebrows. “What? Seems obvious to me.”

Thrain is just as discomfited as me. He struggles a moment, always loath to speak so openly of private matters. Then, quietly he says: “The issue is... when she and I are alone, the impulse to bite is impossible to resist. And it pulls her out of the craze. If you remember, back in Uradech’s camp... we were not alone. We were held back from biting one another. That is why we both stayed in the craze for so long.”

A blank pause stretches. He’s being so careful with his wording, as though trying to dispel the fact that it was Ivar himself that had held onto me that night, naked and feral as I was.

Ivar hooks his thumbs into his swordbelt, grinning widely.

“So?” he says. “What is it you’re trying to say?”

But he’s heard Thrain’s intent loud and clear, and so have I – I’m biting my lip as I look between them, excitement fluttering in my belly.

“I’m saying that we should be clear,” Thrain grumbles, still curt and uncomfortable as he turns to look at me. “About how this is going to go. You should have the final say, Tamsin. Regarding how you want to spend this first heat night.”

“Um...” My lips twist in embarrassment. Is he really going to make me say it out loud? “Well, if it’s all right with you... then maybe it would be best if... if both of you stayed with me? So we can have a practice night together?”

Thrain stares at me, as though the idea of being in rut with Ivar and I at the same time had wiped his mind clean.

“Both of us?” he echoes at length. “You’re sure?”

For God’s sake, I said it once already. *Yes, I’m sure*, I trumpet indignantly through the bond. He bristles as the message reaches him loud and clear.

“That would be nice,” Ivar purrs. “But since you aren’t having a regular heat, lamb, I worry we’d be too much for you.”

Thrain cocks an eyebrow. “Are you admitting that you have no impulse control?”

Ivar just smirks at him. “Oh, that’s rich. Coming from you.”

“You’re referring to years past. I have better control than you now and you know it.”

“Really?” Ivar teases. “I have no such certainties. It’s been a long time since I spent a full rut with you.” He very conspicuously rakes his eyes down Thrain’s body and adds: “I suppose we’d have to get reacquainted.”

Thrain seems to stiffen all at once. “We have an important purpose, here. This isn’t just a question of indulging ourselves.”

“I’m quite sure purpose and pleasure aren’t mutually exclusive. But I suppose it’s your call.”

My blood’s pounding in my groin as I follow their exchange, the smooth glance they share, the competitiveness already rising between them. Maybe I’m getting in over my head, here – Thrain is already intense in his rut, but *Ivar*... and both of them at once... but God, last moon it was all I craved.

Thrain heaves a long sigh, shaking his head a little, as though already exasperated with Ivar’s needling.

“You don’t mind – staying with me, then?” I repeat, just to close the discussion.

They speak at the same time: Ivar says, *it would be my pleasure, lamb*, while Thrain simply bites out, *fine*.

They move briskly on. Thrain gestures to the neighbourhood firepit where many Dubliners are sitting to eat and talk together, mentions flatly that they

should finish up the feast preparations. Ivar agrees, falling into step beside his brother.

Distracted, I follow them both as they stride to the men. For a moment all the talk is about camp organisation: what food reserves we have, which of the youngsters they will subdue, and where to place them all. Once Ivar is busy speaking with the elders, I tug on Thrain's sleeve.

"Thrain," I murmur, and he turns, softening now that we're alone again. "Remember that promise we made? That we'd always be honest with one another?"

A small smile drifts on his lips. "I remember."

"Then you need to tell me, if you aren't happy with our plans tonight. I don't want to do anything that'll make you uncomfortable."

"I'm fine with it. Really, I am."

"Are you sure?"

He presses a kiss into my hair and says, "I'm sure."

* * *

I'm helping them to lock away food reserves when the sky begins to darken. Blowing my hair out of my sweaty face, I glance up, finding the first stars beginning to shine. A dull kind of heat is weighing in my gut – with the feast preparations, I hadn't noticed it. But it's here.

My false heat is starting.

I'm not used to this sluggishness. Usually, my true heat begins with shakes and hot flashes, a sort of wobbly readiness that demands that I find someone, anyone to keep me company. It is energising more than anything.

But now, there is this deep exhaustion instead, and a visceral ache for my pack – an ache that only gets more painful the longer they aren't with me.

In a way, it's even worse than a true heat. It's more debilitating still.

I take in a shaky breath, hands curled around the edges of the crate I just set down. Thrain and Ivar are close by; to have them near this time is deeply soothing. Sensing my state, Thrain drops the grain sacks he was storing and comes to me.

“Tamsin.”

I shake my head. “I'm all right... you don't have to drop everything.”

Ivar joins us, a barrel under his arm. Still he keeps a small distance, though he's devouring me with his eyes. His posture is eloquent: *is it time?*

I glance across the road at Angharad's house, the nest that's pulling at my bones. Then something hits me – it isn't exactly empty, is it?

“What about Olaf?” I ask them. “Will one of you subdue him tonight?”

Both of them share a baffled glance.

“No. Definitely not,” Thrain says, as if the very question were outlandish. “We couldn't. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen anybody subdue Olaf.”

Ivar grins. “As far as I know, Father is the only one who's ever done it.” Then he tilts his head at me. “I'm wondering though... perhaps you could, Tamsin. With your purr. You've been putting Rhun to sleep regularly, haven't you?”

My cheeks flush as I imagine it. “But Rhun's like a reed compared to Olaf.”

“You calmed him in his fever. I think you might be able to manage it.”

“But...”

I stare at Angharad's house, heart thrumming as I hesitate. Then Thrain

runs a hand down my spine, and the contact lights me up, makes me arch despite myself.

“Oh...”

“Go,” Thrain growls. He alone can appreciate how strong my scent is becoming, the bone-deep call of it; he knows we will have to begin our long night soon. “We’re almost done here. We’ll join you once he’s down.”

* * *

I linger by the doorway, looking in. Olaf is sitting up against his pillows, an empty cup in his shaking hands. He’s shining with sweat, his blue linen tunic darkened with it, and he’s breathing deep as though trying to nurture control.

God, his scent. Usually it’s thick and comforting, baked bread glazed with butter. But now with his rut coming on, it’s cloying and heavy in the air, filling the house.

He lifts those pale, bloodshot eyes to mine.

“Princess,” he growls.

Just the sound of his voice floods my lower body with heat. With great effort, I push away from the doorway, placing one foot carefully in front of the other as I join him at his bedside.

“Here, let me help you.” I take the cup from him, scoop water from the barrel that sits by his bedside.

He watches me quietly. When I pass him the full cup, the sight of his trembling hand makes me bite my lip. I’ve never seen him actually suffer the symptoms of his rut before, since he’s always occupied himself under the moon; either by riding out on some purposeful mission, or stupefying himself with drink.

To sit beside him now while he's hot and sweaty with rut, unable to go anywhere to spend his energies – *Christ*. I have to remind myself again, that whatever intimacy we've shared thus far has been purely one-sided. I've cared for him, touched his bare skin, washed him, bandaged him, but he has no recollection of it. He...

He doesn't want any kind of closeness with me. He needs time.

"Thank you," he grunts once he's drunk his fill. "I apologise."

I shake my head. "It's your nature. You can't help it."

We both linger there a moment, staring at anything but each other. While I struggle to find a way to bring up my actual purpose here, he speaks first.

"You tell my brothers to behave themselves tonight, all right?" he grumbles. "After everything you've been through already, it isn't right that we should ask so much of you."

I grip my dress. "I stayed behind last moon. I haven't done nearly enough to protect you all. If I'd only gone into my craze then –"

"Princess."

"– if I'd done it, you wouldn't be hurt."

A pause stretches between us, in which my knuckles whiten in the folds of my dress, and he breathes softly. I can feel his eyes on me. Then he raises his enormous hand, and I'm startled to feel him touch my cheek.

"Tamsin." He wears a small smile, gaze tender. "Please. There is no one to blame for this injury but the Bowman and his arrow. So I won't have you shoulder the burden."

An eternity passes before I manage to build up the nerve to speak.

"I – I had something to ask you," I blurt.

"What is it, princess?"

"Well... Ivar mentioned that I might be the one to put you to sleep

tonight. With my purr. If you'll allow me to."

The words come out in a mangled stop-and-start rush. His clear eyes shift away, and he leans further against his pillows, considering this. From his total absence of expression, you'd think he hadn't heard me at all.

Eventually he lets out a long sigh. "I suppose there isn't much choice," he says. Then, stirring as though realising how hurtful the words might've been, he adds, "I don't mean to be disobliging. In truth, since I must be subdued, then I'd much rather it be you than my father who does the honours."

He says it with his usual courteous manner, as though only being polite – as though we weren't talking about something deeply intimate.

"If you don't manage it, please don't be disheartened," he tells me. "I have not been subdued in a very long time."

I nod, hands twisting together.

"May I?" I ask him quietly.

He closes his eyes and nods. I lean closer, carefully cup his face like I did when he was feverish.

Sleep now... sleep and restore yourself. The intention swirls and crests into a purr.

He tilts his head back into the pillows with a soft groan, his huge body stirring beneath me, lazily stretching out.

Christ, this is so different than last time. Of course it is; he's awake and sweaty with rut. And my heat is rising in me relentlessly. I can't stop thinking about how warm his skin is; how the bristles of his beard feel against my palms. How I want to feel them against me in other places.

More tender places.

It's communicating through the purr, I can't help it; the need for him, the budding desire that's a blend of nurturing and want. *Sleep*, I try to think,

louder to drown out the rest. *Sleep. I want you to sleep.*

Soon I'm leaning over him, both of our faces close, his features softening as he relaxes. I can feel my slick pooling, smudging between my thighs – it's costing me so much concentration to hold back that I don't even notice when Thrain returns.

A hand lands on my shoulder, caresses down my back. The mattress sinks behind me as Thrain sits close by. "He isn't in the deep sleep yet, is he?"

"Getting there," I mumble.

"If you can't manage it, we can call in Gofraid –"

"No," I snap, surprising myself that I might slam it down like that. *I want to be the one to care for my pack; Olaf needs me.* And nobody will dislodge me from my place.

"It's all right. You have time," Thrain says.

He leans against my back, curling his arm around my waist. His growl stutters against my spine, and I'm so wrapped up and blissed out, between him and Olaf.

This... this is where I belong. If only Ivar would arrive, then I'd feel complete.

Olaf's breath deepens as he falls further into sleep. Thrain pulls me off him, insisting when I try to resist – it wakes a senseless sorrow to be torn apart from my silver packmate all over again. But Thrain holds me close enough for me to find comfort there, my bonded mate, my husband – and I nuzzle against him, giddy as the strength of that yearning changes target.

"Please," I mutter, frowning, wishing this could just be a normal heat, straightforward sexual desires, stupid and simple. None of this whirring yearn to own, to devour, to keep forever. "You'll stay with me this time, won't you? You'll stay..."

He cracks at the sound of my voice, and kisses me deep enough to have me moaning again. He lifts me in his arms, carries me over to the hearth so he can sit us both down with me in his lap. And he kisses away the sorrow, soothing me, pulling me into the pair-bond.

I'm here, it promises, warm and inviting. I'm with you. Always.

Chapter 35



IVAR

Full Moon of August

I'm sitting outside Angharad's house, trying to calm my nerves. Around me, musicians are playing the song of Sigurd and the dragon, and for a while the music helps me to stay calm. Allow Thrain the privilege of precedence, as ever.

But *gods*, Tamsin's scent. Like last moon, it acts as a stark warning. The tantalising honey and apples have an acrid hint, as though sweet poison resided at the heart of the apple.

Back off, it says. *Taste me and suffer the consequence.*

That she would wear a scent that so aggressively wards off any Varg but Thrain is doing things to me. Bringing back that old issue of territory, this time with a vengeance. She and I have shared so much, I try to tell myself. This repulsion, it's just instinct; just the rules of the bite, the senseless rules of our deep natures.

I frown, beating the song's rhythm with my foot, as though that could distract me at all.

My rut is telling me I have two options. Either I stay out here, stay away from her, as her scent is commanding me to do. Or I stride in there, pull her onto my knot and bite her, thus ending this outrage where *my* Vanirdottir wears a full moon scent that repels me.

“Ivar...!”

The sound of her voice breaks me out of the red-tinted grind of my thoughts. I turn my head, and her voice rises again, shaky with distress:

“Why isn't he here, why is he –”

“He's just outside, cariad,” Thrain soothes her. Then, louder; “Ivar, get in here.”

The other musicians jeer at me, reach to pat me on the back. *Go on, go on now*, they say. *Don't overwork yourself!* I smirk at them, pretend confidence even as I rise on shaky legs.

That half-open door is like a door to another realm; a golden slice of firelight, a promise of pleasure. I stride to it. Force myself to step inside.

The sight before me robs me of my breath.

They're both coiled together in the sheepskins that circle the central hearth. Thrain is kneeling, gloriously bare-chested; he straightens as he turns to look at me. Tamsin's legs are hooked around his hips; she's arched in the furs before him, wearing nothing but her shift, her sumptuous ginger curls fanned out around her. Her eyes are glazed and black with heat as she gazes at me.

“Ivar,” she breathes.

... *fuck*.

I suck in a breath. Jealousy is still drumming through me, my fingers

digging into the doorway at my back. That claimed scent makes me senselessly angry at her; angry at him; it's all muddled up, because I want them both, and I don't know what I'll do if I take even one more step into this house.

Tamsin's hand is in the sheepskins, crooking a little as though trying to reach me. Then she smiles at me, and the relief on her face now that I'm here clenches around my heart like a fist.

"Come closer," she begs in that breathy, heat-struck voice. "Please..."

Outside, the men launch into a debauched song, some of them shouting encouragements to us, though thankfully Tamsin cannot understand them. And though I have never been one to shy from such scenes under the moon, I still find myself rooted to the spot.

Watching, just like I did in Uradech's camp, as Thrain leans over her again. Watching as he scents her all over, bunching up the shift, running his nose up her belly, between her breasts. Nips and sucks those rosy nipples until they're taut and tight.

He's working just as hard as I am to hold onto restraint. Even now as the rut thuds through our veins, he moves with the calm assurance of a Varg who savours what is his; he knows he can have her again and again throughout the entire night.

I shut the door behind me. Lean against it so I can watch them more comfortably.

He's always so patient and sweet with her. I marvel at the sight of it; there was never any patience nor sweetness between us, back when I held him down under the moon. But that was another time. My eyes rest on the impressive musculature of his back, the shifting shoulder-blades as he handles his wife with impeccable control.

Slowly, he pushes inside her, making her arch and cry out.

Fuck, my rut is scraping through my veins at the sight of them. It's agony to hold myself away. And they aren't just a beautiful couple of revellers, fucking right in front me – it's *them*, my erstwhile pup whose body I know as well as my own, and the Vanirdottir we share.

I know what it feels like to be inside both of them. I know what they sound like, what they look like when they come. I've been tucked around them in Tamsin's nest so many nights since arriving here.

That makes them mine.

Both. *Mine*.

I decide to be gallant. We can start with small pleasures... and I need to pace myself, or I'll lose my head. I can't fucking prove Thrain right, that my self-control isn't as stellar as his.

Eyes traveling down Thrain's spine, I grab myself through my breeches, stroking in time with his thrusts. He always had such a tight little arse... perfectly rounded. The clench of his thrusts makes me bite my lip, appreciating how the firelight curves around each cheek. But the point of their joining is cast in shadow.

Licking my lips, I tilt my head back as the rut shivers through me.

"Lean over her," I command him. "Let me see."

He turns his head, throws me a glare of pure outrage over his shoulder. *How dare you. Don't tell me what to do.*

My grin widens.

There he is. The little shit I remember under the full moon.

But he's indulgent; perhaps because she's here, tempering him. He leans over her, hands planted on either side of her. Like this, his back dipped, his thighs held apart, it's almost as though he were presenting himself before me.

And he gives me a beautiful show; pulling his cock out of her slowly, almost all the way out, firelight shining on the copious slick that covers his girth. Her downy lips are mouthing around the tip, clinging on. I pull harder at my cock, biting my lip, weakening at the sight of it. Then he sinks into her, that impressive length disappearing inside her until his weighty sac is nestled against her.

And he does it again. A slow, slippery slide.

I let out a whine of pure need. I can almost *feel* the glide of his cock, the stretch it must be for her, just by watching. Taking myself out, I stroke up and down, spreading precum over myself, adding my own scent-markers to the saturated air.

They pick up the pace. I can see the tell-tale flush at the base of his cock, his knot bulging out progressively as the rut overcomes him.

Loki. Her lips glitter with juices as he stretches them with his growing knot. He eases that flushed ball in and out... *fuck*. That must feel so good. The shivers I can see running down his back are the same I'm feeling, cold fingers making me arch against the doorway.

And he manages to keep a civilised rhythm? Doing *that*? The man has nerves of iron.

"Tamsin," he breathes, like it's so good that it's robbed him of his voice.

Then I realise that knot looks heavy and ripe. And he's not stopping.

"Don't you fucking dare," I growl, and then my legs are pumping across the room without my ordering them. I collapse on my knees behind him, pulling him up by a thick fistful of hair. He comes up growling, hands slipping down Tamsin's arched body as he straightens. His back hits my chest and I hold him there, growling in his ear; "Don't you dare knot her yet."

"You'd better let go of me, *now*," he snarls back.

“Thrain,” I warn, clenching my fist tighter, making him bristle. Nose in his hair, I breathe him in, sweat and musk and the delicious notes of rut. My free hand winds around his waist, reaching to clasp that thick bulging knot, slippery with Tamsin’s slick. He tilts his head back against my shoulder and gasps as I *squeeze*.

So responsive. Just like I remember. I burrow my erection against his arse as I keep a firm hold of his knot. “It’s been a long time, so maybe you’ve forgotten,” I hiss in his ear. “You don’t give me commands on a rut night. You shut your mouth and you *obey*.”

“Ivar,” comes Tamsin’s breathy voice from where she’s lying. “Don’t talk to him like that.”

“Don’t worry, lamb. He knows good things come to those who earn it.”

He huffs a laugh. “Still an asshole, just like always.”

“And you’re still a greedy little shit,” I growl in his ear. “You wanted to knot her now? And keep her locked for an hour? I swear to you, Thrain, if you do that, I will fuck you right as you are. I’ll fuck you so hard she’ll feel your knot in her throat.”

He only arches at my words, his knot bulging against my fingers. He’s giving shallow, needy bucks now, fucking into her even as I hold him firm.

“Oh, you’d like that, would you?” I purr into his ear. “You’d like me to fuck you while you’re knotted to her?”

The spike in his growl tells all.

“I think I might do that, then,” I go on. “Give you my cock just the way you like it. Deep and slow... you remember?”

He lets out a strangled sigh, throwing a hand back over his head, trying to grab hold of me. He finds purchase at the back of my neck, and his desperate clutch makes my cock twitch.

“I’ll give it to you,” I promise him. “But I want her first. So be good for me.”

“Piss off,” he growls. I only grip him harder, fingers squeezing the blood from his knot. He gasps, switching to garbled Norse: “– *hhff*, Loki stuff your mouth –”

“Are you going to be good?”

“Fuck you –”

“You’re about to come, aren’t you?”

“Yes –”

Tamsin’s legs are curling around the both of us now as she arches in the furs, taking his thrusts, panting as she feels him stiffen inside her.

He struggles in my arms, unable to resist the instinct to knot her. But I hold him firm, delighting in the telltale signs of his climax. His mouth drops open, his chest swells – he grows stiff against me, his knot pulsing like a heart in my hand.

His growl twists up into a whine as he comes. And just that sound, the feel of his abandon, it’s too much – too good – I bite down on Thrain’s neck as my own release pounds up my cock, spurting over his lower back. I grind like a pup between his cheeks as my come slicks that soft crevice.

He pushes his knot and my own hand against the rim of Tamsin’s entrance, and she winces to feel my knuckles there.

“Calm,” I warn him, hoarse with pleasure. “Settle.”

He’s high in his climax, fuzzy enough to heed me. I’m wrapped around him as he relaxes, his pulse still thundering against my palm.

“Good,” I murmur. “Very good.”

“I am going to *kill you*,” he pants.

I let my teeth skim his ear. “Always these empty promises.”

Tamsin's legs are still curled around both of us; I stroke her, excitement fizzling through me at the idea that I can have her, taste her with all the hypersensitivity of the rut.

Odin, but I'm too worked up. If I sink into her now, warm and creamy with Thrain's come as she must be, the moon-craze will snap its jaws around me. And it will be harder to steer them both – not to mention keep my own head. I may want to help her ease into her craze, but this is also the first time I've allowed myself to be in full rut with her; in a sense we are all testing our control tonight.

"Tamsin," I murmur as I stroke my nails along her bare thigh. "I think we should reward him for his good behaviour. What do you say?"

"Mmm," she agrees, smiling up at us, hazy in her own aftermath. She seems pleased as she takes us in; she's understood that whatever harsh words I may utter, it's ultimately a game. Dominance and control; two Vyr-gen negotiating hierarchy.

Thrain pulls out of her, collapses beside her, one arm thrown over her belly. Like a well-trained pup, leaving me his place so I can fuck her. For a glorious, heart-stopping moment, I have her splayed in front of me, thighs wide open, too groggy to correct the indecent position.

I stare.

Her ginger curls are matted; she's oozing Thrain's remnants, thick globs glistening on flushed pink flesh. And the *scent*...

Freya have mercy.

I've dropped between her thighs before commanding my body. I need to taste her. I run my tongue up that decadent fount, gathering them both up, moaning against her as the delicious combination hits my palate.

A feast. A *feast*. Loki would weep with jealousy.

Thrain growls. He's making a huge allowance right now, watching me as I lap at her puffy lips. Tamsin writhes to have me burying my tongue inside her for more. But it's been a long time since I've done this; I have no talent for it. Not like he does.

I think I've found Thrain's reward.

I climb over Tamsin, nudge her mouth with my own, lick her so she can taste the cream she wears in her cunt. "I think we should let him have that feast," I whisper to her.

Her cheeks are flushed red as she understands my meaning.

Thrain looks as though he's watching the sky open upon the gates of Asgard as she moves to straddle his face. She's turned toward me as she does it, eyes averted, mouth twisted in a shy grin that I can't stop staring at. He tilts up his chin, beard tangling with her ginger curls as he moulds his mouth over her sex. He drinks deep, and the sight of him arched under her, arms around her thighs as he devours her cunt – *gods*.

I'm kneeling between Thrain's open thighs, watching them, pulling at my cock as it thickens again. The rut shivers through my veins, a dizzying rush, back and forth with each heartbeat. I can barely focus. I need to calm... calm down.

Tamsin moans as he licks her, collapsing a little more, hands planted by Thrain's hips. His cock is filling out again, twitching up as she breathes on it.

How the fuck am I meant to calm down?

We both stare down at that glorious glistening cock. I don't know what I want more between watching her suck it and tasting it myself.

Damn them both. I've watched long enough.

I shift, lying in the furs so I can grind against soft sheepskin. Tamsin's eyes go wide as I stand Thrain's cock up, loosely clutching the base. I run my

tongue up the underside, tasting the divine mead that clings there.

I let his thickness glide into my mouth, hunching over him so I can take him down deep. He *moans* into Tamsin's cunt as I take him further into my throat – eyes squeezed shut as I fight the gag reflex.

So deliciously thick. This man. I'm not sure I've lain with someone as big as this in a long time. I pull back, raking my teeth softly over the flared ridge of his head. This is how he used to like it, if I'm remembering correctly... with a bit of teeth, aptly placed.

I was right – he growls against Tamsin's puffy lips, making her frown and gasp as the vibrations hit her right where she's most sensitive.

“How are you doing that?” she asks me, panting.

I glance up at her, cheeks hollow, mouth still full of Thrain's cock. That she would ask me questions while I'm sucking off her husband makes me grin – a difficult, uncomfortable thing when my jaw is split open around this monstrous thing.

I break off, ending with a lick along his seam that makes him shudder.

“Doing what?” I tease her.

She's red as a beetroot as she tries to put words to it.

“Taking it... so deep,” she manages.

That *she* would say that – stammering little princess that she is after dark – it sends a bolt of desire through me.

“You want to show me how you do it, lamb?”

She does so, not without difficulty as Thrain is providing ample distraction. Breathless, I watch her as that plump little mouth opens around him. She can't take more than his thick, blunt cockhead. But she sucks on it so adorably, frowning in concentration, stopping sometimes to use her tongue.

“You’re going to make me come just watching you do that,” I growl at her, making a fist in her hair to keep it out of her face. I want so badly to just shove her down on him.

She breaks off, panting; Thrain’s still growling against her, sucking on her drenched sex, and she must be close now.

“Don’t come,” I command her. *Not without me.* “Can you hold back?”

“I – ” She tilts her hips, concentrating, letting out a small frustrated whine. “I can try.”

“That’s my good girl.” I stroke down her jaw, her throat, push a little at her shoulders. “You need to give yourself room,” I instruct her. “Don’t worry about breathing. Just feel him glide along on your tongue. Feel him rest against the back of your throat.”

She moves, angles herself differently, breathes out slowly. Then she tries to take him again, going a little further this time.

I sit up again between Thrain’s thighs as I watch her work through the exercise. She comes up gasping for air, panting, glancing up at me as though for feedback.

One hand in her hair, the other pumping my cock, I grin at her. “Such a good girl,” I praise her. “Keep going.”

She doesn’t get very far into the exercise, because Thrain’s growl is pummeling her clit and I can see how she’s trembling, so close to orgasm that she keeps having to tilt away from him. She’s whining and gasping around his cock, getting sloppier by the moment.

Gods, I can’t resist her.

I tug at her hair, make her look up at me. She lets that monstrous cock slop down from her mouth and fall back against Thrain’s stomach – I nudge her lips with mine instead.

“Open your mouth,” I breathe. “Wider.”

She does, panting, eyes closed – she’s too close to climax now to care for propriety. I shove between her plump lips, my hand pumping frenetically – it’s *her*, Tamsin, with my cock in her mouth – the fucking sight of it is driving me insane.

“Come,” I moan as the rush of climax pounds up my shaft, “come for me – *now*.”

Like a good girl, she does as she’s told.

Her breaths come hot and fast as she climbs the peak. And the sight of my come jetting into her mouth, white splashing over her tongue, dribbling over her lips as she holds her mouth open for me...

Absolutely unreal. I force myself deeper, and she makes desperate little noises as she reaches the height of her own climax. I can feel her tongue cushioning me, her moans vibrating around me as she bravely manages to bear through it.

Swallowing at last, she breaks off, coughing and gasping for air. I lean to kiss her, taste myself on her, delirious. She’s so perfect. This girl. This blushing princess who really isn’t as shy as she seems.

Thrain’s deep panting breaths are clearer now; he’s tilted away from her to breathe.

“Tamsin,” he moans from between her thighs. “Please.”

Well, fuck me.

I’m spent, but just the sound of that word in his mouth...

It would take me so much effort to earn that word. It was capitulation; pulling away from pride, stooping to beg. But Tamsin didn’t even have to do anything to make him say that.

It isn’t capitulation when he says it to her; it’s just pure *need*.

Just with that, I'm already hardening again.

Gods, this is going to be a long night.

The three of us are completely beyond reason now. Filthy and desperate and grasping at each other. Thrain is still hard as a brick; I grin at Tamsin as she holds herself there, shaky and dazed.

"I think you need to finish that exercise," I tell her.

Chapter 36



THRAIN

Full Moon of August

He's *playing*. Just playing with us like he does with all his feast partners – as though there were no greater significance to this night. Odin, surely he knows it is a precious, sacred thing to share the moon with her.

But he's still just bloody *playing*.

He looms over us now and I can only glare, heart thudding, one hand clasped in Tamsin's hair as she goes on pleasuring me. He grins, his lips shining, and *gods* I want to whack him – he thinks he can just take these liberties with us, with *me*, no questions asked?

Those black eyes wear that *look*. Proprietary smugness. He's sharp and merciless tonight – driving us, laying commands, sending a thrill in my veins that I haven't felt in a long time. He acts as if no time had passed. As if this were a mere rut night like any other, and I were still that young pup he could squash under his heel.

But I am older now, heavier than him, and far more self-possessed than I used to be.

I prop myself up on one elbow, rising into his space, my growl crackling between us. Tamsin is entirely too involved in her efforts to realise this nascent antagonism – it’s a feat to concentrate on Ivar even as she takes me deeper into her throat.

I snarl at him in Norse; “You think you can just do what you want?”

“Mmm.” Those musician’s fingers are splayed around the base of my cock, sliding lower. “I don’t see you trying to stop me.”

His obtuseness smarts like a wound. He has not noticed – he doesn’t even realise it, does he? Tamsin swirls her tongue around me, and I’m breathless as I try to talk;

“I am not that young man any more, Ivar. So don’t presume –”

But she takes me deeper still, and my mouth drops open, words scattering. Ivar closes the space between us as I pant through the pleasure.

“What point are you trying to make, Thrain?” he whispers. “You’re the one who invited me in.”

Those fingers glide deftly over my balls, nestling between my thighs. I can’t help but tense up as he circles my entrance, slicked by droplets of Tamsin’s saliva.

“Would you prefer if I asked nicely before I touch you?” Ivar purrs.

I grit my teeth, growl shuddering between them. In all the moons that have passed since those early years, I’ve not trusted anyone to touch me down there. Not since him – self-serving *bastard* –

But the way he’s pressing and circling has me sagging back to the floor, head tilted back with a groan. He’s... too good at that. I’d forgotten... *Odin*.

He encourages Tamsin as she takes me into her throat, then his slick fingers slide into me, and I lose what little remained of my head.

I cry out as Ivar presses up against my bulging prostate, rubbing and massaging until I'm senseless. He's still leaning over me, taking in my expression, wearing that familiar intensity in his face – the face of a Varg glorying in his pup's subjugation.

There is no way to speak the words any more – but I still glare at him, willing him to hear them. *What are we even doing? What is it that you want?*

He holds my gaze and the answer, right then, is obvious. *I want to hear you moan*, those black eyes say. *To have you under me, where you belong.*

Orgasm cracks through me like lightning, makes me groan like an animal. He joins Tamsin, and their tongues dance over my cockhead in tandem, lapping me up, sharing me between themselves, kissing each other around the slick tip. Their hands are everywhere, teasing, pulling, massaging.

“St – ah,” I moan, reaching to stop him, but my hand only lands weakly on his shoulder. “Iv – ar –”

I'm making senseless noises, spine arched off the floor. Even after they have the mercy to break away, pleasure still rolls through me in shuddering waves. *Fuck*, I'd forgotten how this felt.

“I think he liked that,” comes that idiot's voice.

Hands caress my belly as though praising a loyal dog. All I can see are dancing lights in the post-orgasm fuzz, but just the sound of his voice is enough to pull me back to consciousness. When my eyes blink open I find him poised over me again, gazing down at my expression.

“I think he liked that very much,” Ivar purrs.

Go fuck yourself, I want to snap at him, but I have no breath left for insults. He leans closer, and when he kisses me I can only frown into it,

panting against him as he takes what he wants. Just like he always has.

* * *

Tamsin takes care of me, holds me so achingly close as the night deepens. There is no hesitation between her and I – the mating marks we wear only attest to the certainty of our commitment. It is a reassurance I find myself sorely needing tonight; to feel this belonging, deep and wordless.

Ivar is as a shadow pressed between us, dark hands wrapping around my throat. His touch is addictive, intoxicating. A vestige of lonelier, torturous times. I should know better than to try and look for some deeper meaning there. I remember now, painfully clearly – how good our rut nights were, how infuriating it was to have to separate again come the daylight. But such is the way of the feasts – that is what he taught me. Lonely bursts of pleasure; ephemeral joinings. Such is the way of Vyrge men, he said.

The way of Vyrge men. Ha. It is just his way, in the end. Even now, as he lets Tamsin climb upon him, his claws digging into her, I have to wonder – is there any depth to it? Or is that possessive grip just an illusion with her, too?

He lets her venture down his lean, sweat-slick body, take his own rigid excitement into her mouth. And when he tilts his head back, eyes closed – it is never quite abandon. Always a controlled release.

The three of us stay on the surface, grasping and sucking and pleasuring each other. Though I wrap my fist around him and draw ragged moans from his throat, still he tempers himself. There's something very careful about the way Ivar moves; his hands tremble as the moon rises. He's keeping himself in check.

Eventually Tamsin grows impatient, whining her need to be fucked and filled – and when she nuzzles him, his growl grows deeper, more aggressive.

And he breaks through his careful façade.

He bites down hard on her neck, holds her there against him. Even when I loom over them, one hand moving over his saliva-slick cock, he will not let her go.

The moment is heady. Blurred with desire. *Genuine* for once – this craving he has for her. I can't rip my eyes from his expression, naked hunger etched in every line of his face. But his teeth are digging in deep; and Tamsin twitches with pain.

Instinctively I check his eyes.

Red.

“Ivar,” I warn.

Still he does not let her go, so I take him by the neck.

“Calm,” I growl, trying to thread something soothing into it. “You're slipping.”

Finally he detaches from her neck, breathes out slowly. For a moment we're hunched together, panting. Gods, the pure yearning I feel through the bond – she's tireless tonight, and both of them together spell a dangerous combination.

I know he's been holding back from fucking her so far. I'm wondering now if it's because he's afraid to lose control entirely.

“I'm here,” I remind him. But from the way he glances at me, I know what he's thinking.

I've never had to pull him back from his feasting, under the full moon. Olaf has always been the one to subdue him if he goes too far. I don't know if I can handle him in his moon-craze; it has never been our dynamic.

Still holding her against him, he closes his eyes and speaks in Norse, his voice low with need; “I want to bite her. Properly.”

Indignation surges in me. “You can’t,” I tell him sharply.

“I know. I just can’t stop thinking about it.”

It’s the rut talking, we both know that. But to hear those words is so jarring, coming from him – the grinning skáld who commits to nobody, who treats his partners so lightly. I can’t imagine him wearing such a stark mark of possession on his throat.

His eyes meet mine, black corrupted by a frayed red edge. “If I lay with her... I’m going to bite her,” he admits, still in that low, shamed voice. “It’s her scent. It says that she’s yours, and I just need to correct it. I need it to say she’s *ours*.”

Odin help me, I’m going to hit him. I want to rage at him: *you think you’ve earned the right to bite her? You think I’d let you claim her so carelessly, on some mindless moonlit whim?*

“Brother,” I grit out. “You’ll do it when you both agree to it properly, with all the appropriate rites. Tonight is not the night.”

“Are you two all right?” Tamsin asks, her Gaelic rising between us as she straightens to look at us.

I turn to my wife, stroke her freckled cheek. The rut will not allow for much more peace; we need to come to a decision now, or Ivar will have to walk out if he can’t stay sane. And I don’t want either of them to have to suffer that separation.

Leaning in, I kiss her softly in reassurance. “We’re discussing whether he can stay.”

“Stay? Why couldn’t you stay?”

Ivar glares at me; he did not intend me to immediately make it an

ultimatum. But he knows it cannot be otherwise if we're to keep Tamsin safe from whatever excesses the rut would push him into.

He sighs and then catches her eye, lets her see for herself the thread of crimson in his irises. And he admits it to her in a growl: "I want you too much."

That only makes her smile. "Don't see the problem there," she teases.

"Tamsin," he warns. "You know how this ends if I lose control."

"Can't Thrain subdue you?"

"He never has before. We have no certainties that he could."

"I could purr for you," she offers, and both Ivar and I grow limp purely from the memory of it.

"As much as I would love it if you did," Ivar says, "we aren't certain that it would work."

Tamsin opens her mouth to argue, but she knows he's right. So far she's only managed to subdue one gangly pup, and a wounded man.

Then I remember... something Ivar used to use on me. Something I know we keep around for those feral pups and undisciplined Vyr-gen who are hard to control. Something I should not even be mentioning to a Varg pack leader – but he's pissed me off enough by now. I want to see the face he'll make.

"Brother," I begin casually, speaking in Gaelic to include Tamsin this time: "Do you still have muzzles in your coffers?"

Ivar turns, slow and deadly. His expression does not disappoint – he is brimming with pure outrage.

"Excuse me?" he snarls in Norse. "You try to strap one of those on me and I will break your arm. Don't even think about it."

"Muzzles?" Tamsin asks, eyes aglitter with curiosity. "What – ? For cursed men?"

The deadpan look Ivar lays on me clearly says, *now look what you've done.*

“They’re used to train the more unruly pups, usually,” I explain to her. Then, trying my best to suppress my smirk, I turn to him again: “There is no shame to it, Ivar. She is a Vanirdottir. These aren’t exactly normal circumstances.”

“You managed without a fucking muzzle!” he barks back, his Norse gravelly with fury. “Do you take me for some kind of undisciplined adolescent? Are you actually trying to insult me?”

I let my growl rise, cutting my words sharp to meet his surge of aggression: “I was not trying to insult you, brother. Unless you see insult in being treated like a pup, which is how you’ve treated me most of the night. And it’s laughable, really, when it is clearly *you* who is the most lacking in self-control.”

He looms threateningly close. Tamsin makes a concerned noise, shuffling forward.

“Please don’t fight,” she says. “I’m sorry, but – can you please speak in Gaelic?”

“You think I’m *lacking*, do you?” Ivar hisses, ignoring her as he continues in Norse. “Just say it to me, Thrain. I’ve seen you staring red murder at me all night. Spit it out, whatever it is you’ve swallowed down.”

The rut makes me grab him, fist shaking with anger. Accusations flood my mouth, so many things I thought I had buried, old aches I have not tended in years.

“There is too much I want to say to you.”

“Start with the most obvious, then,” he snarls. “You don’t want me here at all, do you? You don’t want to share her –”

“Of course I want you here!” I roar. “But we can’t just take risks like this. I know it wounds your pride to stoop to concessions, but if you cannot even afford us that –”

“A muzzle is not a concession! A muzzle is humiliation –”

I take him by the throat, lean right into his space. “I have made concessions for you,” I seethe in his ear. “If you are incapable of showing us the same respect then you will have to leave. Is that really what you want?”

“You present me with an impossible choice,” Ivar snaps. “All because you don’t think anyone else is worthy of her, and especially not *me*, just admit it – the bastard who needs a fucking muzzle –”

“Freya, the rut is scrambling your brains!” I shout, patience snapping. “If the moon were not high you’d know that’s a load of nonsense –”

His eyebrows shoot up. “And now you’re calling me an idiot, too?”

Tamsin’s voice rises again, shaky and afraid; “Please, stop –”

But Ivar has surged at me, and all sense evaporates. The rut bursts, blood pumping through me at the coming violence, making me eagerly meet his challenge. He shoves me down into the furs, except we have no room to roll and kick each other off between hearth and bed– it becomes a grunting struggle of who can strangle the other, eyes locked. My forearm pushes against his throat while he pins me down and growls spikes at me.

“Stop, for God’s sake!” Tamsin calls out. But I have to try and drag him off and under me – pride and the pounding rut demand it. His thigh is planted between my legs – we’re half growling, half grinding against each other as we push and struggle for dominance.

She rummages in the coffers. I vaguely hear clunking gear and rustling fabric. I’m too focused on Ivar’s snarling face, the red encroaching on his eyes, the insult I need to soothe.

“Of course I think you’re worthy of her,” I hiss at him.

“Am I?” he sneers. “Worthy enough for you to suffer my presence here?”

“Yes,” I insist. “But you’re also – an impulsive, domineering – *arsehole*.”

I tilt my head away from the crush of his forearm, trying to breathe. “I want us to do this properly. No moonlit promises that lead nowhere. I will not have you hurt her like you hurt me.”

A frown dents his brow. His grip loosens. “Hurt you?” he asks. “When did I ever hurt you?”

This is so insufferable that I grab him back, yank him down in that small moment’s hesitation. It’s a feat to hold him face-down in the sheepskin, pinning his arms behind his back, pitting my whole body weight against him while he hisses and tries to buck me off.

Then Tamsin drops down onto her knees in front of us. “Oy! Are you done?”

We go still, the instinct to protect her reining back our violence. Like two dogs stilling around the rope they’re gnawing at, we twist sheepishly to look up at her.

She’s sitting on her heels, naked, holding an unbuckled leather muzzle in her lap. It has two straps that tuck around a man’s head, and a mouthpiece with slits for breathing. She twists the straps in her hands as she gazes at us, the pair-bond twisting with fear and annoyance.

“You’ll wake Olaf with all your shouting,” she says. Olaf sleeps the sleep of the dead, after she purred for him – but she has a point. “I don’t know what you were saying. But I’m guessing this is about pride, isn’t it?”

Ivar huffs against the sheepskin, eyes on the muzzle.

“Never mind what these are usually used for,” she says. “Never mind all that. In this house, there is just us. And I want you to stay, Ivar.”

His growl still stutters on the air as she reaches to run a hand along his shaved head.

“I understand it’s a lot to ask,” she says softly. “But if this is the condition for you to stay... then wouldn’t you wear it? For me?”

Ivar hangs his head. The budding moon-craze is still present, but the touch of her hand is forcing him to calm.

She leans forward, presses a kiss to his forehead.

“I don’t want you to leave,” she murmurs. “Please.”

He hoists himself up; I give him enough room to sit up, still holding him with his arms pinned behind his back. He lifts his chin to kiss her, rough and needy, a whine twisting from his throat.

The strength of his sweaty body against mine is hard to resist. Both of us are toppling between cravings, violence and sex, the rising moon dragging us with it. She needs to put that muzzle on him *now* if he’s going to stay.

“Can I?” she offers, holding up the leather contraption. Slowly, as though approaching a wolf with its hackles raised, she brings it closer to his face.

He has too much pride to accept it verbally. But though he inches away at first, he stills and lets her slip it over his mouth and jaw.

A quiet kind of awe blooms in me as she tugs the straps over his head, fumbling a little as she finds out how to buckle it. Nobody – *nobody* but Tamsin could do this. Buckle a muzzle onto Ivar while he holds himself still for her. He said it himself; he’d sooner break my arm than let me do it.

He may be insufferably dominant under the full moon... but somehow, impossibly, he actually decided to listen to me for once. He accepted to make this concession for me. For *us*.

Swallow his dignity and wear leather over his mouth.

My hand slips down his sweaty arm. And I let go of him.

* * *

There are no more words. Only the crackle of the hearth, and Tamsin's precious sounds as she holds her pack together.

The air has thinned to naught. We tilt up our faces to reach what we can, as though we were sunk underwater. Inevitably I have to pull Ivar back from her when he grows too brutal, my arm wrapped around his torso – and instead of fighting me, this time he stays put, his back slick and hot against my chest. Tamsin climbs on top of him, and we are all locked in together as she rides him, rosy face split in a smile.

Ivar wraps his tattooed fingers around my forearm. I nuzzle into his hair, take his scent. The pair-bond lets me share their sensations – the way his cock stretches her, how deep he reaches inside her. A phantom echo of it glides behind my pubic bone, as though he were inside me.

Gods, how long has it been... how long since we shared that closeness, him and I? *Too long*, growls the rut, the yearning that makes me clasp him tighter against my chest. He tilts his head back against my shoulder, and Tamsin leans to nuzzle us both, and for a glorious moment there is nothing separating us – nothing at all.

What is that... that blunt pressure, that surge of bliss – Tamsin cries out, and though I know she is the one being filled, the same sensation is blooming in my own gut.

Ivar's knot has grown. She's sucking it in, rocking on it almost playfully. His breaths grow strangled as he thrusts it further into her, too high in his craze now to resist the urge. And distantly I know I should stop them, but I *can't* – he's wedging his knot deep into her softness, and I can feel it – I feel

every bit of it, as though he were offering us both that staggering promise, that he wants us, that he will stay for good this time.

No. *No*. Stop them – I need to stop them. They didn't agree to this in daylight, Tamsin would've told me otherwise. I reach around him, clasp his slippery knot. He growls and struggles, and Tamsin lays a wounded look upon me, the pair-bond tugging at me.

“Please, Thrain,” she begs. “My love, *please...*”

Gods, that heat-struck voice of hers. She wants this... she wants this so badly. And try as I might to cling to reason, the beast in me wants it, too – *Loki*, to feel that heavy knot wedged deep inside me, even by proxy – just the thought of it is enough to loosen my grip.

My resolve only weakens for a moment. But a moment is all it takes. She sinks down upon his knot, and all rational thought collapses. He arches against me, climax overwhelming us all. His huffed breaths are caught in the muzzle, and I am gasping with pleasure – that thudding of his seed in Tamsin's belly, I can feel it deep in my own guts.

Sweat drips between us. The straps of the muzzle are chafing against his skin; he shakes his head like a dog as though he could be rid of it. When he surges up again, he burrows into Tamsin's neck, intention crystal clear.

If he wasn't wearing that muzzle, he'd be sinking his teeth deep into her flesh.

For a moment I stare at them, stupid with pleasure. Tamsin's wrapped her arms around him, keeping him close, his face buried in her neck. Then... her mouth opens, and the light glints along her own canines as they grow.

I blink. The moon-craze – it's spilling red over her eyes.

Fuck. That's right, that was our purpose – the whole purpose of tonight. For us to help her stay in control, enter her craze as smoothly as she could.

But we have lost all control now. Gods, what have I allowed us to do –?
“Bite,” she orders Ivar. “Bite me...”

He whines into her neck, frustrated that he can't obey her command, his claws digging so hard into her skin that he's drawing red lines along her waist.

Fuck. *Fuck*. She will mark him irrevocably if I don't stop her. I rise up, grab her by the hair and bite hard into her neck over my mating mark. She clings onto me, gasping – I'm biting with blunt teeth, hard enough to draw blood.

Pain blares through the pair-bond, her craze diminishing. When I draw back, I find her blinking at me, eyes blown wide, pupils black.

Thank Freya.

I kiss her in an apology. Understanding thrums through the pair-bond; as lucidity gains her, she realises just what she'd been about to do. She holds onto us both as Ivar rocks her on his knot, all three of us panting and clasping one another as we give in to the giddy heights of midnight.

Chapter 37



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of August

I wake tucked against Olaf's side. He's warm, chest lifting with his breaths. For a moment I'm basking in the comfort of the bed, lifting my chin to check on him. He's sleeping a calm, reassuring sort of sleep; it looks like he could wake at any moment.

So much so that I realise what exactly he'd wake up *to*.

Oh God, oh *God*. I squirm away with difficulty, but I can't get very far. Ivar and Thrain are curled around me, heavy arms criss-crossed over each other, our bodies in a tangle. The nest is a *mess*: furs and sheepskins are folded and rumpled, the hearth spilling ash.

I stare, aghast.

We –

We did all of this. While Olaf slept. While he lay there, recovering, we –

God!

I eel my way out, pull on a shift and blanket. Last night I remember feeling as though it was as it should be; all of us here under one roof. There was no issue in my mind that we might stay together under the full moon. But – I can't, I can't bear Olaf waking to *this!*

I shake both my men awake. “Oy. Oy. Get up. Wake up!”

“Hnnff – wha – ?”

Thrain's face emerges from his mess of hair. I tug at his arm; I can't hope to even lift a bit of his heavy body, but he wakes at least.

“Get up!”

Ivar pushes himself up, blinking groggily. I stride to the door, pull it open, let dawn stream in white and blinding. They both groan at the same time, lifting arms to shield their faces. The water bucket's got rags hanging off the rim, soap water from when we washed throughout the night – I lug it outside on shaky legs.

Bright daylight slams into my eyes. Dubliners are lying around or laughing together in various states of undress, walking on legs just as wobbly as mine. Some are washing, others just waking and stretching in the morning light. They wave at me, greeting me cheerfully, as though there were nothing wrong about this morning at all.

I let the water bucket plonk down onto the ground and turn back in.

“Get out!” I snap at Ivar and Thrain, throwing wet rags at them. “Get out and wash yourselves.”

“What in Odin's name,” Ivar mutters, glancing at the rag that's slapped onto his shoulder like it just fell on him from the sky.

“Tamsin, what is it?” Thrain rumbles, but I won't have it; I pull and tug and *insist* until they're stumbling across the threshold, clothes in hand, bare-arsed under the noon sun.

“What is wrong with her?” Ivar grumbles as he stands there in his tattooed glory, unconcerned by the glances and jeers they’re receiving from the men beyond. “We share the night with her gentle as anything and she throws us out like dogs – ?”

“Did you even think for a second of Olaf!” I snap at him, throwing out an arm to gesture at the mess of the house. “What if he wakes to *this*?”

To my complete annoyance, that has them both grinning.

I fight the urge to whip them with my remaining rag. “He’s been fighting for his life and you think this is *funny* – ”

“Olaf wouldn’t care, lamb,” Ivar laughs while Thrain just sits by the bucket and starts washing, as though he knows it’s futile to argue. “If you only knew all the things he’s seen and taken part in –”

“I don’t care, Ivar, just – wash up and *put some clothes on*,” I command him, before going back in so I can try and start somewhere in this clean up effort.

By the time I’ve patted all the furs, tidied the hearth and batted a cloth in the air to try and dispel the smell of our rampant rutting, both Ivar and Thrain are washed and dressed. Ivar’s talking with several Dubliners outside; Thrain stops me in my frantic efforts, pulling me against him with a lazy arm.

“Wife of mine,” he says, holding me firm when I struggle. He smells now of musk and clean soap and spices, making me weaken. “My loving, caring, beautiful wife,” he goes on in his deep morning rumble, making me crack a smile. “Would you *stop* rushing around. Please. Let us help you, now that we’re dressed to your convenience.”

“Thrain,” I deadpan, glancing up at him to find him grinning. “It’s just –”

“I know.” He kisses my forehead. “Let’s take these furs back inside and get some breakfast in you.”

* * *

We sit outside together for breakfast. It's an overwhelming aftermath; we can hear all sorts of shouting and post-moon disputes from the other warbands that occupy the wider territory of Dumbartonshire.

The Dubliners come to greet their Jarls, bowing to them and bringing their own small disputes that arose in the night. The perimeter watch has yet to return; Thrain and Ivar ask after them, demanding to be notified when they reach the camp.

I sit there with these two men I spent the night with, munching on dried bread dipped in milk. Ivar's wearing a sort of sempiternal smirk this morning, a crease in his cheek that won't go away. Thrain... Thrain looks shattered. None of us look at each other for a moment as last night's events echo in us all.

"Well," Ivar says quite affably, "that was a disaster."

Thrain just snorts. I can't help but notice how he's tilting his hips to the side, as though it aches too much to sit down.

"Are you all right?" I ask him.

He shifts his posture. "I'd be better if *someone* was a little more gentle," he grumbles.

"Oh, please," Ivar says, grinning wider. "I was plenty gentle. But no man emerges from a whole night of rut without some aches and pains."

"You see, this is why we don't do this any more," Thrain says, turning to me as though to piss off Ivar by ignoring him. "My brother over here is only ever intent on satiating himself. He has no sense for other people's pleasure."

“Ha!” Ivar only leans back, sucking a dribble of milk from his thumb while his black eyes spark at Thrain. “The things you say. You’re like a little Christian boy. Denying that you enjoyed every moment of it.”

“Fuck off,” Thrain growls, though his eyes slip to the way Ivar is licking milk from his wrist.

They’re being casual and even somewhat *catty* this morning, but there’s no denying the aggression between them last night. The way they went at each other, I thought they’d tear down the rafters.

“Is it always like this?” I ask them. “Between Vyr-gen men in general?”

“Not always,” Ivar says. “Some men know their *place*.”

Thrain scoffs at that, deciding not to dignify it with an answer.

“But...” They’re talking about it so casually. I shouldn’t have to feel so damned embarrassed by all the questions I want to ask. Ivar touched Thrain in places I had never even dreamt of touching him; plunging harsh fingers and tongue into him, driving him mad. “... doesn’t it... hurt? What you do?”

“Not always,” Thrain says lightly. “Some men know how to make it good.”

Ivar only grins at the jibe. I can’t help but notice the playfulness in his manner, the carefree façade snapped up again even after we spent the heart of last night wrapped together, his knot pulsing a heartbeat in my belly.

I break away to bite into my bread, hoping he won’t see my flush.

We don’t have much longer than that to enjoy the morning together. A great clatter of hooves out in the forest draws their attention away – the perimeter watch is returning, and the time for banter is over. We all rise, Thrain’s hand coming to my shoulder as we watch our men ride toward us between the thatched roofs, Armod leading them.

There is a familiar cloaked figure among them.

My heart leaps to my throat as they all come to a halt. Armod swings down from his horse.

“Jarls,” he says. Then he bows lower to me and adds, “Kátr-Ekkja.”

Ivar takes the horse of the cloaked figure by the reins. “Are we alone in our section?” he asks Armod. “We have no visitors from other warbands?”

“We are alone, Jarl.”

Ivar gestures to the figure, who dismounts at once. One gloved hand notches the hood back a little, revealing Skaði’s face, flushed and sweating from her ride. She nods to Ivar and Thrain while the watchers crowd protectively around her.

“You didn’t have to come into the camp,” Ivar criticises her. “What have you to say to us that couldn’t be communicated through our men?”

Skaði holds up a roll of parchment. “Eormen asked me to put this directly in your hands. It’s been a rough first night.”

Thrain frowns. “We thought you’d have peace, since Gofraid placed a ban on raiding while the fever lasts.”

Skaði lets out a scoff. “You think his warbands all happily respected his ban?”

“Urgh,” Ivar sighs. “Of course. Come, lay it on us then.”

He hands her his mug of water, and she drinks thirstily, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Only a handful of Gofraid’s men went raiding,” she says. “We managed to catch most of them. Still, now that Arlyn and Eormen have barely a few hundred men to watch the roads and hills, we may not be so lucky these coming nights.” She thrusts the parchment at Ivar again, and he accepts it this time. “We need more men. A lot more men. Eormen wants the army up north to yield us some reinforcements. But they refuse to split their numbers;

they're paranoid about leaving the northern border undefended." She taps the parchment. "So we will need a letter from the Briton King. To persuade the captains up there to move their arses."

Ivar stares at the parchment in his hand. "This is a formal request to King Arthgal, then? You want us to smuggle this into the fort?"

"Yes."

Thrain stirs. "I don't think we can smuggle much of anything into the fort while the moon is high. The camp is full of restless Vyrgen. It will be difficult to practice stealth."

"Oh, we know it'll take some time regardless," Skaði says. "There are high chances we'll be alone this moon either way, we're aware of that. Eormen only wishes that you might get that letter into the fort as soon as you possibly can. That is all we ask."

"All right. We will," Ivar says as he forcefully walks her back to her horse. "You'd better go, Skaði. Your kinswomen have been wandering around here quite liberally lately."

She puts boot to stirrup again, pulling her hood closer around her face. "Freya keep you all," she says. "We'll see each other again soon."

* * *

Olaf reclines in his pillows with the open parchment, once his brothers have finished reporting Skaði's visit. I'm vibrating with shame, still – how can they stand there like we did not roll around in the furs at the foot of his bed? But Olaf seems utterly unperturbed, especially with Eormen's letter to ponder.

He heaves a thoughtful sigh. “Skaði’s right – the Britons will most likely be alone this moon,” he says. “Even if we could smuggle this into the fort right now, it would take days for the King’s runner to reach the northern border, and then for the reinforcements to come down.”

“And there will surely be more rebellious raiders riding out while the moon lasts,” Thrain says. Wonderingly he adds, “Skaði didn’t even think of inviting us to help them.”

“Of course not,” Ivar growls. “It would be an affront to assume we’d be willing, after what they dragged us through. We have enough wounded to tend as it is.”

I twist my woollen belt nervously. To think I spent such a hedonistic night with my pack, while Eormen was out there again with her brother, sword raised, defending the lands...

“I have to do it tonight, then,” I blurt. “Our plan. I have to hold down Gofraid’s men tonight, if only to spare Eormen the hardship of defending the hills.”

Olaf lays a heavy gaze on me. “It could be beneficial, yes, to push our plans along if we can. Do you feel more confident after last night, princess?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

I try my best to avoid looking at either Ivar or Thrain as I say it. Last night was an absolute mess, but we still managed to contain each other’s excesses to a certain extent. And I heard Skaði just like they did. We can’t risk any rogue raiders dragging girls back to camp.

It comes down to me, now. Arlyn and Eormen barely have any men left as it is. And it’s far past time I took the burden of responsibility out of Eormen’s hands.

Olaf gazes at me sternly. “Then if you’re ready, princess. Tonight, you’ll

make Father's men kneel in your honour, and let him see what you can do."

I swallow hard, holding his gaze.

"I'll do my best," I promise him.

Chapter 38



IVAR

Waning Moon of August

Everyone is preparing for the second night, cleaning up the mess of the first. Each warband claims their own territories, calling to one another from across makeshift boundaries made of dragged benches and mud-spattered banners. Rowdy groups of men jeer from around firepits and houses; some of Father's men are trailing male prisoners they mean to involve in their debauchery.

Here in our section, many of the Dubliners are crowding around the neighbourhood's main firepit. They're laying down woollen blankets for comfort, setting up what they'll need in food and water for the night.

It'll be a good spot for us, too. Fenced in by the protection of our pack.

Thrain and Tamsin are going around the men, informing them of what is to take place tonight. I station myself on a crate by the firepit. This *waiting* is making my leg jump with nerves. I take out my tagelharpa, join the musicians who're already adding beats to the rowdy evening.

Tamsin will be nervous, exposed out here; but then, tonight is all about exposing herself.

Becoming the red-eyed goddess who spreads ice in the bones of men.

Giddy excitement streaks through me at the thought of it. My cock is already stirring as I imagine what it will take to push Tamsin into her craze again; and gods, to dive into it alongside her this time.

We will be stepping into legend.

But though we did not voice the risks, I think we all know just how dangerous this night will be. We'll be walking along a knife's edge, trying to keep things civil.

I lean back, bow sawing across my strings as I draw out a song. Several men join their voices to mine, and I throw myself into it, letting all my nerves vibrate along the strings.

At one point Tamsin returns to us, and her stark claimed scent casts ripples among the men. They all lean back, step away as their instincts heed the warning. She smiles apologetically, and they make an effort to stay put, keep the song going.

She comes to me, and I let my eyes rest on her firelit features as I play the last refrain. That smile of hers turns shy as the languorous notes coil around her. Once the final note is ringing in the air, she bows her head to appreciate it.

"That was beautiful," she says.

I reach out, snake my bow around her waist so I can pull her closer. She laughs and staggers against me.

"It is for you that we play," I purr. While she blushes, the men lift their cups to her before drinking. Some take up the tune again, another skáld leading, and soon she and I are left in relative privacy.

She eases her weight against me and loses her smile as we linger in the firelight. She did not come out here for jests and play; I wait for her to speak as she fiddles with my studded collar.

Finally, she says in a low voice: “I’m scared, Ivar.”

My arm crooks tighter around her. “Thrain and I will be guarding you,” I remind her. “Every step of the way.”

“Thrain seems to think...” She fiddles some more. “He worries it won’t remain peaceful.”

“We will rise to the situation, whatever happens,” I tell her. “It’s like in every great battle – there is always the unknown to grapple with. We must learn to weave around it.”

Her smile returns, then. “Isn’t that just a fancy way to say we’ll make things up as we go along?”

“I suppose it is,” I tell her with a grin. Then, trailing a finger down her spine: “You trod along the boughs of Yggdrasil, Tamsin. You will manage things beautifully tonight. I know you will.”

She mulls that over, nuzzling into my braided hair a moment. The gesture makes me close my eyes, appreciate this animal closeness as the darkening sky makes us both all the more vividly sensitive.

“It’ll be all right, lamb,” I growl, claws digging possessively into her back. “I’ll be right there with you.”

“But...” She sighs. “I’m worried I’ll get angry. Especially if we eventually find Gofraid. I know he’s your father... I know you all love him. But if I face him in my craze, I’m afraid of what I’ll do.”

My eyes open a sliver as her words trickle like ice down my spine.

It is the one risk I have tried not to linger on. Because once we set Tamsin loose, she could have all the mightiest of men dancing upon the tips of her

fingers, doing exactly as she commands.

And that includes Father.

There is some blackness within me that revels in the idea, as I imagine the night to come. The chaos that Tamsin may unleash.

Olaf has been worrying over this too, I know it. He loves our father. Always has. Why should he not? He is the treasured first son; his priority has always been to fulfill his role, to make his father proud. To be worthy of the gilded name that was bestowed upon his head.

“Ivar?” Tamsin’s small voice is in my ear. I breathe in slowly, scenting the woodsmoke in her hair.

“What is our priority here, Tamsin?” I ask her.

She’s confused for a moment. “It’s to defend the Vanirdøtur.”

“Exactly. So keep that in your mind.”

“But your father...”

“My father’s wellbeing is not your priority.”

She blinks at me, taking in the amplitude of that statement. I stroke back her hair. I want to tell her so many things. How strange it is to detest a man and yet still yearn for his approval, that bristling smile, the wrinkles that web around his eyes like cracked glass. How he has loomed for so long over my existence that he may as well be the giant Ymir; more ancient than all the realms.

Perhaps the gods thought the same of Ymir; that he could not die, that surely he would never be gone. And then Ymir died... and all the realms sprung from his bones, and a new age began: an age of wild green lands and endless possibility.

I sink my fingers into Tamsin’s curls, kiss her one last time. We linger – with the rising rut, her lips are so plush and soft and wet, entirely impossible

to break away from. Still, I force myself to draw back.

“It’s time you subdued Olaf,” I tell her. “Thrain and I will be waiting for you out here, when you’re ready.”

She gazes at me a moment, looking torn; I have not given her any kind of answer or reassurance regarding Father. But there is none I can give her. So she nods, and turns back to the house.

* * *

Anticipation is tightening the air. Dubliners cast glances around, waiting for Tamsin’s return.

I raise my chin and close my eyes as I go on playing the tagelharpa. Try to calm even as my rut starts pounding through me insistently.

We need to be in control this time. For her sake. To better guide her through this night.

Fire crackles. Voices ring out all around the fort, such a density of them that they are like a windswept field of clustered grasses, high and low, rich or brittle. Every sweep of excitement raises them all at once around us.

I’ve closed my eyes to appreciate the layers of sound. When I open them again, I find Thrain there, a dark shape standing over me.

“Promise me,” he growls at me. “Promise me you’ll be reasonable tonight.”

I grin at him. “I’ll be about as reasonable as you, I’d wager.”

“Ivar. This is no laughing matter.”

The moon is making everything so sharp. I can smell every aspect of him. The fragrant linen of his tunic, the dirt smeared over it. The rich stew on his breath. The arousal in his sweat, how it trickles from under his arms, clings to

the blond curls that cover his body. The delicious musk that clings to his girth, low-hanging and thick with rut.

“If you’re so anxious,” I purr at him, “then we could always take the edge off.”

His growl rises, made velvety smooth by his own rut. To my delight, he takes me by the braid, interrupts my song so he can hold me tight enough to hurt. I tilt my head up, letting out a breath of longing.

“Be serious for once,” he grumbles.

“I am serious,” I hiss.

Oh, I can see that lust in his eye. He has a way of showing it that is all brooding darkness, and it only makes me smile wider.

It’s no surprise when he leans in. I hear jeers from the men – it’s been a while since they’ve seen us both engage in something like this. He’s huge over me, holding me by the hair as he sinks his tongue deep into my throat.

I’m perfectly placed to grip him between the thighs. He groans as my hand tightens over the bulge in his breeches.

“Get down here,” I command him.

The tagelharpa slants to the ground. Thrain lowers himself between my thighs, though I don’t let him break the kiss.

On his knees before me. As it should be.

He doesn’t take long to remember the paths I taught him. I’m panting with sheer anticipation as he bites my neck, unlaces me with deft fingers. It’s hard to let him move down, away – I want to keep his closeness, keep the heat of his tongue against mine. The rut has me grinding my teeth when he breaks away.

Gods, the rut is riding me hard. I watch, breathless, one hand tangled in his hair, as he leans down. That slick mouth of his closes over my cock, and

then there is no more logic or reason – only the textured length of his tongue cradling me, the sheer depth at which he can take me.

Fuck. Nobody does this like him. No other man has his talent for it.

I'm groaning and sighing, head thrown back as I let him pleasure me. Tamsin is entirely spoiled by this mouth of his. I had forgotten what it felt like.

He adds his growl to the titillation, those vibrations massaging me until I'm cursing all the gods and trying to hold back. But it's useless; he has me bursting in his mouth in no time, spilling down his throat. He swallows every last drop, milking my knot dry. I'm limp and panting as he climbs up my body and lets me taste my own remnants on his tongue.

"Mmm," I hum against him, breathing in his cloying spices. "I'd forgotten how good you are with your mouth."

"You are the one who taught me," he rumbles back. And then he spoils it by adding, "I'd forgotten how easy you are."

I grin. "I should have you here like this far more often," I hiss, making a tight fist in his hair. "On your knees to please me."

Indignation makes him tense up. He grabs me by the tunic and drags me to the ground, and I'm laughing as I grasp him back. And the Dubliners around us yell:

Braaaww!

* * *

We're dirty and half-naked, covered in each other's claw marks by the time we detach, breathing hard. The moon has turned our blood to the silvery silt

at the bottom of lakes. Each heartbeat is sluggish, gorgeous, a thick thrumming in my veins.

No Tamsin means I have more control; enough for complete dominance. I have claimed it over and over again, pressing Thrain down, tasting victory on the back of his neck, in the sweat along his spine, the sound of his broken, panting voice saying those sweet words.

I yield.

He only says it when he's twisted under me, vanquished. He hates admitting my victory over him; he will rear up once I let him go and drag me in a headlock to level the playing field.

But his instincts work against him under the moon, as ever. So I keep the upper hand.

I slam him down on the ground one final time. I'm straddling him with his wrists pinned over his head, the length of his cock pressed against mine, his budding knot notched beneath my own.

Like this, I have all liberties imaginable.

Slowly, with relish, I close a hand around his neck. A soft whine leaves his throat as he accepts it. He adores this; the thrum of blood only adds to his hardness, makes his body arch up from the floor.

"Do you yield?" I murmur.

"Yes," he hisses, "Jarl."

I reward him with a deep, filthy kiss. This... this is why he's mine. I know him too well; and he knows my weaknesses just as much.

I reach down to free us both, hand splayed wide over both shafts as I stroke us to completion. He rasps against my mouth as my grip tightens, climax approaching. In this state of focus, there is nothing else but us; the

cries he lays on my lips as he comes, the warm streaks that spatter our stomachs as I join him.

It isn't enough. Not nearly enough.

Moving with pure instinct, we both work to pull his breeches from him. It is like falling through time – returning effortlessly to old habits, the warmth of his thighs around my waist, the tremor of readiness that runs through him. I hunch over him, covering him with my body so no one else can see how I'm caressing his entrance, circling that tender place that makes him lose his wits.

“How long has it been?” I growl.

Eyes shut, he pants awhile, his focus inward.

“Long,” he admits at last. Then quietly he adds, “Not... since you.”

That pleases me entirely too much.

“Then I'll be gentle,” I promise him.

He only grins, baring sharp canines. “You couldn't be gentle if you tried.”

“Is that how you remember it?” I murmur. Then I push my fingers into him slowly, make him bite his lip. “Your memory does you a disservice.”

He's breathless as I find his sweet spot, rub it with tender insistence. Before long he grabs me by the neck, pulls me down forcibly. Kisses me open-mouthed, filthy and panting and desperate. I can't resist much longer; I glide out of him and angle my cock, let him feel how hard and ready I am for him.

“You want it?” I breathe into his open mouth. “Ask me properly.”

He snarls, resists valiantly while I tease him, pushing, edging. Then he gives me what I want, though it is barely a whisper:

“Please.”

He is tight, and tense, and delicious. He holds onto me as I reclaim this space – above him, inside him, within the circle of his arms – as though it

were second nature, a dynamic we take to as a matter of course. One hand slammed in the dirt, the other hooked under his knee, I take him slow and steady, and though I know it hurts him – I wait for that pain to turn to delight, watching him avidly. He throws back his head, crying out as it overcomes him, and I swear I have not heard him make those sounds in a decade.

Gods. Why did we ever stop doing this?

I thought it had been a concerted decision, that we had drifted apart due to circumstance. Once he no longer needed training, we were pulled this way and that by battle and the men we commanded. Necessity pushed us to find release with others, and then we never returned to one another.

That was how it happened at the time. These things ran their course. Once we stopped spending the moon together, I thought he'd been glad, surely, to not have to suffer my dominance any more.

But his words last night... *I will not have you hurt her like you hurt me.*

He was hurt? He never gave me any sign of it.

Or perhaps... I did not care to see it, back then.

He comes first, messily across his belly; I follow him soon after. I can't rip my eyes from his hazy afterglow, the vulnerability he's allowing me to see.

There are many eyes on us, furtive or fixed. I sense one pair – one presence I had not detected, so sunk in Thrain as I was. I straighten up groggily, kneeling there with one hand still kneading my knot as I scan the revellers around us. And I see her: Tamsin, sitting by the door to Angharad's house, pink in the face as she watches us.

How long has she been there, holding herself apart like that? I lift a hand, encourage her to come. So she rises, our Vanirdottir, glowing in the firelight. I watch her walk across the beaten earth, the most sensibly dressed person

here. She wears her shift and a woollen blanket, her braid neatly falling down her front.

The Vyrgen around us cheer for her, greeting her with many a shouted *Kátr-Ekkja!* But they do not approach. Her claimed scent wards them off, as before. Honeysuckle trapped in a tangle of thorns.

Thrain moves under me, straining toward her as she arrives. She drops to her knees beside us, leaning to nuzzle him, and he is so soft with her as he kisses her back.

“Are you all right?” she asks him, and he touches her face so carefully after the way he’s been clawing and tearing at me.

He nods, still breathless, and she traces the bruises around his throat, the red marks I left on his body. She throws me a reproachful glance, though it doesn’t bear much weight when her arousal is drenching the air.

“You two,” she chastises.

She touches my own bruised body, and the concern in her eyes poses a question – why would we be so violent with each other?

And then I realise it.

It was never a question of caring, between Thrain and I. We came together for many reasons, but *sharing* something, the two of us acknowledging it, was not the point. I saw an opportunity to exercise my own strength; I had things to prove. We both had so much anger to expel; we wanted to batter it against anyone who was willing to try and contain us.

We were never very careful. Pain just came with the territory of violent encounters in the dark, clutching at what could satiate us. We each had our role; the dominant, the submissive. We took, we rushed towards bliss, we spent ourselves. And it ended there.

Fucking, fighting, mingling sweat; they were moments, not shared but

experienced selfishly, closed eyes turning it into something we could each take some sort of warped nourishment from.

But to come together too often made caring inevitable. And neither one of us wanted to care. And so I left, to spare us such complications.

I stare down at Thrain, wondering – have I only ever used him? Has he only ever used me? Almost every man around us is doing the same; it’s a reflex at this point, to reach for bare skin and know it changes nothing come morning.

He’s holding my gaze. My expression must be telling him something of my thoughts, because he is soft with curiosity. I reach for him, pull him up so he can be closer to us. While Tamsin nuzzles my shoulder, I let my fingers trail down Thrain’s throat, over the bruises and claw-marks... down over his heart.

What would it look like... two Vyrger who chose to care?

His pale eyes flicker between mine, his brow furrowing just a moment. Then Tamsin shifts beside us, and we turn as ever to her, to the duties that lay before us. Easier, far easier to be soft with her; to look at her than each other.

We each give her a hand, and she holds onto us. If she’s out here... it must mean that she’s ready.

“Are you joining us, lamb?” I ask her.

“... yes,” she says. There’s such sweet timidity on her face at being out here among a pack of rutting Vyrger. Thrain strokes back her hair as she hesitates.

“Cariad,” he says. “Are you sure about this? Seeing what lies ahead... we might be a little rough with you.”

“That’s all right,” she murmurs. “I... I like it. When you’re a little rough.”

Tch. This girl. I lean in, nudge her hair aside so I can kiss her neck.

“We have our pack all around us,” I tell her. “If you need them to wake Olaf for any reason, you tell them.”

She nods.

* * *

It's early hours. The sky is dusted with stars above us, the night chill settling on our sweaty skin we make room for her. The Dubliners yield her the best place by the firepit, offering us many mats and furs to place under her rosy knees.

Some Dubliners receive tokens of favour from her; a kiss on the hand, or the privilege of a scent-mark upon her own knuckles. We allow a few.

Then we growl to ward them all away.

Thrain takes her first. She straddles him, firelight turning her shift golden as she moves over him. He pulls her down onto his glistening cock, and the sound she makes pushes me ever closer to a feral state.

Does she realise the possibilities that lay before us, now that we're here like this? Perhaps tonight, we might indulge ourselves just a little further... but it must be controlled; a controlled fall.

I settle behind her, pull her back against my chest so I might cup and soothe her breasts while she chases her pleasure.

“That's it,” I whisper. “Ride him harder... let me hear him.”

Thrain makes a choked, indignant sound as she does just that.

“Good. Can you feel his knot growing?”

“Mmnn...”

“I’ll bet you can. You’re doing so well, lamb,” I breathe in her ear. “Perhaps it’s time we shared you properly.”

“... properly?”

Thrain glances up at me then, his gaze dark and heavy-lidded. Oh, he wants it just as badly as I do, I can tell. She’s slowly sinking into the demands of her heat as we handle her between us, gentle as we can be at this hour.

“I’ll show you,” I hiss. “Lean over him for me.”

She complies a little groggily, until she’s on all fours over Thrain. He kisses her, reassures her as I pull up her shift, bare her so that the night air kisses her plump freckled backside.

She saw what Thrain and I were doing. Perhaps she can guess what’s coming. I lean in, lick a stripe up the slowly rocking hinge of their joining. My tongue glides along Thrain’s knot and up her stretched lip, along her taint till I find that untouched entrance.

She makes a strangled noise as I lick her there. Thrain slows, rocking his knot against her at an aching rhythm. Her breathing is getting more and more laborious as I tease her, pressing in with the tip of my tongue.

“Oh *God*,” I hear her sigh into Thrain’s neck. “You can’t, you can’t do that *there*...”

Thrain threads through her hair, tucking back messy curls. “How does it feel?”

“I don’t know,” she groans, embarrassed. And then: “It shouldn’t feel so *good*.”

I grin as I rise from her again. I knew she’d like this.

Slowly I work to prepare her, stretch her open as I did Thrain. She gradually relaxes around my finger, gives short gasping breaths when I thrust

deeper. I can feel Thrain's girth through the thin barrier; she moans as I rub inside her, slow and patient.

A second finger makes her gasp. "*Stings –*"

"Focus on me," Thrain rumbles.

Difficult not to, when he's buried inside her up to her ribs. But then, there are many things pulling at our attention, whether it's each other or all those Vyrgeen around us who are fucking and watching and revelling in the night.

He grinds his knot against her clit until she unravels between us, her noises high and uncontrolled, spasms rocking her body. She's softer afterwards, unfocused, her body loosened. I've buried three fingers inside her now; she dips her back unconsciously to give me more room.

"Feels good?" I ask her.

She moans in response.

I take that as my cue, leaning over her to kiss the back of her neck.

"Tamsin," I purr in her ear. "Are you ready?"

She shakes her head. "Just do it."

"Don't push yourself," Thrain reminds her.

"You can take it," she huffs.

"I have experience. If you want us to stop, you can say so."

"Mnn." She sighs as I go on fucking her tight hole with my fingers, her breathing all disjointed by it. "But I want... to take care of you, I want you to... to be satisfied..."

"Tamsin," he says. "Cariad. That doesn't mean you must put yourself through pain."

I ease my three fingers into her as deep as I can go, making her shudder and whine. "She doesn't seem to be in much pain," I growl.

"She will be," Thrain grumbles back. They lean together as she hesitates.

“It will hurt in the beginning.”

“I don’t mind. I want... to please you.”

Thrain makes a kind of noise then, half indignant, half flattered. He kisses her, pulls her into his neck, then glares over her shoulder at me.

“You be gentle with her,” he commands me. I snarl at him. Who does he take me for? Of course I wouldn’t just ram into her. Though my rut is chomping at the bit, a savage shadow straining to leap from where I hold it – I’ll manage it.

Our knots brush over one another as I angle my heavy, leaking erection, oversensitive now from how much I’ve denied it any kind of stimulation.

Slowly... gently. I grit my teeth as I press against her rosy, twitching entrance. When I push inside even a little, she gasps, gripping onto the blankets by fistfuls. Thrain holds my gaze, as though he could keep me gentle by the weight of his glare alone.

I push more – she cries out. He kisses her to distract her, keeps her on the edge between pleasure and pain as I push inside, slowly, slowly –

Fuck, she’s so tight. I’m biting my lip to the blood as I force myself not to shunt into her, giving her time to breathe and accommodate me as Thrain goes on soothing her with tender strokes.

“Can’t,” Tamsin gasps. “I can’t –”

“Breathe,” he tells her. “Give it time.”

Eyes closed, I’m mesmerised as I feel the slow glide of Thrain’s cock inside her. He coaxes another climax from her, making her clench up around us both, and all three of us are halfway gone by the time she collapses again, giving a mangled cry as we fuck her through orgasm.

After that she’s ragged and overwhelmed as we both spear her in tandem. She’s muttering in Brittonic – I grin groggily as I recognise a curse word that

the Picts taught me. It must be good if she's reverted to her mother tongue.

I want to hear more of it. I want to hear her scream it.

Thrain's knot is flush against mine as we rut her deep and merciless, until she can't hold herself up any more. Soon she's crying out loud enough to raise answering cheers and savage yells from around us.

That's the Vanirdottir I remember. Those rich cries rising to honour the moon. Animalistic and insatiable.

It's almost too much for me. This sensation; the clamp at the entry, the buttery softness inside, and Thrain rubbing against me within her, it's – too *good*. Then, inevitably, Thrain gives in to his own imperatives; I feel him push the breadth of his knot within her.

Fuck. It jostles up her insides; I'm squeezed within as though in a clenching fist. I can only moan as the craze rushes up my spine, eyes growing hot even as I try to blink it away.

Loki, I very much hope I'm not going to need the fucking muzzle again.

She's voiceless with pleasure, lost between us now. Each kick of his come pulses against my cock through the barrier; I can feel him fill her, each wave of the stream as it travels through him.

Fuck me... this is too much. Too much... I can't even tell whether I'm coming or just getting dragged into their shared bliss. I need to knot her... notch mine against his inside her, complete this joining, though she isn't ready for it. I know I'll hurt her, I *can't* – not yet, hold back, hold *back*.

I'm squeezing my knot so hard it hurts as I pant against her spine. Both of us are filling her belly with our seed, joint streams pounding within her, staking our claims together.

No competitiveness this time... just pure, filthy euphoria.

She rises from Thrain, straightening so she can fall back against me; I

catch her, arms around her, burying my nose in her hair. I'm still hard; I'm at the peak of the rut, fucking her through my own sloppy spend even while Thrain has her knotted firm. She crooks an arm to touch my face, pulls me around to kiss me... and I see her heavy-lidded eyes.

Red irises.

She licks into my mouth, teeth sharp against my lip as they grow. A thrill crackles down my spine, and all I can think is, *there she is... my beautiful Vanirdottir.*

Chapter 39



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of August

Yes – God – yes.

For some reason I'm thinking of Saint Sebastian, pierced through and through. I'm thinking of thick wooden shafts, tunnelling through flesh. A penetration that should kill – an arching of the body, stretched taut between pain and pleasure.

How did he survive it? How am I surviving this? The fluids that cling to my skin – surely if I look down, it'll be the gossamer of blood, a red silk web. But it isn't.

I'm not dying, it's the opposite; an elevation.

My arms are out, in supplication to the sky. The wolves are on me; they have me in their claws, knotted firm between them, and they are eating me alive.

My most loyal – my love, my darling – Thrain, his teeth are in my neck, ravaging, feasting. And my skáld, my poet, his arm is wrapped around me, his teeth biting hard into his own forearm – an evocation of what he would do to me, to us, the scent of his blood clouding around us. I plant my own claim under Thrain’s ear, holding him by his blond lengths.

There is no stronger act of love. No better tool than teeth.

To linger on your loved one’s tongue; isn’t it where your name lingers too, isn’t it where all of their words of love spring from? Here in the dark – I need nothing more than taste to bring me the whole world, the ones I love most.

When we part, Thrain’s mouth is stark crimson, his beard drenched red. My skáld is the same, lips and chin shining with his own blood.

Their eyes. So beautiful. The red glint is retracting; their canines are long, a creamy white, slowly shrinking too. My strength is fleeing, the moment crumbling. But they buck inside me again in tandem, and I throw my head back and scream.

Resist it, pants my skáld. Resist the bite next time. We need to keep her... keep her crazed.

I laugh. Keep me crazed, indeed.

It’s too much. Too much. They pound into me, both of them.

Too much and not enough all at once.

More. I need *more*. They turn me around, the night air cool against the sweat that’s beading on my skin. We mate like dogs, open-mouthed and snarling, their claws digging tracks into my hips.

And it rushes over me again – the force of a waterfall drenching my veins. I’m screaming, weeping, holding them close, their hair tangled in my fingers.

A knot, huge and hot and thudding in my belly. The second one, a swell of pressure under my tailbone. Hair and fur and claws. No teeth this time.

Who's making those sounds – those rasping, ragged moans? It must be me – pain curls out of my throat with each breath.

I stare up at the stars. The sparks of the fire drift, mingling with them.

Bliss.

Then there is no sound nor sight any more. When everything is so saturated, it all collapses into one. Like the three of us, collapsed together.

Eventually, my mouth guides me back into the world. Salt; prickles of a beard; hot, glutinous kisses. My hands find sweaty skin. Matted hairs curling under my fingertips. The smooth angles of bones under my palms. Slipping, I find cool grass poking between the edges of the woollen blankets we're laying on.

These contrasts. How is the world so beautifully textured? It's like I can see without seeing. The little ridges, the balls of fluff. The liquid smoothness of each blade of grass. I need more hands to touch it all.

And oh, all of this skin. That I can feel them moulded over me like sunlight – that they can feel me, filling the space between them – it makes me want to cry.

We're so close. Will we ever be this close again? I want it to last forever.

I wrap myself up in my packmates, like burrowing into the furry body of a wolf.

Cariad, whispers my most loyal, *cariad*, and I growl the same to him, speaking it in tongues that a wolf might understand.

Tamsin, says my skáld. Seriousness in his tone.

Mmh. No.

I don't want to exist anywhere else than here. Like this, with them.

Tamsin.

“What,” I sigh. There are fingers dragging tenderly through my hair.

Open your eyes. Don't forget what we must do tonight.

* * *

My most loyal sits by me, uncorking a waterskin for me. I'm exploding with love just watching him do it; surely nothing else comes to the heel of these small attentions. He takes care not to turn his wounded hand too much. He hurts because of me; he hurts himself for me.

When he gives the waterskin to me I take his hand, purr for him, soothing the nerves I can feel pulsing in my own arm.

He leans into me. A cyclical nourishment; water, healing. Small attentions.

The skáld returns with my horse in hand.

I don't understand. I have to get up? Move away?

But God. That horse is so beautiful. Golden in the firelight. And the scents he wears! I stand up, suddenly so high it's like I'm on stilts. I try to move, jangle-boned, my legs somehow so far apart after they both cleaved me in the midpoint. The skáld is grinning as he steadies me.

The horse's coat is packed with heat and scent. My fingers sift through the coarse hairs, mesmerized by how the thickness parts. He smells so strong.

Grass under my feet; my horse's strength beside me; the fire, crackling in the night. I stare at it, seeing this place through the tunnel of time.

How many women have stood here like this? How many have watched the stars wheel overhead while the warmth of the fire lulled them to sleep?

My distant ancestor is standing where I am. This is what she felt, at the dawn of time.

She's known these exact sensations, though we are hundreds of years apart.

I stare at the fort, high above us, outlined against the stars. All the other daughters of Clota are there, sharing in this moonlight.

Sisters. All of them my sisters. All descended from long unbroken lines of women, women who bear the same curse... and the same blessings.

The thought of them is an ache in my gut. Love keeps expanding in me like swelling waves in a cavern, spilling from the cracks.

I'm crying, I keep crying, I can't help it.

Oh, lamb. The skáld is with me; he lends me his warmth.

"It's so beautiful," I hiccup.

What is?

"Everything."

He soothes me, a hand on my neck, his lips on my temple. The fire shifts and dances, and I stare.

She's there. In the shivering spaces between the flames. An ever-changing silhouette, black slices in the fire. Wood cracks and pops, and I swear, I swear I see her.

A grinning figure in the dark.

Shall I give you a leg up?

The skáld turns me around. Horse fills my nose, overwhelms. I grasp his mane. His smooth palomino coat brushes against my naked front as I climb on, straddling his bare back.

So high now. I'm almost flying. I'm so involved in the swaying motions of his gait that I don't realise at first, that my two mates are leading me on

through the village, that our pack is following.

Then... many beady eyes blink around me. I blink back.

All of these Vikings. All of these men.

An army. Poised around the fort. Poised around my sisters.

The high I was riding pulls down suddenly. I'm horribly giddy as I try to grapple onto that expansive feeling of euphoria – but it's spoiled now. Completely spoiled. They smell like strange men; they reek of ale and piss and stale meaty breath.

I clutch my horse's mane. By what right do they crowd my land? By what right do they lay those eyes on me? They smell Thrain's claim, they don't approach. But they still take, they peel parts of me away for their own pleasure as they stare at my nakedness.

Why – why am I out here? Why am I letting them look at me?

Oh. Yes.

The point to all this is to show them what I can do.

Find the King. Wade through the body of this army and find the head, wrap a hand around its throat.

Show him that I can keep his dogs down if I will it.

One hand held out, I feel for them like plucking at strings, those warbands close enough to hear me. The command comes, smooth and cold as iron. *Kneel*. And they do so in a wave, an orderly clatter of metal and creaking leather.

So we ride, leaving wide-eyed kneeling crowds behind us. We untangle all the noise and chaos, steadily turning the camp to a smooth still lake.

Then the tide of men swells ahead. Noise froths into the air, loud male voices.

Back off! We're the ones that found her!

She belongs to Røkia's band now!

A scent of strawberries is on the air, a note of sweetness drowning in the heavy miasma of men and their drooling bodies.

A scent I recognise. So does my pack; they turn as one, take the same surprised inhale as we come into another section of the village.

Strawberries...

...Eormen. That's Eormen's scent.

She's here in the camp.

No. No. If they have her now – if she's here –

A ripple parts the great wave of men. And we see her.

Eormen. My cousin, my sister under the moon. She's high in her heat, and three men are holding her down – they are tearing off her armour, her tunic. Her breasts are stark white and bare, too soft in this slaver's circle of teeth.

No.

No.

Saliva springs to my mouth. They will die and I will do it. I will do it myself, plunge my hand into their stomachs, up into their ribcages.

I will *rip out their hearts*.

Somewhere, distantly, I hear someone call my name, some warning meant to pacify me. But it is all background noise.

To my pack, I bellow the command, because there is no other path than red hot rage – “*KILL.*”

The iron voice unleashes them. Red-eyed and hunched, they sink with a snarl into their deep craze. Then they pounce like so many hounds of Hell. Røkia's men meet them, most of them barely armoured.

To the men who have my sister, I yell, “*ON YOUR KNEES.*”

They slip away from her as though she were made of ice. Baffled faces turn to me as they stagger to the floor. One is huge and decorated enough to be Røkia himself. I slip down from my steed, pluck an axe from the madness, let it drag behind me.

I can feel them – all these men, each rugged sweaty body, as though they were beads rolling across my palm. When I command them, it's like closing my hand tight around them all.

A word from me and stillness cripples our enemies. My pack butchers them even as they twist in the clamp of my commands.

I'm standing before Eormen's captors. She's scrabbling away, one hand holding her clothes over her chest, panting sobs spilling from her mouth.

Salty air bursts in and out of my lungs. The men's fear dribbles from their pores, I can taste it.

Then I am tasting their blood.

Never. Never again. These hands, these filthy stinking bodies, these gaping wobbling mouths. They will never touch a sister of mine again. And these eyes, the ones that looked upon Eormen –

I shove my thumbs into them until I feel them squelch and collapse.

They pretend such strength, but they're really so soft and stringy once the skin is torn open. I hunch over Røkia himself, look at my grinning reflection in his panicked eyes. He's still alive – he groans and twitches.

I know he sees how my naked body shines with sweat in the firelight, bare before him, covered in blood and the remnants of sex.

“This is what you wanted, isn't it?” I hiss at him. “To see what we were like. Have a closer look. Well?” I lean closer. “Do you like what you see?”

He gurgles something, a terrified animal. I laugh at him.

Then I burrow my thumbs deep into his eye sockets.

The air is red and drenched with blood. My pack surrounds us, forms a circle of shields, my most loyal commanding them to protect us – always so protective, even in the depth of his craze.

I turn to my sister. She can't stay here. She's curled up on the floor, hands over her face, muttering prayer. I go to her and her head snaps up, eyes wide in terror.

She signs the cross over herself as she stares at my face, my eyes, my bloody haggard figure coming to her.

“O Father, who art in Heaven,” she mutters, as I crouch beside her. “Hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in H-Heaven...”

“Sister,” I hiss, clutching her wrists so she might stop convulsively signing the cross. “It's me. It's me.”

“Tamsin,” she gasps. “Oh Tamsin, oh Jesus Christ.”

“Did they take any other girls?” I ask, and I have to repeat it before she understands. “Are there girls here in the camp?”

“I don't know. I don't think so. I got – I got separated from Skađi, they dragged me away.” She pants, swallows. “Tamsin, my God, what happened to you?”

I take her head in both my hands, spreading blood there. She whimpers, her eyes linked to mine, filled with tears that keep streaming down her face.

“It is Clota's blood,” I tell her. “It runs in your veins, too. I know you've felt it. This anger.”

“No I haven't,” she sobs. “I haven't.”

“When you spilled blood under the full moon,” I insist. “Didn't you feel it then?”

“No,” she goes on, shaking her head. “No, no, no.”

Why is she lying to herself? Why does she limit herself, stay firmly behind that line that was traced at her feet at birth – propriety, correctness, a lady’s values? She wants to remain a good woman; she sees how I have fallen and it terrifies her. To know that all it takes is a tiny step, and she will be down here beside me, hated by those she esteems so much.

She’s afraid. Just like I used to be. I need her to see – I need to bring her into this expansive feeling of togetherness, let her see that the butchery had purpose. I need her to understand that I love her so much, her and all the women in the fort – I would protect them from all the armies in the world.

I stroke her hair, and speak more softly.

“I’m here for you, sister. I’m here. I know you’re angry, too. You don’t have to hide it from me.” I grasp her firmer, trying to stop her trembling. “The Cavaliers, and all the men of this land – they will look at you one day, see what you really are. You cannot count on them. But you will always have me. All the women of this land – we will always have each other.”

“No,” she insists. “I’m not like this – I’m not like you.”

“Look at me,” I growl at her, and she does, and I see it – the red in her eyes, a thin line like rust around the edges of her irises. “You are,” I hiss at her. “You are everything like me. We share the same body, the same curse. You know exactly how I feel.”

“Stop it,” she gasps. “Let go of me!”

I do, and she curls away from me, panting and gasping, holding herself around her middle. A crimson veneer blooms and retracts in her eyes, and she blinks, rocking, muttering prayer again to our bodiless Father.

It hurts. It hurts like a wound.

I love her but she can’t accept it. This heart I have in my hand. She’s too afraid; it’s too raw, too bloody.

She needs to go far away from here. I need to pluck her off the ground, get a horse for her. Looking up, I find several of the Vikings' steeds tied to a rack, whinnying and stepping around in fear.

Movement and loud shouts turn our heads around.

A deep, imperious voice: *What is the meaning of this?*

The circle of shields parts. The crack lets me see who has just arrived.

It is the Viking King himself.

He steps down from his horse. He is huge, almost as tall as the houses around him. His shaggy silver hair is resplendent in the moonlight, as is that braided beard.

He stands in full conscience of what is happening. All these men are red-eyed and growling, bristling around me. He thought they were his – but they are *mine*.

He's staring straight at me, stock-still. I move to cover my sister, bloody arm held out.

"Get to the horses," I rasp at her, and she scrambles away to where the beasts are fighting their lead ropes. "Ride out of here."

The Viking King does not try to stop her. He does not send any of his waiting, wide-eyed men after her, nor does he engage my circle of protectors. He sees how I handle them; how many of Røkia's warband are kneeling or dead in my wake.

Realisation, deep and profound, lines his face.

Hoofbeats resound behind me. Eormen is running – galloping away through the trees. My chosen packmates break from the circle, come to flank me protectively, their eyes spitting red.

This is their father. He has that claim over them. He has always been in control.

But he is just like the rest of them. He will heed any command I give and he knows it; I see it in his face.

May I approach, princess? he asks me.

“You may,” I hiss at him.

Fear glints in his eye. The earth shudders under his weight as this gigantic Viking steps into my circle.

I smile at him, giddily free now of the fear this man used to hold over me. As in the *galdr*, where the heaviness of the earth fell away to allow flight, I stand tall in his company.

His deep voice rises in the superstitious silence of his couched, vanquished men:

Princess Tamsin. I see now. I did not see it before, but I cannot refuse to believe what is before my very eyes. Will you have your men stand down, so we can talk?

“We will not talk,” I hiss. “You will kneel.”

He lifts his chin, his muscles tensing up to obey me. Exhilaration pounds through me as he lowers himself, the clutch of my voice dragging him down.

I want him to see. These are my men. My land. My country.

His son the skáld stands beside me. I reach for him, close a hand around his neck, pull him down. The kiss we share is sloppy with blood, metallic and delicious. I moan into it, and so does he, the sound travelling down my spine.

My most loyal slides a red hand down my naked back, makes me arch. They’re both safe... both unhurt, both smelling of rust and sex, both *mine*.

My skáld is kissing me with so much hunger, and I’m planting my claws in his hide – I want him, I want him so much, I want nothing more than to climb upon him and claim him right now, in this bloodbath, as it should be.

But there are other ways to mark my territory.

“Go to your father for me,” I breathe to him.

He turns and strides to his father’s side. A seax shines in his grip, slowly dripping globs of blood. The Viking King watches his red-eyed son come to him. That proud old face is falling, lips open around a panting breath.

Ivar, he breathes.

My skáld grips his father by the hair, digs his nose into the top of his head. Scents him, standing close enough for it to be an embrace.

The Viking King’s eyes are closed as his bastard son holds him there.

“Press your knife against his throat,” I command.

Everything is still. Metal rises slowly, a slice of silver crackling through the bristles of that great white beard.

My son, says the Viking King. His hand grips my skáld’s forearm, a pitiful claim. *My son, listen to me*.

My skáld holds the seax there. It’s shaking, as though he were struggling to keep it steady. Then he speaks, his voice deep and distorted by the craze:

Wrathful was Freya, and fiercely she spoke,

And the great dwelling of the gods was shaken.

His words are nothing short of veneration. But the way he says them... almost like he’s encouraging himself. He cannot resist my command; he sees himself doing these things, and he’s afraid.

It only makes me love him more. That he would heed me regardless. If he is lucid enough to speak, he could voice his protest.

But he does not.

God, what it will be to see this giant have his throat cut. I can feel the smoky air around me grinning, as though Clota were beside me, her bony fingers whispering along my body.

And I know... that by having him killed, this king among men, I would

make my ancestors proud.

Tamsin!

The sound of Olaf's voice rends the reverential silence. I twist around, heart in my throat, looking over the heads of my guards and those milling masses beyond.

Olaf is astride a glowing white horse, cutting a path between the many Vikings. He's bent over its mane, panting hard, taking in the scene with wide fearful eyes.

What – Christ, what is he doing here? He can't be up and about. He can barely hold himself up.

I rush to my packmate. He slides down beside me, leaning heavily against his horse, one hand clutching its mane. He's making an ungodly effort just to stand there, his face crumpled in pain, his skin as white as his hair.

What is he doing, what has he done – he's meant to be recovering! And now he's set himself back, pushing through so much pain just to come to me –

I take his face in my hands. He's so cold to the touch. I press his cheek against mine, pulling him to me like I could warm him myself. The purr pours from me, and he leans into me with a groan as it envelops him.

“Olaf,” I moan, heart pounding with worry. “You shouldn't be out here. You should be safe in my nest...”

His hand climbs up my naked back, sinks into my hair, making me ache and moan as the shimmer wakes. We're going down, collapsing on the ground. He presses a kiss to my jaw, and I nuzzle into him, heart thudding as I let him breathe over my neck.

After all this time... finally. *Finally*. I've ached so much for the feeling of his hands on me; his approval of me.

My mate... the elusive silver prince.

He trails open-mouthed kisses down my neck. My eyes are closed, a ball in my throat. His large hands are clasped around my nakedness, digging into me, his delicious growl rolling over me.

Then his teeth dig into my mark – and it's too late for me to protest it, to want to throw him back, when my mate is holding me so close. What is the point of protesting this, again...? I've forgotten why I'm out here. Why I'm so angry. His blunt teeth pierce skin and it's all I can think about now.

I can withstand the pain when it's his mouth on me, his teeth devouring me, letting loose his own hunger at last. So we can be joined. A perfect... perfect union...

The shudder of pain is pulling everything down, the weightlessness, the giddy freedom, until even sight does not return to me when I blink. His heady, amorous growl has turned to a leaden directive I cannot help but obey.

The dynamic is reversed. But though I know I am the one turned helpless now, I'm not afraid of it... I'm not afraid to let go as his growl drags me down into sleep.

Not when I am in his arms.

Chapter 40



THRAIN

Waning Moon of August

The goddess's commands must be heeded.

They close around my flesh like her loving hands. It is pure tenderness, like the smooth glide of a leather collar, this grip around my mind. She knows best... she knows what's best for me.

I will serve her until death takes me.

I watch her cradle the King's eldest against her. My brother; he's so huge over her. Huge and yet crumbled, a caved-in wall.

He sinks his face into her neck. An ache blooms in the pair-bond, then pain, *pain* – teeth digging into her – teeth in my neck.

He's biting her mating mark. *My* mating mark. A growl shivers up from the pit of my belly – he has no right, *no right* to touch her there – I pant through heaving waves of possessiveness and outrage, that she might be in pain, that all of her delicious power might be taking flight.

Then... those loving hands are gone from me; there is no more guidance.
Her commands lift from my body like many taut ropes snapping at once.

I am severed from her, dangling into nothingness.

* * *

Dirt in my mouth.

I cough, push myself up.

What...?

What in Loki's name?

All around me, a circle of men lies on the floor, shields scattered. As though we had all collapsed at once. My eyes burn; I blink, sickness surging in me as I try to sit up. Ivar is sprawled at his father's feet, his seax laying nearby.

Gofraid kneels beside him. I frown, squinting to clear my sight as Ivar rises with difficulty. One hand covers his eyes, as though rubbing away an intense headache. There is a moment where Gofraid cups his son's face, grasps his arm, ascertaining his state. A breath of silence passes between them both.

"Father," Ivar mutters. And Gofraid pulls his son to him, half embracing him, half pulling him to his feet.

Yes... gods, that's right.

Ivar had that seax at his father's throat. At Tamsin's behest.

What happened? What in Hel's name happened? We meant for this to be peaceful – hold everyone down, show Gofraid that she could command control – she was calm, at first. And it turned to unhinged carnage.

Eormen. It was because of Eormen. Tamsin wanted to protect her, and everything went wrong.

I turn, find Tamsin naked and vulnerable, curled in Olaf's arms.

Unconscious.

My guts twist up. It is the quiet before chaos. I can feel it; the quiet, confused atmosphere weighs on my bones like lead.

The Dubliners are stirring. Others come to help them up, warbands who stayed on the outskirts to witness the madness. Our men are all shaking out of their torpor together. They stare at each other like sleepwalkers blinking awake.

While the Dubliners wake, the other warriors all creep closer, huge and snarling, all around our improvised circle. They stare fixedly at the place where Tamsin lies in Olaf's arms. He's holding onto her tight, somehow managing to stay upright even in his state.

Voices rise. Questioning. Shouting.

It's beginning.

Gofraid throws out a deep-bellied growl, trying to fill the empty circle so that it stays that way.

But it will not stay empty for long.

Ivar and I rush to Olaf's side as many more voices and growls rise in challenge. Gofraid meets them, lifts his arms as he faces his men. Shouts abound;

Gag her! Cut out her tongue!

Kill her – you must kill her!

She spoke with the voice of Hel herself –

My King, she had you on your knees!

Focus. Focus. My hand trembles on the hilt of my axe, bloody as it is,

dripping with bits of entrails. We need to keep her safe – keep her safe.

But she is culpable. That is the way they see it. They have forgiven my pack and I without a thought. We are not the only ones waking from her spell; the survivors of Røkia's pack are rising, too.

Tamsin ordered us all. She will take the fall for everything.

Olaf is locked onto her tight; in the absence of his own ability to move or respond to any of these threats, he's opted to turn to stone. She's purring as she sleeps, only making it harder for him to let go. I'm relieved at least that Gofraid is intent on protecting her just as much as Olaf is; he stands as a guardian now while we coax Tamsin from Olaf's grip.

“What did you expect of the Vanirdøtur?” Gofraid bellows at them all. “She warned us of this! She warned us and we did not listen. She is a daughter of Freya! It is the goddess herself that spoke with her tongue. You want me to mutilate her? You want to see what happens if I try?”

“She's unconscious!” another shouts back. “You must neuter her while you can!”

“There is no sense in any of you!” Gofraid yells. “All you can give me tonight are suggestions of violence while the moon is high.” He throws out a hand. “I will keep her locked away until morning. Jarls! You will contain your packs. We will convene at dawn, when the rut has passed. Can I count on you?”

“Yes, my King,” several of the Jarls agree, not all of them particularly enthused. Gofraid turns to us even as the shouts continue.

Kill her! She killed Røkia! She slaughtered his men!

You must cut out her tongue! There is no other way!

Ivar soothes Olaf with an arm around his shoulders, muttering to him, persuading him to let Tamsin go. Olaf's eyes are corrupted red, his budding

craze giving him added strength. But it will push him beyond his body's capabilities – he knows it, it's why he clings to it now, so he can have the strength to hold and protect her.

Eventually he recognises who we are, what we're doing – he lets me have Tamsin, locking those corrupted eyes upon me as I slip her slight body into my arms. I heave her against me, sighing in relief to have her close again.

But we are not safe while we stay here.

Ivar pulls Olaf to his feet, helping him to lean against Alsvithr again. Gofraid can barely turn to speak to us; everyone is shouting for his attention.

“Olaf, are you lucid?” the King growls.

“I am,” Olaf rumbles back. “Let me take her. Back to the baker's house. I'll keep her there 'till morning.”

“Chain her. We'll take no chances.” Gofraid glances at Ivar and I. “See to your men. For the love of Freya, let us try to prevent more bloodshed.”

“We will,” I promise him. And we weave our way through the confused, aggressive throngs, pulling a frantic Cynan after us, trying to make some sense of this madness.

* * *

There is no sleep to be had. Once Tamsin is tucked in the baker's house, Olaf shuts the door on their privacy, and Ivar and I turn to our long night. I can feel her purr through the bond; it is a soothing glow, the same that has soothed Olaf to his deep sleep several times now. I can only hope they will both rest safely.

For us, it is endless hours of subduing, tucking away the wounded, pacifying those who seek to prolong the fight.

There are only a handful of Røkia's men left, leaderless and raging under the moon. The other Jarls help to hold them away. But others share their opinion of Tamsin being dangerous, and debate rises hotly in the night.

Violence sparks everywhere. Those who knelt before her get mocked by others, who boast that they would never bend to a woman's commands. Many roaring brawls break out.

When dawn rises at last, I ache for mead and some furs to pass out on. But it is not to be.

Gofraid sends runners to the four corners of the siege camp, calling a council in his royal tent. I find Ivar just as exhausted as I am.

He clutches my shoulder companionably.

"To think we started this night perfectly reasonably," he mutters, and I can only laugh. *Reasonable* is not a term I would've used, but at least we started off on the right foot.

"It could've gone well," I mutter. "She was calm at first. If those idiots hadn't dragged in Eormen –"

Ivar scoffs. "It did go well," he says. "Did you see the look on those warbands' faces? They were terrified of her. I think this will have precisely the impact we hoped it would."

He has an odd tilt to his chin. Perhaps the lasting sparks of deep satiation, after a night of sex and bloodlust, but also... pride.

How could he be proud of having watched her sink her hands in the bellies of those men? And his father. She would've had him kill his damned father!

Another look at the hard line of his jaw, and I realise perhaps he wouldn't entirely have protested that.

I sigh in aggravation. "You can't seriously say any part of this night went

well.”

“Thrain, don’t you see?” he insists, eyes grave as they meet mine. “Now that every Jarl in this camp knows that she can take command of their own men, that all the Vanirdøtur have the same ability – do you really think they’ll want to stay and pursue this siege?”

“All I know is that Gofraid will probably keep her chained,” I growl at him. “If he does not order her execution outright.”

“Ah, brother,” he says. “You only see the worst that could happen.”

I shake my head. Trust him to say such idiocy after a night like *that*.

We head for Gofraid’s council, bleary-eyed, dragging our feet.

This is going to be messy.

* * *

“All right, boys,” Gofraid rumbles at us, clapping his hands on the table. “I’d like to know exactly *what*, in the name of Loki’s horse *cunt*, happened out there last night.”

We’re all gathered in his large royal tent. Almost all his Jarls are milling around, standing inside or crowding the entrances, grumbling into their beards. Many are bruised and leaning this way and that.

Gofraid gestures at us.

“My sons. Please.”

Ivar steps forward. “Tamsin’s craze has already been a subject of speculation, as you all remember. My brothers and I witnessed it back in Dál Riata ; Father asked to see it, but she was too afraid to show him. We agreed that it would be too dangerous for her to descend into it. But tonight... she

felt ready; she felt in control enough to show it to you. What it is her voice can do. She wanted to meet with Father and plead with him to end this siege.”

“That’s why she was going through the camp on horseback?” one Jarl shouts out. “She was going to meet the King, buck naked and mad-eyed?”

Laughter and jeers rise at the oddity of that spectacle.

“It was meant to be entirely peaceful,” Ivar drawls, loud enough to drown them out. “She was calm. And being on horseback allowed her to be separate from you bunch of louts. We wanted her to feel safe, and to stay calm.”

“Well, that worked, didn’t it!” another shouts, inviting more jeers.

“If it had not been for Røkia’s men, yes, it would have!” I shout over them.

“Don’t you dare speak his name.” A well-hewn warrior turns from the corner of the crowd, glaring at us; it is Ögmundr, Røkia’s elder brother. “She butchered my brother like an Alfarblót pig. She spoke whatever wretched *seiðr* that was and brought such shame upon his body –”

“We could not have anticipated Røkia would drag in a Vanirdottir, could we?” Ivar counters, crooking a hand to make this seem obvious. “Naturally Tamsin wanted to protect her kinswoman. If Røkia had looked up from his slaving lust for just a moment, he might’ve noticed there were hundreds of men already kneeling in her wake. But he did not, and now here we are.”

Oh, what is he doing, taking that flippant tone – Ögmundr looks about ready to rip off his balls.

“You defend her, Ivar?” snaps Ögmundr, his tone feral. “She almost had you kill your own father. She shamed you just as thoroughly.”

Ivar lifts his chin, ponders this a moment, and says, “How can it be *shameful* when she speaks with the intractable voice of Freya? Are you saying our King was shamed, too, when she ordered him to his knees?”

A silence falls, then, where we all feel Gofraid inviting any one of these men to say it to his face. That everyone saw him kneel before a woman, that everyone undoubtedly has opinions about it.

I step in.

“My King, with all respect,” I say. “We greatly regret the turn that last night took. But you cannot say we did not warn you about this. We told you that it was not wise to anger the Vanirdøtur.”

Gofraid only scoffs at that, his great bulky arms crossed over his chest. “Indeed.”

“Do you see now?” I insist. “Why we warned against coming here? Why we said it would spell danger for us all?”

“I see it,” he says. “I see it now, of course. Why you came at me that day, all three of you practically foaming at the mouth.” He shakes his head in wonder. “This is what she did? Up in the mountains, in Uradech’s camp?”

“This was much more... inspired,” Ivar says. “But, yes. Up in Uradech’s camp, she ordered two hundred men to kneel, carved off a man’s head and went wandering with it.” He glances at me. “Can’t say she isn’t suited to you, Thrain. You both have a flair for dramatic decapitations.”

I’m amazed to hear levity from him – and even moreso when some voices rise in laughing agreement. But those who knew Røkia, those who cared – they are glaring red murder at him.

“Are you truly jesting while my brother’s corpse is still fresh?” Ögmundr grits out. “You insult me with every breath you take, Ivar Gofraidsson.”

Ivar only cocks an eyebrow. “Then I must continue to insult you, I’m afraid.”

“Please,” Gofraid rumbles, cleaving their argument. “Ögmundr. I’m very sorry for your brother’s fate. If there is anyone here that is to blame, it is me –

I should never have let this butchery come to pass. We must think of the wider repercussions of this. If Princess Tamsin is capable of that voice, then what about the rest of the Vanirdøtur we seek to claim? That is the question my sons brought to me before, that we must ponder now.”

That plunges everyone into contemplations. Questions fly around, similar to our Dubliners when they first encountered Tamsin’s craze.

“What was it like to be under her command?” one calls out. “Is there truly no defense possible?”

Gofraid ponders this.

“It was a strange thing,” he adds slowly. “To feel her command come over me. I never would’ve thought...” He shakes his great bushy head in wonder. “I have never felt the influence of the gods more keenly. It is as though she left Freya’s fingerprints on me.”

Everyone is quiet as they listen. He’s under some kind of awe. I can understand him; it is an experience unlike any other.

“I was certain she was going to kill me,” Gofraid says, still in that wondering tone. He blames her entirely for that, too, though Ivar held the seax.

Glancing at Ivar, I find him studiously silent.

“But she turned away as soon as she saw Olaf,” Gofraid goes on. “It was more important for her to care for him than to complete her own revenge.” He scoffs. “And to think I doubted her sincerity. She put herself at the mercy of an entire army just to keep Olaf from collapsing on the ground.”

He’s talking to himself, now. Some of the Jarls are stirring impatiently, apparently not quite as taken by fascination as Gofraid is.

“I wonder,” says Aurvandill. “Why did the Britons meet us with an army, when their women can command us? Why not post a single Vanirdottir here

in this forest to thwart us all?”

“Because it is a dormant ability,” Ivar tells them. “They are Christians. They do not let their women celebrate the moon. Tamsin happened upon the ability by chance. And I’m certain it’ll be the same for those wives you pluck from this place.”

“I can certainly see why the Christian King keeps them from feasting under the moon,” laughs a Jarl. “Imagine what chaos it would be to have many of them crazed at once.”

“Yes,” I say pointedly. “It is something to consider, indeed. Now that we are here – do we really want to take a hundred instigators of chaos back home with us?”

Silence.

Ivar throws me a warning glance. I know it may be too pointed if I insist. But he is the one who told me that this could change everything. And from the way this council is going, he might be right.

The words must be said: “There is still the possibility of retreat.”

Several Jarls murmur together. To my delight, I see some nodding – agreeing.

“Tuh! Retreat,” others echo, and then a dispute rises between those who agree and those who protest the very idea of leaving now.

“We hold the Briton King by the balls,” Gofraid roars over the noise. “His army is battered and split across the land. He cannot have much food reserves left in that fort now, after two months. We are so close to victory – there cannot be any question of leaving.”

Ivar places a hand on my arm even as molten anger and disappointment course through me. *Steady*, his grip says. *Let them talk it out.*

“I hold that there is a simple solution to this,” calls Ögmundr. “Once we

have them, cut out their tongues and be done with it.”

Loki. I was afraid things would take this turn. The suggestion raises many voices around the council, the disputes continuing.

“So that is how you see it?” Ivar drawls at them. “You are gifted with a Vanirdottir – after centuries, *centuries* of them being hidden from the world – and the first thing you do is mutilate her and rob her of her speech?”

“I do not need my Vanirdottir to talk back to me,” says Ögmundr. “I do not need her to talk at all.”

Guffaws rise to that. Many allude to the heat and how they intend to enjoy it unimpeded by words of protest.

Ivar and I are not the only ones to turn a baleful eye upon them. The council is steadily breaking in two – those who are on Ögmundr’s side, and those who would rather leave, who still wear fear and respect in their faces.

“Cutting out tongues? You would really bring that barbarity to me in daylight?” Gofraid booms. “Odin hear me, I am ashamed to stand in your company. Do what you will with your slave girls, but these are Freya’s daughters we speak of. And you are all here at my invitation. The first who cuts out the tongue of a Vanirdottir will see his own daughter cut up just the same.”

This incenses many of the men. It is growing noisy and chaotic – Gofraid can plainly see that he is losing grip of his Jarls entirely.

There are voices near us, voices that go on quietly speaking of leaving. Voices tinged with fear at the very idea of what the Vanirdøtur could unleash. I glance at Ivar again, both of us letting the arguments rise around us.

We have planted the seed, at the very least.

“Listen to me! The Vanirdøtur are far from won yet,” Gofraid booms at last. “And we know they are harmless while the Christians have them. Our

priority right now must be to hold down this camp while our wounded heal – we have time, we need not decide this now. There are surely many ways to keep those women subdued; if the Christians manage it, then surely we can too. I say, until we have them, this matter must be put aside.”

My heart sinks. Shouts and questions abound.

“I must add that no one,” Gofraid intones, “*absolutely no one* goes raiding under this moon. I am counting on you, my Jarls, to enforce the ban and contain your men. Is that clear?”

“What will you do with her?” they call. “What will you do with Princess Tamsin?”

Gofraid holds my gaze a moment. Then to his Jarls, he says, “While the moon is up, she will be sequestered and subdued in her nest. My sons have kept her contained thus far; and she has strong protective instincts toward Olaf, which I’m sure will keep her from protesting her imprisonment. We will reconvene once the moon has waned, regarding her freedoms within the camp.”

I’m gritting my teeth as I share a glance with Ivar. Gofraid wants to use her nesting instincts to cage her. But to cage her with Olaf?

“Sequestered? Is that all?” Ögmundr growls. “I seek reparations, Gofraid! For my brother, for all the men she had slaughtered –”

“I hear you,” Gofraid snaps back. “But I will not allow any more opportunities for chaos under this moon. As I said; we will reconvene at the last quarter. That is my final word.”

Chapter 41



OLAF

Waning Moon of August

I wake to grogginess and a pounding headache. A warm body is curled up against me, and the delirium of waking makes me believe one of Freya's large cats must've nestled in this bed with me while I slept.

But it is no large cat at all. It is a girl, naked, streaked with blood. She has her back to me; her ginger curls are compacted and crimson, covering her body like a mane. Her nails are black, her feet dirty and tucked in. She's purring as she sleeps, and I'm heady with it as I sit up in the pillows, gazing down at her.

Tamsin.

It's strange to wake from her purr; the world has soft edges, like one might get from the buzz of alcohol. To have been lulled by such an animal comfort makes me keenly sense that I am in this Vanirdottir's lair, that she sleeps now because she trusts me enough to do so; to show me her naked back like this.

But last night, she was feral.

I remember. Red skies, red ground. Father, on his knees before her. And how she walked straight into my arms and let me catch her, though she could've completed her revenge so easily.

The weight of that gesture, the trust it implied; it sits heavily within me now.

She is deep in a dream, totally unresponsive to my movements as I shift to a seated position. One of her dainty ankles is encircled by an iron shackle; I placed it on her myself last night. A chain spills from it, hooked up to the wall.

Now that it is morning, I cannot have her wake to her own bloody nakedness. She will want to hide herself, scramble out of this bed, preserve her modesty.

I pluck up one of the water buckets from the bedside, start lathering up a linen rag with soap. It is something we both dutifully ignore; the fact that we have both seen each other at our most raw, most unpresentable states. She is like me, she places value on courtesy and decorum – and though it's impossible to uphold even a modicum of decorum in a siege camp like this, Freya knows the dear girl tries.

In truth, she should not be out here at all. She should be enjoying the type of courtship every young woman does at her age; flowers, long walks in the forest, colour coded ribbons in her hair. Horse rides, jewels, secret smiles in sunlit nooks. Yet here we are, both forced to confront our most bestial states, both forced to reveal too much of ourselves. It is the way of war; all art and courtesy stripped away until only the throb of fear and ferocity remains.

I deepen my growl for her. Let her stay asleep for now; let me repair this, so she may at least wake in comfort.

Her body is so slight and delicate in my hands. I find no injuries, only the grime of her many kills that I scrub until she's pink. There is something uncanny about the soft freckled skin I uncover; this fawnish innocence hiding under the gore. The face of a rosy-cheeked girl emerges from the blood, and I hold her in my dripping hands, wondering that such a tiny little thing may have wrought such terrors.

Once she's clean, I avert my eyes from the rosy peaks of her breasts, the soft fuzz of her intimacy. By now the whole length of her slippery body has passed over my palms; I know I must dispel those sensations, but she keeps trying to wrap herself around me, following her nesting urge. I grip her tight by the arms and sit her up, pull one of Thrain's tunics over her head, coax her firmly into the pillows. For a moment she seems settled, but then she just climbs onto me again, chain clattering as she nestles.

"Princess," I sigh with a defeated smile. "Are you awake? Are you all right?"

"Mmm..." She only holds onto me tighter as she hums in her sleep.

I gaze down at the crown of her head. She is clean and dressed now as though she had just gotten ready for bed. But the notion of preserving her modesty is far from the only issue at hand.

There will undoubtedly be consequences for what she's done.

She's purring as she settles against me. I lay a hand on her shoulder, staring groggily at the door, trying to think. Father must've had a council with his Jarls... surely Thrain and Ivar are in attendance now; surely they will return soon with news.

I allow myself to drift in the meantime, as her purr envelops me like fog.

* * *

When the knock comes, I straighten, bristling.

“Enter,” I call out.

The door swings open. In the opening are two men I recognise as Father’s Southern Islers; they are in full armour, and they don’t look friendly.

“Hail, Olaf Gofraidsson,” one of them shouts entirely too loudly, as though to make his announcement heard by us as well as our whole camp. “The King has placed us here for the safety of the men, to guard the princess. He has granted you this one council with your brothers, but it is the only one you may have until the moon has waned –”

“Yes, yes, we know,” comes Ivar’s annoyed drawl, and he eels between them. “Get out of the way.”

Father’s men take their places at either side of the door while both my brothers march in.

They look exhausted, still wearing their bloody armour. But when they see the way Tamsin is still doggedly curled around me, purring luxuriantly, they both falter, staring in wonder as they sit carefully at either side of the bed.

“I thought we’d find you writhing in agony,” Ivar quips, cocking his eyebrow as she adjusts her grip on my tunic. “But it seems the night wasn’t too much of a hardship for you after all.”

“It’s just her nesting instinct,” I counter gruffly. “She doesn’t know she’s doing it.”

Tamsin stirs some more, disturbed perhaps by the guards and all this new noise. Thrain lays a hand on her shoulder. I try not to think of how the feel of her nakedness is still imprinted upon my own palms; he must know I washed

and dressed her. But he makes no issue of it, though he still looms possessively.

“She’s all right, then?” he asks me. “And you, brother? You rode across half the camp last night like a madman. How’s that leg of yours?”

“She was purring all night, so I can’t feel it at all.”

He nods, gazing at her with a small smile. But as soon as I mention the purr, it disappears entirely from the air, as though jinxed.

She’s woken up.

She blinks, finds her bearings. Her cheek is smushed against my chest; she pulls away with difficulty. Thrain reaches to tuck back her hair, smiling broadly now.

“Good morning, cariad.”

She realises all at once the position she’s in, half laid across my lap with her arm around my waist. She wrenches herself away and flushes a deep red as she sits up.

“Oh,” she mumbles. “Oh... I’m so sorry, Olaf. I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s all right, lamb,” Ivar says to her, still grinning. “I doubt he’s overly offended.”

I lay an exasperated look on him. But Tamsin faces away from us, a hand raised to her forehead, eyes shut tight as though fighting an intense migraine. So we all turn our attention to her, ready to help her with the aftermath of her craze.

She’s nauseous, foggy, and doesn’t remember anything at first. And then slowly, as my brothers offer her drink and reassurance, she begins to recall the night.

What she almost did.

She turns to face me then, and a heavy silence falls across the house. She

cannot look me in the eye; she fiddles with the hem of Thrain's tunic, vibrating with guilt and shame.

"...I made a mistake," she says at length, her voice low. "I went too far into the craze, I got too angry –"

"Princess," I interrupt her, and she stops at once. "We all planned this together. We knew the risks. I cannot be angry with you for something I expected of you."

She continues to stare down at my lap.

"You should be angry with me," she mutters. "I almost killed your father."

"You almost killed the man who brought an army to your homeland," I correct her. "I can't exactly fault you for that, can I?"

"But he's your *father*."

"Yes. He is my father. And no one has ever brought him to his knees like that before." The image blooms in my mind again as I evoke that awesome sight. "But you did not actually hurt him, princess. You accomplished what we wanted in the end; you showed him what you can do, did you not?"

That mellows her a little. As she mulls over my words, I turn my attention to my brothers; they are both quiet, holding back, as though waiting for us to be finished.

"So Father knows now, what it is the Vanirdøtur can do," I say slowly, daring to hope. "What did he have to say at the council?"

Thrain and Ivar glance at each other. It is a way they have of communicating; so subtle you'd think they have a pair-bond.

Then they explain.

Father has reinforced his ban on raiding. So that is one definite victory. But Tamsin will have to stay imprisoned in this house for the remainder of

the full moon. Chained and subdued. Thrain and Ivar are under express orders to monitor our pack every night, just like every other Jarl... meaning they cannot spend their nights with her.

Meaning I am the one who must care for her. And she, for me.

She still cannot look at me; she is crimson as she discovers the chain, one hand fiddling with her iron shackle. This will be... complicated. But there are far more preoccupying matters to broach than that of our intimacy.

“Did Father seem any closer to leaving?” I ask my brothers. “Now that he’s seen what Tamsin can do – does he understand that he must discontinue the siege?”

Thrain sighs, and all my hopes plummet.

“Many of his Jarls are seriously considering retreat. And he was certainly intimidated,” Thrain says. “But, no. He’s not about to leave. Not right now, anyway. There will be another council, once the moon wanes, to reopen the discussion.”

I clench my fist around a wad of linen, fighting to push back my anger. “Gods, what will it take? How long will he push the decision away?”

“I think it doesn’t matter what Father decides,” Ivar says. “He is losing his Jarls. A good half of them clearly want to leave after that council, and almost all of them contest how Father is handling things. I think all we need do is sit back and watch his authority crumble.”

I glare at him. Trust him to propose such a reckless solution.

“If we do that, it will be chaos,” I grumble. “Freya, but he’s seen her now. He’s felt her grip. How is that not enough to persuade him?”

Ivar smiles a cynical, humourless smile. “He thinks it’s a grand idea to simply decide what to do about the Vanirdøtur once we have them.”

“Madness,” I mutter. “Utter idiocy. Tamsin – the staff, please. I’m going

to see him myself.”

Tamsin rushes to bring me the long stick that’s resting against the wall, but both my brothers protest as I wrap a hand around it.

“No, you have to rest –”

“Brother, you shouldn’t be moving –”

“Get out of my way,” I growl at them both as I push off the bed.

“Freya help us!” Ivar rants. “We handled it, Olaf, your involvement will not miraculously change everything –”

“*Move.*” I shove past him, leaning on the staff. And then I place all my weight on my bad leg as I step past him.

Odin.

Hot pain shoots through my pierced thigh, through my whole body like molten fire. My grip of the staff slips, sweaty and shaking, and I fall to one knee – it’s back, the pain has come back all at once, and I can barely breathe as it rushes over me.

“Fantastic,” Ivar rails at me. “Well done! Would you like us to roll you through the door? Drag you through the camp by your foot, perhaps?”

But I have no breath left to argue. Without Tamsin’s purr I feel my thigh bone itself is searing hot – I’m panting, barely aware of what they’re saying as Tamsin kneels by my side, wraps an arm around me to help me up.

By the time they’ve hauled me back into bed, the world is spinning around me. I’ve half forgotten what I was trying to do as everything turns to clenched muscles, the cold foreign pulling of flesh around my bones. Pain clamps around me like a cage; I can only stare out of it in mute shock, and wait for it to ebb.

* * *

Useless damned body. *Useless.*

Tamsin busies herself around me, taking over once my brothers move away. I'm barely present enough to protest what she does, how much responsibility she takes on. It is her turn now to care for her bedmate – she folds the covers around me, props me in the pillows, fluffs the furs until I am suitably enmeshed in the bed. Her chain clinks after her, a sound that is quickly registering in my mind as a part of her, an announcement of her closeness, which is entirely perverse.

“Princess,” I mutter, but moving my leg makes the thoughts all tumble again.

“Drink,” she says, and there's the round rim of a cup against my mouth, blessed cold water on my tongue.

“Princess,” I mutter again. I don't have the strength to form any other words; I want her to know I'm thankful, and she shouldn't, doesn't have to – but she takes care of me anyway.

“Rest,” she says, and she leans close, her scent of apples and honey sweetening the air. She presses a kiss to my forehead and I mindlessly raise my chin towards her softness, as though leaning into the sun. “Shall I purr for you?”

Mm. Gods. Yes. The memory of it, that steady dousing of all the fire coursing through my body... I turn my head further into her embrace.

“Yes... please.”

And she purrs.

Freya... there is nothing like it. She has an arm around my shoulders, her cheek leaning against the crown of my head. I turn into the centre of her purr, her velvet-clad bosom.

This intimacy is achingly familiar. Small, careful hands; a woman's musk on the air, the careful movements of concern.

She is Tamsin. That thought aches within me. This woman wrapped around me, she isn't you. Not you, running your fingers through my hair; not you, resting your hand on my upper thigh, smoothing down the covers.

Not you... but she moves as you would; and there is a strange comfort in it, this overlapping of ghosts and the living. In this moment, she reminds me... of you... but it isn't fair to her, is it? She strives so much to hide what she feels towards me. All those moments she averts her eyes, stumbles over her phrases, I know she is reining it in; she cannot look at me without going red.

It endears me so much to her. That she would show such cares toward me. She strives to stay formal, to step lightly over your territory.

Her purr turns my body to softness again, like the inside of cushions. I've not been held like this in so long... so long.

Will you forgive me, my love... will you forgive me if I lay here like this? If I take this peace from her?

Because that is what it is: it is peace, her purr. It is a stillness I have not known since I woke with you that first morning after we were wed, and contemplated you as one contemplates the rest of their life.

All I want is to sleep and be rid of this hurt. I'm so tired, my love...

I'm so tired.

* * *

The house smells of her rose soap and the sweaty musk of close cohabitation. I blink awake again, my body fused to the mattress. My brothers are gone, the

door shut. She's pottering around the house, clearly preparing the place for the next few days we will have to spend together.

My brothers left us food and gear; so she takes stock of it, opening sacks and coffers, rearranging what little furniture occupies this house so we can have our things at hand. She fills the shelves, hangs up a hemp sheet to the rafters to form a makeshift modesty panel for us; then returns to the hearthstone.

An iron pot simmers there. It sends a waft of earthy valerian potion in the air; she's making more for me, adding honey to sweeten it. It's hard not to see that she's still following her nesting urge, keeping the lair comfortable, caring for her mate.

Her mate. That is how she views me. It is no mystery to me; she wears that endearment in her gaze whenever she looks at me. She knows I cannot give her what she hopes for, yet she still smiles at me in that way.

I stare at her stooped back. Tamsin... Tamsin.

The one to whom I am bound.

One day I would like to coil up our threads, ball them up like a string of yarn until I fish up the Norn who thought it amusing to bind us. I am too old for her, surely; too worn and miserable. And yet she has the patience to wait.

I try to push myself up. She shouldn't do all the work. But without her purr, the pain in my leg is returning, glowing steadily hotter like before.

She gazes up at me from where she kneels by the hearthstone.

"You're awake," she says, angling that lovely smile at me. "How are you feeling?"

"... better."

She pauses then, as though to gauge how truthful I'm being. "It's still your thigh, isn't it?" she asks softly. "I could help you to take a look at it, but

I... I wanted to ask you, first. If you'd like my help or not."

She's staring at the iron pot now, pink in the face. With the way I'm propped in this bed, anyone tending this wound would have to tilt my thigh to the side, uncover tender skin.

Loki. Of course I would have a wound in the most inappropriate place possible – and one that forces me to bend over and lose all my strength in the effort.

"I don't think I can accomplish much without help, at this point," I grant her. "It's kind of you to offer, princess. Thank you."

Still blushing furiously, she gets up and starts sorting through the paraphernalia at my bedside. Linens, salves and brushes; she knows which to pick and prepare.

"You know what you're about," I comment, surprised.

"Armod showed me how to do it."

She sits by my bad leg, sets down her gear. I arrange my tunic for modesty, gritting my teeth as her closeness stirs my blood. Then I force myself to recline, let my knee fall to the side. She hesitates then, as though the wound were higher up my thigh than she remembered. But she goes on with the work regardless.

"Can you pass me the pin?" she asks softly.

I do so. She takes it, and then those little hands move to my thigh, start unwinding the linen. A charged, heady silence settles as she bends over me; her touch is so light, sending goosebumps all over my body. She uncovers the inflamed skin around my wound, dabs cold water over it, then applies numbing salve. I try to keep from groaning as I sink back into the cushions.

"Is that better?" she asks, her voice low.

"A little, yes," I mutter. "Nothing will vanquish the pain like your purr

does, but then no man could expect to bask in it all day long.”

She smiles at that. “You can ask me, if it grows unbearable. I can purr for you if you need me to.”

Her tone is just as delicate as the touch of her fingers as she winds the new bandage for me. I afford her a nod.

“Thank you, princess. But I will not abuse the privilege.” I watch her work awhile, trying to wade past the pain and return to prior considerations. “What time is it?”

“Mid-afternoon. You slept most of the day.”

I frown. We were talking earlier... that’s right, we were talking with my brothers.

Father’s council came to a decision. The army isn’t leaving yet. Father... Father isn’t leaving. Even after seeing all that Tamsin could do.

I gaze at her as she meticulously ties a knot in my bandage. Amazing to think she has survived so long, all alone in a Viking army. She has seen so little of the world and yet she seems so remarkably resilient.

One could never guess that she is deeply traumatised, with the way she smiles. She will carry this war like a scar within her all her life. All because I could not make the one sacrifice that was necessary to make.

My heart clenches as I stare at her. I am the one who stopped her last night. I acted on impulse, wanting to save her and my father alike, unwilling to choose. Unable to accept that there is no real choice.

She could’ve saved all her sisters last night in one fell swoop. And I stopped her.

“I’ve failed you,” I mutter.

She straightens in alarm. “No, Olaf –”

“I have,” I insist. “In keeping my father alive, I’ve failed you. You and all

your kinswomen. We would never have even had to come here if I'd just..."

Her gaze grows intense. "He's your father," she murmurs. "Of course you wouldn't pit yourself against him."

I let out a ragged breath, shaking my head.

Gods. Is it the fate of every son, to pay for his father's mistakes? He has brought death like a pestilence to the Vanirdøtur's door. And I have helped him in his task, as I always have.

He may be a man of many faults, but like she says, he is my father. When I reach out for family, he is there. He's always been there. I owe him everything.

She touches my knee, and I stare down at that little hand, her lithe fingers hesitant. That she would still be so gentle with me when I have placed my father above her and her kinswomen... she is young and far too forgiving.

"It wouldn't solve anything, would it?" she murmurs. "Thrain said that even if Gofraid were killed, nothing would actually change. One of his warlords would simply take his place and pursue the siege."

I scoff at that. "The truth is that we can't know," I tell her. "We can't know what would happen. If I took up my father's mantel, the outcome would depend on us and how we would handle the situation."

Her moss-green eyes flicker between mine. She has a question on her lips; I can almost hear it.

So what are you saying?

What are you going to do about this?

I imagine it for a moment. If I had let it happen. Ivar's seax, cutting into Father's throat. The red curtain of blood, falling from his neck, dying that great white beard crimson. The life fading from his eyes.

A surge of horror rises in me like it did last night, making me breathe in

sharply.

No. *No.*

I can't. I can't bear the thought of it.

Tamsin strokes down my shin in a reassuring gesture.

“We still halted the raids for good,” she says slowly. “And we saved Eormen, too – we can continue working with her and the Briton army. Ivar says a great many of the warlords will leave of their own accord... in a sense, last night mostly had a good outcome, didn't it? I know we're playing the long game.”

I stare at her, speechless. Does she not realise what *the long game* implies?

No. Of course she realises it. She's living this just as we are. The longer this siege goes on, the more chaos and rivalry we allow to brew between Father's warlords... the more deaths will pile up around us.

She's only trying to comfort me. Pull my mind away from contemplating patricide.

I lay a hand over hers, rub my thumb along her knuckles. Both of us know that there is no simple, elegant solution to any of this. Even the *long game* relies on hope and leaps of faith.

“Are you hungry?” she asks softly. “I can start on dinner.”

“Don't worry about me,” I tell her. “You eat.”

* * *

Ruckus wakes outside. The full moon feast is just beginning. Music and revelry abound; I can hear Ivar's tagelharpa on the air, long elegant notes

resounding among many voices. It seems Father has at least encouraged peace between his Jarls while the feasting continues.

Tamsin has been fretfully occupying herself with washing and changing for the night, hidden behind the modesty curtain. Both of us are feeling the effects of the full moon rise.

I know she can subdue me; she's already done so. But it is still utterly strange to be in the company of a young woman on a full moon night, especially now that we must spend the whole night together again. To wash ourselves, to strip in the company of one another, it is impossible not to feel the breaking of boundaries it creates.

The air is thick with her musky sweat, the sticky sweetness of it thickening the air. When she emerges from behind the curtain, she wears nothing but her shift, and her long hair is loose.

The impression of her being a young woman freshly offered to me; the rut turning it into some lurid fantasy of an arranged marriage in this firelit nuptial chamber – it means nothing, it means *nothing*. She is imprisoned here; we must make do.

“Princess,” I invite her, because we cannot linger like this, each entrenched in our own reluctance; it will only be more difficult to weather the rut, otherwise. She approaches, sits on the edge of the bed beside me.

“We will subdue each other,” I tell her. “That is what we did last night.”

She nods. She's all hunched up, quiet and withdrawn. I wonder at first if it's just her nerves, as always, at being in my company. Steering her will surely put her doubts at rest.

“Come,” I tell her. “Lie down. It'll be easier while it's still early.”

Gods, why does it feel like the words from a tentative wedding night – it isn't, this arrangement is nothing like that. She slides across the bed. When

she curls up in front of me, she has her fists under her chin, her eyes slanted away. There could be no more eloquent picture of discomfort. She looks somehow even younger like that; shoulders high, legs tucked together.

“What is it, princess?” I ask her, gentle as I can.

She fiddles with her mating mark. Her eyes are shining.

“It’s just... it’s silly, really,” she whispers. She’s fidgeting, her feet rubbing together, her hips rocking slightly. Her scent is growing ripe on the air; I can only be glad for Thrain’s stark claim that pushes against my rut. “Thrain shut off the pair-bond,” she mutters. “To give me privacy. But now that night’s fallen, it just feels so...”

She squeezes her eyes shut, frowning. To see her like that makes me rein in the impulse to touch her hand, comfort her somehow. I need to be careful with her; if she’s here at all, it is to be subdued.

“I just miss him,” she whispers. “I know it’s just the heat talking, but... to know they’re out there, it *hurts*, it feels like they’ve abandoned me here –”

“They have not abandoned you.”

“I know. I know they’re heat thoughts,” she insists, even as her voice begins breaking up. “I know they aren’t rational.”

She wipes at her face. Still the impression of the young bride protesting her nuptial night persists, try as I might to shake it away.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “It’s so silly – I’m sorry, Olaf, I wish you didn’t have to put up with me like this.”

I have to manage her. She’s spiraling; she needs structure.

“You need their scents in this nest,” I tell her. “Thrain and Ivar’s things are all there – go, add what you want. Until you feel comfortable.”

She blinks, sniffs. “But it’ll be all cluttered.”

“It’s your nest. It needs to be as you prefer it.”

She nods, then does as she's told. I watch her, the golden light webbed across her back where it glints off her hair.

Odin, she is beautiful in daylight, but... seeing her with the interest of the rut is something else.

I focus on breathing and shoving down the rut thoughts as the evening deepens. She adds clutter, kneels beside me until the nest is arranged and plump as she likes. I can't help but grin at the way she's all but buried me in furs and clothes and even a dirt-stained cloak.

She breathes out as she sits there, observing it. She looks satisfied. When she turns back to me, her cheeks have gone pink.

"Better?" I ask her, and she nods, her mouth squirmed into a shy smile.

"Yes."

"Come here," I rumble at her, opening an arm.

Her face is bright red as she tucks herself against me, back against my chest, the chain clinking after her. She's curled up so tight. I offer her my growl, and I feel her relax a little against me.

"Would you purr for me?" I ask her. This has to go both ways.

She nods, but she lays there in my growl a little longer, as though she can't get herself to do it. After a while I hear her sniffing again, wiping at her nose.

"I'm trying," she whispers. "I'm sorry."

I gaze down at the rich ginger crown of her head, the curls that are splayed all around us as though we were on a bed of golden vines.

She needs more than this. I can scent it on her; beyond the metal net of Thrain's claim, her arousal is blatant. Though she does her best not to let herself lean against me, there is need in the arch of her spine, in the tightness of her fists. The way she rubs her thighs together.

Ah, Freya.

I stare down at her hair. Last night her purr deepened so deliciously when I kissed her neck; when I sank my teeth so deep I tasted her blood.

The thought riles me, sends blood thudding to my groin. I grit my teeth at the foreignness of the sensation – to feel that here, with her, feels like utter disrespect. But she is already responding to me; it's only natural that I'd respond to her.

I brush away her hair, baring her neck. Goosebumps erupt all over her, and I stare at that patch of prickled skin between her hair and the loose collar of her shift.

Such soft skin.

Saliva is rising to my mouth as I stare.

I lean in. She arches, makes a needy little sound that makes me open my mouth, kiss her there, taste her. She is turning mindless as she makes more of those sounds.

Odin... it should not be possible to taste so sweet.

I don't know how it happens. Just that the clutter moves, her body twisting. She's so soft against me, the embrace stuffy and warm. She bares more of her neck for me, and then I'm kissing along her jaw, and she's turning her face up to me.

We find ourselves staying in that closeness, her lips parted and waiting under mine. My pulse thuds as I let her hold me in this rapture, the space just before contact.

How long has it been since I found myself here?

I close my eyes, shake away the restrictions that have been clamped around me this past year. They fall away like so many dusty shackles; my movements are uncoordinated, shaky from disuse.

My fingertips travel up her throat, up to her chin. Her eyes are closed, her breaths coming short and fast as I hold her there; the way a lover holds his partner.

“Olaf,” she whispers. There’s so much longing in her tone.

She needs this. She needs me to do this; give her what she craves so much.

Something writhes and coils in my belly as I hold myself there, my nose nudging hers. I’m so close I can smell the mead on her tongue; feel her lips catching a little on my beard.

Nobody. Nobody has come this close since...

The thought makes me frown, shortens my breath. It feels like I’m breaking – not just an impression of shackles, but me, my entire being. Cracking. A fissure snaking through my chest, my stomach.

Breaking open. Within, everything is so soft and vulnerable, the flesh of an open wound. I want nothing more than to hide it away, cover myself with both arms.

She waits. As she has done, all this while, waiting for me to be ready. She isn’t breathing at all now.

Neither am I.

The instinct to shy away pulls at me – do we have to do this? But it’s inevitable, isn’t it? She’s bound to me, and everyone’s been waiting, everyone’s been watching me and wondering, *when is he getting over his wife? When is he going to get better?*

All those nights spent drinking with the greybeards, patting me on the back. *It’s only a matter of time, you’ll see*, they’d say. I always hated that expectation of theirs, as though it were inevitable that one might betray one’s ghosts, that the moon might force us to act out of pragmatism alone.

There'll come a point where you'll stop dreaming of her so often, they'd say, their words heavy with long experience. You'll see.

I sigh against Tamsin's lips, frowning, my throat hot. I wish I could shut it all off, these broiling thoughts, these memories. Give her what she needs, rather than this loneliness that blackens the edges of my lips.

She tucks in her chin, respectfully breaking away. It's easy to see that she's upset, though she tries to hide it.

I trace her jaw, tilt her chin up again. She blinks up at me.

"Olaf," she says. "You don't have t—"

I kiss her. Slow, open-mouthed, rediscovering the mechanics of it. We stay suspended there afterwards, lips parted, half-dazed by what we've just done. Then I kiss her again, and she gives a muffled whimper, holding on tight.

Freya. I can barely recall how this felt... but I know you didn't feel like this. You had sharp edges; she is so pliant and yielding. I'm sinking into her, how she lets me lead her on, our mouths joined as though there could be no separating now that we've begun this.

She strokes up my neck, fingers carding through my beard. You... you used to do that.

I need to stop.

Stop thinking about you.

She breaks off. Pants against my mouth, nudges her nose against mine. I keep my eyes closed, breathing in her honeyed scent, the tint of Thrain that cages it in. Both of us are marked; hers is fresh, while mine...

She takes care not to touch me there. The white circle at the crook of my neck.

Gods, why is it so difficult? If I could just pretend she and I are alone...

young and unattached, meeting as we were meant to, with no heavy pasts dragging after us.

But I am not young, and she wears her hair long and unkempt over the translucent fabric of her shift, blushing as though she were a maiden on her first night – and my rut refuses to ignore how perfectly she fits the image I have always had of her.

I lift my shaking hand, sink my fingers in her hair. Hold her by the base of her skull as I taste her again.

Her purr rattles to life, and I sink into it – and slowly, slowly, we both drag each other down from this sticky mess of yearning and into the deep black of sleep.

Chapter 42



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of August

Four days. We have four more days of heat to pass in this little house.

I wake sprawled over him again, this time head-to-toe, both of us tangled up in an absolutely nonsensical sleeping position. When I try to pull away, he wakes and starts laughing to see that one of my feet is right by his face.

He tells me not to apologise, that it is just my nature, that he doesn't mind. Then he hands me some folded linens, proposes that we take a moment to groom ourselves; so I start gathering up the wash buckets and grooming materials, and the morning ritual is sealed.

The kiss – the long, heady, desperate kiss we shared last night – neither of us mention it. Clearly it belongs in the same category as these acts of necessary closeness. Passing the wash buckets, sorting between each others' wash cloths, sharing this stuffy space.

He only did it... he did it because I needed him to.

I keep reminding myself of that. I try not to look him in the face – otherwise I’ll look down at his mouth and realise the absolute strangeness of it.

Olaf. I kissed *Olaf.*

I hide behind the modesty panel to wash. Like this I can’t help but hear his own private morning habits. The rustle of the hay mattress, the soft grunt as he moves his bad leg. There is the tapping and clicking of pots and bowls, the slosh of water as he prepares his grooming station. I can’t *peek* at him – but the urge is there, as though I were a wayward child trapped in a Viking prince’s chamber, curious to see his small personal rituals.

I call out before I emerge again, freshly dressed. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed with his bad leg stretched before him, facing his silver mirror. A decorated knee-length tunic is draped over him, wholly flattering his figure, cinched at the waist by a jewelled belt. I watch, fascinated, as he dips a boarhide brush into a pot of sweet-smelling pomade. Deftly he brushes back his white-blond hair, giving it its distinctive combed-back shape.

“Princess,” he rumbles once he’s finished, startling me back to attention. “Would you help me to the desk?”

I stare at him uncertainly. “Are you sure?”

He nods. Though he’s heavy, he’s determined to walk. Between me and his staff, he manages to limp across the room with many a gasping stop. By the time I get him into his chair, we’re both panting with exertion – I feel I’ve rolled a boulder across the room.

“Hopefully that will get easier,” he mutters with a smile.

He asks me to bring him things from the coffers; he wants to work, still, even in his state. Clearly he doesn’t intend on remaining bedridden while we’re stuck here. Something about his calm authority tells me he is entirely

used to commanding people to do his bidding, whether his brothers, his men, or his servants. I don't even think about saying no, nor contesting the way he shapes the day for us both.

Like a dutiful attendant, I fetch his writing equipment and parchments from his coffer. Stock lists, maps of Dumbartonshire, letters from Eormen and others; he splay them all out and sets to pondering over them. I can't shake the impression that this must be a common sight in Dublin's great hall; Prince Olaf Gofraidsson, poring over lists and missives as he rules over his settlement.

Nausea starts creeping back up my throat as I kneel by the hearth to put water to boil. I've been wobbly since the craze – but I can't bother him with it. He's already taken such cares with me. I don't want him to tend to me for four whole days, when there is so much hanging in the balance as we wait out the moon.

Still, he notices that something's wrong as I set down a steaming cup of valerian on his desk. He gazes up at me, clear silver eyes limpid.

“What is it, princess?”

I bite my cheek, waving him away. “It's nothing. I still feel a little sick, is all.”

He's quiet a moment as I place the pot of honey next to his cup.

“Have you been feeling nauseous a lot in the mornings, lately?” he asks.

I frown at him. “Maybe a little, from time to time... but nothing as strong as this. Why?”

“You're near two months on, pet,” he reminds me softly. “It's not unusual for it to start around this time.”

“For what to start?”

“Morning sickness.”

Oh Christ. He's talking about my pregnancy. I hadn't even thought of that; I just assumed any sickness I felt was due to the camp rations and the stress.

"Is nausea really an enduring thing?" I ask quietly. "I thought it would stop at some point."

"It can be long for some women. Here." He reaches into the sacks of supplies at the foot of the desk, pulls out a sprig of mint for me. "Boil yourself some mint and honey. It helps."

His tone is gentle, practiced. I can't help but wilt internally at the thought of how much experience he must've had with these early stages of pregnancy.

Saints, this can't be comfortable for him. Sharing a bed with me, and now sharing *this* – the discomforts of pregnancy, which he definitely needs no reminder of.

I take the sprig from him and hold it against my bosom a moment. "I'm so sorry about all this, Olaf," I mumble miserably.

"Don't be. It's perfectly natural."

"But I never meant to sleep here and make you uncomfortable –"

"Princess," he interrupts me. Then he holds out his hand for me to take.

Timidly, I do so. The shimmer wakes between us upon the skin-on-skin contact, making me shiver. He looks very serious as he contemplates me in the semi-darkness.

"I know there are things you share with my brothers that you do not share with me," he murmurs. "We both know the reason why. But we are still pack, princess."

I hang my head. I hope he doesn't see how that admission makes my instincts sing with delight.

“I thank you for your concern, and your respect,” he says softly. “But I don’t want you to feel ashamed around me.”

“But I just... I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“I hear you. I see your intentions, Tamsin,” he says, tenderness in his tone. “It is never an inconvenience to have you with me.”

His words set off a hot glow within me; for all that we may be speaking of tact and respect, I’ve never so fervently wanted to climb up onto his lap and hold him as close as we were last night. But his hand is all he’ll allow me in daylight, and it always feels like such an extravagant contact already. When he rubs his thumb over my knuckles, the touch echoes through my whole body.

I breathe out, smile at him even as I wrangle with my instincts. I will not let the heat ruin this rare time we have together.

Hand still tingling, I return to my potion-crafting. While I stir my mint leaves into the iron pot, I hear his pen scratch on parchment behind me. And I hold his words close to my heart as we settle in comfortable silence.

* * *

Toward midday, a knock comes at the door. I perk up from the lunch I’m preparing, hearing Ivar’s voice arguing with the guards in Norse.

“Brother!” Olaf calls. “Is there news?”

“Some, yes – only, the guards want to fight me for wishing you good morning,” Ivar calls back. His annoyed drawl makes me grin. The ache to see him and Thrain wakes in me, fresh and hurting.

“Don’t fight the guards,” Olaf calls back patiently. “Tell me as we are.”

“Hmph. Fine.”

They go on; Ivar speaks of a warband that's packing up to leave, and Olaf bends over his map, noting things down with his charcoal pen. The guards open the door, shove in morning supplies; fresh water buckets and forage. Ivar is there beyond them, bare-chested and arms crossed as he goes on in Norse – he's turned away, keeping an eye on the men beyond.

One glance is all I get as I drag in the buckets. The Dubliners are still mostly asleep, half-dressed, some covered in dirt. Thrain is over by the firepit, sleeping against a saddle. He has Ivar's tagelharpa cradled against his side.

Again that pang of being apart from them pulls at me. Last night Olaf had me build up my nest to distract me – but in daylight I need something to latch onto, a bone to gnaw that'll allow me to accept this distance.

The guards shut the door in my face before I can even meet Ivar's eye. Olaf keeps up their blind conversation, adding notes to his parchments while I busy myself tucking away our supplies. Then it winds to an end, Ivar calling something that sounds like, *talk to you later*.

"Olaf," I say with a frown. "Could you teach me some Norse? All of you are always talking over my head. I need to learn it at some point."

He looks at me in surprise. "Four days will not be much. But it could be a start."

"It's plenty of time. There isn't much else for me to do in here," I say. Then, realising just what *other things* are on the table with it being the full moon, I add with a flush, "I mean – if it's all right with you."

"Of course," he says. Then he catches my eye and just barrels right into a gravelly Norse phrase. I frown at him – I think he's asking, *shall we speak it like this?*

"Maybe just a few words, first?" I stammer with a grin.

“All right.” He holds out a hand. “Let’s start with lunch.”

While I cut us some dried ham, he takes me through *please* and *thank you* and the names of what we’re holding. Soon enough I have him cracking smiles and even rare laughter when I get stuck on the word for *spoon*.

Warmth gushes into my chest as I glare at my spoon and try again. It isn’t just the exercise; the pair-bond is open again, Thrain’s intent is whirling through me, a wash of love and concern. And I smile to myself as I sit there with my spoon held up, enjoying the quiet attentions of my pack.

* * *

Nighttime returns. Ivar’s tagelharpa sings over the rising ruckus. It’s early, still; Olaf is bent over his parchments again, an elbow on the desk, kneading his forehead. He’s been trying to piece together a solution – some other way to dislodge his father, some alternate plan that might spare him the hardship of unsheathing his own sword.

He doesn’t seem about to interrupt himself. So I sit on the bed alone, doing up a fresh braid. The bond is still open; I lean into it, letting my own senses blur with Thrain’s.

He welcomes me gladly. Saints, he is so languid with his rut already; he’s clearly opted to indulge himself to the fullest tonight, as have all the men. Everyone is amusing themselves out there. The men are dancing a jig, half-naked and decked in twisted flower necklaces while Ivar plays for them. I want to get up and dance, to fold myself into my packmates’ arms – the yearn makes me huff as the heat rises.

I lean further into Thrain, into his hot sweaty body, his budding arousal as Ivar gazes at him over his tagelharpa. Then the song changes, and Ivar rises;

tall, half-dressed, gloriously handsome. He reaches Thrain, pushes him down to straddle him – straddle *us* – we both gaze up at him, my heart thrumming wildly as Ivar’s liquorice touches my tongue.

The pair-bond is still open, Thrain says. She can see you.

Ivar grins, leans closer. *Is she watching?* Then his hand moves, undoes the laces of his breeches, and we follow it till it’s looped around his erection; a glimpse of thick veins, a glimmer of precum. *Can she see this?*

They torture me like that – letting me see, letting me feel – until it is so real, Ivar’s ghostly kisses, his hand cupping the throb between my thighs, Thrain’s thighs – I turn away, gasping, needing release so badly it’s almost painful.

Ivar whispers against the shell of Thrain’s ear; *does she know what I would do to her, if she were chained to my bed?*

Please, I throw out desperately, please close the bond, I can’t take it.

Thrain does so reluctantly. And I lurch in the solitude, the emptiness that greets me.

Olaf’s pen is still scratching on parchment. I bury myself in my nest, try to take some solace from their clothes, but I need more, I need *more*. I can’t just touch myself with Olaf there – so I curl into a quivering ball of need, one arm thrust between my thighs, trying to stifle the sobs that bubble up.

Misery. This false heat is nothing but bloody misery.

Then, a hundred years later it seems, the mattress sinks. Olaf’s scent clouds around me as he leans in. He pulls back a corner of the covers, and I let out a whimper, turning my face away.

He clicks his tongue, speaks in a low rumble; “Oh pet, why didn’t you say anything?”

His rugged hand skates down my bare arm. I give a sob of relief, so

touch-starved that my whole body comes alight. He lies down behind me and pulls me back against him, and the purr pours from me, an aching gladness. He gives a soft groan as he sinks into it.

“You must tell me when you need me,” he murmurs into my hair. “I won’t have you curling up quietly in a corner like this when you need company.”

My heart flutters to be so close to him. These evenings with him feel unreal somehow, like stepping into a feverish firelit world. This is the only time he lets go of all his royal rearing, too – he burrows, holding me close, his large hand skimming the underside of my breasts as he settles. And we fall asleep just as we did last night; coiled up, fists in the blankets, breathing lungfuls of each other’s sweat.

I’m mortified the next day, but he speaks nothing of it.

So the days pass in a messy routine. We wake, groom ourselves, pretend we did not sleep all tangled up like dogs. He spends the mornings teaching me the runes and Norse phrases. Then he sinks into his work all afternoon, only emerging again when I ask him, stammering and embarrassed, to put me to sleep.

We call out to the voices outside, laughing with them – it’s the only contact we have with that outer world, what exists beyond this heady little house. The Dubliners hear of my morning sickness, and they’re sweet enough to go foraging for me; Ivar brings me the wild berries and flowers they find.

Thrain tells us there have been no raids, no more altercations. We’re all just waiting for the last quarter to arrive and break this spell, where everything seems suspended.

In the depth of the evenings, Olaf’s wayward hands brush over me, and the outline of his stiffness presses against my lower back sometimes;

somehow these things have become acceptable mishaps. But to face each other would be going too far; to kiss him as I did that first night, that isn't possible, that is an indulgence he will only allow when absolutely necessary. That's how I interpret his silence, anyway; there is a reason, surely, that he never mentions that kiss at all.

So I don't ask for it, and he does not kiss me again.

* * *

He never talks to me much about himself. I'm too afraid to ask questions; always afraid of bringing her up, the one who lingers in the shadows, in his silences.

On the morning of our last day, we laze around in the nest. I wouldn't ever have thought to find myself here – caught in the crook of Olaf's sculpted arm while he reclines, eyes closed. Both of us have been awake for awhile, but I'm loath to rise and trigger the nausea, and he's loath to face the pain of checking his bandage. So we lay there, content to serve as one another's pillow.

So many of his things have Celtic knotwork on them. His cape brooches, the hems of his cloaks and tunics, his belt buckles. I hold one of his brooches up, letting the daylight glint on the horse and rider depicted on it.

“One would think you were born an Irish prince, from all this knotwork.”

He scoffs. “It is not all Irish. We have similar designs.”

“Still. You take trips to the realm of the Fair Folk, and all,” I say with careful offhandedness. “How does that work? A Viking going to the land of the Fair Folk. Why would Yggdrasil have a branch that leads there too?”

He reflects on that. “Yggdrasil sprouts through all the realms. We say there are nine in total, but who knows how many there really are?”

I tilt my head. “Is your concept of the world so changeable? You just add whatever you encounter?”

That makes him chuckle. “You Christians make room for the Fair Folk too, between your Heaven and Hell.”

That gives me pause. “That’s true.”

“What is it you call it?” he asks me. “The land of the Fair Folk, in Brittonic. You told me once.”

“We call it Annwn. The land of the Tylwyth Teg.”

“*Ah-noon...* tell me more about it.”

I fidget. “I only know the stories my nursemaid used to tell me. You want me to tell you one?”

“Why not,” he says, and I can hear a smile in his voice. “It’s probably noon and we’re still in bed; seems a fine time for children’s stories.”

“Well,” I say. “There was once a prince who journeyed there often. Pwyll, the prince of Dyfed, down in the kingdoms of Wales.”

He stirs. “How do you say that name? *Poyish*?”

I laugh, pronounce it again with more of a hiss. He tries to whistle it through his teeth before giving up.

“It sounds like a gust of air,” he complains with a laugh. “And I thought Irish names were strange.”

“It’s not any more ridiculous-sounding than *Loki*. Or *Orm*. I mean bless him, the man’s lovely, but what kind of name is that?”

Olaf’s belly bounces under me as he laughs. “A good, strong name, I’d say.”

“Well that’s your opinion,” I protest. “I won’t let you insult Pwyll. He has

the best stories, and he was always my favourite. Now are you going to listen or keep criticising?”

“I’m listening, princess.”

So I tell him about Pwyll, who rode regularly into Annwn on his hunting trips. I detail his meeting with the ruling fae king himself, Arawn, and how they became good friends. I try to describe it all as my nursemaid did for me, daring adventures against a backdrop of beautiful rich lands.

“There’s one tale I like most,” I add. “The tale of how Pwyll met Rhiannon.”

“Go on,” he says. “I’m taking a liking to this Pwish fellow.”

“Tch! Have some respect.”

It feels oddly intimate to share childhood stories with him. The story I’m about to tell is a romance – I worry I’ll come across as girlish. But he seems entirely receptive.

“So, there was an ancestral mound in Pwyll’s kingdom,” I start. “It promised to show him visions of the woman he would marry. So the prince travelled there, and his bride-to-be appeared to him, a beautiful lady riding a white horse. But she didn’t stop to greet him; she rode away from him, so all he could see of her was her long luscious hair.”

I’m realising with a pang as I tell it, that I could easily draw parallels with his life. A faceless woman atop a white horse. It’s as if Vírún has invited herself into the tale. I swallow, going on:

“Rhiannon was mistress of horses, back in Annwn. Naturally she was a skillful rider. Pwyll chased after her so he might catch her... but though her horse would only ever amble along, somehow he could never reach her. He found the fastest horses in the kingdom and sent his best riders after her, but she always remained just out of reach.

“So one day, the prince rode after Rhiannon himself again. And this time he decided he would not stop until he had her. When he got tired, he finally called out to her. *Rhiannon, oh Rhiannon*, he said, *would you please turn and show me your face?* And she did. She slowed down, looked at him at last, and smiled. *Well*, she said to the prince. *Hello to you too. Why didn’t you just ask me that from the start?*”

Olaf scoffs at that. I grin as I carry on:

“You see, Rhiannon had glimpsed Pwyll on his many journeys through Annwn, and had fallen in love with him. So she had come to the realm of men with the full intention of marrying him. But all this while, she had been waiting patiently for him to show some manners and call out to her... so she might turn around and face him.”

He’s quiet as I come to a close. My face is hot as the parallels strangle me. He could see many things in it; whether his own wife, riding away into Annwn. Or me – the princess he is fated to marry, the Vanirdottir he’s been chasing all this while, without ever actually facing me nor talking to me properly until now.

“Sorry,” I mutter. “I didn’t mean to say – it’s just a story.”

“I can see why you like it,” he says, a smile in his tone. “Horsewomen and fae magic. It’s a tale well told.”

We lay there, the morning laziness turned to hesitant honesty.

“You have not offended me, princess,” he adds softly. “Though I see the parallels just as well as you. It has been ill-mannered of me indeed, to not sit with you more often and talk like this.”

“I don’t think you’re ill-mannered,” I stammer. “I know why you and I – why this isn’t possible yet. I don’t bear any grudge.”

That turns him to silence again. I chew on my lip. *Yet*. Why did I say *yet*?

Ah, bollocks, he must think me so entitled.

“I’m not waiting for you, Olaf,” I mutter. “Not... not really. I don’t expect anything in particular. I know that this... this is just for this moon, being together like this... but it’s nice.”

He says damnably nothing again to that, and my heart is punching its way out of my chest as I wait, forcing my mouth shut before it can keep running on.

Finally he lays a ringed hand on my head, brushing back my hair. “It’s sweet of you to say so, pet,” he mutters at last. “I’ve enjoyed this week just as well.”

Pet. The word floods my belly with warmth; it always feels so intimate when he calls me that, stepping down from his usual formalities.

“Rhiannon’s story,” he adds. “How does it end?”

“Oh, well.” My face is burning as I think of the rest, and how Pwyll and Rhiannon’s romance only continues to echo Olaf’s own life. “They... they get married, but... well, it’s a long story, really.”

“We have time.”

I sigh. “I really shouldn’t have started telling her story. There’s a lot of woe and misery in it.”

“But there is resolution?”

“I... I suppose there is, yes.”

So, in a tentative tone, I go on with the story. How Pwyll and Rhiannon struggled for years to have an heir, only for the babe to be stolen from the crib. And how Rhiannon had to go through terrible punishment and calumny before her son was found again. He was a golden child, strong and fit as only the child of the fae can be; there could be no mistaking his parentage, so he

was returned to her by the peasantfolk who had reared him, thinking him an orphan.

“When she got him back, her first words upon holding her son again were, *what a relief from my anxiety, if it is truly him,*” I add. “And so her companions decided he should be named after those words – *pryder*, in Brittonic, means anxiety. And Rhiannon’s son is named Pryderi.”

Olaf wears a wistful kind of smile. “As a fae child, does Pryderi ever return to Annwn?”

“He does. He has a whole adventure there, when he’s grown to a man. He ventures into a fae fort and gets trapped there. And Rhiannon goes after him, and does everything in her power to save him from that fort, even if it’s at great risk to her own life...”

Olaf has taken on a strange focus as he listens. And then something changes in his whole demeanour as his eyes roam between the rafters.

“Does she indeed?” he mutters. “Does she indeed...”

He sits up, the mattress sinking under his weight. I look up at him, leaning back on one arm, his face intense as he stares at his desk. He is so sunk in his revelation that he barely affords me a glance.

“For the love of a son, one would do anything,” he mutters to himself.

“Yes, I suppose so,” I agree, heart thudding. “What is it, Olaf? What are you thinking about?”

“Would you help me to the desk?”

I frown at him, disappointed. “You want to work, now?”

He makes the request a second time, still calmly, but with a hint of command in it. So I help him, and he’s still wearing that intense concentration on his face as he leans over his parchments.

“Olaf,” I say, panting and a little irritated. “Are you going to tell me

what's going on?"

He gives a humourless laugh. "I think your Rhiannon may have given me my solution."

His flat tone sends a chill down my spine. After that, there is no return to lighthearted conversation; he writes and sketches like a man possessed. And I can only return to my own occupations, casting worried glances his way.

* * *

Evening comes. He's been aloof since morning, bent over his parchments all day long to apply whatever revelation he had. But he will not tell me what's on his mind, and I haven't had the heart to insist when my mind isn't on war tactics or politics at all.

All I can think of is that by tomorrow, the heat will no longer give us this excuse to be close. We won't sleep in an unselfconscious pile, holding one another close, everything forgiven and forgotten because of the moon.

Soon we will be separate again. Just as we were before.

When comes the time to sleep, I'm holding a stone of sorrow in my chest as I scoot back against him, facing away as ever. He wraps an arm around me, both of us buried in blankets and furs, my purr melding with his growl.

I want... I want to stay like this. With him. I want things to stay like this...

I know they can't.

I wonder if he feels the same as I do, when we're like this. Everything is hazy and soft and warm. The nest around us becomes the whole world. All else is inconsequential.

The heat is boiling in me, making me teary at the very idea of it. We share so much uncomplicated pleasure in this little space.

“Olaf,” I whisper.

“Yes, princess?”

“I love being here like this,” I manage. “With you.”

He breathes awhile, his arm crooked close around me. Some remaining lucidity nags at me, that it was the wrong thing to say, that we shouldn’t be admitting it out loud.

“Sorry,” I add. “Just ignore me.”

He runs his hand down my waist, and that simple caress – he rarely strokes me like that, other than to hold me in place – it’s enough to have me sighing and baring my neck for him.

“I know you’re waiting for me, princess,” he says. “A blind man could see it.”

No, no, no. Ah, God, why did I open my mouth?

“I don’t know how long it would take me to meet you where you’re standing,” he murmurs. “And I don’t know whether you’d still want me by then. I’m old enough to be your father.”

That makes my heart thud. “I can’t tell how old any of you are with your great big beards, anyway,” I tell him, and he affords me a rare laugh.

“The point still stands.”

I catch his giant’s hand, and he leaves it there for me to explore; the rugged pads of his fingers, the rough time-worn skin, the gleaming rings he wears. I don’t know how to tell him that it only makes him more attractive to me; all the experience he has, the gravitas of his years.

I can’t find the words. I just want him; I want him, I *want* him.

I press a kiss to his bruised knuckles. He lets me do it.

“I don’t care,” I whisper against his golden rings. “I’ll wait for you.”

The mindless swell of desire pushes out the words. When he says nothing I blink, realising what it is I allowed myself to say – God, what am I doing? I need to stop, *stop*, leave him alone.

He shifts closer, engulfing me in his body heat. Then he brushes back my hair, the tenderness of the gesture making me melt.

“Princess,” he whispers, and I can’t tell if his tone holds yearning or melancholy. I close my eyes, holding onto his hand as though to dear life as he looms, breathing on my bared neck.

He goes on, speaking low and private: “It is cruelty on my part. To make you wait. I never thought I would meet you like this, after so many years, at a time where I can only shy from you. You deserve better than this.”

It takes so much effort to lie still, because if I turn around – I can’t just grasp him, kiss him as hard as I want to.

“It isn’t cruelty,” I whisper. “It’s already a privilege to be in your company, Olaf. As long as I can have that privilege; as long as I can make you smile like you have these past few days; then that’s all that really matters to me.”

I try my best to believe those words as I say them. Damn the heat and all its demands – I want to know him, *really* know him. To have seen him and his little rituals this moon has only made me want to discover all his facets, talk with him deep into the night, draw that hard-earned laughter from him.

Surely a woman can love a man without laying hands on him. Regardless of all the base yearning of the heat – I would rather know him and never touch him, than not know him at all.

He still isn’t saying anything. I wipe the tears from my cheeks, turn my head a little, encouraging him to speak. Listen to him breathe slow and

steady, as though he were mulling over my words.

He leans closer until his lips hover over my neck. Goosebumps spread all over me to feel him there, on the cusp of a kiss. He nuzzles my hair, coaxing gently. As though he's encouraging me to twist around, pull him into me as I did that first night. But I won't, I won't, he's not ready, he doesn't want this – not really.

It's just this moon.

Then, lips just by my ear, he murmurs; "Rhiannon, oh Rhiannon... would you turn and show me your face?"

That he would say that – spin those words in my ear when I'm all raw with heat – I'm trying to blink back tears but it's not working. I wipe at my face, sniffing as I twist around, turning my face up to him. His silver eyes are hooded and so intense as he gazes down at my tear-strewn face.

He kisses my eyelids one after the other, surely tasting salt. I cling to his collar as he does it, breathless with the tenderness of the gesture.

When he draws back, his eyes drop to my mouth. He lets his gaze weigh there heavily.

"Olaf," I stammer. "I don't need you to do that. I promise you, I'm all right."

But he only cups my face with that large jewelled hand, rubs his thumb over my lower lip until I whimper. He sees straight through the lie, I know he does. Then he leans in, and there is no escaping the kiss he lays on me, the pure hunger of it. I let out a moan, a desperate, shameful noise as I grip onto him.

It is like ripping through restraint, every last barrier we had carefully erected to protect ourselves, to protect each other. My heat glows in my belly as I pull him closer, hook my leg around his waist, *saints*, to be allowed to do

this – have his good thigh caught snugly between mine, the length of his body so warm against me. He holds me in the sure, firm grasp of a patriarch; just like that first night, it says to me, *I have you. You're safe with me.*

It barely takes me a moment to break, his thigh pressing just where I need him, God, *God* – I bite back my moans, I can't let him hear, can't let him see just how deep this yearning runs.

But he listens; he knows. He holds me through it as I pant into his decorated collar, apologies spilling from my mouth, and he murmurs in my hair, *hush, pet, it's all right.*

It occurs to me then, dimly, in the window of clarity that climax brings. I may be in heat, but Olaf – Prince Olaf, the man who is always in control – he is prey to his rut. And he might not be so in control tonight.

When I look up, I find his pupils ringed with red corruption, stark as blood on snow. He's not just in rut – it's getting worse than that.

I have to stop this. Break it off before it goes any further than this.

“Olaf, please,” I bite out, bracing against his chest. “Stop. Stop.”

“This is what you want, isn't it?” he growls, his voice gravelly and distorted.

“I...” I don't need to say it; I'm wrapped all around him, aching, clinging.

“Then let me give you what you need.”

“No. Olaf, you aren't lucid.”

“Princess. It's the last night... the last time I can give you this.”

My brow furrows. He makes it sound so final. I want to say, *there will be other nights, we can wait*, but my throat is burning too much for words. So I shake my head, because one of us has to steer us through this night, though I want nothing more than to heed his command.

He kisses my forehead, and I can feel tears run down my cheeks as I

refuse him, refuse myself the indulgence.

“Unlace me,” he murmurs.

“No,” I insist, the word breaking from my lips. Then I throw all I can into my purr.

Stop. Calm down and sleep. Sleep now...

He can't help but moan as the purr travels through him, releasing all tensions, forcing him to relax his grip of me. Gradually his huge body grows limp against me as he surrenders to it. And the madness relinquishes us at last.

* * *

Chain curled around me, I sit by the hearthstone the next morning. The wash bucket is beside me; I'm wiping away his scent-mark from my mouth.

I don't want to clean off that mark. But it's such an intimate thing to have bestowed on me. And he'll regret going as far as we did last night, I know he will, when he wakes; we can't just pretend it didn't happen.

Once I'm done, I fill a cup of mead, place it on the hearthstone's uneven edge.

I wipe at my eyes, hating that I'm being such a weakling again. Crying for no reason. Guilt hammering away at my chest.

I touch the cup of mead. Try to imagine her; the ghost who lingers here with us. She prefers wine, I know that much. She is faceless in her furs and silver, the Lady of Dublin sitting in the shadows beyond the fire.

“Sorry,” I stammer, tapping a finger against the cup. “I'm sorry.”

I drag my knees up to my chest and stare at the reflections in the golden liquid. Perhaps I should drink too; doesn't seem polite to abstain. Drinking

with ghosts surely follows the same etiquette as with the living.

But I feel I've taken enough this moon.

* * *

“Tamsin.”

Olaf's deep voice rises from the nest. I bristle, wiping at my cheeks some more. I can't face him. I have no idea what to say.

I don't have the heart to act like everything's fine.

He moves until he's sitting on the edge of the bed. I hear him give a deep sigh. Turning, I find him rubbing the bridge of his nose, as though trying and failing to find what to say, too.

He eyes the cup, and I cringe at the idea that he might understand exactly why I placed it there.

“Come here,” he says. I shuffle over to him, chain clinking, until I'm kneeling at his feet. He lays that haunted look on me, then reaches to stroke my hair. I frown into the caress, fighting the instinct to nuzzle into him.

The moon has waned to its last quarter. I'd have no excuse.

He pulls me up until I'm perched on his good thigh, then wraps me in a hug. I blink as I let him; he never touches me like this in daylight.

“Olaf,” I mutter, throat tight. “It was me, my heat – I pulled you deeper into the rut –”

“It was entirely me,” he rumbles. “Do not shoulder any part of this.”

I stay in his warmth. He runs a hand over my tangled hair, soothes down my back. I wonder if that was the first true rut he let himself slip into, in the past year. If it was the first time he spent the moon with somebody in all that time.

He draws back enough to cradle my face in that giant's palm. Then he says something in Norse; a muttered phrase, all tenderness in its feather-soft consonants.

“Fyrirgefðu mér.”

I know that one. It's one of the first he taught me.

Forgive me.

I offer him a tremulous smile and try to remember the response.

“Ég fyrirgef ūér.”

I forgive you.

Chapter 43



IVAR

Last Quarter of August

Gods, my *head*.

I groan as sunlight shoves spearheads under my eyelids. I've got dirt in my mouth; dirt and blood and come.

Last feast night. Always a mess.

I drag myself up. I'm half-buried in a mass of men, all of us huddled close to the firepit. Instinctually I pat around for Thrain; then I remember he took the last watch so I might catch some sleep.

Something tells me he just wanted to get away from me. He wasn't very present tonight at all. I'd bite into his mating mark just to provoke him, irritated that his attention might be so divided. We spent a glorious moon together, just like old times; and then he went cold on me out of nowhere, on the last night we had to enjoy.

But I couldn't get him to spit out what was eating him.

I look around and find him a few steps away. He's sitting on an upturned bucket, looking about as fresh as a heated turd, scrubbing his eyes with both hands.

He must be exhausted. Neither of us got much sleep these past few days, between patrolling and fucking and supervision duties.

"Up for another round, brother?" I call at him as I stagger up from the snoring pile of men. He stares blearily my way over his fingers, then gives a groan that makes me laugh.

"You know, there comes a point when the fucking has to stop," he mutters. I snort as I lope up to him.

"Really? I wasn't aware this was an immutable law."

"Ivar, I promise you," he mutters in some obscure warning. But when I step behind him and squeeze his shoulders, he gives an involuntary groan of appreciation, leaning back into my grasp.

I knead his stiff muscles, then let my fingers glide through his tousled blond lengths, tucking them neatly down his back. We both shared more than just each other under this moon, of course. I know his concerns probably involve Tamsin somehow. Everyone was toasting the last day of the rut, eager for the restrictions to lift, so they might see Olaf and their Kátr-Ekkja again.

I would've thought Thrain would be similarly glad. But he's only troubled.

He appreciates the massage for a moment before twitching me off.

"If we fuck one more time my cock is going to fall off," he grumbles. "And you stink. For Odin's sake, put some clothes on."

I scoff at his foul mood. "I treat him like a prince for a whole moon and this is how he speaks to me," I sigh as I step away.

“Like a prince,” he echoes with a snort.

I’m grinning as I scope for my clothes. It’s true that I’ve not had many meetings with princes that involved them being on all fours in the dirt. But he can’t say I was not amiable and generous with him, too.

We can hear voices beyond, the men returning from the well with water to distribute. By the time they arrive and hand us a bucket, the others have begun to stir around us. I place the bucket between Thrain and I, wanting to make the most of the morning while it’s still quiet.

He splashes water in his face, rubs at his beard. I let my eyes drift down his impeccably crafted body as I wait for him to tell me what’s troubling him.

It’s always a little bittersweet, the first morning of normalcy after the moon has waned. There will be no more urgency to claw at one another now; only the drudgery of duty.

“Is it the morning sickness again?” I prompt him when he says nothing. It amused me to no end to see him stagger around in the mornings, prey to Tamsin’s pregnancy sickness. “Does the noble King of Dublin require me to pick strawberries for him?”

“Fuck off,” he says, but he’s wearing a grin. “No, the sickness hasn’t been so strong these past couple of days.”

“Good. But you’ve been tense all night, Thrain,” I insist. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing,” he mutters as he scrubs at his neck. “I’m just worried about her. What Gofraid’s final verdict will be for her.”

He glances at Angharad’s house. I wonder what it is he’s feeling through the pair-bond now. I have toyed with that link throughout this moon, trying to imagine what it’s like for her. To feel us as though in some insubstantial realm, touching through the bond.

Longing throbs in me. I've missed her this moon. To know that Thrain could be so intimately bound up in her own innermost feelings even while I was shut out by that damned door – it's been aggravating me to no end.

I pluck off the bandage I've been wearing over my forearm, inspect the bite mark there. The grooves of my own canines are still deep. I wash the wound carefully.

Thrain watches me. He's staring at that bite-mark; the one I inflicted on myself to keep from biting her.

My gut clenches to feel his eyes there. I half want to hide it from him.

"Have you spoken with her about it?" he asks quietly. "The biting."

The question flies at me out of nowhere, like a bird hitting a window. I stare at him, unable to do anything but scoff indignantly. He would just ask me that like this? Between scrubbing his balls and his armpits? *So are you ready for a life commitment?*

"No, Thrain, I haven't," I tell him. "Being that she's been chained in that tiny house for a whole moon, I've not had the opportunity, have I?"

I'm pleased with how flippant I sound when my stomach is flopping at the very idea of it.

He perseveres: "Have you thought about it?"

"Have you thought about minding your own bloody business?"

He grins at that, gives a sort of rolling shrug, pretending nonchalance. "Just thought I'd ask."

"Oh you did, did you," I rail at him. When I dip my rag again, I splash it more than necessary. "Besides, even if we had discussed it," I mutter, "she's not the only one I'd need to ask."

"What was that? You're muttering into your beard," Thrain says. My beard? I reach to feel my face, finding stubble there. Gods. I haven't even

groomed myself all moon.

“I said, I’d have to ask you too, wouldn’t I?” I snap at him.

He opens a hand. “Ask me, then.”

Heart thudding, I stare at him. “You really want to have this conversation now? While having a wash at the arse-crack of dawn?”

He just starts laughing. “Ask me, you idiot.”

“Fine! Would you be all right with it if I bit your fucking wife?”

“Yes! I would.”

“Grand! That’s perfect then.”

He shakes his head. I pretend mild annoyance while trying not to pass out from how fast my heart is beating.

“You keep saying *your wife* this, *your wife* that,” he tells me, straightening as he goes on washing. “But she’s her own woman, too. She’s still Tamsin, she has her own desires.”

Difficult to say whether the whir of fear and elation in me is particularly positive, but, when I look back at that little house I can feel it all settling into a smile.

“By the way, do you want some tallow? To shave that stubble off?” Thrain chucks me a little pot before I can even say anything. “It doesn’t suit you at all. And I doubt she’ll like it either.”

“Oh, well thank you very much for your input.” I glare at him as I unscrew the thing and slap tallow on my cheeks. “Where would I be without you to teach me all about courtship and seduction?”

He’s grinning as he comes to kneel in front of me, unsheathing a little dagger. “Come here,” he grunts, and he starts carefully shaving my jaw himself.

* * *

Father comes to our section of Dumbartonshire to inform us of his verdict regarding Tamsin's fate. Our Dublin pack rises, all of us groomed and armoured again, expectantly gathered around the baker's house.

Thrain and I venture to the front of the crowd while they all settle. Father nods at us. He's kept a vigilant eye on us all moon; I'll be glad when he withdraws his men from our territory.

"I have spoken with the Jarls," he intones.

Thrain bristles beside me. Father is speaking in Gaelic; it is for Tamsin's benefit, surely, so she may hear the verdict from inside the house.

"They have agreed," Father goes on, "that the princess is to remain confined and chained –"

Ah, Loki.

I glance at Thrain while protests rise; he looks pissed but unsurprised.

"*What!*" shout the men.

"Still? But the moon is past!"

Our Dubliners go on contesting, so Father raises his palm to quiet them. I gaze at him coolly, arms crossed.

I wonder how much of his decision was swayed by his own fear.

"– it would be for her own safety," Father goes on, louder than before. "Many of my warlords believe she deserves a much harsher punishment for what she did to Røkia and his pack. Many are afraid of her. I have decided that she will simply be chained in her nest, which you'll agree is a kindness on my part, when she's so eager to see my throat sliced open."

Mutters abound. Still he uses that passive voice when he mentions the incident with the seax.

Still he refuses to look at me when he speaks of it.

I can still recall it so vividly. The thudding of blood in my ears. Being hunched over his great bulk, that seax in my trembling grasp. The storm of anger and fear in my mind.

He pretends I only obeyed her command. He pretends there is no possibility that I might've enjoyed it, on some deep primal level, under the fear and heartache.

To stand over him.

“For how long will you want her chained?” Thrain asks, his words cutting sharp.

“For as long as we are here,” Gofraid replies. “I will trust you to keep her contained, as you have thus far.”

That sends up another volley of cries. Some are in Thrain's defense – *you would keep a man from his pregnant wife?* They speak of her as though she belonged to all of us, as though Gofraid were locking away the bride of an entire pack.

Tch. Most of these men are married. They should keep this devotion for their own damned wives. But their fervour is to be expected: all throughout the moon they have discussed what it was like to be under her command, picking apart the sensations, imagining what it might mean for the future to have such power in our midst.

“My decision is final,” Father booms. “You should be thankful. I am protecting her from the far more dire punishments my Jarls would like me to apply.” He turns to Thrain and I. “While she is chained, you may of course resume visiting the house as before.”

“What about Olaf?” calls Orm. “Is he better? Can we see him?”

“Yeah!” Several others join in. “Olaf! Olaf!”

“Olaf is still recovering!” I shout at these idiots. “Don’t make him walk out here –”

But they’re chanting it now, stamping their feet and shields on the ground. Father turns with a sigh. Upon his signal, the guards open the door to Angharad’s house, file inside. They appear a moment later with Olaf, who’s leaning heavily on a staff.

Freya, he’s still shaking. He looks well, but... it’s only been a week, I shouldn’t have expected anything better. Our Dubliners let out a cheer for their chieftain, and he raises a hand to greet them.

“Did she take good care of you, old man?” calls one youngster.

“You mind on your own damn business,” Olaf calls back, making the men laugh.

Tamsin does not show her face. The guards must’ve made her hold back, warned her not to step out.

Father makes a grand show of patting his son on the back and expostulating on how well he’s recovering. I hurry forward to help my brother stay upright. He leans on me heavily while Father addresses the men.

Freya. He smells so overwhelmingly of Tamsin.

“The moon is past,” Father calls. “Unless the Britons are waiting for us all to die of old age, I do believe they’ll resume their harassment. Be ready!”

“Aye, my King!” come the dutiful cries.

Father nods at us before turning to leave again. Over Olaf’s shoulder, I watch as Thrain strides to the house.

Tamsin’s there, just beyond the doorway.

The sight of her hits me straight in the gut, all my longing for her rising in

a wave. She's pale, nervous-looking. A furtive animal peeking out of its cage. But Olaf needs my help to stand, so Thrain steps inside to be reunited with her first.

Olaf stays upright for as long as he can while Dubliners come to greet him, pat his shoulder, inquire about his health. Eventually he turns to me and grunts, "Come. Back to the house. I need to speak with you all."

I throw a glance over my shoulder at Sigbrand, give him a significant nod. He knows to warn us if Father returns, or if any of his men approach.

Then I help Olaf back into the baker's house.

* * *

Gods, the scent in here. It smells like an animal's lair. I hiss as I bear Olaf's considerable weight through the threshold – he's barely holding himself up, now.

"Let's keep the door open, shall we?" I squeeze out. "Just so we can breathe."

Tamsin is wrapped in her husband's embrace – my words interrupt them quite rudely. But she looks concerned and dutiful as she turns toward me. She rushes to help me with my brother, her chain clinking after her.

I can't help but glance at her over Olaf's head as we help him sit on the edge of the bed. She's just wearing a shift and shawl, her braid messy. And this *nest*...

The little darling pulled in some of my leathers and clothes, as well as Thrain's.

What utter ignominy to have been kept from her all moon. Just the sight of her sends my blood thudding to my groin. That chain clinking after her...

it's rousing ideas that probably have nothing to do with what Olaf wants to talk about.

"All right," I say as I skirt around Olaf to meet her. "You and Thrain get on with it. Tamsin and I will be in her nest."

"Ivar –" Tamsin protests with a smile. But I catch her by the braid, kiss her hard, pressing her back against the cluttered bed. Olaf calls for me to behave, but I've toppled her into the clutter, making her squeal as I plant a knee beside her and lean down to claim her mouth for myself.

"Ivar," she sighs. "Oh don't, the bed's all sweaty –"

"Don't care. Smells like you."

She hums, flushing pink. "I missed you."

I will never admit how those quiet words lift my heart.

"I missed you too, lamb," I tell her, grinning. "Would've much rather been here in this nest of yours than out there in the dirt."

"That would've been nice," she agrees, still smiling up to her ears.

Thrain grabs me by my collar, tugs me up again. "Would you stop molesting my wife at every waking moment?"

She laughs and sits up like she wants nothing more than for us to stay in this clutter with her. But Thrain pulls me away – we're jostling Olaf, and that won't do.

We all settle down, Olaf looking serious as ever, though the sight of Tamsin's smile seems to be summoning one to his own lips.

"Can we speak now?" he asks. "Are you all finished?"

"Go on. Spoil the morning for us," I tell him. "It's been a while since we had that pleasure."

Olaf lays a deadpan look on me. Then he looks to Tamsin, softening as their eyes meet.

“Now that the moon has waned, we’re free to return to our plans,” he says. “You still have the message Eormen left us? Her plea for reinforcements?”

She perks up, glances at the mess of the house. Then she rushes to her coffers and takes out the little roll of parchment. We all stare at the wax-sealed roll as she sits with it in her lap.

“We need to get that message to the Briton King,” Olaf says. “And... I’ve been thinking... it is not the only thing we can bring to him, if we’re to help him gain a more significant advantage.”

I scoff. “You spent the moon in a Vanirdottir’s nest, and still you spent your time plotting and scheming?”

Olaf heaves a sigh. “One of us has to keep his head on his shoulders,” he rumbles.

I glance at Tamsin. “This beautiful nest is wasted on him,” I tell her. “I’ll keep you company, next moon.”

“Oy,” Thrain grunts at me while Tamsin throws me a bashful grin.

Olaf takes the parchment from Tamsin. It’s funny to see how casual they are around one another. They’re used to this closeness now. I’ll have to get it out of one of them – what really happened in here.

“Look,” Olaf deadpans. “We’ve been operating on the day-to-day. Moving in the shadows, remaining discreet. When all this while, we have been diligently ignoring the one issue that’s staring us in the face.”

I lift my chin, observing him quietly. His tone is dreadfully serious, now.

“That issue is Father,” Olaf says in a gravelly voice. “I cannot move against him. Not directly. And you have all been very patient with me, Tamsin most of all. We have faced staggering losses, and made many

compromises, just because I cannot stomach the idea of cutting his time short and taking his crown myself –”

“Olaf,” I say, mouth dry, but he stops me.

“I’m not finished,” he says, hand up again. “I know we’ve all been thinking about it. And I also know... that I can turn this weakness of mine – this bond with Father – into a strength.”

I frown at him in alarm. What is he talking about?

“Thanks to Tamsin’s craze,” he goes on, “Father was forced to entertain the idea of folding up this siege and retreating. He just needs one last push; an even stronger push. I’m certain of it. And I know how to push him.”

“How?” I ask him warily.

“With the right leverage.”

We sit in silence a moment, waiting for him to reveal whatever has been twisted up in his throat.

He looks between us gravely. “You’re going to fight me on this,” he says. “But I urge you to see the reality of the situation. I am bedridden; I’m useless to everyone like this. You both bear the burden of our mission, now. I no longer have any true value in this war effort –”

“Don’t speak like that,” Tamsin interrupts him. She’s looking at him with a dark, concerned expression. “*Value?* Of course you have value.”

They share a long gaze, until the steel in Olaf’s expression has melted away.

“I speak pragmatically, princess,” he says gently. “I’m a burden. I burn resources whilst being unable to give anything back.”

“That’s not fair. You’re wounded,” Tamsin protests. “Would you say all your own wounded men no longer have *value* either?”

“As warriors, no,” Olaf says. “You are thinking emotionally, you defend

their intrinsic value. I'm thinking of what they can do on the battlefield. When a man is wounded, he becomes an expense rather than an asset."

"It's not like they can help it," Tamsin says thinly.

"It's war, princess," Olaf tells her. "No place for mincing words nor speaking kindly. It is just the truth; the wounded are deadweight."

I'm glad she puts a voice to it. This direction he's taking... I don't like it at all.

"You can still use me, however," he goes on. This time he stares straight at me. There's such intensity in those silver eyes; the deep grey of storm clouds.

My gut tightens as I wait for it.

"When we deliver Eormen's message to the fort, I will give myself up as a hostage to the Briton King," Olaf intones. "That way we can make an ultimatum. Father will have to leave with his army if he wants me back."

... give him up as a hostage? *Give him up* to the Britons?

No. He can't be serious.

Thrain is speaking; so is Tamsin, a tangle of words I don't hear.

Fury claws up my spine as I stare down my elder brother. He does not spare a glance to either Thrain nor Tamsin; he holds my gaze, as though we had clashed swords, grinding steel.

He is. He's serious. He's decided on this. I know that look; he's been mulling this over, and he's already decided to go ahead with it. He's only telling us so he can have us do his bidding.

That is the way he has always operated. He forms the plan; we execute.

"Shut up," I hiss at him. The others take it to mean them – they quiet down, linger on the outskirts of our clash. "There's no way we're throwing you into that fort."

“Think,” Olaf urges me, impatience creeping in now. “Think, little brother. Eormen and Arlyn’s management of their army is rickety at best. We need certainty. It is the surest option we have –”

“Piss on your *certainty!*” I snap. “The Briton King despises us. Arlyn’s attitude is only proof of how little they care for the health of their Viking allies. What do you think their king would do with you? Take care to give you a comfortable cell?”

“Lower your voice,” Thrain urges us, but I growl at him, heart thudding.

No. No, no, no. We had it all in hand, Thrain and Tamsin and I, while Olaf was down. Under this chaotic moon, we came together, we helped Tamsin step into her own power. We were on the right path, I was so sure of it.

He can’t just do this. Take the role of unshakable patriarch, as he always does; take it upon himself to put everything right.

“Ivar is right,” comes Tamsin’s voice. We turn to her; she’s wearing that same intense expression as she fixes Olaf. “My family... they view you as little more than animals. Even if my uncle accepts to collaborate with you, he would only see it as necessity. If you give yourself to them, I know they wouldn’t spare you any quarter.”

My breath is coming short as I watch her. She sits there, leaning forward, urging him with her shining eyes, her white-knuckled hands, her whole posture.

He only gazes back at her. “I know,” he tells her, and there is no steel in his voice when he speaks to her; only a quiet pleading to be heard. “I know, princess. But they cannot kill me as long as they wish to have leverage against my father.”

“Olaf, please,” she insists. “I’ve been in those dungeons. It’s no place for

a wounded man to recover. You need care, you need to rest, you...”

“I need to make myself useful. To you and your kinswomen,” Olaf grits out. “We are here because of my mistakes, my inaction. This is the only sure way to fix everything.”

“Olaf,” she says again, a croaky protest.

“We aren’t having this conversation,” I growl at Olaf. “Because we’re not doing this. Thrain and I won’t help you. As you’ve said yourself, you’re deadweight. You can’t even walk. So you aren’t going anywhere.”

Olaf turns to steel and indignity again. “You will think on it. And then you will do it. Because you know I’m right. You know Father will take his ships and leave as soon as he catches wind of my disappearance.”

“*Fuck you!*” I snap at him. “We aren’t your fucking lapdogs, we won’t follow your every brainless command –”

Thrain has a hand on my belt, holding me back; I barely notice it, I want to pounce at my brother, shake the madness from his head.

“Bark at me all you want,” Olaf grumbles. “You know I’m right.”

“I almost lost you once already,” I seethe at him. “You can’t expect me to pluck you from your sickbed and throw you in their dungeon –”

“Ivar,” Thrain warns again; he’s standing now, facing me, a fist in my chainmail as he holds me back. “Lower your voice.”

I pant against him, glaring at my elder brother over his shoulder.

Olaf. Always steadfast. Always in control.

Always the rational, objective one.

I know he’s right, I know it’s a sound plan, it would be a sound plan if it involved anyone but *him* –

“We found them, little brother,” he says, and the way he looks at me pulls me in, so that everything else disappears. “We found the Vanirdøtur. We

pledged to find them, and Freya delivered them into our hands. Now it is our responsibility to protect them, in any way we can.”

Little brother. I hate it; I hate when he calls me that, harkens back to the fragile little creature I used to be.

The one that’s powerless to stand in his way.

I push away from Thrain, turn around, raking my hands over my hair. I want to march out of here, lock the door after me, and not spare a single thought to this plan any more.

“I’m with Ivar,” Thrain growls. “What do you hope will happen, once the Briton King has you? You have no guarantee that he will deliver you back to us, once the siege has been lifted.”

“The objective is for the Vanirdøtur to have their sanctuary back,” Olaf says. “If Father lifts the siege, then the Britons will only have Causantin to deal with. As they have Uradech’s support, they’ll defeat him easily. And our mission here will be a success.”

“Oh, and your survival is just a detail, is it?” I snap.

He throws me a dark look and says, “The objective has never been for us to survive at any cost.”

I can only scoff. He says these dramatic things in that detestably passive voice. *Gods*, I have never hated him as much as I do now.

“Maybe not for you,” I hiss at him. “But I think the rest of us would take issue with that.”

But Olaf isn’t paying attention to me any more. He’s fixed on Tamsin now, looking grave. She’s curled her arm against her chest in a defensive posture, as though she’s trying to ward away the pain he’s causing her.

Something unknowable passes between them. For all of Olaf’s posturing, in front of her he cannot throw up his dominance quite as firmly. In fact he

almost looks ashamed.

“How could you say that?” she murmurs. “Of course the objective is for you to survive, too.”

He lets out a breath, casts around for an answer.

“Tamsin,” he says at last, and leans forward as though to speak. But she gets up, a hand over her mouth, and drifts to the hemp sheet that divides the room. “Tamsin, wait,” Olaf calls after her. “Tamsin –”

But she’s slipped behind it. I can smell salt and distress on the air.

The look that Thrain gives my elder brother is one I’ve never seen before. Pure disappointment. Then he turns his back on Olaf and surges after his wife.

“Talk some sense into him,” he grunts as he passes me.

It’s just my brother and I, now.

We aren’t really alone. But to be hunched together like this, it brings back memories of when we were both young men, mapping out the next location to scout, the next lead that would bring us to the Vanirdøtur.

Now that we’re here, this whole situation is so much bigger than us. That’s what he’s telling me. This discovery is much bigger than our own fever dreams, the stupid boyish plans we had to find and conquer.

Olaf stares at me as ever, not needing any words to let his intention weigh upon me.

I sit on the edge of the bed, rub my face tiredly.

“It used to be me,” I tell him in Norse. “I used to be the one with stupid self-destructive impulses.”

“This is not an impulse,” Olaf counters. “Nor is it self-destructive.”

“Oh, is it not?” I rail at him. “Do you think I can’t see straight through you? It’s easy for you to suggest this, Olaf. It’s win-win for you. You

sacrifice yourself; the Vanirdøtur stay safe, and you can return to Vírún and Nóri.”

That leaves him rattled. He seems too indignant to speak, but he manages to say, “You really think this is easy for me?”

“Yes. I do,” I throw at him. “It’s easy to be a martyr when you already have one foot in the grave.”

“That isn’t –”

“Don’t even try to deny it,” I snap, and I can feel the irritation rolling off him.

“Ivar. This is a strategic decision. This is how I can make the most of my position. Death is not such a certain outcome as you’re making it out to be –”

I scoff. “If Tamsin says it is, I believe her. You know how her people treat their own cursed boys. They are ruthless.”

He shakes his head. Silence falls then between us, and I grapple with the panic that is tearing through me, making me giddy and light-headed.

“Olaf,” I grit out. I’m staring down at his clenched fist as I mutter, “I can’t... the Dublin pack can’t lose you.”

“I told you, that is far from a certainty,” he says. “But whatever happens, you’re more than ready to handle them.”

That only makes me want to laugh. “I’m not so sure about that –”

“Of course you are,” he insists. “You’re strong and capable. You think I haven’t watched you grow over the years?”

“Shut up,” I snap. “Don’t talk like that.”

He leans forward in a rustling of hay. Takes me by the shoulder, knocks his forehead against my temple.

“You’re a good, strong man now, little brother,” he mutters. “I know you don’t believe it, but you have it in you to be a good leader. A far better leader

than me, in fact, if you just applied a little more discipline.”

I choke out a laugh despite myself. There’s that burning in my throat, and I hate to have him so close, because now I can’t hide how terrifying this entire prospect is.

“You can do all of this without me,” he says, and I want to smack him.

“No I can’t,” I hiss at him.

“Yes. You can.”

I’ve been grappling with it while he was unconscious and now bedridden. What it would be like to carry on without him.

I don’t want that. I don’t want to even consider it. That he would *choose* that option for us when I’ve been fighting it all this while – it makes me want to rage at him.

He presses a kiss to my temple, squeezing my shoulder roughly.

“Death is not a certainty; it’s a risk,” he says. “A risk that is well worth taking in this case. You know that. I know you understand that, Ivar.”

Fuck you, I want to snap at him. Fuck you for suggesting this, for expecting me to listen, for making me consider it.

Because I know he’s right, I know his plan would work without a shadow of a doubt, and I *hate* him for it.

I push away from him, stride to the door.

“It’ll take preparation,” he calls after me. “Speak to the men. We’ll need to plan a skirmish...”

“You need to shut up,” I bark at him, before leaving.

Chapter 44



IVAR

Last Quarter of August

Thrain unchains Tamsin and walks her out. Nobody stops him; if anything, the Dubliners are glad to see him thwart Father's authority. I glance at them as I go to the firepit, where many of our Dubliners are gathered. Thrain is standing by the horse pen, his arm around her. Her shoulders shake as she cries; so she turns to him, as she always has, for comfort.

A tug in my chest tells me to join them. But something holds me back; I stand there, grinding my teeth, empty hands fidgeting along the line of my belt.

"Jarl?" the men ask me, approaching warily. "What is it? What did Olaf want?"

"Give me a moment," I say, waving them away.

I pace between the houses, trying to shake out the agitation. We're at an impasse again – a knot in our threads, a moment I need to unravel. Why is it

that I feel like we are all pushing against one another, pushing, pushing – and something needs to give?

I've been holding onto them so tight. Thrain, and her, and my brother. Especially my brother. Gods, the things we've done for him, the taboos I've broken, the magic I've braved. And now he would scorn all my efforts.

He would turn around, pry his way back out of my grasping fingers. And walk straight-backed into Hel without another word.

Odin hear me, why is he making this so difficult? We're back to where we were a few weeks ago, when he was sweating and unconscious, and everything was in the air. Our pack, our hierarchy; my place in all this, in Father's legacy, in the Dublin pack, and in Tamsin's life.

Back then I decided to close my hands around what I held dear. To hold on. And we made it through.

But the threads are pulling apart again... the Norns lifting bony fingers as they tug Olaf toward his fate. Perhaps this braid we made of our lives was never tightly wound enough.

Perhaps one of us was always meant to leave. And all our struggling is just delaying the inevitable.

I look at that house where Olaf lies, and I can hear them – I can practically *see* them. Those three crones, their long white hair glowing like moonlight as they lean over him and whisper in his ear. I might've wrestled Olaf from their bony grip once, but they will not stop until they have him. I imagine them turning those wrinkled faces and smiling at me, laughing that old woman's laugh, the sound of the all-knowing.

Child... child...

Don't you know it's futile to fight it?

Your fate is sealed. You must resign yourself to suffer each loss as it

arrives.

I suck in a breath, fingers digging into the small black pouch that's tied at my hip. And I stride away to the forest, to the darkness of the canopy. I find a flat stump – I sit by it, pouch held in my shaking hand.

It's a little black hemp satchel. Inside are my mother's runes, old wooden chips she fashioned herself when her hands were still steady.

I upturn it, let the runes scatter. My palm comes down to steady them, and I arrange them face-down, in the shape she showed me. An oval, like a longboat. And one chip in the middle, the lonely traveler.

I shouldn't do this. My palms are sweating as I move them around. But Tamsin and I have already broken through this taboo – she's given me permission, in a way, as a daughter of Freya – so why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I attempt *seiðr*, if it's just in its most simplistic form?

My mother made a game of this to better teach me the runes and their meanings. And while an experienced *seiðmaðr* could find deeper significance by reading the runes like this, I have never known enough to delve so deep myself.

Freya, let me find significance now. Let me catch just a glimpse – just a *glimpse* – of what I need to do, where we're going from here.

I hold my breath and turn the little bits of ash wood over. One after the other. The stark burnt lines cut into my eyes as I recite the runes under my breath. But all I see are letters, letters and vague meanings. Othala, the rune for *home*, the symbol of one man's place in the world, it's upside-down; but it is right there beside Naudiz, a complex rune of attachment and trust.

My brow furrows. I don't know how to interpret any of this.

A sharp caw breaks through my concentration, makes me lift my head. There are two fat ravens sitting on a branch overhead, tilting their beaks this

way and that as they observe me.

Caw, caw. It's like they're laughing – laughing at my sheer incompetence as I try to wrestle for control, for *some* kind of direction. I concentrate on the runes again, but that brittle laughter only fills my ears.

Child... child...

You know this is futile.

Gritting my teeth, I let my hand run through the ship, breaking it apart as the runes scatter.

* * *

Thrain has rallied the men by the time I return. They all wear long faces as they mull over what Thrain has told them of Olaf's decision. I sit with them with a sigh.

Tamsin is still in the horse pen while we talk. She's keeping Alsvithr company. The afternoon sun gleams on her as she casts him out to trot in circles around her, so she might exercise him. He snorts down his nostrils at her, dominant and asinine as always. They respond to each other's cues until he's offering her beautifully cadenced gaits, and she smiles in appreciation.

I let my eyes rest on her while our makeshift council debates over what to do. The slanting afternoon light gives her such a glow as she turns on herself, spinning slowly, keeping her shoulder aligned with Alsvithr's hindquarters as she drives him.

“The fact is that the Britons would keep him alive,” Sigbrand argues. “As a hostage, Olaf would be far too valuable for them to harm him. I think it's a sound plan...”

The fact is, I want to snarl at him, you can't know that for certain.

But many of our Dubliners agree with Sigbrand. Thrain casts glances at me, looking confused that I'm not pushing back as hard as he expects. He is the one who repeats the dangers, the fact that Olaf is weak, that it would be risky. But in offering himself up, Olaf would be saving many lives, saving us from a potentially long and bloody siege... and Thrain and I are here to hold together his warband, his township of Dublin, his legacy.

The discussion endures into the evening. While we crouch over dinner, I'm not the only one who leans out of the conversation from time to time to stare at Tamsin, who's giving Alsvithr a post-exertion brush down.

It's soothing to watch her. Like this, I can mull over the question of Olaf's ludicrous martyrdom with a cooler head. And one thing is clearer than ever as I stare at her molten figure turning in the sunlight.

It's for her. Everything we do. It's for her and all her kind.

I understand Olaf's impulse as I watch her. If such a simple solution could really save her and her kind...

Wouldn't I do the same?

It comes to me just as surely as Olaf's decision must've appeared to him. As clear and stark as the lines of the Othala rune turned upside-down. I know exactly what must come next as I watch her.

Thrain heaves a sigh and concludes the discussion.

"It's settled, then," he says. "Tomorrow morning, we'll stage an attack and spirit Olaf away on horseback. And we will smuggle him through the fort's outer wall, with Princess Tamsin's help. All agreed?"

"Aye," say the elders, though they still wear their long faces.

He calls Tamsin to us, so she might sit and point to the places on the map where the secret passageways lead into the fort. There are two; the one we have already used, just by the Leven Port, which is a dark narrow stairway in

the rock. And another that is large enough for horses, whose entrance is further away in the forests. That one would be impossible to access discreetly unless the camp emptied out, so we opt for the Leven Port passageway; it will be easy to lose ourselves in the tumult of spooked warbands who are readying to leave.

Thrain looks at me, frowning. Still expecting me to push back just as violently as I did against Olaf himself.

“That’s it, then,” I say instead. “We have our plan.” And he stares, not trusting the coolness of my words.

Giving the Britons a Viking prince as hostage is a good plan, a sound plan. One that guarantees results.

Except Olaf is not the one who will give himself up.

I let out a shaky breath as the men start getting up. It’s strange, how easy it is to come to this decision. But then, I’m used to turning away and leaving. As ever, it will be to everyone’s benefit.

If I go, then perhaps I can keep them all safe.

We order our men to their different posts, and our little council disbands. Thrain comes to me, clasps a hand over my shoulder.

“You all right?” he asks. I nod in response, and though he doesn’t look convinced, he knows better than to push me. “Will you take the first perimetre watch, then? I’ll take Tamsin in and tell Olaf we’re doing it.”

I gaze up at him. If I take Olaf’s place – then this is the last time I’ll see Thrain. Potentially for a very long time. My chest clenches as I take in the handsome lines of his face, the trust in his gaze.

“Let’s do that, then,” I tell him. “Go on. I’ll take care of everything.”

He squeezes my shoulder, this brother of mine, this man with whom I’ve shared far more than I would ever have expected. He recognises that there is

some turmoil in me; he leans in and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

I take his favour wordlessly. Something crackles through me as I let him stray as close as this.

Always barbed words and teasing between us. Masculine pride brushing like the screech of chainmail. But he has such softness to him that I have never enjoyed nor encouraged. Not properly.

Not as I should have.

Always this, before the end: should have, should have.

Then he turns and I watch him leave, trying to believe that surely this is not the last time I stare at that broad frame, and the way the sunlight slips down the fall of his hair.

My brother. My dearest friend. So quick to trust my word.

He should know better. I almost want him to fight me, to turn and properly acknowledge that gut feeling he has, that something isn't right.

But I keep my mouth shut, my resolve firm. And he does not turn back.

* * *

Darkness falls upon our camp before long. When I get back from my watch, our Dubliners are settling in for the night, discreetly making preparations.

I venture inside Angharad's house. Olaf's snoring in bed, turned towards Tamsin; she's curled up beside him, one of his great paws clutched against her, a sign of reconciliation. I sit beside her, tuck the furs closer around her. She's frowning, her body curled in a tight ball.

I stare at her a moment. To leave Thrain behind is different; with every battle we have fought together, I have always wrestled with the notion of sudden separation, that Odin may call upon one of us before the other. It is

not an unfamiliar pain to consider now, that we may separate until we meet again in another realm.

But her...

To have tasted such closeness with my Vanirdottir, only to turn away from her again? Perhaps for good?

It sits bitterly in my gut. It's strange; I have always been the one to leave my partners. But this time, this time... I find myself with that dagger of hurt pointed at my own gut, the childish yearn to clutch onto the other person blooming stark red and urgent in me.

I run my hand down her cheek, along the velvet of her arm, and she stirs with a little moan. Surely this is how it should be. To leave her. She could never have really been mine, anyway. It would've been too good to be true.

That is what I tell myself, trying desperately to believe it as I gaze at her. Words drift back from ages past... a belief I never quite shook away.

A bastard dare not dream so high.

I venture to her belt, the pouches that dangle from it. Eormen's rolled parchment is easy to find. I take it, wedge it in my own belt. She's turned to me, but she gives no indication of having noticed.

I stand over Olaf as he lies recumbent and snoring softly in bed. The night has deepened; it's quiet now, a moment that calls to hold one's breath. I reach down, card my fingers through his cropped white hair. He had hair almost as long as Thrain's for so many years; it's still strange sometimes, to contemplate him with this shorn style.

I gaze down at this brother of mine for as long as I dare. One last look before I go.

No. It won't be the last time I see him. I won't let the Britons do just what they want with me. It is not a death sentence, this mission; death is just a risk.

Like he said. Just a risk.

Still. If it comes down to that, I have already taken metal to the gut for this man. I would do it again gladly.

Better me than him.

I fan out the four jewelled braids that fall down my back, coil one around my hand. Lift my seax to sever it at the root.

Then I wind it around Olaf's hand, silver jewels and all.

That way he'll know to be pissed at me when he wakes.

I stride to the door, throat tight, eyes hot as I try not to turn around. If I turn around now I know I will not find the courage again to leave the both of them here.

Everything is in place so that I might slip away, unseen, into the night.

* * *

I'm only a few paces from the house when a voice rises at my back.

"No, don't. Please don't."

The words are a whisper, shivering down my body like a command. I turn, find Tamsin at the doorway. She's staring at me, and there is terrible understanding in her eye.

She saw. She watched. She was not asleep at all.

I lift a finger to my mouth, hushing her. As though she'd accept to quietly let me leave. She rushes up to me and I clutch her by the arm to stop her, squeezing her hard.

She hisses it again, *you can't, don't do this*, so I pull her further out to the horse pen, where our voices will be better muffled.

"Quiet," I tell her.

“You’re going, aren’t you?” she whispers. There’s a shine in her eyes. “You’re going in his stead.”

“I can’t let him give himself up,” I tell her. “I’m in far better shape than he is. I’m the better candidate.”

Her expression is crumpling again, that earlier wounded look she laid on Olaf now directed at me. I try to bear through it, gritting my teeth.

“You don’t even know how to find the Leven Port passageway,” she whispers. “I was meant to guide you all tomorrow.”

I cock an eyebrow at her. “You as good as told us how to find it. The spirals etched in the stone –”

“It isn’t easy to find. Especially in the dark.”

“Well, you could always give me more directions.”

“No. I’m not telling you anything. You’re staying – you’re staying right here.”

“Oh, is that right?” Impatience and fear pound through my veins. I have to make her see. “Then Olaf will be delivered to the fort, come the morning. And the Britons will throw a bloodless cripple who can’t even defend himself down in their dungeons –”

“Stop it,” she says, breathless. “Just – would you stop it, please?”

I watch her silently, hating that I must hurt her when she’s already distressed. She’s huddling there, staring at me so imploringly.

“I can find the passageway myself,” I insist. “You can’t stop this from happening, lamb.”

She shakes her head. I can’t rip my gaze away from her, the anger brimming from her.

“You know why I have to do this,” I urge her. “You understand. I know you do.”

“I understand that you and Olaf will do whatever it is you’ve set your mind to,” she grits out. “However it might affect everyone else.”

That clinches my guts. “Tamsin –”

“If you’re going, then I’m coming with you,” she says. “I’ll show you the passageway. And I’ll vouch for you.”

I stare at her. There are so many things I could say to her to deter her.

Thrain will never forgive me if I accept to take you along. And secondly, who knows what your own people will do to you once they see your mating mark?

It all seems too cruel. Especially when she is standing there for *me*, braving the night for me. My Vanirdottir, rushing after me to keep me safe.

She is a beacon of fury, glaring at me as though she wanted to murder me rather than protect me. And I can’t do otherwise than take it for the declaration it is.

I run a finger along her jaw. She stumbles in her anger, and that flash of vulnerability, that *need* I see in her eyes – it undoes me. I lean in, nick her lower lip with my teeth, draw a delicious noise from her.

“I know full well that you can be an unstoppable force,” I tell her. “But the moon is gone now. I am at full liberty to throw you over my shoulder and carry you back to bed.”

“Oh? Well then I’ll wake Olaf and tell him exactly what you’re planning to do. And he won’t let you go.”

I shake my head at her. “You’re really intent on cornering me tonight, aren’t you.”

“You’re my chosen pack,” she snaps. “Mine. Do you know what that means? It means I get to make the decisions, too. Even if none of you will let me.”

The words rob me of my voice. She balls her hands in my own cloak, her breath hot against me.

“Let me protect you, damn you,” she whispers. “Let me vouch for you. They only know your name in there; what scant few allies we have don’t really know you. You need me to vouch for you.”

Gods, I wish I could appreciate this properly. Her loyalty is scorching me raw.

Still, I try to resist: “I doubt they’ll show me mercy just because you ask them nicely.”

“We won’t know until we try,” she hisses. “Come on. If we’re going now then we shouldn’t linger.”

She takes me by the wrist, turns and drags me a few paces after her. I can’t help but smile at her brashness, how she’s taking a leaf from Thrain’s book and trying this dominance upon me.

It’s easy as anything, physically, to pull her arm back, to lift her. Though she weighs nothing to me, still the act is difficult, as though I were pulling up the weight of her devotion, all that gold she offered me that I must refuse.

I chuck her over my shoulder, clamp an arm around her waist.

“No,” she wheezes, making fists in my tunic as I stride down the beaten earth road “*No, Ivar – put me down –*”

“If you come with me and we make it out alive, then Thrain will murder me all over again for ever putting you in danger.”

“Stop it – put me down right now!”

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“I know,” she huffs. “I know. Thrain will be angry. He’ll be angry at us both. But I don’t care, I can’t – I can’t – Ivar, for God’s *sake!*”

She’s being too loud, wriggling now like a wildcat, digging in her nails,

scraping at my neck and face.

“Let go of me, let *go* –”

If she’s any louder she might wake Olaf. Already those few Dubliners who patrol the roads have turned their heads, some laughing at our antics, taking it to be a lover’s spat. I let her down again by the door to Angharad’s house and she grips me close, glaring up at me. Her tousled hair is strewn over her face, her eyes full of moonlight. I let her hold me, enrapt by her furious expression.

“You’re all idiots,” she hisses. “All three of you. You’re trying to be noble but all you’re doing is risking your lives – being so *stupid* –”

Her voice is catching on her words, threatening tears.

“I don’t want to lose you,” she breathes. “Please. I don’t want to lose any of you. Don’t you dare leave me here, don’t go without me – don’t go –”

Gods, I can’t stand to hear the hurt in her voice.

I kiss her full on the mouth. She rises into the kiss, whimpers softly. It is a cold, uncomfortable embrace – the door is rugged and hard against her back as I lean into her, let her consume me.

Mine, she said, with so much righteousness in her tone.

She has me so completely.

“Please,” she says, wedging the word between kisses, as though threading petals between my lips. I bite her, lose myself in the kiss, hungry for her as she opens her mouth for me.

Do you know what you’re doing to me? I want to growl the words against her, sink them into her skin with my teeth. *Do you even know what I wouldn’t do for you?*

Right now, like this, there is no more hesitation in my mind. I clutch her, claws digging into her arms, breathing against her neck before I bite her

there. Her spine arches against rugged wood, snug between the door and the solid wall of my body.

“When the full moon returns,” I growl, “I will place my bite on you. Right here.”

She takes a trembling breath. “Ivar...”

“Tell me,” I insist. “Tell me the same, if you would have it so.”

She cups my neck, nudges her lips to mine. “When the full moon returns,” she whispers, “I will place my bite on you.”

So it is sealed.

I stroke down the Yggdrasil pendant she wears. And there, the red ribbon she’s woven into her hair, a thin braid behind her ear; she wears them both, Thrain and Uradech’s favours. A spark of possessiveness makes me reach for my belt, searching for something she can keep, something she can hold onto when she thinks of me. I find my pouch of runes; I untie it and slip the long braided drawstrings around her neck.

Wordlessly she touches it where it rests against her bosom. I chuck a thumb under her chin and manage to smile.

“Keep that safe for me,” I tell her. “I’ll be wanting it back.”

Then I reach around her, open the door and fairly push her inside. She staggers within, the moonlight catching on those wide, frightened eyes. I wait for her to wake Olaf, but she only stands there, holding onto that black pouch, distraught.

She will not wake him. After a spell of indecision, she must realise that she only has one viable option.

She has to let me go.

I turn away from her while I still can, jaw clamped tight as I make for the trees.

* * *

I stride through the dark forests for a while, my senses strained, eyes flickering all around me. Life-long practice has made my footsteps light and discreet as a fox.

A scent tickles my nose as I navigate through the thick humid waft of rotting leaves and rain-damp moss. Prickles on the back of my neck tell me I'm not alone.

I stop many times, listening for the sound of a pursuer. But the nocturnal forest delivers no obvious evidence of one; only the caws and croaking of night creatures, and the bustle of the siege camp just beyond the trees, Viking watchers patrolling and drinking around their bright firepits.

When I get to the tree line near the docks, that prickling feeling has not left. But I don't have the time to tarry and make sure. There is a whole warband at the docks, arguing loudly with those men that guard the parked longboats. Last we came by here, the docks weren't so densely occupied; I must find a way to reach the cliff undetected.

Thankfully everyone seems too occupied by the altercation. Even the nearest patrol boats are pulling in to see what's going on. So I slip down the dark beach, finding refuge in the maze of lichen-covered boulders soon enough.

The night is warm and windless, making my hands clammy as I walk among the rocks. The mission drives me, now. There's no time to keep glancing over my shoulder.

It's taking me too long to find the passageway. There must be some trick, some rock to roll away, some crevice to uncover. Stars turn overhead and still

I tarry, breathing faster as my feet squelch across damp sand.

And then I see him.

A figure wrapped in a dark cloak. Standing by one of the high lichen-covered rocks lining the riverbank. He turns, moonlight shining on the tabard he wears, the wolfsbane flower and its purple bells.

A Cavalier.

My pulse races. I let a hand fall to my sword hilt. But he doesn't make any move to attack or sound an alarm; he only observes me. Waiting for me to approach.

I step furtively to meet him. He turns, opens an arm, his cloak swelling out as he does so. A signal to follow as he leads me on.

How could they have been expecting me? Or perhaps they saw me approach from some observation point? But I made myself invisible; and the night is so dark.

He leads me into a crag, and I feel every bit the animal led into a trap as the darkness closes around me. Stairs lead us up, up into the belly of the cliff.

I feel I'm staring up into the gates of Hel as pure blackness opens ahead. Any time now, my companion will loosen a dagger from its sheath and carve into my unprotected back.

Then... thin threads of light trace a square. A trap door. He bangs against it, calls out in Brittonic. They open for us, and I'm admitted into a room of pure light; I'm squinting after the inky black of the stairway. It's a little niche, lit by candlelight, occupied by several Cavaliers.

And one... one who is far too small and slight to be a soldier.

Brittonic flies over my head. I snag some words, the crux of the exchange.

Is it him?

Yes. The Prince of the Vikings.

Let him be. Let him approach.

That voice.

I rub at my eyes, blink at the small figure.

Tamsin's wearing that black velvet, still. Her scent is filling the space, alongside the drugged earthiness of all these wolfsbane-sipping Vyrger.

I can only frown at her in alarm. What is she doing here? I left her – I left her at the house –

Gods, she must've slinked in the dark after me, followed me through the trees. She knew exactly where to go; she must've climbed that stairway and alerted them while I was still fumbling in the dark like a fool.

They don't leave me time to speak. They're on me in moments, two at my shoulders to hold me down, a third wrenching my wrists forward to shackle them. I let them, though I am not noble enough to spare them a glare.

This is what I'm here for. To be subdued and shackled.

"He means us no harm," Tamsin says, lapsing into Gaelic. "I told you. He comes of his own accord."

"He comes armed," another says. I try not to move as I feel hands on my belt buckle, unclipping my sword, daggers and axe, even my waterskin.

"I didn't know what kind of welcome to expect," I say to that one with a smile. He's a thickset fellow with a grave face that seems to not ever have known joy. He wears the decorations of a captain; the others call him Heddwyn. I vaguely recognise the young man who stands by Tamsin; he is the one who was with us when we freed the prisoners. Emrys.

The others are strangers. Cavaliers who have been informed of our will to help them. But of course, being informed is nothing like the trust that builds when one has fought back to back.

Emrys is snapping at the others in Brittonic. I can only hope he's asking them to respect our deal. But then I move, just turning my head to scope them out – and they surge, shouting, and wrestle me to my knees. The burly captain drives his fist in my stomach so I might double over, forcing me into a repentant pose.

Tamsin is repeating something urgently. It's such a musical phrase. She grips one of my captors by the arm, imploring him.

“Os gwelwch yn dda!” she says again, more loudly still. It takes me a moment to remember what it means.

Please. It means please. Such a pretty phrase. I gaze at her, remembering how she was in her heat, how she pleaded then. Deliriously I tell myself that I shall have to summon that pretty phrase from her lips when we are alone again.

I'm not even thinking that she may be pleading for my life.

I glance at the grave-faced captain, my weapons dangling from his own belt. I wonder if he'll keep them as his own loot. I shouldn't have brought them. That sword is a gift from my father, tempered steel wrapped in red-dyed leather.

Ha. Well. Perhaps it was time I let go of it, anyway.

Angry Brittonic rumbles over my head. It seems an interminable wait, kneeling there against cold stone, before they roughly pull me up again. Tamsin stays near me, and the young Cavalier remains doggedly close to her, eyeing us both with concern.

“What are you doing here?” I ask Tamsin in low Gaelic. “You should go back while you still can.”

“I'm not going anywhere,” she hisses back. “I'm here for you.”

“Tamsin –”

She glares at me. “This is my home. You have no right to chase me from the front door.”

That word snaps around my tongue like teeth, stilling my response. *Home*. It is like my own childish mind thinking of the Völvas’ caverns as *home*, even when that place fostered only misery.

They march me across the niche, to a locked door. While one of them works the locks, I stare at Tamsin’s pinched profile, the fear and determination in her beautiful face. She’s here for me... risking her people’s judgment, just to have my back.

Her cloak covers her mark. The thought gives me a rising nausea.

“Does Thrain know?” I ask her.

She affords me a glance. I wonder how the pair-bond must rock and roil between them like a stormy sea. As far as I know, she doesn’t know how to shut it off; she can’t have hidden this from him.

“Yes,” she whispers.

The notion of his pain, his fury at finding us both missing – I can almost feel an echo of it, though I’m not part of their bond.

The door opens. Tamsin gives me an encouraging nod. And I want so badly to take her hand – let us plummet through chaos together again, but without losing one another this time.

“Where are they taking us?” I ask her.

“To the King,” she says.

PART III

THE GREAT BLACK SERPENT

Chapter 45



THRAIN

Waning Moon of September

I kick open the door to Osian's house. Rhun startles from within. He's been skulking here ever since Gofraid whacked him, slowly recuperating; one of his eyes is still garishly purple. He's pale and hunched but wiry with tension; from what Tamsin told me, he's spent his time honing his body as best he can in here, though he still suffers dizziness from the blow.

He stares up at me in alarm as I tower in the doorway. I duck in, march straight to him. Metal clatters as he pushes himself to his feet and glares at me head-on.

"Don't you fucking touch me," he snarls, spitting his pup rattle at me.

"Shut up and give me your wrists," I bark at him.

His arms move despite himself, wrists summoned into my grasp. He tries to pull away but I yank him by the chain. He's all stiffness and protestation

until he realises I'm tearing up the iron, half undoing the mechanism, half destroying it.

He stares at me as they fall from his wrists.

"You're coming with me," I grunt at him. "You know how to find the Leven Port passageway too, don't you?"

He frowns up at me. Then he says, "What makes you think I'd help you?"

"It's your sister," I snap at him. "She's gone. She went to the fort."

He lets out a breath, and his aggressive façade flickers as he lets Tamsin's absence sink in. He must know, surely, that their kin will not greet her kindly when they see the mark on her throat.

"Why?" he asks.

"She had some notion of saving my brothers from their own stupidity. And now she's risking herself to do so. Are you coming or not?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Get her back, evidently," I hiss at him, impatience thudding through me.

"You can't possibly be discreet as you are," he counters. "You had monk robes last time. Are you planning on just marching in there like that?"

He gestures at the weapons I've slotted into my belt.

"What has a half-starved pup to teach me of strategy?" I snarl. Though he does in fact have a solid point, my patience has all but run out. I drag him upright by a fistful of his dirty tunic. "You know what she's risking, don't you? She is bitten and claimed by a Viking. She bears my child. Do you think your King will take kindly to that?"

His eyes are darting about in panic as he considers this. "Oh, Tam," he mutters to himself, and her name presses into my chest like a burning brand.

I ask him again; "Are you coming?"

He staggers a little as I let him go. Still lost in worry, he straightens his

filthy tunic. Then he angles that piercing glare at me again.

“Am I getting weapons and chainmail, too?”

I scoff at him. Then, heedless of Nýr’s resentful presence at the door, I grab the princeling by the scruff of his neck and drag him with me out of his prison cell.

* * *

I want nothing more than to run into that fort right now. Axe brandished, Odin, the catharsis it would be to unleash myself upon them all – *gods*, I hunger for the slitting of flesh around steel.

Tamsin. Her name twists through the bond, an indignant growl, a whine of fear. *Tamsin. Tamsin...*

I can feel her, the spidery fear, the grip around her wrists. There’s darkness around her, sometimes giving way to glowing golden candlelight. Voices; a faint echo of human warmth, and I hate how vague they are, these impressions. Stone walls, the thrum of anticipation, the ringing of shouts.

Why? The plea threads through the bond, and I feel her own anguish in receiving it. *Why would you put yourself in danger like this?*

Spots of firelight guide us through the darkness of the camp. It’s easy as anything to get the help of my Dubliners, once I glare at them and swear them to silence. They provide chainmail and a belt of weapons for Rhun, whose face is alight with awe as he buckles it around his slim waist.

But my Dubliners aren’t without criticism. They see my face; they guess at the depth of my fury. They know what I look like when teetering on the borders of madness.

“Jarl,” says Sigbrand, a hand on my shoulder. “No disrespect. But are you sure you want to do this? Going to the fort alone? It’s just...”

It is not the right time to ask questions. I shove him back, a growl bursting from me as I press him against a tree. Every second I spend listening to them, she’s sinking deeper – further away from me – where I can’t hope to reach her.

“Jarl!” Several of them call in protest, but none dare to step forward and stop me.

“Thrain. Please,” Sigbrand wheezes. “If you’re going – is the usual order of command in place?”

That makes me hesitate. Sigbrand wraps a hand around my wrist, waits for me to come to my senses.

We have a system in place. Leadership of the pack falls to the elders when neither Olaf, Ivar nor I are present. And if I leave, Sigbrand will be one of those in command.

If I leave...

Olaf cannot lead. Without me he’ll be the only one left of the three brothers. Bedridden, sick with worry. For I know Tamsin has not gone alone. She has Ivar with her – it is the deep urge to protect him that spurred her on.

“Are we going or not?” Rhun snaps from behind me.

I glare at him over my shoulder.

No... damn it, *damn it all*. I can’t leave Olaf to try and steer things from his bed. I know the great oaf will certainly attempt it.

She’s gone. Tamsin is in the guts of the fort now; even if I run to the passageway with Rhun’s help, who’s to know whether I’d be able to find her? Though I feel ready to take on an entire fort of Briton soldiers, it would go against everything we’ve been attempting to do here.

I let go of Sigbrand. The sigh that leaves my mouth seems uprooted from the pit of my belly.

“As you were,” I tell him. “I’m going to see Olaf.”

Sigbrand pats my shoulder, looking relieved that I might’ve taken the saner option.

Rhun trails after me like a thin, hungry dog as I lead us through the village. For all his self-imposed training, he still has a gaunt, haunted look about him.

I don’t like to see it. He reminds me of what I used to look at in the mirror.

We hear Olaf before we even get to our neighbourhood’s main firepit. An indignant bark lifts into the pre-dawn quiet:

“THRAIN!”

Everyone keeping watch in our neighbourhood turns to stare at Angharad’s house. Then at me. My steps spring faster – but Olaf has already staggered to the doorway, leaning heavily against it, a wounded giant.

Clutching the small wooden frame, he sags a little when he sees me. As though relieved. I can’t help but feel the same – that I could be here, answering his summons. One brother at least that has not deserted him.

“Where is he?” Olaf growls, and he looks about as pissed as I am as he pushes away from the doorway. He wears naught but a knee-length tunic and the sempiternal bandage around his thigh; I rush to him as he takes strides that are far too wide for his capacity.

His knee hits the floor just as I reach him. Collapsing on all fours, he catches his breath for a moment, glaring at this ground he cannot cross unaided. The sight of him chills me to the bone; he’s shaking, at the very end of his tether now, held up by fury alone.

One of his hands is wrapped with a thin black rope. It's studded with silver clasps...

My guts clench as I recognise it.

One of Ivar's braids.

"Where is he," Olaf seethes, panting. I clutch at his tunic, heave him upright so that he sits on his heels, leaning against me. "Where is that senseless halfwit –"

"You know already," I grunt at him.

He's taken your place.

Olaf shakes his head. "No," he growls, and he repeats it as if it could rewind the evening. I clutch him to me, trying to take his weight off his bad leg – we can't have this discussion with him kneeling in the dirt like this.

"Come on. Back inside," I wheeze as I heave his considerable weight.

"Odin hear me now," Olaf seethes, "I will burn that house to the fucking ground if I have to spend another moment inside it."

I pull at him, relentless. "Come, brother."

* * *

Rhun paces around the room as I put Olaf back to bed. The pup manages to remain somehow so focused even in his haggard state.

I don't like how he stares at Olaf. He is every bit the lean hungry dog, glimpsing a juicy prize.

I pluck my axe from my belt, push it against his stomach.

"Wearing your sister's face will not help you, if you try anything," I snarl at him.

He holds my gaze defiantly. “You can’t touch me. Tamsin would never forgive you if you did.”

He’s right; already I feel a pull in the pair-bond, a resistance even as the very idea appears in my mind.

“Sit down and shut up,” I bark at him, and the physical imperative all but yanks him to the coffers. He catches himself, glaring at me as he sits.

“Why is he out?” Olaf asks.

“He knows where the secret passageway is,” I mutter. “I wanted to... well. I was being a fool.”

He easily guesses what I was about to say. “She’s gone too,” Olaf states, staring at me. It isn’t a question. “She went with him.”

“Yes.”

He leans forward, presses the heels of his palms into his eyes. He stays like that a long while, hunched over, as though he were crushing his eyes into his skull.

“I shouldn’t have brought it up the way I did,” he says at last on a sigh. “I shouldn’t have pushed you all so far.”

There’s nothing I can say to that. He’s right. It was a cruel thing to ask of us; to drop him straight into a pit of snakes when he’s so weak.

“It’s pointless to go over how we got here,” I mutter. “What do we do now?”

“Where is she?” he asks me. “Can you feel her?”

“She’s in the fort. She’s being led deeper into it.” I pause. “If I concentrate I could tell you more. I only know she’s...”

My mouth is so dry. It’s a pain to swallow and keep going.

“What?” Olaf coaxes me more gently.

“She’s frightened.”

Olaf drops his hands to the furs and says nothing. He shakes his head slowly as we both sit there and try to think of how to salvage this.

Ivar took the plan in his own hands. He's given himself as hostage to the Briton King. If he's doing this at all, it's to spare his brother; he's implementing Olaf's plan.

Something nags at the back of my mind.

"Olaf," I say haltingly. "We know the hostage plan would've worked if it had been you. Gofraid would leave for your sake. But... for him?"

The question sounds even harsher once it's out. But it has always been so painstakingly clear to me that Olaf is the favoured son. The eldest; the most legitimate. In all the years I've known them, it has always been him at his father's side, sharing the feast table, striding together in council meetings, talking of war and philosophy over games. But Ivar... Ivar always went out of his way to avoid being alone with his father.

"Would Gofraid drop everything for Ivar's sake?" I rephrase it quietly.

"Of course he would," he grunts.

I stare at him, somewhat disbelieving. He meets my eye.

"Ivar told you about Ósk, didn't he?" he asks.

"Yes. He did."

"Father never loved another woman as much as he loved her," Olaf says, reciting it dully. "What happened to Ósk is his greatest regret. And as regrets tend to do, she sticks to the front of Father's mind." He shakes his head. "It is some mixture of love and guilt and repentance, the bond they share. I know it's strange. But it is strong."

"Strong enough for this plan to work?" I ask him.

He sighs again, rubbing a hand over his face. "Yes. I believe it."

I hear what he leaves out.

I have to believe it.

Chapter 46



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of September

The Cavaliers lead us up to the top of the wall. We skirt along the watcher's path that runs around the fort's crenellations. We're above the fort's inner sanctum, this way; our feet skim the thatched rooftops, and we cast glances between the many roundhouses and buildings.

Dumbarton fort is aglow with many firepits and braziers. All the villagers are crammed in here. Those who do not have the privilege of staying in the enviroing houses and workshops have erected canvas awnings and tents. Some are nestled in stacks of hay under the stars, while the weather holds.

My heart feels shriveled and tight, as though it had burnt up from stress. I stare at this place I grew up, disfigured now with the war effort, just like the village outside.

So many families have been huddling in here. Just like I've been huddled in Angharad's house as time passes and our kings decide on how best to

react, when to push, when to wait.

Eventually our party must head down from the wall. A narrow stairway leads us down to the courtyard that yawns at the doors of the royal castle. There are villagers there, too; tents, ever more tents and bright-eyed watchers who stay awake while their children sleep.

The waning moon hides the scents of the daughters of Clota who are cooped up here. But I recognise many of them. There must be dozens of them up here. God, under the moon, it must've been such a heady saturation of scents.

Captain Heddwyn sends a Cavalier ahead to warn the King of our arrival, while we negotiate the path down the stairs. Being shackled, Ivar has to be slow and careful. I stay ahead of him, making sure he's stable.

Everything has fallen away now save for this fear, this one driving principle to keep him safe. To survive. In a sense, it's almost comforting; there is nothing else to think about than the animal imperative to protect my packmate.

Who is that?

Who goes there?

Voices rise from the sleepless watchers. I recognise some dimly lit faces as they approach the stairs.

"Clear the way," calls the surly captain. "Keep clear, now! Back to your beds."

Who do they bring? The murmurs are ceaseless. I try to keep my head down, heart thrumming painfully, but it's no use.

Is that the princess?

Is that Princess Tamsin?

We've stepped down into the courtyard; people are drawing nearer,

though Cavaliers try to dissuade them.

“Back!” they drawl. “Leave us space.”

“It’s the Princess! Oh, Princess!”

I can barely react as a dim, greyish crowd begins to form, bolstered by woken villagers who follow their curiosity. Thankfully the Cavaliers keep us fenced in, but there are pointing fingers, smiling faces, and I can’t bear to look at any of them. The swell of delight at being with my kin again is spoiled entirely by the knowledge that their joy is superficial. It would curdle to hatred as soon as they heard my story.

I know I do not belong here any more. Their happiness to see me stings all the more for it.

“They have a hostage!”

“They have a Viking bound in chains!”

To my dismay, the Cavaliers make us wait in the courtyard while the King is woken and alerted. From beyond the line of Cavaliers with outstretched arms, I try to see if I can find Hilda. But if she’s there at all, she must be hidden among the masses of villagers and their children, all straining to catch a glimpse of Ivar and I.

“She’s alive! Thank God!”

“Princess! Are you well?”

“Is that the Viking right there?”

One of the Cavaliers steps forward. “You will go back to your beds,” he commands. But the crowds are excitable, probably not very well rested, and to have an enemy in their midst – the inevitable occurs.

It takes just one child, yelling at Ivar and throwing a clump of sodden horse manure at him. And then the game is begun.

“You will stop!” the Cavaliers call lazily even as the crowds shift. They

don't particularly move to protect Ivar, who is standing side-on by the wall, as far as he can be from the crowds. There is something very ominous about his stillness, the way he blends into the shadows – he might not mean to, but he is threatening enough to invite this disdain.

Then one of the projectiles spatters at his feet, and a cry of joy rises from the crowd, their efforts redoubling.

God, I have to show my colours. *I have to*. I can't just let them do this.

“Stop it!” I shout at them, trembling as I move to stand in front of him. “Please stop. This man is Prince Ivar Gofraidsson, heir to the Viking King. He comes to end the siege.”

The silence that follows my words is absolute. I sweep across the crowd, knowing that I have bared my jugular; I stand with a Viking rather than with them, and it makes me as much of a target for fistfuls of dung as Ivar.

They stare at me, then at Ivar, partway between hatred and fascination. They take in his leathers and chainmail and shaved head; of course, he does not fit their image of what a *prince* should be. But he looks every bit like the enemy that is encircling their fort, keeping them prisoners in their own home, and that is all they see.

“A Viking prince, is he!” one calls. “A prince of Hell and damnation!”

The others take up the insults and spatter more dung and bedpan contents at our feet. I want to scream at them as it carries on; my throat is hot as I stumble closer to Ivar, holding out a hand to shield him. And the Cavaliers – they don't care, they still call out lazily, not moving to stop the indignity.

“He's here to help us,” I shout. “We're only trying to help you!”

“No use, lamb,” comes Ivar's voice from the shadows behind me. “They are a mob. You waste your breath.”

I bite back my anger, trying to control my breathing.

“What is it they called me?” he asks me in undertones. The shouts are loud enough now that we can speak privately.

“Prince of Hell and damnation?” I tell him in Gaelic. Incredibly, I hear him laugh.

“I quite like that, actually. I’ll keep a note of it.”

If we did not have dung spattered across our legs, I would’ve laughed with him. Trust him to say such a thing in this situation.

Then at last, at *last*, the doors open, and we can turn our backs on the shouting mob.

* * *

It’s surreal to be led into the castle flanked by Cavaliers, like criminals or important dignitaries of some kind. Only last spring I was still running around here, little more than an overgrown child with her skirts bunched in fistfuls. And now...

I’m leading a Viking prince into the heart of our sanctuary.

The Cavaliers hold up flaming torches as they lead us to the King’s throne room. The great wooden doors are intricately carved with historic scenes and woodland creatures, inlaid with gold and gems. So many times I’ve run past it, barged inside looking for my mother.

Now... the flickering torchlight on all that grandiose craftsmanship is so much more intimidating.

Beyond is a king. *My King*, my Uncle, the one who has always been a stout protector of the daughters of Clota.

But I don’t think of him in those terms any more. I spent so long hating him for throwing Eormen and I out into the wilds. I think of him now as the

Vikings do: he is simply *the Briton King*. An asset to be persuaded, moved, negotiated with.

No – we’re here now, in *my* home, with *my* people. They are *my* allies, once they put down their fistfuls of dung and listen to us. And Uncle Arthgal has seen Rhun and me grow up, he’s always been as a benevolent entity watching over us all. Never mind that he married Eormen and I off – that was only a strategic move to win us allies and protect our people. He couldn’t have known the misery that would follow.

He’ll help. He’ll listen in that calm, studious way of his.

I swallow hard as the doors open. And we are marched in.

Uncle Arthgal is there, clearly roused from sleep. He is such an achingly familiar sight. As though I had not spent the summer far away, dragged through terrible things. His grey curls messily frame his head, his thickset body wrapped in a shawl. The golden circlet he wears, engraved with Celtic coils, seems hastily pushed on.

Uncle Arthgal’s eyes shine with recognition and relief as he sees me. But the Cavaliers force Ivar to take the knee, and I can’t help but rush to his side before even greeting my Uncle.

“He knows how to act in front of a king,” I snap at the Cavaliers. “Leave him be.”

“We aren’t taking any chances with this one, princess,” huffs the captain. Then to Uncle Arthgal: “This is he, Your Grace. Ivar Gofraidsson, lord of Dublin and heir to the Southern Isles. And Princess Tamsin, who brings us news from the Viking camp.”

“Captain, you bring me a bounty indeed,” Uncle Arthgal says, and he strides forward. I hunch, fingers digging into Ivar’s chainmail – but Uncle only offers me his many-ringed hand and a smile that crinkles his eyes. Heart

thudding, I step to him, and he takes me in his arms, hugging me against his great wool-clad bulk.

I blink.

It's entirely bizarre. Our relationship has never been particularly close. He was no substitute for mine and Rhun's late father. But we are in this war together, we are pulled so much closer now by virtue of circumstance. It is the same spell I felt with the Cavaliers, whom I always despised before; now they are my crowd, they wear my colours in this war.

"Oh, Tamsin," Uncle sighs. "When I heard you were alive... you and Eormen, both..." He pulls away, cups my face in his big hands. "I'm so very glad to see you."

I stare at him, blinking back confused tears.

He's welcoming me back? Just like that? Does he know what... what I've done?

"Uncle," I croak out. "I... I've not been..."

"They've told me of your plight," he says. "It matters not to me that you are marked. You serve us now as a dutiful princess of Strathclyde, a defender of your country. I can't tell you how proud I am of you, Tamsin. Pulling through such hardship and staying true to your country, true to who you are."

I fold a hand over my mouth before the sobs can come out. God, that he might say that to me. *Him*. My Uncle and King, forgiving me. The dissonance and yearning in me rages, a confusing whirlwind that robs me of my strength. I've sunk to the ground before even realising it, kneeling there before him.

"Thank you, Uncle," I wheeze out. He places a hand on my head.

"Rise, my dear. Let us welcome our guest."

I let him help me up, and I lower myself again in a deep curtsey, for

respect. Then I turn back to Ivar. My heart thuds an irregular rhythm as I meet his gaze. He's kneeling there, bent forwards uncomfortably, those piercing eyes of his following my every move.

What must he think of me? Kneeling before the King that gave me away. But it wasn't like that – it was more complicated than that. It was a political, strategic move.

Just like this is.

“Our brave princess has made allies for us among the Vikings, or so I hear,” Uncle Arthgal intones. “This is one of them?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” I tell him. “He gives himself freely for our benefit. As your hostage.”

“The son of the Viking King,” Uncle Arthgal says as he steps around Ivar's kneeling, prostrate form. We're speaking in Brittonic; I can imagine how it must all be flying over his head. Ivar lowers his eyes as the King approaches him.

He's taking to his role.

“I do believe King Gofraid has three sons,” Uncle Arthgal says. “This is the eldest?”

I quake. Should I lie? I need to make Ivar sound as valuable as possible.

“This is his favoured son,” I say, hoping Ivar won't understand. “The eldest... the eldest is fatally wounded and bedridden, Your Grace.”

“Indeed?” Uncle raises his eyebrows at me. “You bring only welcome news, my dear.”

The fact that he might say that about Olaf, that his injuries are *welcome news*, sours the delight of his acceptance. But of course; of course he would view it like that.

“Ivar Gofraidsson speaks Gaelic, if you'd like to converse,” I add.

Uncle gives a small laugh. “Yes, I’ve heard these... *men*... acclimatise quite well to the places they invade. But I don’t think it’ll be necessary to speak,” Uncle says. The way he looks down at Ivar... it makes my stomach clench up uncomfortably. He’s glad to have a Viking prince kneeling in front of him. There is a terrible, vengeful light in his eye. “I don’t suppose he has any wisdom to impart that you may not give me yourself, beloved niece.”

I try not to pant as my heart races fast enough to burst.

“And I expect you’d like retribution sooner rather than later,” Uncle adds, glancing over at me. “For that mark upon your throat.”

No. No, no.

I step beside Ivar. “I seek no retribution. He and his brothers saved me from the worst of them. I have no qualms with this man.”

“Then he may offer his back to repent for all his kind,” Arthgal says in that terribly low tone. “He has not spoken a word yet. Perhaps he knows he is here to act as a martyr.”

“Please,” I manage. “Please, it is to show respect that he does not speak out of turn. I think it could benefit us to hear what he has to say.”

Uncle Arthgal ponders this. Then he flicks a finger to his Cavalier captain.

“The Northman may lift his eyes to His Highness,” barks the captain in Gaelic, shoving Ivar. Ivar does so, lifting those black eyes slowly to meet Uncle’s gaze. “He may speak his purpose.”

With difficulty, Ivar straightens for more comfort. “I’m very sorry to interrupt your sleep, King of the Britons,” he intones in his perfect Gaelic. “As your Cavaliers have no doubt told you already, you face two threats in this war; you are besieged by Albans and Vikings alike. Your army is holding your northern border against Causantin as we speak. I am here to relinquish

you of the Viking occupation you have had to suffer. My father will undoubtedly rethink his tactics once he hears you have me; it is our hope that he may be persuaded to leave entirely, once you begin negotiations. And with him gone, you may focus your efforts on confronting Causantin's treachery."

Uncle Arthgal scoffs. "The man speaks of treachery," he mutters in Brittonic. "He who wears several colours himself, and betrays his own father."

I blink at him. "He does it for our benefit."

"He is still a traitor. Whoever it benefits does not wipe away the stain to his character."

"Uncle, that isn't fair."

Ivar waits, holding Uncle's gaze.

"You would give yourself as a bargaining chip, Ivar Gofraidsson?" Uncle Arthgal asks him in Gaelic.

"Yes, Your Grace," Ivar speaks calmly, as though he were not wearing bruises and dung on his clothes.

"Very well. Then we shall see about preparing those negotiations with your father." Uncle Arthgal paces awhile. When he speaks again, it is with an unsteady thrum of emotion. "My daughter. Have you any word from her? Last I heard, she had rejoined our army, but we have had no news since then."

He looks at Ivar with a gleam of hope in his eye. I realise then, how cut off Uncle has been from his own army in this fort; how little information of the war has seeped through the Viking occupation.

"We've been in regular contact with Princess Eormen, indeed," Ivar says. "She's quite well. I believe she's still stationed out in the Kilpatrick hills with a small contingent of men. In fact, your daughter had a request to make of

you; she needs your permission to distribute your army more evenly across the land, and call down reinforcements for herself.”

I scramble forward. He still has the parchment. When Uncle sees Eormen’s handwriting, he will believe us, I’m sure.

The Cavaliers stir as I kneel by Ivar’s side. My cheeks flush as I admit this intimacy, leaning close to Ivar as I fumble for the slip of parchment in his belt.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to him, sniffing.

“You’re handling it beautifully, lamb,” he whispers back.

I meet his gaze. I want so badly to drag him after me to my room, where I could clean him up and tend to his wounds.

I straighten with the parchment in hand. Uncle is so eager to see this small scrap of evidence of his daughter’s wellbeing that he surges for it, uncaring of our closeness.

“This is Eormen’s writing. Oh, thanks be to God,” he murmurs, stroking a thumb over the parchment. He stares at the request, thinking on it. Then to the captain; “Heddwyn. Go and wake the commander of the fort garrison. We need to discuss all of this.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Niece,” Uncle adds as he turns back to me. “If I want to send out a messenger to Eormen, your allies will receive him and guide him through the Viking camp?”

I nod. The pair-bond is still pulsing with pain; I’ll have to do my best to wade into it, to invite Thrain to work with us. “They will,” I promise him.

“All right,” Uncle says with an uncertain nod. “In the meantime, I believe you’ve earned the right to rest, dear niece. Emrys, take her to her room. My head servant is awake – she may tend to the princess.”

“And the Viking, Your Grace?”

“Secure him in the dungeons.”

“Uncle,” I burst out as the Cavaliers start unceremoniously yanking Ivar back to his feet. “Please. He’s our ally, he...”

Uncle glances at me.

“I know it must’ve been a confusing time for you, my dear,” he says softly. “But you do not have to pretend allegiance with these dogs any longer. You don’t have to give any part of yourself any more. You’re home. You won’t have to see him again.”

“Uncle,” I breathe, grappling for some credible argument. But there is no other option, is there? Ivar will certainly not be kept in any comfortable chamber. “He’s been kind to me,” I manage, my voice coming out horribly wonky. “He acts in my interests. Please don’t hurt him. Please.”

Uncle observes me a moment longer, then comes and places a hand on my shoulder.

“You’ll feel like yourself again once you’ve had some rest,” he says. “Come. Emrys, take her to her chamber.”

I share a glance with Emrys, who looks grave and thoughtful. We follow Ivar to the main doors, and I linger there as I watch him get dragged out again; the entrance to the dungeon is an ominous barred doorway out in the courtyard. Shouts abound as the Viking captive is dragged before the mob.

I grapple for something Olaf taught me, something I can shout at him in the privacy of the Norse language. But I know nothing except domestic pleasantries. Still, I can’t just let him go without letting him know I’m here for him.

“*Góða nótt!*” I call in what I hope is intelligible Norse. “*Sjáumst síðar!*”

Good night, see you later. It’s so pitifully inadequate. Ivar’s head

twitches to the side as the Cavaliers unlock the door to the dungeons. He calls back to me in Norse:

“Freya halda þér, sæta.”

Freya keep you. The last word, I’ve never heard. I’ll have to ask him when I next see him.

Soon. I’ll see him again soon.

Chapter 47



THRAIN

Waning Moon of September

Rhun comes with me as I take my patrol group across camp to the Leven Port. It is bustling with activity, even as the morning rises; all throughout the moon, recalcitrant warbands have been packing up their belongings, preparing their ships for departure. Arguments ring in the air – Gofraid has not allowed anyone to leave, and his guards are preventing the warbands from cutting their ships loose.

As we arrive, we lose ourselves in the milling of men, the chaos of brawls and goods being transported. I speak with Gofraid's guards, offer to sweep the beach for any stragglers. And it is easy as anything to march across the sand toward the jagged cliffside, heading for the maze of fallen rocks that hides the Britons' secret passageway. I am Gofraid's adopted son; they trust me.

Tamsin invited me out here. She has been pressing this cliff face into my mind, telling me the Briton King will send a messenger tonight. We must place ourselves to receive the lad as discreetly as we can.

So we stand guard among the rocks.

My men raise their heads up to the fort as they keep to their stations, wistful, worried. They all feel the absence of their pack leader and their Kátr-Ekkja just as keenly as I do.

I'm so focused on her that I can barely concentrate on my surroundings. The pair-bond is a slowly spinning fractal of colours and impressions. Often I stop by an outcropping of rock and stare into nothingness as I try to sharpen my sense of our bond.

She's so afraid. My own guts feel pierced through by her fear. She keeps thinking of Ivar; so much so that she summons the last image she had of him into my own mind. His pale profile, the dark shine of his eyes. The clink of chains in this strange transparent world.

"Thrain," Rhun mutters. He knocks his knuckles against my shield, breaking me out of those spider-silk shapes. "Look."

I turn around, squint in the darkness toward the cliff face. My men are on the move, sending quiet hand signals toward us. I jerk my head at Rhun, and he strides after me as we make our way through the tall rocks.

There, between the jagged standing stones – a Briton silhouette, the gleam of a nervous face in the moonlight.

The Briton King's messenger.

I drag Rhun forward, and the sight of the princeling lights up the messenger's face. He makes his way between the rocks, clasps his prince's forearm in greeting.

They both speak in low Brittonic. For a moment Rhun seems imbued in

his princely role, nodding and reassuring the messenger with a hand on his shoulder. I let him embody his princely function a moment, since he has so rarely been granted the chance to make himself useful. Then I give him a glance, and he switches back to Gaelic.

“This man bears a message for the commanders of the Briton army,” he declares. “The King has approved Eormen’s request for reinforcements.”

Hope lifts my chest. I gaze at the messenger. “You have the royal seal?”

The man rummages in his belt pouches, shows us the rolled parchment. It’s stamped with red wax, pressed with an intricate red seal. Strathclyde’s royal armory.

We stand among the tall rocks, staring at that slip of parchment. To think this messenger will have to journey across half the country to deliver it to the army commanders up north. One man, one little scroll sealed by wax – the Britons’ only chance to bring thousands of men down to bolster Eormen’s numbers.

“Come,” I tell him. We hand him a Viking helmet and whisk him into our group, marching together across the grey sand.

I take the lead. When we stride through the port again, I nod at Gofraid’s men, who only heed me in passing. There is still commotion everywhere; they don’t care to count my numbers. So we leave the port behind and take our masked Briton through the siege camp.

I can breathe more easily once we’re past the Dublin banners. The messenger follows us to the horse pen, where a horse has been tacked and readied. I untie the reins and pass the horse along to him.

“Are you headed north alone?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. “The King asked me to find Princess Eormen and travel north with her, so she may deliver this missive herself.”

I nod at him. “She should still be in the Kilpatrick hills. That is the last we knew of her location, in any case. Perhaps the men stationed up there can point you more accurately. Do you need anyone to accompany you?”

“I’ll be fine, thank you.” Then, in a stutter; “I’m sorry but – your scar – are you really Thrain Mordsson?”

He sounds awed as he says it. I repress a smile. “I am indeed.”

The poor man seems quite overwhelmed. Rhun grasps his hands, says something in Brittonic that sounds like, *good luck to you*. We should not delay him any more than this, not when he has a long way to go yet.

“One last thing,” I add. “Princess Tamsin, and the Viking accompanying her – have you any word?”

“They were brought before the King. Beyond that, I cannot say.”

I sigh and nod, dismissing him. His black cloak billows as he mounts his steed. And in a muted thud of hooves, he gallops away into the darkness, under our watchful eye.

* * *

Olaf is waiting outside Angharad’s house when I return. Dawn is growing pink by then, illuminating our camp. He’s perched on a crate, leaning forward eagerly as though he wants nothing more than to get up and meet me – but it must’ve been a struggle already for him to get out of the house at all.

“I thought I told you to rest,” I call to him.

He waves this away and asks, “So? Did a messenger come?”

I sit by him and tell him about the night. He bobs his head as I speak, staring intensely into nothingness, as though he’s calculating possible trajectories for all the moving parts around us.

It hits me, then. The extent of his strategy, when he offered to go to the fort with that parchment in hand. He wanted to give the Britons a Viking prince as a hostage; that was his main plan. But he had opted to use Eormen and her army as insurance.

In a few weeks from now, Eormen will return with enough men to oust Gofraid, in case he does not agree to leave.

In case he chooses to let his son die in that fort.

I glance at Olaf, take in his tensed posture. That determination in his eye sends a chill through me. He is locked in a deadly strategy against his own father, stacking insurance plans in advance, so that if the first blade misses its target, a second will strike true.

“Any word of Ivar and Tamsin?” Olaf asks me.

“Not much. Just that they met with the King. I think Ivar was taken to the dungeons.”

He nods grimly. His palm is still wrapped with Ivar’s braid. I lay a hand on his shoulder, because for all his princely fortitude, he is still hirsute and grisly as a bear from his long recovery.

“You should rest, Olaf.”

He shakes his head. “As soon as the sun rises and the army wakes, we must go to Father and tell him that Ivar is gone.”

I let those bloodshot eyes hold me there a moment. Gods, I can’t imagine ever saying those words to Gofraid. I have no idea how he’ll react.

“You shouldn’t ride through camp,” I tell him. “I will go and tell him.”

“No. You will bring him here. I want to tell him myself.”

I nod, trying to hold back from snapping at him. “All right. But in the meantime, you should rest, brother. Here, let me help you up –”

He waves me away as ever. “You’re the one who should sleep. You’ve

been up all night. I'll take it from here."

I frown at him in concern; what is he going to do? Limp about the camp? His gaze hardens to a glare as he dares me to voice these worries, but I don't dare to, not to his face.

"All right, well," I grumble, casting around for a stick of some kind; he has nothing that can even serve as a cane nearby. I reach for a spear to give him, and he takes it grumpily. "Wake me if you need anything. Anything at all, you hear?"

He relents a nod, half batting me away with his spear. So I leave the great Jarl of Dublin with his stick and his crate, ducking into the house to catch a few hours of rest.

* * *

Tamsin's nest is gloriously cluttered and sweet-smelling. To have her scent all around me like a ghostly presence... there's no way I can sleep. I sit there, crooked with exhaustion, hand splayed over the furs and tunics that bear the scents of our pack.

I don't know who I'm more afraid for. My wife or my brother.

I wish they'd been more reasonable. At least had the mercy to tell me they were going. Both of them together always seems to spell chaos, like they draw out the reckless trickster in each other.

I sigh, rub my hands over my face. Then, staring at Tamsin's fine bone-carved comb that lies in the clutter, I try to access the strange magic that binds us.

Tamsin...

I frown, trying to throw her name out as a bridge into her mind. We've so rarely been capable of communicating with words; feelings and impressions reign so far. Even while she was imprisoned in the house with Olaf, I was pulled between duties and then nocturnal madness; I never really sat and attempted to *speak* to her through the bond.

Tamsin.

Her awareness of me tugs me closer. I focus on the hearth fire, trying to see if I can communicate it to her the same way she pressed that cliff face into my mind. The captivating swirls and volutes, the sparks that drift away... I welcome her as best I can, inviting her to feel where I am.

That scrambled impression of fear smooths out. She relaxes into my invitation, her ghostly presence whispering around me. Then she seems to pull me over that bridge to where she is. I can feel a wet cloth dragged over my ankles, the cold silence of a room. The pottering of a servant woman. There is a persistent smell of horseshit and sewage, and I have to wonder whose side that comes from.

It's her. The scent comes from her. Shame twists and pulls. She's getting cleaned up for bed.

I breathe out through my nose, fury rising again. Did her own people spatter her – ? Loki, I wish there were a more straightforward way of learning what she's been through.

“Are you safe?” I ask out loud, hoping Olaf has limped away and can't hear me muttering to myself like a madman. But it's the only way I know of to focus my intention.

It takes a moment for the exchange to rock forth and retreat again, like waves.

Yes.

I try to ask after Ivar. If she was spattered, I can only imagine my brother must've fared the same or worse. I visualise him, his elegant prideful profile, hoping she might understand the question. And she answers.

A vision of muck and yelling crowds. A man wrapped in shadow, holding stock still save for his cutting eyes.

Shackles.

Chains.

I grit my teeth. The thought of Ivar suffering such indignity is hard to believe. To me, he has always appeared as a dove flying over the mud, always keeping that poise and elegance even when he sups on chaos. And now he's allowed himself to be caught and dragged through the muck.

Loki, I am so *angry* at him. He puts himself through it for Olaf's sake and for the sake of all the Vanirdøtur, I know that, it's all very noble.

I still want to shove his damned head through a table.

He really decided to face the worst danger alone, head-on. I'd wager he laughed his way into their dungeon, because he's like that. Reckless and wild as they come.

And he's just left me here. To shoulder it all; this horrid fear for his damned life as well as responsibility over our whole pack. Olaf may do what he can, but he cannot exactly face a crisis properly in his state. Trust Ivar to make a dramatic exit just at the most inopportune time.

I sit and stare at the hearth fire, breathing, trying to calm down. Tamsin doesn't need this. I need to keep it together for all our sakes.

Eventually I'm focused enough to feel as though I were sitting quietly in her company. The servant leaves her alone after a while, and Tamsin sinks in her covers, the warm tug of fabric closing over my own body.

Gods, I wish she were with me. I wish she hadn't gone.

A faint caress glides along my brow, down my cheek. She must be touching her own body with the intention of passing those sensations across the bond. She strokes down her own neck and the contact echoes in me, running down to my collarbones. Sighing, I close my eyes and enjoy these small attentions.

I'm with you. The intention throbs between us. I touch my lips, imagining they're hers, and a shiver of pleasure runs through her as she feels it.

I'm with you.

* * *

The noon sun is gleaming overhead by the time I emerge from the nest. I trudge wearily to the horse pen, none too happy at the prospect of facing Gofraid. Rhun is standing nearby, discussing something with Nýr. I'm surprised to hear them speaking in Norse together, though Nýr helps the princeling along here and there.

The lad might harbour the will to kill us in our sleep, but clearly he and Nýr have managed to keep their friendly rapport intact. Still, I can't help keeping an eye on the sullen redhead as I tack up my steed. I don't like leaving him with the others, after everything that's happened.

"Oy," I bark at Rhun, and he jerks around. "You're coming with me."

Nýr lowers his chin. He's visibly reining in his own possessiveness as he defers to my command, letting me have his pup. I tilt my head curiously; I should've known their relationship would strengthen like this, what with them spending several moons together now. But it still surprises me that Nýr would be on the verge of challenging me outright.

Still, he comports himself as he should before his pack leader. He taps Rhun's shoulder, telling him to behave, and bows to me as we pass the princeling between us.

Rhun and I ride out, travelling through the Viking camp. He stays close to me, the chainmail he wears hanging like a sheet over his gaunt frame. But he's white-knuckled and determined as he gazes around us at the camped army.

We eventually find Gofraid at the Leven Port. It seems his guards could not properly contain the commotion; at least three warbands stand on the docks now, yelling at the guards, grabbing at each other's tunics in their anger.

Gofraid himself stands there like a tired giant, sunlight glittering on his wild masses of silver hair and beard bristles. He's dressed in his usual regalia of finely woven wools and rich chainmail, fists on his hips, face drawn in consternation.

"They're still going at it?" Rhun mutters beside me, eyes on the noisy multitudes around us. He follows my lead as I slow my horse to an amble, listening to the discordant voices.

It is the same issue as last night. Those three warbands want to leave; Gofraid's guards will not let them. Some have come to jeer at the deserters, calling them cowards for being afraid of the Vanirdøtur – but it does not deter them. The deserters call back that those who will not heed Freya's warning will get what they deserve. Eventually Gofraid barks at them all to quieten down, and they turn their faces to him. His finger taps nervously against his forearm as they wait for him to speak.

"You want to leave?" Gofraid calls. "Then leave. But know that you will no longer have my friendship; you will no longer benefit from the

benevolence of the crown. When this war ends and we are dividing lands and women among us, do not return and beg me for your share.”

A murmur goes through the crowd. Slowly the deserters pull away from the guards’ grasps and file onto their ships. And though they are still jeered at and insulted, they take to hoisting their sails, determined to leave this place and its promises behind them.

Rhun glances at me. There’s a spark of something in his eye – hope, perhaps. Surprise, too. He sees how the story of Tamsin’s craze has circulated all around the camp; how it has spooked many warbands into action.

While everyone watches the deserters unfurl their sails, we approach the King.

“Gofraid!” I call out, catching his attention.

“Thrain,” he greets me quizzically, turning. “You’ve ridden out to find me? Is something the matter?”

“Olaf wants to see you,” I say curtly. “We have some urgent news.”

He clicks his tongue. But whatever complaint he was about to say dies on his tongue when he sees Rhun. The lad bristles as they clap eyes on each other; Rhun brings a hand up instinctively to the place Gofraid hit him, as though to shield his head from further abuse – then forces it down again.

“You’ve let him out?” Gofraid deadpans in Norse, his confusion only deepening.

“He’s been locked up for over two months,” I tell him. “Seemed a waste to let him wither away in the dark. I have him in hand; you don’t have anything to fear from him.”

Gofraid raises his bushy eyebrows and lets out a laugh. “I don’t think I ever had anything to fear from that upstart little pup,” he says. “He surprised me in that forest, is all. But Thrain, my boy, are you sure you have time for

him? We are all quite busy enough without having to keep an eye on troublesome prisoners.”

Rhun gazes at him with a flat, dull expression, pretending he does not understand a word of our Norse. But I see that dark flame in his eye.

“Like I said, I can handle him,” I grunt. “Come.”

Gofraid heaves a great sigh as he strides up to us, the earth shaking under his feet. “All right. Are you going to tell me what is so urgent?”

“Olaf wanted to explain it himself.”

That makes him brood. “Trust my eldest to pile more bad news on top of the rest,” he grumbles. “Björn! Get me a horse.”

* * *

Gofraid stands before his eldest son in the clear morning light. Olaf is seated on a crate, his spear leaning between his thighs, like a wandering druid awaiting a storm. His chin is lifted, his eyes squinting up to meet those of his progenitor.

I stand at a small distance, as I always do when matters of blood arise between their small family. My heart thuds as the words are spoken.

There was a skirmish during our perimeter watch.

They took Ivar.

The words sink in. At first Gofraid asks for details, as though to ascertain whether to believe us. *What do you mean, they took him? How did this happen? Did you see it? Did they injure him?*

We dress up the lie as best we can; how they managed to take Ivar and Tamsin alike, how I saw it all happen and could not prevent it.

Gofraid lays a glare on me that makes my instincts shrivel. I step back, fighting the urge to turn my neck in submission.

“Father,” Olaf barks. “You will not blame Thrain for any of this.”

The great white giant expels a cloud of fury through his nose. “Indeed,” he all but growls. “If that idiot son of mine did not insist on being the figurehead for whimsical incompetence, we would not have to come to this —”

“*Father,*” snaps Olaf. “They were overwhelmed. There is no question of Ivar’s own skill.”

Gofraid turns, paces a moment. His eyes are tracked on the floor, getting wider as he allows the idea to sink in.

“We believe they came from the fort,” Olaf says. “They have passageways. They must’ve tracked our perimeter watch and decided when best to strike.”

Both of us are watching him as Gofraid shakes his head, silently seething. Red patches are appearing on his skin.

Voice flat and heavy, Olaf concludes: “I believe the Briton King may call upon us for negotiations sooner or later.”

We watch as Gofraid stops, stares up at the fort where it looms against the sky. I follow his gaze. Try to picture them, where they huddle in the bowels of that stone beast. Gofraid certainly has reason to worry; his face has gone quite flushed now with the rage of helplessness.

Olaf and I are studiously quiet as we wait for the explosion.

It begins with a growl. Gofraid snarls out the words: “First Causantin abandons me to see to his broken army. Then we have rampant fever, and Tamsin spooks half my men... and now this?” He laughs a tight, mirthless laugh. “Oh, I hear you, Freya. I hear you mocking me now.”

I throw a sidelong glance at Olaf. He discreetly holds his hand out flat, telling me to stay still.

“Ten thousand men,” Gofraid goes on growling to himself, “ten thousand spears. An overwhelming force. Whittled away to pathetic impotence. How could we have come to this? How does such a thing even happen?” He shakes his head. “But then, even the mightiest of oaks dies, if it has vermin hollowing out its heart.”

I do not even dare glance at Olaf then. My hand lays upon my axe hilt, my heart thudding steadily, the excitement of impending battle rushing through my body. Any moment now, I wait for Gofraid to face us and accuse us of treachery.

But he does not say anything. Only turns around and marches away from us.

The clamp around my chest does not ease. Surely he must see it; it seems so glaringly obvious. Surely he has put the pieces together by now. But he keeps walking, and eventually my grip on my axe loosens.

He does not see our treason. His eyes are fixed upon that fort wall instead, unscalable, unbreakable. His mind fixed upon his son, held prisoner in there, at the mercy of the enemy.

When he passes one of the houses, he lets out a yell of fury, and punches into the main wooden pillar upholding its centre. A human man could not punch straight through such a thick trunk bare-handed – but Gofraid’s fist has it folding inwards, the cob wall crumbling around it. Gofraid swings another punch into that pillar, breaking it completely. And in a sinister groan, the roof structure begins to fall.

Olaf lets out a breath, eyes wide as he watches his father give in to his own rage. Our Dubliners are all rooted to their spots, stopping whatever they

were busy with to watch as the roof caves inward, the Viking King standing before this wanton destruction, knuckles bloody.

“My King –”

Orm makes the mistake of stepping forward – Armod hauls him back just as Gofraid turns, a frothing beast, ready to gut any who might approach him.

Olaf pushes himself up, protective instincts moving him forward. I help him as he limps along with his spear in one tight fist. And Gofraid calms at the sight of his limping eldest, at least enough not to vent his rage upon our men.

“Father,” Olaf says in a low rumble. “Please.”

Gofraid lets out a few breaths, his beard bristles vibrating, before finally being capable of speech again.

“I’ll gather the Jarls,” he grunts. “Watch the fort wall for me. If you see the Britons signalling for a parley, come find me.”

“We will, Father,” Olaf promises.

We watch him stomp away. His great towering bulk moves between the thatched roofs, shoulders slumped. And it is the first time I have ever seen that man wearing defeat so plainly, as though he were trailing a leaden cloak.

Chapter 48



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of September

I wake to the familiar sounds of pigeons cooing on the roof. Frowning, I sit up in bed.

My room. My bed. The large mattress spans most of the room, the one I've always occupied with Rhun. A decorative panel stands at the foot of it for privacy, the morning light glowing through the thin wood.

I blink. It could be any summer morning. There is the sound of water being sloshed into the tub, ahead in the water closet beyond the panel. I rub at my eyes, glimpse the collection of pretty rosaries and crucifixes that hang along that flower-painted panel.

I'm in my own room.

My throat tightens as I sit there, staring around myself. My hand ventures to the mark on my throat.

Thrain, I think, concentrating – but he’s asleep, the bond twinkling darkly between us, like the calm of a still lake.

I stand, smoothing my shift.

“Hilda?” I ask in the direction of the sounds.

There’s an achingly familiar *Oh!*, and the clutter of pots and paraphernalia. A swell of glee fills me as I hear my nursemaid’s bustling. I’m halfway around the panel when she skirts to face me, both of us almost bumping into one another. She’s just the same as always, wrapped in her usual headscarf and apron, her twin grey plaits falling down her front.

“Oh, poppet,” she says, her eyes full of tears. I can’t look at her without bursting into tears like a child, myself – she gathers me against her big soft bosom and I hold onto her, this woman who raised me. “Hush, hush. Oh Tamsin, my dear, dear girl. You’re home safe now.”

It takes me a moment to unwind from her, and she wipes away my tears herself.

“Look at you,” she fusses. “All skinny and exhausted! I’d wager you haven’t had a proper breakfast in a while.”

I cough out a laugh. “That’s true.”

“Let’s get you cleaned up and dressed.”

I let her whisk me into the water closet, strip me of my months-old shift and mourning dress, making a funny face as she bundles them up.

“Fit for burning, that velvet,” she says. “I’ll be surprised if Cinnie manages to make anything of your shift, but, we’ll see.”

I’m naked in the tub. A *full tub* of hot water, just for me. It’s never felt as much like a luxury. I close my eyes and relish it as she scrubs me and works rose-scented shampoo into my hair. The mark on my neck is plainly visible to her; the ring of teeth, the twin puncture points of the canines.

“Dear,” Hilda mutters to herself as she skims over it gingerly. “Dear, dear.”

“It’s all right,” I tell her. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“What’s this?” she adds, touching the cords around my neck. Thrain’s Yggdrasil pendant and Ivar’s black pouch hang between my breasts; I clutch them both protectively.

“Just gifts,” I say.

She breathes through her nose, the kind of labouring breaths that tell me she’s trying very hard to keep all of her questions tucked away. Then she finally comes out with, “I’m just glad you’re all right, poppet.”

I have no idea how to talk to her about any of it. So I ask after her own health instead; her and her daughters. She tells me about how they’ve been faring, how fortunate they are to be working in the castle and afforded good food and shelter compared to those out in the fort’s roundhouses and tents.

“Your mother, now she’s been a saint,” Hilda goes on. My heart clenches painfully. “It’s like this entire war has given her new life. She’s out there all the time, tending for the daughters of Clota, praying for our Cavaliers. I think you’ll find she’s quite a changed woman, just like you are.”

I let out a little laugh. “I’m not so different,” I croak out, though even as I say it I hear the lie of it.

Everything’s changed. Everything.

She pats me dry and wraps me up in sumptuous red wool that I recognise all too well. This is the dress I wore when Rhun had his wolfsbane trial.

“I gave this dress to Cinnie,” I protest.

“Well, you brought all your dresses along with you to Dál Riata, didn’t you? Cinnie won’t mind if you borrow this one,” Hilda chortles.

I smile at the mention of Cinnie. The dress is so luscious and soft and

sweet-smelling. I feel like I've been wearing a coat of mud for weeks. Hilda wraps me in a thin cape, too, just to hide my mark.

"There," Hilda says, once she's braided my hair and stuck it through with fresh flowers. "More than fit for church."

I blink at her. "Church?"

"Yes, poppet. Your lady mother will be at the commoners' chapel. She sleeps there sometimes; she requested that you be brought to her." She smiles at me even as my insides plummet. "She'll be so happy to see you."

* * *

Emrys is stationed at my door. We exchange a glance as he falls into step beside me. But he finds nothing to say as he accompanies me out of the royal castle.

"How is he?" I ask him. "Ivar?"

He clucks his tongue impatiently as we step out through the front doors. "Alive," he says.

That makes me stare in horror. "What do you mean? He's well, isn't he?"

"Best you don't ask after his wellbeing while you're out here," he says. I stare out at the courtyard, and I see what he means; there are so many families out here, ousted from their own homes by the Vikings.

"Emrys, you have to tell me," I say, grabbing his arm, and he glares at me before pulling me closer for privacy.

"I don't know how to navigate this, all right?" he admits. "I'll try and find out for you. But you need to be careful now, Tamsin. I don't think it'll do you any good if you keep insisting that the Vikings are your friends."

There's a shadow over his face as he says it. I know he's confused and probably afraid, though he tries to hide it. We've both danced close to the Vikings and he still hasn't made his peace with it.

"I understand what you're saying," I grit out, and he nods.

"Come on."

We stride along the muddy central street, skirting tents full of women bent over their tasks and children running around. It's so strange to be surrounded by so many women all at once. Not to mention, a good portion of them are my kinswomen, daughters of Clota. The only men within the walls of this fort are very young, very old, or crippled.

Many of the younger daughters of Clota stare as I pass. I recognise most of them. I wouldn't count them as *friends* – I never really had friends beyond Rhun and his band of Cavalier-hopefuls. But I know all these girls from around the village and farmsteads.

The recognition in their eyes is tinted with curiosity. Some try to step forward, only for their mothers to hold them back.

"Don't talk to her," their mothers mutter.

"Princess Tamsin!" A young girl barges out from between the curious onlookers. She's the weaver's daughter, Drysi, thirteen years old and an absolute busybody. She gives me a buck-toothed grin, defying the hush that hangs over me.

"Is it true you sailed on a Viking longboat?" she asks loudly.

"Drysi!" Her mother swipes at her. "I apologise, princess... Drysi, *come here.*"

"No it's all right," I tell her. "I did, yes."

Drysi's sparkly-eyed with curiosity. "Is it true you were part of a big sea battle?" she goes on, ignoring her mother's hissed reprimand.

The thought of it cuts into me. But she says it like it was a daring adventure.

“Yes, I was.”

“Leave her be, Drysi,” Emrys barks at her.

“No, please,” I tell him, heart thudding. To be met with curiosity rather than wary judgment is warming me so much. “I don’t mind answering her questions.”

Some of the mothers aren’t quite so adamant to keep their daughters away from the bad influence I must represent. In fact they look just as curious to hear what I have to say. Drysi is joined by a little gaggle of her friends, all of them around the same age, full of blunt questions and affirmations about the Vikings. I sit on a nearby crate and answer as best I can.

What was it like up in Dál Riata? Did you meet the King of the Vikings? What was he like? Was it very frightening? Did you see lots of battles?

“Your mother’s waiting,” Emrys tells me impatiently.

“She can wait a bit longer,” I tell him.

Eventually there are older teenagers, girls closer to my age who’ve drifted closer to listen. I don’t say much; Drysi wholly leads the conversation, affirming or refuting what I say. *Well according to what I’ve heard, that’s incorrect... the jewel maker’s son met lots of Vikings when he went to Wales and they were more like this... yes that’s right, I’ve heard that too.* She’s completely full of herself, but if it had annoyed me before, it only makes me smile now. If it weren’t for her barging in and taking over like this, I wouldn’t be sitting here, being encouraged to speak.

I feel like I’ve aged ten years. To look at these girls exchanging noisy chatter and feel nothing but contentment; that they’re safe. That they’re my

kin. They've never gone out of Strathclyde; they're so sheltered. Craving stories of what it's like out there.

"What's that necklace you're wearing?" Drysi asks, and I clasp the Yggdrasil pendant protectively. I have to persuade myself to show her.

"It's a gift from my protector," I tell her. "It's something from Viking superstitions. The world tree, Yggdrasil."

She's fascinated by that. "Your Viking protector – is he that man you brought in?"

"All right girls, that's enough," Emrys barks.

But the girls don't heed him. *I heard they were all decked in gold from all their raiding. Bit of a cheap protector if he'd only give her a piece of wood.* Then another goes on, *if I had a Viking protector...* And that rouses their mothers and aunts, who speak up to chastise them for even thinking such things.

I'm glad Emrys cut them off. I wouldn't even have known how to answer her. I've grown so used to having my pack, I'm only realising now what an aberration it'd be to say, *well you see, I have three protectors... three men I care for deeply. And a fourth perhaps, who's far away...*

Emrys grabs my arm, forces me up so he can march me onward. But Drysi and a few others only follow me obstinately, talking among themselves, as though being near me lent them some of my aura of daring adventure.

"I've been up on the battlements," Drysi boasts. "My second cousin is a Cavalier and he showed me the whole Viking camp..."

"Yes Drysi, you've told us five times already," another girl complains.

Drysi goes on asking me how it is out there, amazed that I might've lived among the Vikings. I try to remain light-hearted in my answers. She's

appalled to hear that I've only had one dress to wear for months, that the Vikings are similarly frugal. I tell her I lost most of my things in my travels; I don't tell her how all those delicate dresses have been lost to the blood stains of battle.

An older daughter of Clota, much shyer, is walking alongside me. She catches my eye and smiles; she's tall and lanky as many of them are, having subsisted on rations and stress for two months.

"Is it true some of them are friendly, then?" she asks anxiously. "Is it true they can be reasoned with?"

"Yes," I tell her. "Some of them."

It seems to calm her nerves, to think that the great mass encircling the fort isn't a force of pure evil. That it's possible to survive them. As we reach the commoner's church, a woman comes forward to claim the shy girl, complaining loudly about how we're going to miss mass – and I realise I'm staring at Angharad.

I flush as I stare at the baker, her familiar rolled up sleeves and stout industrious manner. I've been sleeping in her house – God, if she knew! All the heathenry that's been going on under her own roof.

"Angharad," I greet her with a nod. She fusses over her daughter, eyes skimming over us all.

"Girls, what are you doing, crowding around the princess like that? You know she's been through hardship. Give her some space."

"I have it in hand," Emrys tries, but he can barely get his voice heard over the noisy girls and Angharad's authoritarian tone. I'm grinning at how he closes his mouth and fumes silently while Angharad takes over.

"You poor thing," she says, running a hand down my arm. She smells like the little house, rye thatching and baked bread – and a strange wave of

longing, almost like homesickness, batters into me. That is where my pack is... where my nest is. “Give these pests leave to talk and they’ll be at it all day. In the church, now, girls! Off you go.”

“Here,” says Drysi, and she slips a thin iron band from her finger and gives it to me. “Sorry you got spattered on your first day back. You can have that, since you lost all your things.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what to say as I take it. Then another girl offers the same; a bracelet, a bauble really, dried rowan berries woven together, a protective charm mothers often give their daughters. “Thank you. You don’t have to.”

It’s a strange sort of ritual. They’re adorning me and I’m not sure if it’s out of pity, or because they want to borrow some of my adventurousness in return. I can already imagine Drysi boasting about it. *I gave Princess Tamsin my ring...*

My mouth is pinched, my eyes swimming in nonsensical tears. They don’t make much fuss about these things, these obscure girlish rituals, but for some reason it pierces my chest to see these dried rowan berries on my wrist.

Then just as Emrys finally manages to reclaim his place at my side, a familiar figure strides up to us. And I look up and find Cinnie; Cinnie, who grew up with me and Rhun, who’s wearing a wide brilliant smile.

“Princess!”

The sound of her voice washes over me. She’s got a pile of laundry folded over her shoulder, her glossy black hair tucked in a band that’s all askew – but she comes at me for a hug anyway. And all I can do is crumble into it, trying not to let anyone see I’m crying again.

“That’s a nice dress you’re wearing,” she says, and I hiccup a laugh.

“I’ll give it back to you,” I mumble.

“No need.”

“I *will*.”

Emrys sighs and says, “Come on. I’m quite sure mass has been put on hold already because of you. Hurry up.”

“Oh! Sorry, sorry,” Cinnie says. She hoists up the laundry, saying, “Better get these back before my mother gives me an earful,” and I wipe my face as I watch her bustle away to the royal castle.

Emrys gives me a rare look, something like kindness. He’s almost smiling as he watches me brush my cheeks down. Then at last, he leads me into church.

Chapter 49



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of September

The commoners' church is a ramshackle wooden structure, nothing like the stone grandeur of the chapel in the royal palace. But it's much larger and admits many more people. The doors are wide open, gaggles of women in shawls huddling in conversation while their youngest run amok.

Inside it's the same thickness of people, the odour of many sweaty musky bodies pressed together. Incense is burning, but it only adds saturation to the scents.

I wonder if this is where the daughters of Clota spent the full moon. Deep in prayer and abstention, no doubt. There's a tinge of copper on the air, remnants of blood. It's strange to think many of these women have the same scars as me on their backs, and it's normal here; it isn't repugnant.

"Tamsin!"

My mother's voice pulls at my guts. I strain to see her – then she straightens from where she was crouching, and her sumptuous jewellery and gown set her aside from the other women instantly.

I stand stock-still. I can feel my mark like a burn in my neck as I watch this tall, thin woman sweep towards me.

My lady mother. She takes my hands and hers are just as cold and claw-like as always. Her features look different, more beautiful somehow; wide cheekbones, pretty almond-shaped eyes, a cutting jawline that gives her neck a delicate quality. Her ginger hair is pulled back behind a white veil.

She glitters with respectability, as ever.

Last I saw her was in the courtyard before heading off to Dál Riata. Her eyes had been so cold. She'd told me to remember a woman's duty; and she'd let go of me, believing it would be forever.

What did she feel, when she heard of the Firth of Clyde massacre? Did she believe Rhun and I had died on that ship?

She looks relieved now, but not as you'd expect from a mother whose child returns from the dead. To her, a proper lady is never so crass as to show ostentatious emotion.

"Hello, Mother," I tell her, my voice unsteady.

She lets out a long sigh, then strokes my face. "I'm so glad to see you," she says. "And your brother? Did he travel back here with you, too?"

"Yes."

She closes her eyes and smiles. "Thanks be to God," she says.

God had nothing to do with it, I want to mutter.

"Are you really glad?" I ask her, meeting her eye again. "To you, he should've died in the bogs."

She reels a little as though I'd slapped her in the face. Then she observes

me a moment and shakes her head.

“Oh, Tamsin,” she sighs. “I have prayed. And prayed and prayed. To try and understand everything that has happened. I know I was harsh with you. I’m so sorry to have said all those hurtful things to you, before you left.”

I blink at her, just as confused as I was with Uncle Arthgal.

So after all the blame she placed on me – telling me I was the reason this entire war is even happening – now she says those are just “hurtful things”? Now she has the grace to absolve me of it all, just because she’s had a change of heart?

“If we can make it through this war,” my mother goes on with a trembling voice, “and if God can grant me both my children by the end of it – that is the victory I long for.”

The dissonance of being in her company is whirring around me. I’m still wearing all the spikes she planted in my chest; and now she acts like there is no hurt between us.

“I thought you said it was a woman’s role to endure hardship,” I snap. “Even to lose your children, if that is the bidding of God – you said that to me once.”

“Tamsin,” she says, again with that condescending smile, as though she had reached some absolution and pitied me for still standing on the dirty ground. “There are things that become much clearer when you’re at war. I see now that I was a terrible mother to you and Rhun alike. I’d like to make amends for it. Let me take care of you now.”

Take care of me. I have no idea what’s implied by that.

Warily, I follow her further into the church. We stop at the front, sitting on the mats alongside Eormen’s sisters and several other high-borns. The

general populace has only the beaten-earth floor to cushion their bottoms; they're organising around us to form lines of seated supplicants.

"You've had to endure so much," she says. "There are those who think you aren't fit to sit in mass, but I won't have you shunned. You're my daughter; you will always be my daughter. I'm sure you're anxious to be cleansed of it all."

To be cleansed. Of course. That's why she had me brought here.

Before long the priest, Father Madog, emerges before the altar and cross. Out of pure habit, I bow my head along with everyone as he presides and greets us all. I move out of blind automatism, my heartbeat the only thing I hear.

He opens his book before us all. Latin flows over our heads as he intones the catechisms I have heard all my life.

I watch, trying to sit still and swallow past the ball in my throat as the mass goes on. He calls us to feel gratitude before the full glory of God and – and a wave of nausea overcomes me.

I've wrapped a hand around my belly without thinking. Father Madog has his back turned to us now, host and chalice held up. The church is quiet save for the screaming of children outside as the priest blesses the wine and bread under his breath.

My mother has not missed a crumb of my own actions. She stares at the arm I've wrapped around my belly.

She knows I spent my heat out there in the wilderness. She knows I must've lain with cursed men at the height of my fertility.

I meet her gaze.

She's guessed that I'm pregnant. She must have.

I try to unbend my arm, feign indifference. But the nausea is rippling

through me relentlessly. It's all I can do to keep from pressing a hand to my mouth.

She grips my shoulder. "Oh child," she murmurs. "I know it's difficult. But the prayer will cleanse you of everything."

She makes it sound like being in God's house is what's making me react like this. Like there's something in me that needs to be exorcised.

I shake my head, squeezing my eyes shut. "I'm going to be sick," I mutter, and she drapes an arm around me, squeezing me against her.

"It's going to be all right," she says. "Hush, child, I'm here with you. Let's pray together."

Her eyes are closed, and she mutters just like everyone else, praying in the silence while the priest does his consecrations.

God. What might happen, if I sit all the way through this mass? If I take the communion?

Would it –

Would it poison what's growing in me? What if, by God's will –

No. No, it doesn't work that way, it's only wine and bread. Only wine and bread.

I close my eyes and grip the Yggdrasil pendant hidden under my cloak. It's the only image that works to calm me; the tree, lazily swaying in the wind. Wearing all the seasons in its branches. A world tree... so huge it would overshadow this church, branch out into the sky, dig its roots deep into the earth. Realms upon realms, connected by its boughs.

I want nothing more than to be outside. To be free of the suffocating box that is this church. Seems strange to grasp for holiness in a dark, squat building like this.

Then the final part of the cleansing comes.

Father Madog walks around the chapel, starting with the high-borns. My mother accepts the host and the wine, making a show of it as she closes her eyes in prayer.

“Body of Christ,” intones the priest.

Then he comes to me.

I’m panting in fear, sweating with the sickness. I’m going to throw up. Oh Christ, I’m going to throw up all over him – that damned chalice makes me want to grab it just so I might at least catch what’s coming –

He hands it to me. And the wafer.

“Body of Christ,” he says.

I swallow hard, staring at him. What does he see in me? Does he see some vestige of crimson in my eyes? The puffy gums from which my canines have grown?

Does he know what I’ve done? I’ve eaten men alive. I’ve had guts strung around my fingers. I’ve ridden with Vikings through a midnight wood and howled to the moon.

And now he’s offering me the body of Christ. And all I can think of is, why is he offering me another man to eat? Here under this cross.

The blood of Christ. I remember a bloody sheen shining along my hands, along my forearms. Drinking from that was bliss indeed when the moon was full.

It’s too strange. All of it. Too strange. I’m going mad with the dissonance of it.

“Tamsin,” my mother coaxes me.

I shake my head. “I’m going to be sick,” I gasp.

“It’ll stop once you’re cleansed,” she insists. “Take it. Take the communion.”

I swallow, again and again. That is my one prayer – *don't vomit on Father Madog*. Mother says something to him, apologising for me, and he waits with a benevolent smile.

“Those who have strayed are those who need it the most,” he says to me. “God has seen your efforts to help your kingdom, Princess Tamsin. In His magnanimity, He offers you the chance to be purified, to start again. He knows your heart is good.”

All right – now. The sickness lowers just a little, so I open my mouth, hoping he'll just do it already before it rises again.

He places the body of Christ on my tongue. I crush it, swallow it, frowning as all the wrong associations spark in my mind. Then the blood, the metal chalice cold against my lip. I sip from it, cough, press a hand to my mouth.

Can Thrain taste this? Is he taking communion through me? The Great Wolf of Dublin, tasting Christ's flesh on his tongue.

I hear Mother apologising for me again, rubbing my back.

“She's lived through a lot,” she says quietly. “She comes back to us from deep, dark places.”

“I understand,” Father Madog says. “It will take time.”

* * *

The sickness is not cured by the eucharist. I'm wobbly as Mother hauls me out of the church. Outside, we squint in the sunlight – and we find a fair Cavalier captain, resplendent in his armour as he stands in the milling crowd with Emrys beside him. Silver hair tied back, a strict yet benevolent old face; it is Captain Llewellyn, the one that the Dubliners and I brought back from

the secret cove. From the decorations he wears, he's now been made commander of the fort garrison.

He bows low to my mother, first. Then he turns to me.

"Princess Tamsin. I was wondering if I could be so bold as to interrupt your reunion with your mother and borrow you."

"What is this?" Mother says, pretending protectiveness as she crowds me. "My daughter has only just returned to us, Commander. Surely she's earned some respite."

"She has indeed. And I apologise for my boldness, Your Grace," he says smoothly. "Only, Tamsin was in the Viking camp for over two months. She has information that could be vital for us. I was hoping we might bring her to our tower soon, for discussion."

"If it's information you need, can you not just interrogate your Viking hostage?" Mother says. "Really, that you should wish to involve my daughter when you have one of them at your disposition—"

"That's just it, Your Grace," Commander Llewellyn says. "The hostage will not speak to us. He insists upon seeing her, first, to be assured of her well-being."

"What!" Mother scoffs even as the words thump painfully into me.

Ivar's asking after me. He's all right, then – if he's making demands, then he must be fit enough to do so.

"And you think it's appropriate for us to heed a Viking's request?" Mother seethes. "So we should show him my daughter just because he demands it? What depravity is that?"

"Mother, there's no *depravity* about it," I interrupt her impatiently. "He just wants to make sure I'm all right. I'll gladly come with you, Commander _"

“You can barely stand straight,” Mother chastises; I still have an arm around my belly, my throat constricted with nausea.

“I’m fine,” I wheeze out.

“No you’re not,” she insists. To the Commander, she says, “Tamsin will come to speak with you when she’s ready. And there will certainly be no question of *showing* her to any Viking. Don’t you think they’ve done enough harm to my daughter already?”

“Mother, for God’s sake – let me go, I *want* to go –”

But there is no dissuading her, especially as the nausea is clouding my brain and making me stagger. Commander Llewellyn bows low to us, and I can barely throw out the question, *please, how is he?* – before my mother hauls me away, back to the castle.

* * *

She takes me back to my room, and there I am at full liberty to heave to my heart’s delight.

Hilda’s not there; it’s only Mother and I, and the clinging smell of sickness. She has my sick bucket whisked away by servants while I sit on my bed, teary-eyed. The pair-bond rocks – Thrain is being buffeted by this sickness, too. I can feel it. I can almost see him stagger, leaning against a wall.

Mint, comes his suggestion. I almost want to smile at the idea that he’s feeling the same morning sickness as his pregnant wife. It makes me feel less monstrous and alone for a moment.

Sorry, I send out through the bond. I miss him, then – I miss them both so much. Between Ivar’s concern over me and Thrain’s empathy, it’s hard not to

feel a wave of longing. They are my normality.

Or were. I have no idea what's meant to count as my "normality" any more.

Then my mother closes the door on the servant she's been talking with. And she sits beside me, a steaming cup in her hand.

I stare at it.

"Here," she says. "This will get rid of the sickness."

I glance up at her.

Even without asking, I know exactly what that is. The Vikings are savages to her; the idea that I might bear a Viking's child is only one more thing I must be cleansed of.

"Is that Queen's Sage?" I ask her.

She tilts her head. "How did you hear about that?"

My stomach drops.

It is. She's really offering me Queen's Sage. And she's counting on my ignorance of it, too, so I'd drink without a clue of how it'd affect me.

She did not give me a choice for mass. I can only wonder if I have any choice, now.

"I'm not taking Queen's Sage," I mutter.

She stares at me a moment, her affable expression flattening to stone. I can't read her at all as she sits there quietly.

"You were bitten and raped by Vikings," she says quietly. I cringe – the words are like successive kicks to the gut. "The laws of our kingdom would have you shut away in the convents of Cumberland just for being bitten. But our circumstances are exceptional. And *you* are exceptional. You're still so driven, even after everything –"

"I wasn't raped," I bite out through a tight throat.

She tilts her head again, as though I were speaking another language.

“I understand, my darling,” she says, still in that unbearably compassionate voice. “You did what you could to survive. You told yourself these stories so you might bear through it –”

“It wasn’t like that!” I say, louder this time. “You don’t know. You have no idea what I’ve been through. What the Vikings are really like.”

She’s growing stiffer by the moment. “Answer me this, Tamsin,” she says. “Do you want a Viking bastard? Do you want to look on the face of your child and remember, every day, that he is the child of a man who raped –”

“Shut up! Just – *SHUT UP!*” I shout at her. Then, because I’m facing her now, I’m doing this, letting out the truth: “The man who gave me this bite – I wanted him to. I didn’t protest it. He is Thrain Mordsson, lord of Dublin, and when he bit me, it was a claiming ceremony. We’re pledged to one another.”

That robs her of her voice for a moment.

“But you know who did want to rape me?” I go on savagely. “Aedan. The precious suitor you all picked out for me. Aedan held me down on my wedding night and told me he’d dreamed of raping me all this while. And you said the role of women was to endure, but I couldn’t endure it –”

“Stop it. *Stop. Now.*” She slams the words down, silencing me. “You’ll take it,” she orders, cold now and wearing a look that is fear masked by fury. “Take the Queen’s Sage.”

“No.”

“Tamsin, if you do not take this, then you remain tainted. Do you understand? The bite is a taint. It sickens and corrupts you from the inside. And that child, it will only be monstrous –”

“Is this the condition, then?” I snap at her. “You’ll embrace me and call

me your daughter, but only as long as I *cleanse myself?*”

She gazes at me. “It is for your own sake, Tamsin,” she murmurs. “For the sake of your soul.”

I feel it then, this little light in my chest. It is as a burning brand.

For a split second, I wish I could reach in and tear it out. So there would be no question of purity or cleansing or any of it.

“Take it,” she says again, thrusting the cup in my hands. I don’t – she pushes – so I knock it aside, hot water spilling across the floor. She draws herself up, towering over me as she breathes out through her nose. “All right,” she says, more softly now. “All right. I understand, I knew this would be difficult. Perhaps I acted too soon. Tomorrow you will be sent to the commoners’ chapel. And the priest will be far better suited than I, to untwist your mind.”

She leaves the room, slamming the door shut. I just have the time to push myself up when I hear the locks clatter.

She’s locked me in.

* * *

I sit for a long time with my back to the door. My face is glazed with tears and snot – I’ve got an awful taste in my mouth. No matter how much I wipe at myself, I still feel disgusting and sickly.

But it’s good... good to be alone at last. Without all those horribly ‘kind’ voices pulling me this way and that. Now I can collect myself a little.

Refocus on what’s important.

I seat both hands on my belly. I’ve never really acknowledged it properly. That there are two of us. But now – to think that little seedling might be in

danger only makes it more real.

“Hey,” I mutter through my sniffing. “Hey. It’s going to be all right.”

I rub my flat belly, trying my best to feel the tiny thing in there, though the only indication I have is this lingering nausea.

“You’re staying in there,” I say, feeling a little daft. “All right?”

I try to imagine it. A little round pearl. A speck, really. I wonder if it hears my heartbeat. If it gets scared when I do.

I roll my head back against the door with a sigh.

“Yeah... we’re going to be fine.”

The window outside grows dark, sunset blooming. A knock comes after a time, startling me.

“Princess?”

It’s Emrys’s voice. I perk up, pushing myself off the floor so I can lean against the wooden door.

“Yes. I’m in here.”

“You all right?”

“Yeah.” I wipe my face again, sobering a little. “My mother locked me in.”

“Of course she did,” Emrys says with a sigh. “Commander Llewellyn is having words with the King. We need you out of there.”

That makes my heart thud. “Are you going to take me down to the dungeons, then? To see Ivar?”

“The Commander’s working on it,” he says, and I grip onto the door, elation sweeping through me. “That Ivar Gofraidsson’s a stubborn git. Won’t speak a word until he’s seen you. As though you were in enemy territory or something. I don’t think he realises this is our home; you’re safe here.”

I can only smile wryly at that. “Have you seen him, then?”

“Not yet. But the dungeon guards rotate, so we should have a chance to go down there soon.”

“As soon as we can go, just take me with you. Never mind what my mother has to say about it,” I grit out.

He scoffs. “We can’t just disregard her entirely. But we’ll go soon, I can promise you that.” After a quiet pause, he brushes a hand against the door. “Focus on yourself for now. There’s a lot of chatter about you. Not all of it good. You should take better care to uphold appearances.”

I frown at that. I never thought he’d speak to me with sincere concern. It’s odd to have him on my side.

“Emrys?”

“What?”

“Thank you.”

He knocks on the door once before leaving. “You take care, princess.”

Chapter 50



THRAIN

New Moon of September

Church bells are clanging in the clear midday sun, ringing all throughout the camp.

The Briton King is calling for negotiations.

We've gathered at the central square of Dumbartonshire. Olaf is astride Alsvithr, to save himself the effort of walking; I stay by his side, Rhun close by as we find ourselves among Gofraid's inner circle.

Gofraid himself stands at the head of our group, hands on his hips, his huge frame casting a shadow over us. We are all staring out over the King's Garden, at that one weakness on the fort's outer wall: the gate, hidden by the raised drawbridge. Waiting for it to open.

Then – at last, a squeal of metal resounds.

That drawbridge inches down, little by little, and slams into the earth. The Briton King appears in the open gateway, and we watch in reverential silence

as he rides out with his men, clip-clopping along the bridge.

He and his Cavalier vanguard hardly take two steps onto the King's Garden before stopping. They expect to have this meeting right there at the foot of the outer wall, it seems; protected by their archers.

Gofraid glances sullenly at Olaf and I. Then he jerks his head at the rest of his Jarls and calls, "Come! Let us meet with our gracious host."

We detach from the occupied village. We are but a small group, flanking our King, shields in hand as we keep an eye on those archers up there. Once we are several paces from the Britons, we stop, and both camps bow to one another from across the lush strip of grass that separates us.

King Arthgal is a portly fellow. His boyish face is engulfed in grey curls that sprout from his crown, his mouth obscured by a thick dark beard. He wears the gold and green colours of Strathclyde, his jewels glittering in the sun, Celtic knotwork tangled around him like snakes.

So.

This is him. The son of the dynasty that has been safeguarding the Vanirdøtur for centuries. Human, well-fed and ruddy-cheeked. Next to Gofraid, he appears so small and squashable, wrapped as he is in his rich regalia like some overstuffed cushion.

Both kings come forward to greet each other.

Gofraid claps a hand into King Arthgal's while we eye the line of Cavaliers that face us. I recognise Llewellyn with a start. Last I saw him, he was scarpering across the riverbank in the dark, Ivar's arrows protecting his flight to the fort. Though we cannot show any sign of friendship, I still lift my chin in a subtle greeting. His eyes flicker between Olaf and I, and he gives us the same gesture.

"Well met," Arthgal intones. "I think we may be brief. We both know the

reason I have called this meeting.”

“We do indeed,” Gofraid says. “You have my son. I’d like to see him, before we begin.”

“Of course.” Arthgal lifts an arm. We look to the battlements. Sunlight gleams on the helmets of the Cavaliers as they march behind the crenels. Then they step up on a platform, a tall black-clad man wedged between them.

Ivar.

My spine bristles as I stare at him.

My brother. He’s so high above us. Unreachable. He’s clean, at least – but he looks hunched, leaning as though in pain.

“Son of mine!” Gofraid booms in Norse. “Are you well?”

“As well as I can be,” Ivar calls back. “Given I’m residing in this fort’s deep dank arsehole.”

I can’t help smirking at that. Whatever they do to him, they will never vanquish that sharp tongue of his.

Arthgal observes the exchange coolly, letting their Norse fly over his head. Then he lifts his chin, reclaiming our attention.

“You arrived in June. You have been here for over two months,” he states. “You have what – six, seven thousand mouths to feed? And you have feasted twice already. We’re now in September, and I can tell you, you will starve long before we even make a dent in our granaries.”

Gofraid listens, nodding, his expression purely conversational.

“Let us speak plainly,” King Arthgal continues. “I am not here to barter food or land or women. I am offering to give you back your son, along with a generous offering of gold. In return you will leave here, and save yourself the trouble of dragging yourselves through winter with no hope of obtaining

anything out of it, save perhaps death, pestilence and the disdain of your own lords.”

Gofraid nods again, deeper this time, his eyebrows raised. He glances back at his men.

“My son *and* a generous sum of gold?” He grins. “Hear that? Ivar Gofraidsson comes attached with a dowry, for our trouble.”

Several of the Jarls around us laugh. But my eyes are on the battlements, where Ivar has been dragged out of sight again. My jaw clenches. If they hurt him – by Loki, if they give him back maimed in some way – no amount of politics will stay my axe against the Briton King.

“You are very generous, to make such an offer,” Gofraid says with a smile. “If you would permit me to speak with my Jarls, and we may reconvene afterward?”

“But of course,” Arthgal says with a bow.

For all their gracious manners, Gofraid is seething as we break away for a bout of private discussion. He looks pale and harassed now that he has seen his son.

The choice has been placed before him now, bold and stark: leave, or let the Britons do as they will with Ivar’s life.

“You heard the man,” Gofraid barks at his Jarls in Norse. “What are we thinking?”

Olaf is the first to speak: “When the King of Strathclyde offers us treasure, I think it worth consideration. Judging by the richness of their lands, it will be no small pouch of coins. As you said, the offer is generous indeed.”

“Bah! We did not come here for their gold,” calls Ögmundr. “Even cartloads would be worth nothing next to the Vanirdøtur.”

Many agree with that, throwing out an emphatic *aye!*

Another of Ögmundr's friends adds, "Arthgal is bluffing about his reserves. They cannot be so full. The fort may be mighty but there's no way it can hold enough food and livestock to last until the winter."

"Yes! Why not simply barter rations to settle this?"

Gofraid glares at the dissenters. "Arthgal knows that my son is worth more than a few barrels of salted fish."

Ögmundr chuckles. "Oh, I don't know about that..."

That pigheaded churl is riling my blood, to speak of Ivar so disparagingly – I surge forward, growling deep and deadly, but Olaf holds me back. Ögmundr only grins at me, confident as he stands among his allies.

"Settle," Gofraid barks at me. "Let us think of our options."

"There must be a way of getting Ivar back," some of our friends are suggesting. They mutter about the fort layout, the possibility of sending people in to snatch him back.

Others do not even pretend to care, nor mince their words.

"He is your bastard, Gofraid," Ögmundr snaps. "I'm not leaving in the middle of such a promising siege for the sake of the King's bastard –"

Gofraid is the one who steps forward this time, breaking his kingly poise. Olaf and I watch, fascinated, as he slaps a meaty hand into Ögmundr's chainmail and wrenches him closer.

"Odin hear me, you will swallow your words," the Viking King growls. "Ivar is my son and I will not have him harmed."

I stare at him, biting back a scoff. This? From the man who would bruise Ivar's face himself? It's the first time I see him so vehemently lay a claim on his own bastard, and I can't rip my eyes from the spectacle of it.

I wonder what Ivar will think of this, when we tell him about it.

Two parties are distinctly forming, now; those on Gofraid's side, and

those on Ögmundr's, much like at the council.

“Ivar has always been close to the gods,” Gofraid insists. “With Causantin unable to wrench his thumbs out of his own arse, we are no longer certain of having the overwhelming advantage. We would be fools not to consider this offer seriously.”

“Yes!” Olaf takes up the argument. “We were already warned once already. Tamsin showed us all what lay ahead of us, should we pursue this siege and capture the Vanirdøtur.”

“Exactly,” I agree. “This – this gives us the chance to leave peacefully, with enough gold to compensate our efforts. And the gods would be appeased –”

“Oh, the gods!” Ögmundr growls back. “Suddenly the gods are speaking to you, when the King's son is on the line.”

“We have all been debating this ever since Tamsin butchered your brother's warband!” one of our allies snaps at him. “There are those of us who would leave already, were it not for you and your halfwit peers –”

Voices rise. Gofraid is surrounded by discord. I can only watch, heart thudding.

He would laugh to see this. Ivar – what a mess he's causing. He would laugh his damned head off.

“For the last time, you cannot expect me to leave for a handful of gold!” Ögmundr roars as the debate gets hotter. “I have lost too much, I have invested too much to be driven away with nothing but metal in my pocket. I don't give a roasted shit what they do with Ivar Gofraidsson. I want what was promised. I want what we came for –”

His own allies agree, making loud proclamations. Try as Gofraid might to prevent his own council from splitting in two, it's too late now. He must

compromise if he's to keep his authority at all.

"All right, all right. You will *settle!*" Gofraid growls, and waits until everyone quietens. "Let us reconvene with the King of the Britons. I'm sure he's seen how unhappy you all are." He glares around at them all. "Let us hope we can come to a compromise that suits us all."

* * *

The kings stand before one another again. They bow to one another, and Gofraid offers a would-be pleasant smile as he reopens the discussion.

"You are a father many times over, I believe," he says. "How many children do you have? Two sons, five daughters?"

"That's correct," King Arthgal says curtly.

"A blessed man," Gofraid says with a nod. "You understand my position, then. I would leave, if it were just me. I don't want my son to suffer. But a good number of my Jarls are threatening to break away from my army entirely and do as they please, unless you offer them better compensation."

"Better compensation?" Arthgal asks.

Gofraid looks him in the eye and says, "We came for the Vanirdøtur – your daughters of Clota. Give us a number of them, and my Jarls will be appeased."

The boldness of his request makes us all tense up. King Arthgal steps back, worrying his beard as he thinks on this. His counselors and Cavaliers shoot glances at one another over his head as he appears to consider the offer. They speak in Brittonic, arguing by the sounds of it, though they do not climb into spires of anger like we do.

“I hear, I hear,” the King of the Britons rumbles eventually, holding up a hand to stop the dispute. “All right. It is that man, is it not?” he adds, nodding toward Ögmundr. “He is the source of your troubles, isn’t he? So we furnish him with a daughter of Clota.”

“Not just this man,” Ögmundr growls. “There are many of us. We were promised a great bounty in coming here, King of the Britons. We may still reap it if we please.”

“You will not speak out of turn,” growls Gofraid, before returning to the discussion. That Arthgal would even consider his suggestion has filled him with new hope. “Yes. One Vanirdottir would be far too little. You have very many in these lands – you have used them for diplomacy already, have you not? Why not offer us – say, a hundred of them? Even those from peasantry stock would be a prize to us.”

“A hundred!” Arthgal splutters. “You are mocking me, sire. Certainly not so many. I might agree to appease your chief collaborators – surely no more than five.”

“Five,” laughs Ögmundr. “Five! We shall all have to share them, as the Jarls of Dublin share that redhead.” He glances around at his fellows, who join him in his greasy laughter. “They will have to be accommodating women indeed.”

I curl my hand into a fist, breathing out slowly. King Arthgal’s Cavaliers are staring at him in something like abject shock that he’s even entertaining these suggestions.

It makes me sick.

Arthgal is bartering the Vanirdøtur like a carpet merchant haggling his wares. And Gofraid – offering to leave so quickly, giving the Briton King a

taste of victory, only to withhold again and press him with demands. It's masterful manipulation.

Llewellyn steps forward, pulls at Arthgal's shoulder. They speak in rapid Brittonic, the Cavalier appearing to chastise his own king. Eventually Arthgal lowers his chin, looking grave as he takes in what his commander is telling him.

Then Llewellyn is the one who turns to speak with us. There is a quiet rage in him as he faces us down in his wolfsbane tabard.

"You must forgive me for interrupting. But this discussion has gotten out of hand. There will be no question of bartering our women."

Jeers and insults rise from Ögmundr's party as what small victory they sought is slammed down. Gofraid roars over them, and then bids them all take a few paces back so he might have a more private audience with the Britons. Ögmundr's eyes flash dangerously as he obeys his king, moving back with the rest of them so that only we remain.

King Arthgal lifts his chin as though to erase the humiliation of being interrupted and brought back to heel by his own commander. He gazes coldly at Gofraid, summoning his previous grandeur as though there had been no hiccup.

"As my commander says," he intones. "I will not barter with men who would see an outstretched hand and take the whole arm. Our previous terms stand."

"But surely you can see it for yourselves," Gofraid insists to the Britons, all but losing his composure as he is reduced to begging. "My Jarls will not listen to me. They care not for my son's fate."

"It is not our concern that you cannot contain your Jarls. You must find a way to subdue them, if you want your son back." There is a gleam of

eagerness in Arthgal's eye as he adds, "If you do not convince them all to leave, Ivar Gofraidsson will face torture and eventually, death. That is our final word."

Gofraid turns to look at Olaf and I. He is at the end of his tether, we can both see it; bloodshot eyes, a manic sort of manner. He is too emotional to even do the obvious, and press upon King Arthgal's surprisingly grey morals.

"You must give me time," Gofraid all but begs. "I cannot corral them in one afternoon. Give me time to persuade them; it will be no easy task."

King Arthgal leans toward his Cavaliers, speaks a few words with them. Then he says, "We will grant you until September's full moon to leave. If your army is still here by then, you know what awaits your son."

"Yes. That is reasonable," Gofraid grits out. Then, with the steel of possessiveness in his tone, he adds: "Until then, you will not touch him. Are we agreed on that?"

King Arthgal inclines his head, and though he works to keep a flat expression, I can see that triumph in his face.

"You have my word."

Chapter 51



IVAR

New Moon of September

I twist on the chains. My dear jailors have cuffed me to the ceiling; my arms are stretched above my head, my body stripped and arched. This is where I've hung since I first arrived in the fort; the only reprieve they gave me was when they displayed me during the negotiations. I can't feel my fingers, but *gods*, I can certainly feel everything else.

"You know, usually," I breathe as the whip coils wetly to the floor. "This sort of thing is a conversation –"

WHOMPH. The whip sails, hissing as it flies. It tears across my back, the tail eating into my flesh.

"– *hhfff* – I'm – only saying this," I pant out, "because nobody seems to have taught you – the point to all this, my dear man."

The Cavalier prowls around me, breathing hard. From the sound of it, I might surmise that he's aroused by this. His friends are standing on the other

side of the iron-wrought gridded bars, drinking beer and watching, calling out encouragement in Brittonic.

“The point to all this,” my batterer says, “is to see your blood cover this floor.”

“Ah,” I say with a groggy grin. “Right. Well.” He disappears from my sight again. “Didn’t realise you and I had similar proclivities,” I hiss. “Thought you’d be too noble for this kind of play.”

“*Play?*” he echoes.

“Indeed,” I huff out. “I know you’re enjoying yourself. I can smell it from here.”

He only unravels his whip again, and then – *WHOMPH*. Right across the previous slashes, biting into me hard.

The chains clatter as I lean into them, gritting my teeth, squeezing my eyes shut. Pain twangs out from the point of impact, like plucking a cord so hard it slaps against the instrument, resounding in its hollowed bowels.

“’s all right,” I wheeze out. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

He’s behind me, close enough for his body heat to prickle on my open wounds.

“I’m sure you think you’re hilarious,” he growls. “You think you’re going to rouse me so easily? We are not animals like you.”

“And yet,” I say, letting my head drop back, tasting blood as I smile. “Here we are – solid wood in your breeches at the sight of blood.” Can’t see him – can’t turn my head. But I can hear his ragged, angry breaths. “You Christian men. I’ve known so many of you under the moon. Always getting hard over pain and suffering –”

And then *lightning*, bright white, crackles out through the core of my being. He’s digging his nails into my lacerations, intimately close, getting my

blood on his fingers.

“You’re one to talk, Viking,” he growls. “I was out there when you first arrived. I saw your butchery. One of your men tore out my friend’s throat with his fucking teeth. *Animals*, the lot of you.”

“There’s something,” I pant, “called a chainmail hood – in case you hadn’t heard of it.”

His digging into my wounds makes all other intelligible responses tumble out in the form of pained panting.

“What was that, you pig’s son?” he hisses. “I can’t hear you.”

“I said,” I breathe, swallowing hard, trying not to pass out from the way he’s digging in. “You should really... be more careful. I don’t mind... this kind of foreplay, but... my King won’t like it if you ship me back in pieces.”

“Oh, is that right?”

He comes to stand in front of me. It is Captain Heddwyn; the dour-faced man who brought me before the King. He’s really quite a handsome fellow, all hard rugged lines and the kind of face I would very much like to see under me, in other circumstances.

“You forget,” he hisses. “The negotiations are still in session. Whether or not you stay in one piece depends entirely on what gets decided today.”

I can still feel his fingers in my back. That kind of pain – it’s all over me, clinging, prickling like insects.

“But, you’re right. Can’t be too hasty,” he says. He’s wrapped up the whip, hooked it at his belt. There’s something sharp shining in his hand. He raises the blade, runs it up my hip, where black ink blooms into Celtic knotwork. “Shame, really. I would very much like to carve one of these beautiful tattoos off you. As a keepsake.”

The anticipation of that blade slipping under my skin – Loki, I don’t

know how much more I can take of this. Focus. *Focus*. I gaze at his face, concentrating on him.

“You flatter me, Cavalier,” I pant. “That’s really... quite a slick tongue you have.”

“Slick, is it?” he says with a smirk. Then he bites the fingers of his glove, pulls it off. His bare hand finds my chin, grips me hard. He tilts my face up, digs into my cheeks to make me open my mouth. “Not as slick as yours, I’m sure.”

He stares straight down my mouth – scoping out those sensitive places where sharp things are very unwelcome.

Fuck. *Fuck*.

Calm. Keep calm. Focus.

“How many cocks have you had stuffed in here, I wonder?” he says. “You and your disgusting heathen feasts.”

I try to smile, cheeks pushing against his fingers. “All but yours, my prince.”

He brings up that knife of his. My heart thuds in my ears as he trails it over my lower lip. He’s savouring this – every bit of it.

“You don’t seem too frightened,” he murmurs.

“Hate to disappoint you,” I tell him, “but this isn’t my first time in chains.”

“Hmm.” He smirks. “I imagine not.”

“I’m sorry sir, but I really don’t think you should cut him,” calls one of the other Cavaliers. “We aren’t meant to maim him just yet. Commander Llewellyn should be back at any moment now with the verdict.”

“For God’s sake, I’m not going to cut his tongue out,” Heddwyn calls back. “Just give me a moment... I’m savouring the possibilities.”

I can't hold back from panting in true fear now. Whatever he's thinking, I'd really rather *not* get my gums hacked up, or my teeth plucked out.

"Won't you come in here and join me, instead of moaning over there?" calls my batterer. The young Cavalier sighs and comes through the gridded door, strides up to us.

"Here," Heddwyn says, giving the lad a knife. "Heat it."

Obediently, the lad goes to one of the torch brackets, letting the knife linger at the base of the flame. I'm trying to control my breathing as they both exchange something in Brittonic.

Then he returns, and they both crowd me. Both are wearing the kind of avid, half-absent looks of men descending into pure bloodlust.

So much for their wolfsbane tabards, and the rosaries around their wrists. They are Vyrgen to the bone – they relish this, though they will give themselves all the justifications of war and righteousness to excuse it.

"This is quite forward, boys," I tell them, pulse racing. "Really, I would've at least appreciated some courtship first –"

The young lad holds me by the chin, keeps my mouth open while Heddwyn lifts the glowing hot blade again.

"Careful what you say now," Heddwyn says, a malicious gleam in his eye. "Might be the last words this pig mouth ever utters."

His fingers venture in. He pinches my tongue, holds it out.

No, no, no. They said – not to cut my tongue – fuck – *fuck* –

"Don't worry. I'm not going to cut it off," Heddwyn says through his grin. "I'm just going to give the devil's son the forked tongue he ought to have."

I squeeze my eyes shut. My breaths come in rasps, my whole body cringing and tensing up as he endeavours to craft his design.

“Give this one a lick, *my prince*.”

He cuts in.

I can't –

I can't –

A growl bursts from my chest, my voice tangled in it, a guttural spilling of pain. I don't know when it's over – I only know I have a glowing hot coal in my mouth. Hanging my head, jaw wide open, I can only stare at the blackness behind my eyelids and try to hold back from yelling, regurgitating the blaring pain that's collected inside me.

“There we are,” Heddwyn says. He leans in. “What's that? You have nothing to say any more?”

He grips me by the braid, wrenches my head up, and I blink through my tears to see his grinning face.

“Shame. We were getting along so nicely.”

* * *

Well.

This is going to be a nuisance.

I can't close my mouth. I must be a sight, dangling from the ceiling, a long line of drool hanging from my lower lip. My split tongue burns – it burns so much I can barely breathe.

How long has it been? Days? Weeks? Difficult to say when there is no indication of time passing, down here. They were cordial with me when I first arrived; under Llewellyn's watch, they treated me well enough. But the dungeon guard must've rotated to another's command, and these men have had no such scruples regarding the wellbeing of their hostage.

After a time, a tumult of voices breaks out. I glance up to find the resplendent, decorated figure of the commander marching through the dungeon; Llewellyn has Emrys with him, alongside the new watchers. They're staring at me in horror, speaking in urgent Brittonic with Heddwyn's watch. Llewellyn comes into my cell, takes me by the jaw, inspects the state I'm in.

"Can you speak?" he asks in Gaelic.

I want to laugh. My mouth feels like an engorged red cabbage, and surely looks like one too – does he *think* I can speak?

Emrys looks pale as he helps to let me down from the chains. Commander Llewellyn throws out peremptory barks at his men, and then speaks in Gaelic so I might understand. I frown, trying to grasp his meaning through the haze of pain.

"The negotiations have ended. We are not to touch Ivar Gofraidsson until the full moon." Then he adds furiously: "I thought I had made it *absolutely clear* that he was not to be harmed while negotiations were still in session. Heddwyn – this is your doing?"

Heddwyn speaks: "The King himself is only too pleased for us to avenge our losses –"

"So it was you," Llewellyn seethes.

My batterer throws out an arm. "King Arthgal would wield the whip himself if he could!"

"Shut your mouth," Llewellyn barks. "A lawless King should not serve as a standard for a knight of the Order. You violated a direct command. Bring him to the tower."

Feet rush against flagstones, men grunting as a scuffle breaks out. Heddwyn and his men are dragged away.

Once Llewellyn is master of the dungeon again, he turns his attention back to me. We haven't spoken much, as I would always meet his attempted interrogations with silence. One thing is certain – if he still wants to try and interrogate me, that won't be possible for a while now.

He unhooks my chains, and hauls me bodily to the thin blankets and hay that serve as my bedding. Emrys brings in the tray of food they'd prepared, but there's nothing I can put in my mouth now that I bear the forked tongue of a snake, burning relentlessly. Just the thought of anything solid in there makes me shiver in revulsion.

Water – water is a balm that stings and soothes. But there's no comfort to be had. The hay on the floor of my cell bristles drily against my legs, promising to prickle against my lacerations.

Just fantastic.

Sitting with my shoulder against the wall is the only option I have. The Cavaliers crowd me a moment; they are saying something, words that barely register.

“I'm very sorry,” Llewellyn tells me. “This was not meant to happen. I'll see to it that the dungeon guard is taken only by my most trusted from now on.”

He moves away, so I grab his arm with what strength I can muster. Stare at him fixedly. He mentioned something about the negotiations – I need to know what they decided.

His clear eyes flicker between mine, the same sky-blue shade as Thrain's, and something like homesickness jerks up in me at the thought of my brother. Slowly, understanding dawns on Llewellyn's face as he hears my wordless question.

“Your father agreed to leave,” he says. “But he needs time to bring his

lords to heel. He has until the full moon.”

I stare at him. It takes me a moment to unclasp my hand from his arm.

He leaves with one last nod, shuts the gridded door with a whine of metal. And the cell is wide and empty again, a square of nothingness gridded and guarded.

* * *

Father agreed to leave.

Something squirms in me, a speck of unexpected delight perhaps. For a moment the impression persists, like the sun upon my retinas, like that hope I still bore when I was a child – that he could act out of love.

Gofraid Hroarsson, shifting an entire army out of love for his bastard.

I lean against gritty stone, battling the urge to spit.

I know better. It is nothing as noble as that; *he* has never been as noble as that. He lost his bastard to the enemy, after losing most of the military advantage he had. This is not love but saving face, grappling to hold his cracked crown together.

That is all I hoped for when I came here. To strike fear and horror into his heart. I know it is horror that moves him; horror at the idea of his own son being tortured to death. To die in such a way does not make one worthy of Valhöll, and for a king’s son to meet such an end is nothing short of a disgrace.

For Odin’s sake, be a man, he would bark at the gangly cavern creature I used to be. For him, to be manly is to take, to have, to force. To pile on more mass, so that one may face death and be comforted that one is weighted down, strong and heavy, gilded with glory.

I'm not sure I ever managed to be much of a man. I know for certain that I am not a man now. More of a worm than anything else, curled up in a dark cavern, stripped down to my core. Oh, if he saw me now... Odin, the face he would make. My lips curl into a mirthless smile.

Let him scramble in his shame over me. That shame that guided his hand when he left me bruises to wear... the shame he wears in his eyes when he beholds what he has begotten. The black-eyed creature risen from the violence he wrought upon my mother. Whatever it is he feels for me now...

Let it be his own undoing.

* * *

Spite against my father is a potent salve, and sustains me for a few hours. But eventually, the steady drip-drip of time whittles away the rage, and the triumph of Father's defeat. Soon there is only dull, stupid pain, and the panic of being trapped in this sunless place.

The fact of the matter is, I am still here, and this pain is not passing at all. Whatever victory we have achieved is a faraway, external thing – the full moon might be next year, for how far it feels. And though Father's army may leave... there is no true guarantee that I might get out of here alive.

Meanwhile this cell is ever more miserable, as is this new shape of mine – this smarting hide that I am trapped in. I open my mouth, carefully, wincing at the merest movement.

This is what I am now; this *thing*. Voiceless. Crooked.

Freya. What if I never recover the ability to speak? What if all that I know, all the songs and histories I've carefully stowed away – what if I no longer have any outlet for any of it?

My legs curl closer in the hay. This... this is what my mother must've felt. A renowned Völva, losing the proper use of her voice, the steadiness of her hands, when she had so much to teach, to show, to tell. She woke from her long difficult labour and it was all gone... the person she used to be, broken.

Her thread became frayed and worn over time, just like mine has. And yet somehow... she did not hold grudges. She never acted out of spite. She lost near everything, and still she had the grace to hold onto what was precious to her. To care for me, however hard it was.

That is the lesson I should've taken from her. There is a profound purpose to this loss, I know it, if I could just see past the raging grief, the lump building in my throat.

To allow yourself to be stripped down entirely, so that others may flourish... it is an act of selflessness that I am only just beginning to understand. My mother knew that struggle intimately well. Perhaps that is why the magic of the gods came to her in such abundance; her and all those other mothers who teach their daughters the *galdrar*. All their lives they are taught to give, they are expected to give, whether it is their time, their flesh, themselves entire. All without rancour. Like the gods, they have perfected the art of sacrifice.

Odin... even Odin learned to give himself up. He was following in the footsteps of women and sorceresses; he knew that way lay many answers, however painful they were to receive.

I lift my chin as I try to breathe without wincing. I should try to give myself with grace, but it is difficult, impossible surely, to tuck away the bewilderment, the anger over what I must lose in the process. How did my

mother not succumb to grieved rage? Was Odin not furious when he lost his eye? Did he not grip the Norns by their shaggy silver hair and shake them?

Gods, it is so dark and lonely down here. I have not even the ability to fill the silence with a song.

Mamma... how did you bear it?

I tilt my head against the wall. Drool drips down my neck as the pain glows, hot and unbearable. The torchlight bends ahead of me, dreamlike, wavering. Perhaps it is some pain-induced vision, the way it bends in the shape of a crone, hunched and smiling. She carries a long wool-wrapped distaff, her hair glowing white, and she gazes down at me haughtily.

My lips part, slick and hurting.

Why? I want to ask the Norn as she approaches. *Why is it always about sacrifice? You would have us give so much. Too much.*

Clack, clack, goes her staff against the ground. *The boy knows why,* she says.

I close my eyes, and recite the lesson from ages past. *There must always be some form of death,* I say in my mind. *Life grows out of the bones of what came before.*

And so? she croaks.

And so... It comes to me as though she had whispered it in my ear. *In order to have everything, one must first accept to have nothing at all.*

Her gnarled finger curls against my jaw, and she speaks with that deep, cavernous voice:

Yes. Now the boy understands.

* * *

“Ivar!”

I start as Tamsin’s voice resounds in this stinking underground place. Glancing over my shoulder, I find her struggling against the Cavaliers outside my cell – Emrys is trying to hold her back.

“Let me see him – let me go in there!”

“I told you to wait upstairs –”

“Emrys, he’s not going to hurt me. For God’s sake, *move*.”

Freya, she’s going to see me like this – hunched and open-mouthed, drooling like a dog who feasted on a wasp’s nest. I’ve wanted to see her for days, I wanted to make sure she was all right. And of course she comes to me *now*, when I’ve reverted to a drooling cavern creature.

It’s too late to hide from her now. Soon the door in the gridded wall whines open, and she rushes to my side, crouching down to my level.

“Ivar,” she mutters. She looks aghast. “Christ, what did they do to you?”

I try and fail to close my mouth. She cups my face gently, looks between my parted lips.

“Oh my God,” she exclaims. “Oh, Jesus Christ.”

She argues with the men outside a moment – *how could you let this happen? Who did this to him?* – sweeping me up in her righteous anger. All I can register is her closeness, her hands on me. I grip her slender wrists, let myself stroke down her arms. When she reverts to Brittonic, she is utterly unforgiving, the strength of her voice shivering down my spine as she chastises her kin.

I take her in, bask in her presence. Her loose hair flows down the beautiful crimson gown she wears. She’s looking healthy... well cared for.

“I’m so sorry,” she says to me, and there are tears streaking down her face as she huddles around me, coaxing me against her in an embrace. “I’m

so sorry I couldn't come sooner.”

I can barely do anything else than let her manipulate me. Freya, what utter indignity it is to have to show her this: I would've wanted her to know me only as the well-dressed, well-spoken skáld. But she doesn't seem to care what state I'm in. She holds onto me, deliciously close, and then... she purrs.

Urgh.

Yes.

Neither of us care that there are Cavaliers on the other side of that grid, that they can hear her, see her cradling a huge filthy Viking. Emrys calls out to her – *Tamsin!* – as if she were doing something indecent, exposing her breasts or something of the sort. But she only calls back – *look, it relieves pain. You don't have to stay so close to us.*

Incredibly, Commander Llewellyn orders Emrys to turn his back on us. When I next look, those who've stayed by the guards' table have all turned away, giving us privacy.

The throb of pain that spans my back and fills my mouth turns to a heady throb of healing. We lean against one another until finally I'm lying down on my side, resting my head in her lap, closer still to her purr. Gods, I might melt here and never return to human form again.

“I've got you,” she murmurs as she strokes my braided hair. Then, raising her voice to answer those outside the cell: “No, I'm staying here. I'm staying right here until you've brought healers down to look at him.”

I close my eyes, relief singing in my bones as I let my fingers dig into her ample crimson skirts.

Chapter 52



TAMSIN

Waxing Moon of September

Over the next few days, I badger Emrys so he might bring me back down to the dungeons every single evening. The healers bandage Ivar up, give his chains enough slack so that he might move more comfortably around his cell.

It's utterly strange for him to be so quiet. I'll sit with him in his cell, bring him his dinner, and the silence will be so charged as I arrange the bowls and cups. He sits with his back against the wall, a leg crooked around me as we bask in one another's company. Those dark eyes of his are always so eloquent as he watches me fuss over him, unwrapping what comforts I've brought to ease his imprisonment.

The Cavaliers hear everything I say to him, so it's difficult for me to speak at all – my every attempt at reassuring small talk just sounds so girlish and silly. So the moments we share are wordless. He sips carefully from his bowl, drinking the soup and stews I bring him, metal chains clinking every

time he lifts his hands. The first time I rip up a soft honey cake for him, his lips curl into a slow smile. Abruptly I realise he still has use of his hands; he doesn't need me to cut up his food. But he holds my gaze almost playfully as he takes a small fluffy piece of honey cake from my fingers and brings it to his abused mouth.

Commander Llewellyn shows himself to be surprisingly lenient towards me, as though to make up for the fact that his hostage was so severely beaten against his orders. So I make the most of my freedoms; I bring Ivar blankets from my own bed, arrange a more comfortable nest for him, and purr his pains away at every opportunity I have.

Though it makes my heart pound that we might admit this intimacy, I can't help my own instincts when I'm around him. Just this... having him curled in my lap like this, wrapped in my own scent, it's the only way to ease the dread in my gut. To see how he nuzzles and grips onto my scented blankets makes me yearn for the camp, back when we could lounge in my nest and speak to our heart's content.

"Do you have to do that?" Emrys asks one evening as he brings me back to my room; I spent the last few hours purring Ivar to sleep, my nesting instincts sparking with delight to have him so close.

"What?"

"I don't know... *touch* him like that," Emrys says, shaking his head. "Just, if you could see yourself from the outside. Ivar Gofraidsson has the appearance of a bloodthirsty savage. And you just go in there with him like it's no trouble, and you... you hold him in your *lap*."

I scoff indignantly. But I know what he means; Ivar's appearance was obviously no issue when we were out there among the Vikings, but here... with his pagan runes, his shorn hair and his lean, predatory hunch, I can

easily see him with the eye of my own people. The Cavaliers are all strangely quiet around me when I exit Ivar's cell, like they're awed that I would willingly step so close to a snarling Viking prince.

Still. The need to heal him is like an ache. I *need* to believe he hasn't lost his speech forever; to rob a skáld of his voice is too cruel. So I do what I can to help him recover.

* * *

Uncle Arthgal announces it to the whole fort. That the Vikings have been ordered to depart by the full moon.

The Cavaliers set the cheer, and the sound of all the villagers yelling in triumph still shivers in my bones for hours afterward. It's exactly what we all hoped for – it's what my pack and I have been striving toward. But though joy bucks up in me, Ivar has not been in any kind of celebratory mood since he learned it – and judging by the pair-bond, neither has Thrain.

It is not a clean, simple victory. It is only a first step. Gofraid and his Jarls are still here; everything depends on Gofraid properly wielding his authority. It's been such a brutal war that it seems almost unbelievable that it might end this way; in peace, and the gliding away of many ships.

Llewellyn orders his Cavaliers to man the fort walls and observe, day in, day out, what happens in the Viking camp. And all the villagers agree to wait, eyes wide with hope, to see if the Vikings will do as their king commands.

* * *

As the days succeed one another, I settle into a routine. Emrys comes to fetch me in the morning, and I go with my mother and Queen Beatha to mass. Then we go on rounds to hand out rations to the villagers. Eormen's sisters all come with us too, so all the princesses of Strathclyde can tend to the peasantry. And somehow, miraculously... the villagers all treat me with the same respect as my royal cousins.

I've come to love these mornings. There is something so precious about how the daughters of Clota have transformed this fort into a great bustling community. Somehow these small husbandless families manage to turn even a tent awning into something lively – they lean together, chatting about what needs doing, how to distribute the castle's well-water, gossip about the next tents over even while their children play and scream. Many tend to the herds of animals that have been squeezed into the fort; everywhere is the poignant smell of sheep and hay.

Mother is suspiciously quiet and kind with me again. It's so obvious that she's 'working' me, waiting for the opportune moment to offer the Queen's Sage. Thankfully I have Hilda on my side; I take my food and drink only from her, since she can observe the preparations in the kitchens. For all her concern, Hilda cannot openly criticise nor confront her mistress; both of us must remain glacially polite toward Mother, all the while remaining vigilant.

The afternoons are spent locked in my room, reciting Father Madog's catechisms, my entire mind bent on the darkening sky, and the moment Emrys will arrive to bring me down to the dungeon. It is an exhaustingly strict and monitored existence, but... at least I have Ivar. At least I can protect him.

He is always with me, somehow. To know he is right there under my feet as I walk across the fort grounds... even as I walk among my kin,

accompanying Angharad as she wheels out her carts of bread, I hold onto Ivar's rune pouch.

I want to believe this victory will pan out. I want to believe it so badly. Soon, soon... he will be let out of that dank dungeon, and we may return to our pack. Somehow.

I don't let myself think of the specifics.

* * *

“Princess! Hey, Princess!”

I turn, blinking in the morning brightness. There's a tumult among the villagers – the sheep herd has gone wild, bleating and running into people's tents. While I let myself get swept up in the odd hilarity of people and dogs trying to contain all these sheep, Drysi waves at me from over all their fluffy rumps.

“Come on! Let me show you something!”

I glance over my shoulder – Emrys is caught up in the sheep manoeuvring efforts. I squeeze between the bleating beasts until I'm at Drysi's side.

“What is it?” I ask her. But instead of replying, she just grabs my wrist and pulls me after her. She's grinning – several older teenage girls fall into step beside us as she leads me through the tents towards the battlements that encircle the inner sanctum.

“Wait,” I tell her, “wait – Emrys, he's watching me, I can't just –”

“Oh, let him stew a little,” she says. “My cousin just got on his watch. Quick!”

I realise she's leading me to one of the narrow stairways that run up to the battlements, where the Cavaliers are patrolling. Heart pounding, I tell myself

Emrys will probably find me easily enough – I’m in a bright red dress, after all.

And from up there, I’ll be able to see the Viking camp; really *see* it, rather than sense it through the vague impressions of the bond.

We teeter up the stairs, the girls jostling each other, playing a dangerous game. Finally we reach the battlements, and Drysi’s Cavalier cousin meets us. He’s wearing the most fed-up, deadpan look as he stares at us.

“One of these days, one of your girls is going to fall off those stairs and crack her head open,” he complains. “And I’ll have even more problems –”

“Yadda, yadda, yadda,” Drysi sings over him, and then she leads us along the walkway, her Cavalier cousin following.

The fort’s inner wall forms a ring around the castle and the living areas, perched as we are on top of the hill. At one point it forks off into the outer wall, which reaches down to form a second ring at the foot of the hill, facing the King’s Garden. Between both walls is a steep rocky incline that is difficult to navigate; the pathways between outer gate and inner gate are purposefully narrow.

While the girls titter ahead of me, I stare down over the battlements at that rocky incline. The tactical nature of it is so clear to me now, where before I only saw rocks and rowan trees. The fort’s two stone walls only reinforce the natural difficulty of the terrain. If an army breached the outer gate, they would have to separate and climb single-file up the pathways to the inner gate, leaving them at the mercy of our archers.

The girls are still talking and laughing, pulling me away from military strategy and thoughts of invasion. They lead me along the inner wall until we’ve reached its northernmost point, so we have a sweeping view of the Leven Port below. The Cavaliers on guard duty there don’t seem fazed – they

tease the girls, as though this were a regular occurrence. Then they see me and abruptly stand to attention.

“Oh – princess!”

The girls drag me to what is apparently “the best spot”, and I look in the embrasure to see the view. Below us the Leven river stretches out, glittering in the morning sun. Viking longboats dot the silvery waters, outlining the limits of the blockade.

I lean further, wind whipping strands from my braid. Viking warships are parked along the riverbank and the port’s wooden docks. There are so many of them. As though part of the blockade had pulled in. And there on the docks – I recognise the sails of the two Dubliners’ longboats. They must’ve brought them up from the Clyde and parked them here for ease of access.

My heart leaps. This is a good sign, isn’t it? The rocky sand is cluttered with what looks like crates and cargo. Clearly all those ships are being prepared for a return journey.

But the girls have other things on their minds.

“Oh, good! They’ve come down again!” one of them calls.

The others laugh and make odd noises of interest. I bend to try and see what they’re talking about. And there – my stomach flips as I realise what the girls are ogling at.

There are a bunch of Viking men washing in the river. I never even realised they came out here sometimes to take a full bath – it was always a rotation of well water for us, back at the camp.

Perhaps Thrain didn’t want to tempt me to come down to the river, when there are many men from different warbands down there. Some crouch over their armour and clothes; others are fully nude as they rub soap over themselves. Oh, *bollocks* – there are a few Dubliners too, and –

By all the saints. It can't be Olaf.

But it is. There's no mistaking how he towers over the others. He's standing in the water, mercifully immersed to the waist with his back to us – for a moment I'm hypnotized by that thick interlacing of dorsal muscles, all those scars shifting as he runs his hands over his cropped hair. Clearly the water relieves him of his limp, allows him to find his balance; he's letting his body straighten, stretching out in the sun.

I look away, flushing as I afford him this respect. But the girls – they keep on *staring*, grinning down at the men with shameless interest. Sunlight gleams on impressive musculature, on long undone hair, fanning beautifully over the Vikings' sculpted backs. And when they turn, they show off their impressive endowments – and the girls point and laugh, daring the shyer ones to look. God, we really shouldn't be here, they shouldn't be looking at this – I'm the eldest, I should take them back down –

“Jen, look, there's your man,” Drysi calls to an older girl, and they mock one another's tastes, picking out the qualities of each one of these brutal warriors.

“How do you think that one will be spending the full moon?”

“Bribe the Cavaliers and you can go keep him company yourself –”

“Shut up!”

They giggle and speak in hushed tones of what they imagine the full moon holds. I don't even know what to say as I lean there in the embrasures.

“Did you really spend two whole moons down there with them?” Drysi asks me.

“I –” I try my best to put on a stony, indifferent look. “I was locked away for my own safety.”

“Uh-huh,” teases Meryl, one of the older girls. “So you didn't see

anything?”

“No.”

Grinning, Drysi presses an elbow at me. “Come on. You can tell us. It can’t have been that much of a hardship, can it? If you had *that* view every morning.”

I stare at her, mouth parted, mind completely empty. “Drysi, really. This is completely inappropriate.”

“Do you know any of them, princess?” asks Meryl.

“I – *no*, I mean –”

Just as I turn back to the bathing Vikings, an aching familiar figure strides into view, hopping down from one of the ships. It’s Thrain. I can feel my cheeks burning as he wades through knee-high water, throwing a hand up and calling to Olaf. He’s bare-chested, his long hair coiled in a dark wet rope down his pectorals.

“Oh my God!” one of the girls hoots. “Look at that one!” And they all lean for a better look.

Oh, Jesus *Christ*. At least he’s not entirely naked – thank God for small mercies. I clutch my pendants, hoping this spike of guilt and territorial annoyance won’t rouse his attention. But of course it does – he can sense what I see, the glittering water, the sheer amount of male nudity, and I see him falter a little. To my horror he tilts his head up curiously – and I tear myself away, hiding behind the stone merlon.

“He’s looking this way!” Drysi cries. Then in a bout of daring, she throws up her hand and yells, “Hey! Good morning!”

“Christ alive, *Drysi*,” the others whisper-shriek, yanking her out of sight even as they dissolve into a fit of giggling.

“Girls,” one of the patrolling Cavaliers snaps sharply. “What in God’s

name are you doing? Don't *talk* to them!"

"We're miles higher than them," Drysi replies. "What are they going to do?"

"They are *Vikings*," the Cavalier thunders.

"Yeah, and you spend a lot of time staring at them while they're bathing, too," Drysi quips, which makes his whole face pinch up with indignity.

"All right, that's enough. Down you go, all of you."

The girls protest loudly. But the noise passes right over me. The pair-bond is tugging with longing and a spark of amusement I haven't felt from him in a long time.

Are you up there? The question swirls between us, as does his own yearning. *Let me see you.*

I lay my hand on the cold stone, lean into the embrasure again. The wind catches my hair, and I'm brushing it back as I gaze down. Thrain's still standing there in the water, face tilted up, glorious body gleaming in the sun. And I know he's seen me when the bond bursts with delight.

We stay like that for what feels like an age. I haven't seen him in so long... I miss him so much. The sunlight glitters on the water, those ships all standing proudly beyond, and I feel like I could so easily reach him, climb down to the riverbank and fall into his arms.

How are you? I send into the pair-bond. *How is everything?*

He rakes back his hair, taking his time to appreciate the sight of me. The pair-bond is full of giddy contentment, and I'm smiling as I lean there, resting my eyes on my husband and my pack.

Well, comes his response through the bond. *It's going well.*

From the sight of those ships, I could already guess as much. Gofraid must've corralled many warlords, already. I grip the stone, biting my lip.

Perhaps... perhaps it's going to be all right.

I'll see you soon, then, I send out, the intention unfurling like my own hands, reaching down to touch him, to thread through his hair. He touches himself for me, fingers skidding down his bare throat, his chest, lingering over his heart.

My knuckles are going white from how hard I'm clutching onto the battlements. But the Cavaliers call out to me, Emrys's voice chastising me. And the moment is broken; I duck behind the crenels again, and the bond throbs with yearning as I head back into the fort.

* * *

I'm still smiling that evening, buoyed by the sight of my pack, and by Thrain's assurance. Emrys and I stride out together across the courtyard, and I glance up at the crescent moon hanging in the night sky. It's glowing so bright, wedged between the clouds.

"It's the first quarter already," I murmur. I hadn't realised how quickly the time had passed.

Only a week left until the full moon.

Emrys slows to match my pace, eyes on the waxing moon as well. "Mm," he hums in agreement. "So far, so good. The entire northern portion of their siege camp is packing up nicely."

"So I saw. You really think they're all going to leave?"

"Bloody well hope so," he grunts. "Gofraid still has some time."

I follow him to the dungeon. Thrain's worry for Ivar wakes, as it always does when I head down here; his attentions turn to his usual evening

tenderness. He presses the same message into the pair-bond, like a kiss to my forehead.

Take good care of him.

The dungeon door clanks shut behind us. Down, down we go, following the torchlight to the furthest cell. Ivar is intimidating as ever, reclining against the wall of his cell with his head tilted back. Chains spill from his wrists as always, hooked up to the wall. A spark of outrage bursts in me, that his brothers might've enjoyed the sparkling river this morning while he was down here.

Soon. Soon he'll be free of this place.

He lays those dark eyes on me as I arrive with dinner in hand, his expression softening when he sees how wide I'm smiling. I sit and arrange his platter, gabbling about the parked warships, the clear signs of the northern camp leaving. But still I can't get more of a reaction out of him than a sort of wistful smile. His eyes travel over my face, as they always do, as though the sight of me were the only thing he wanted to focus on.

I wish I had a bond with him – just so I could glimpse what's going on in that head of his.

“You know he's doing this for you,” I tell him. “Gofraid. It's an enormous gesture, isn't it? I know it's difficult to hope, but – aren't you happy we've come this far?”

A frown flickers across his face. He shakes his head, just a little, a signal to drop the subject. I reel back my enthusiasm, heart thudding. With him silent, it's deceptively easy to just blurt things out.

“Sorry,” I mutter. Then, quieter: “I just... I wish I could ask you how you're feeling.”

It can't be easy to be optimistic about anything, when he's down here all

day. He lets out a deep hum, one tattooed hand coming around my nape. We touch our foreheads a moment, breathing together, closeness making up for the silence.

The rune pouch I wear around my neck swings forward – I catch it back. Ivar breaks away as though realising something, eyes honing in on the pouch.

Swallowing hard, I pull it from around my neck. It's such a precious gift that I haven't even taken it off since arriving.

"I haven't opened it," I tell him as I give the pouch to him. "I didn't want to lose any of the runes."

He's too driven by whatever idea he has to acknowledge me. To my complete surprise, he pulls the drawstring none too gently and just *scatters* them all over the floor. I yelp and try to scoop them into an orderly pile.

"Ivar! Don't, they'll roll away everywhere," I fret, but he's too eager to care, fingers skating over the runes to separate them.

He nods his chin at me, then gestures at the runes. The meaning is obvious enough: *can you read them?*

"Oh... Olaf taught me what they stood for, but it's been a while," I admit.

Sitting forward, Ivar pushes aside his dinner platter and starts arranging the runes with his lithe, tattooed fingers. Some of the runes match his tattoos – I stare in fascination as he pieces together a word for me.

I frown at it. Try to remember what each rune stands for.

L... A... M...

I sit back, mouth twisting in a pout as I meet his gaze. *Lamb*. From the way he smiles wider, baring his teeth, he can tell I've understood it. He nods at me as though to say, *ask me your questions*.

So I do: "How are you feeling, Ivar?"

And he writes, *fantastic*.

Tch. Of course he'd resort to sarcasm the minute he can express himself again. I steal back the rune chips, arrange them as I can. "Where's the D?" I mutter. "What's the rune that stands for D?"

He shows me; I drag it into my arrangement. When he sees what I'm writing, he lets out a laugh.

Idiot.

We lean over the runes, him offering me help when I don't know the letters. It becomes a stilted, slow conversation – when we want to form sentences, we have to form the words one after the other with the same pile of runes. When I can't read what he's trying to say, he'll tap the chips and hum, nodding with appraisal while I piece it together.

He writes: *How are you?*

Good. Tired.

What do you do all day?

Give out rations. Pray with priest. Baths.

I want a bath, he writes, a look of longing on his face.

Empathy fills me. Then those eyes linger on me a moment longer, and he tacks on, *with you.* And I fume at him.

"Be serious," I say out loud. But he isn't about to let up now that he can finally speak.

Your dress is lovely, he writes. I flush as he stares to press his point; he hasn't seen me in anything else than my black mourning gown in ages.

Then, because he's being bold even while we have Captain Llewellyn's eyes on us, I decide to take my revenge. It's easier somehow without talking aloud, to be bold. Though he's wearing breeches, he's not wearing much else other than bandages and shackles; and he's clean and groomed, as per my ministrations.

You're lovely when you're half-naked.

He lets out another surprised laugh, raising his hand to hide his mouth, as though he doesn't want me looking at his injury. The Cavaliers outside are talking in hushed tones, patrolling as ever; they look in, surprised at the sound of his laughter.

Ivar throws me a glance, trying to flatten his grin, as though to say, *all right, let's be serious*. Clearing his throat, he takes a careful sip of his water and pieces together a longer phrase.

What is it like to be back home?

I frown at the question. My eyes linger on the runes he's used to spell out home. The "O" can be taken to mean home by itself, I remember Olaf telling me that. But the question is too complex; I can't just sum it up in a sentence I'll painstakingly have to spell out.

I stare at his hands as he tears a piece of soft honey cake for himself. I don't think I've felt as content as I am now, ever since we arrived here. To have seen Thrain and Olaf this morning, and now to sit with Ivar like this, and talk in a manner that reminds me of how things used to be... how carefree we were out there in the camp, where we were allowed to be ourselves.

A lump forms in my throat. It's entirely bizarre to be *nostalgic* for the life we had in that siege camp. But it's the closest we really came to living together as a pack, and a fierce longing wakes in me for those casual cares, the men bringing me strawberries in the morning... the sight of my chosen packmates all squeezed into one bed, eyes lightly shut as they dreamed.

Ivar watches, catching onto the solemnity in my expression as I write the sentence.

You're my home.

Him and the pack; right then I miss our old dynamic so much it hurts, though he's right there in front of me.

He's lost his smile now as he stares at that word I've formed. The "O" rune, Othala, sits there between us. I can't bring myself to look at him – it's deceptively easy to be as honest as this, when the words aren't spoken aloud. He leans forward, and those tattooed fingers find mine. He has the rune in his grip; he presses it into my palm as he holds my hand tight.

I lift my face so I might look at the Cavaliers; they're hunched over their own dice game, beer mugs standing on their sticky table. Captain Llewellyn is talking in low tones with another guard, but he's keeping an eye on me. I want so badly to kiss Ivar's knuckles, his face, his neck, to pull him into a tight embrace – but we can't allow ourselves to be so familiar.

"...Tam," Ivar murmurs, and I turn abruptly, his deep voice shivering through me. His brow is knitted, his mouth parted as though it hurt him to form even half my name.

"Don't," I breathe, cupping his face. "Don't hurt yourself."

I let my purr roll out of me, and he sags a little as he appreciates it. The Cavaliers stir – but they leave me to tend to my mate, for the most part. Before long I hear Captain Llewellyn's boots drag along the stone floor.

"What were you doing?" comes his peremptory tone, eyes on the runes that litter the floor. "What are those?"

"It's nothing," I bite out. "Just a game."

Chapter 53



THRAIN

Waxing Moon of September

Rhun staggers away with his training sword in hand. He and Nýr are practicing sword drills by the neighbourhood firepit, as they have done every night since I released Rhun from his prison. Dotted around the fire are other Dubliners, watching as they take their dinner, cheering them on – these training sessions always manage to garner quite the audience.

“Come on,” I call to Nýr. “Don’t go so easy on him.”

“Jarl,” he says, eyeing me with exasperation. “With all respect. He’s still recovering.”

“All right. Then by all means, continue to coddle him,” I say, watching as Rhun’s face creases in predictable annoyance. “I’m sure he appreciates being treated with special care.”

Rhun lets rip a growl of anger and leaps at Nýr again, blunt swords clashing. Nýr and I agreed to get the prince in better shape, for his own well-

being – but also so that he might stay outside and rub shoulders with the Dubliners some more, perhaps let go of some of his anger.

Olaf has been watching our progress with a knowing eye. I know what he's thinking – Tamsin's absence darkens our camp like a lack of sun, a lack of air. He says that I only insist on having her twin around because it is a comfort to me. But it is hardly a *comfort* when our own sparring sessions have already afforded me ample new bruises.

Rhun takes his dinner with us, and though he will not look at me, he always grudgingly asks how his sister is. So I tell him what I know, what I can glimpse through the bond. It is all the words he will afford me; even when we spar, he does not deign to speak to me.

It matters not. As long as he gets some sun, some fresh air, and the company of the others. Tamsin's contentment glows in the bond when I send her those images: her twin perched on a crate, cracking small smiles despite himself as Nýr and Finngeir entertain him with some tale or other. When Nýr bids him to stay still so he can rub lotion on Rhun's black eye, Rhun grumbles but accepts to sit still – and Tamsin revels in that image, her contentment so vivid that she might be sitting right next to me at the campfire.

Many guests from other warbands visit our section of camp while the moon waxes. The entire northern portion of the camp has concertedly agreed that leaving is the best option. Often, Olaf hosts the Jarls for dinner in our territory, and they speak of how they regret not heeding our warning back in Dál Riata. They lay hands on Olaf's shoulder as though they had never laughed at him, stood by and did nothing while Gofraid smacked his eldest down. Some even say it was a mistake to come here altogether.

Olaf and I can only exchange wry glances when they praise our wisdom

and foresight like this. It would've been grand to have so many allies months ago, before we ever set off – when it would've truly made all the difference. Now we work shoulder to shoulder with them, helping them to load their ships, all of us working to be ready by the full moon.

Rhun helps us. He leads the packhorses, carries crates upon the decks of our longboats. And I look at him, that boy, with both feet planted on the deck of my ship – and I'm glad to see that he bears no fear in his face as he moves from stern to bow. Only the same steely determination as his sister, now, and the fading remnants of his black eye.

* * *

Gofraid has prepared an elaborate ceremony of departure, upon the eve of the full moon. He means to be as conspicuous as possible as he leaves, so the Britons will be bound by honour to give us back Ivar.

I wake that morning with dread in my gut. The day ahead is utterly opaque. We have spent over two months pushing towards this moment – it's impossible to hope that it will go smoothly. Still, I wake Olaf as I do every morning, ensconced as he is in Tamsin's nest. I fetch his staff for him, and he leans against it heavily, limps out of the house with as much dignity as he can muster. He gets a little more nimble every day, though Alsvithr still serves as his legs.

Horns are resounding throughout the camp, the signal for all the Jarls to gather at the main square. We are to help Gofraid take down his royal tent. There are far too many Jarls for this task, so most are being summoned to witness the symbolic gesture. Once it is done, Olaf and I will fly the white banner with the King while the army leaves the occupation zone.

Rhun rides behind me, sour as always. But when we arrive at Gofraid's royal tent and start dismantling it, piling the furs and carpets, untying ropes, piling tent poles – he's quiet and focused, as though taking in what a potent symbol this is. To be carefully taking apart Gofraid's own tent – it is just as quietly effective as the rest of our work here. Not rampant destruction, but methodic.

Gofraid's closest Jarls work alongside us, while the others mill around, taking lunch and speaking together. It is all going smoothly until we fix the great white banner to one of the horse-drawn carts, so it looms high, visible from the fort.

A wild yell of protest rises into the air. And many more join the first, so that a great cacophony rises from the vast southern section of the camp.

We all stop, bristling. As one, we turn to face the disruption.

Out there, someone is rallying the southern warbands. Their tents are partially undone; the men leave their work behind and follow the chief agitator, until they form a brimming, yelling river of protestors. And they start flowing straight towards us.

I stride to Olaf, who's standing beside Alsvithr with one hand clutched in his mane. We watch wordlessly as many banners are hoisted, Jarls banding together behind their new leader.

At the front is Ögmundr's banner; a great flame against a white background.

He's done it. He's leading a full-on revolt.

Tamsin. I reach for her, pull her through the bond. It's late afternoon; she's in her room, with her priest, reciting catechisms. I pull at her until I can feel her staring through my eyes, fully present, so she may see what I see.

Warn the fort garrison, I try to tell her. Tell them to keep an eye on this.

Eventually the swathe of warbands comes close enough for us to see their faces, Ögmundr at the front. Bald head, earrings glinting, huge arms bare and tattooed – he is jubilant to be leading this mutiny.

“I knew it,” Olaf mutters. “I knew he would cause more trouble for us.”

Gofraid’s deep-bellied growl echoes the sentiment.

We had dumped our weapons to be able to work more efficiently; now we all stride to the piles of gear and carts, taking back our sword belts. Several Jarls sound their horns, calling their warbands to them. I wind Olaf’s belt around his waist for him, hoping this will simply be a precautionary measure.

“Thrain,” Olaf mutters, nodding behind me. I turn to find Nýr with a sweating, wide-eyed Rhun. With half an army pounding across the camp toward us, he’s looking far less self-assured.

Nýr notices me looking. “Shall I take him back to camp, Jarl?” he asks.

“No,” I grunt. “Give him here.”

Nýr does so. The boy resists me, so I take him by his chainmail shirt, lay the deep sonorous growl of a pack leader on him until he stills.

“Let me go back to the prison house,” Rhun hisses, his head tilted away instinctively.

“No. Better that you stay with me.”

“But –” He swallows. “It’ll be evening in barely an hour.”

The first night of September’s full moon. He’s still afraid of his own rut.

“If you need to calm, then I’ll make you calm,” I tell him. Turning, I call over my shoulder, “Nýr! Get me a shield and a proper sword.”

Nýr brings me what he finds in the carts of loot; a Viking shield and a Cavalier’s swordbelt that still bears a wolfsbane bottle. I pull the belt around Rhun’s waist even as he breathes through his early rut symptoms; the anxious shakes of a pup.

“You’ve fought with us once before,” I tell him as I hand him the sword. “Between Nýr and I, you know well enough how to defend yourself now. No more cowering away in a little shack.”

A muscle jumps in his jaw as he stares down at the sword.

“I did not intend to *cower*,” he mutters. “I just don’t have control.”

“Control comes with practice. Just like your sword stances and everything else.”

I thrust the sword at him, and he takes it uncertainly. We’ve trained with the type of ruined, blunted swords men take up to practice together. This one is gleaming sharp.

“You’d give me a sword,” he says, those moss-green eyes flicking up to me. “You pretend to be my friend. But I’ve not forgotten, Thrain Mordsson. I’ve not forgiven anything.”

Even as he clutches his sword in one hand, he grasps my chainmail with the other, looming closer to glare at me with his uptilted face inches from mine. It is that hatred of me that I know he pulls from during practice; it only sharpens his senses, makes him learn faster than ever.

“I swear to Clota,” he seethes. “One day I’ll kill you.”

I hold his gaze. I must be to him what Harald Fairhair was to me, at his age. A nemesis to pledge one’s vengeance upon. The man who broke his home. Gods, the impression of talking to my younger self is hard to shake.

“One day, maybe,” I tell him. Then I grasp his wrist, twist him off me so I can pull him from the cart. “But not tonight. You stay with me now, is that understood?”

* * *

Gofraid is standing by the central square's main fire pit, a hand on his sword hilt. We and the rest of his Jarls crowd around him protectively. I have Rhun beside me, holding him there with one hand on his shoulder.

Ögmundr's men have arrived, fanning out to face us. They have chosen to draw their weapons, this time, to express their differences.

The wind whips at the great white banner that towers over us, latched as it is to one of the horse carts. Ögmundr gazes up at it, then sneers at Gofraid. The rich golden light of the setting sun gleams on his bald, tattooed head.

“We should call you King Gofraid the White!” he shouts. “King Gofraid the Peaceful. In all the years I have fought for you, sire, you have never stooped to ask for peace. Is it old age that has addled you? Made you merciful?”

Those on his side send up jeers and shouts of agreement.

“We have been here for two months!” Ögmundr goes on. “Two months under your leadership. And what have we to show for it? Livestock and metal – a pitiful prize for the legendary Strathclyde. And meanwhile the prize has been right there.” He points with his unsheathed sword, up at the bone-white fort. “*Right there*. You have told us to sit tight, while we writhe with fever and get picked off by their warriors – sit tight! Be *reasonable!* Let the long months of hunger and isolation weaken them for us, when we could've snatched them on the first fucking day. And now you tell us to leave, while the fruit is still ripe and unplucked?”

“You would really send your men on to pointless deaths?” Gofraid shouts back. “Because that is what would happen, if you launch a full frontal attack on that fort. You know this! I explained it to you time and again. There is no way of entering the fort. Even if you fill the ditch, even if you batter the gates

down, that is only the outer wall. The inner wall is guarded on both sides. We would get massacred, as Causantin explained to us –”

“Oh, Causantin! You’ve let Causantin hold onto your balls for long enough,” Ögmundr growls. “I will not let a pair of clean-handed cowards dictate how I do war.”

More shouts rise from his camp, axes raised in the air.

“Gofraid whinges like a girl because they will kill his son if we attack,” another calls. “So let him die!”

“Yeah!” Others turn it into a chant: “Let the bastard die! Take the fort!”

I grip my axe tighter. Olaf has a firm hand on my arm, but he too is readying to fight.

“You’re insane,” Gofraid growls back. “How will you cross that ditch in the King’s Garden? Just let your men’s corpses pile up till you can walk over it?”

“Why not!” Ögmundr laughs. “At least those wretches would make themselves useful.”

Gofraid stares in disbelief. “You don’t even have a battering ram!”

The bald giant turns, lifts a hand. “You think we have been content to play games for two months? We have been working, *sire*, while you sipped wine and ate your honeyed venison in the comfort of your tent.”

To my horror, his men part to show what they have brought; some are carrying a thick felled trunk, others ladders and hooks.

Tamsin, I throw desperately into the bond. *Warn the Cavaliers. Warn your king.* I can feel her anxiety, feel the flurry of her feet. She’s running – running along stone corridors, the clank and clatter of armed soldiers around her.

Gofraid shakes his head. “You will die,” he calls to them. “You will all

die if you attempt this. Hear me! No sane man would hurl his warriors at that wall. It is only the boiling blood of the rut that moves you all –”

“We have been decided on this for much longer than tonight,” Ögmundr snaps. “You will not move any of us with your pathetic peace-mongering.”

Gofraid unsheathes his sword, holds it out in a low guard. “A half-brained dog has more loyalty than all of you,” he growls. “I pity the way your fathers raised you.”

Ögmundr draws his own blade. “And I pity the sentimental wretch that you have become.”

He surges against his King.

Each camp converges on the other. Blood pounds through my veins as I’m caught in it, the rut rising like foam. In my last moment of lucidity, I glance at Rhun, who’s wide-eyed and panting by my side.

“You wanted to kill some Vikings, boy?” I rasp at him. “Now’s your chance.”

* * *

It is an ugly fight. The rut makes it bestial and merciless. Steel clashes as many chainmail-clad hounds leap and savage one another.

I dive into it with relish. Finally, *finally*, I can let out all the anger that has been building in me since Tamsin and Ivar left.

Let these idiots take the brunt of it. I don’t care any more. I just want to *kill*.

Blood spatters my face as I hack into Ögmundr’s men. The rising moon makes me salivate, makes me burst out of the pained, crippled shape my body has been restricted to. I can barely feel the nerves in my left arm any more – I

have an axe in each hand, metal singing as I take to the butchery until I'm dripping in gore.

“Thrain!”

Olaf's barked commands pluck me up by the scruff of my neck, point me towards a target. And I take chase, teeth bared, pulse singing.

Four men around me. Five. Eight. Twelve.

“Oho! They unleashed the Great Wolf of Dublin!” They cry to one another to give themselves morale. “I'll give the one who slays him his own weight in gold!”

I grin at them. Oh, I've heard that one before. So many times. But nobody ever got their own weight in gold, in the end.

When I lunge at them, they wear their fear in the stark whites of their eyes. And then those white eyes are fixed to the sky, and they are all in pieces – each one of my steps squelches into some part of them, a coil of gut, a wayward hand.

In the chaos, a familiar yell of fury resounds nearby. I turn – Rhun, Rhun is there, just as crazed as I am. He is fighting admirably, three opponents around him. But there are more coming.

I march over to him, bark at him so he knows it's me. A lunge, a clash, and we're both back to back while Ögmundr's men surround us.

“Good form!” I shout at him. “Let's see if you can manage as many as me.”

He gives an indignant growl, and then pushes away to engage.

Gods, it's good to use my left hand again. The painless freedom of movement is more than ecstatic. I sail through my side of the aggressors, and it almost feels like dancing. That the moon might return this to me makes this feel like a dream, like pushing through all my body's boundaries.

But Rhun – Rhun is intent on biting off more than he can chew. I dive to help him, and in the struggle, I pull down one of the men with me.

The great giant of a man falls and takes me with him. I'm crushed under him, wedged between bodies.

Rhun stands over me as I struggle to drag myself out. He's protecting me – slaughtering the rest of the men, his slashes wide and furious.

For a moment a fierce rush of pride overcomes me. This enraged Briton boy, the one whose life I saved, the one who hates my guts – now, for the time being, he's opted to have my back.

He defeats them, turns around to stare down at me. I expect him to crouch and give me a hand. But the look in his corrupted eyes makes me still even as I'm pushing myself up.

He's angling that same furious glare at me. Then, teeth clamped together in a snarl, he points his sword right at my neck.

I lay there, leaning on my elbows, holding his gaze.

Perhaps this is why he fought off those men; so that he could claim this kill for himself.

It would be fair. I've slaughtered so many of his kin. But Tamsin, Tamsin... I dig my fingers into the sodden earth beneath me, hoping he'll think of her. That even if he thinks nothing of me, then perhaps he can think of his sister's pain, and the child in her belly.

I don't know if he's capable of much thought. His eyes are glowing red, his face contracted with rage. I breathe out hard through my nose, the impulse to grasp that sword and yank it away almost overwhelming. But I can't fight him – can't risk fighting him in this state.

The moment is endless.

Then something gleams behind him.

“On your right!” I shout, and he turns just in time to parry the oncoming attack. I push away the corpse pile with renewed vigour, eyes on the boy. He manages to catch the Viking’s axe hilt in one hand and slams his sword’s steel pommel up into the man’s groin – *crunch* – a move I taught him.

When he turns, I’m almost freed. I wait for him to renew his threat, but he only spits out a trembling curse and kicks at the corpse pile to help me. And he reaches down for me, so he might grasp my forearm and help me up.

There is no time to linger on what the act means. There is no respite. The warbands are feuding viciously; Gofraid is doing what he can to gather those that are on his side.

But we’re getting overwhelmed. We’re totally outnumbered. Olaf is fighting close to his father – he too is unleashed by the moon, his limp and his weakness all but forgotten as he sweeps his sword in dazzling silver arcs.

“Father, come,” he barks. “We can’t last like this. Come with me. Come to the ships – let them run to their deaths since they are so set on it –”

But Gofraid only has eyes for Ögmundr. Though Olaf tries to cut him away from the combat, his father always staggers forward again to meet his nemesis with a roar. And the two giants fight, the earth trembling under their feet.

Then – a crunch, a growl of pain. Gofraid’s huge silhouette slumps. And Olaf turns, his voice piercing the air.

“Father! *FATHER!*”

I clamp a hand around Rhun’s arm, drag him with me. People are stepping back to observe the scene, forming a circle.

Gofraid is kneeling there, breathing hard. Ögmundr has buried his sword deep into Gofraid’s gut. His worn chainmail is pierced; his body perforated through and through, the silver point gleaming in his back.

He has a great hand wrapped around the blade, cutting into his glove as he glares at his murderer.

Olaf lunges, but one bark from his father and he's pulled back, standing beside the great kneeling form of his progenitor.

Ögmundr slides out the blade, slowly and painfully. Olaf curls an arm around his father to keep him from collapsing. The kneeling King coughs out a glob of blood, brilliant crimson covering his beard like blood on snow.

Around us, Jarls are barking at their men, the fight simmering down for a moment.

Olaf lays a look of pure hatred upon Ögmundr, who stands there glowing with pride to have felled such a giant.

"I have no qualms with you, Olaf Gofraidsson," says Ögmundr. "If you want to take your father and lead his men to the ships, I will let you go."

"I will only leave this place once your severed head hangs from my belt," Olaf spits out. The opposing Jarls snarl and throw out encouragements for violence.

"No," Gofraid wheezes. "No. Leave... take what men you can... leave." He reaches up to grasp his son's arm. "Let the Britons see that the King of the Vikings has left... save your brother for me."

Olaf's fist tightens in his father's chainmail. It is the demand of a dying man; I know he cannot do otherwise than stall his vengeance and heed it.

He shares a glance with me. So I turn and address those men still loyal to Gofraid who stand, blood-soaked, on our side of the battle.

"To the ships!" I roar at them all.

Our Jarls begin to call back their crazed men. I dive to Olaf's side so I can help drag Gofraid away, to the cart where the white banner flaps. And

Ögmundr watches us with a satisfied grin, before returning to the madness so he might lead their full-frontal attack on the fort.

He raises his sword, encourages his men with a yell. They all brandish their weapons in turn, their faces lit with fervour.

For all intents and purposes, he is King now.

Chapter 54



TAMSIN

Full Moon of September

“Tamsin,” Father Madog insists, his hand tight on my shoulder. “You shouldn’t be out here. We should get you to the safety of the palace.”

I ignore him. I’m holding on tight to the parapets of the outer wall, Commander Llewellyn at my side. I had to shout, to batter at my bedroom door, for Emrys to heed me – they let me out, let me run to the battlements with them even while Father Madog followed at my heel, incensed that the Cavaliers might’ve allowed me to join them out here in the red light of sunset.

From up here we have a sprawling view. The Vikings are like a flood, spilling across the King’s Garden. A great black blot. If they’ve been allowed to swell out to the fort in full rut like this, it can only mean one thing.

The hierarchy in place must have fallen apart.

Thrain, I think desperately, pulling at the bond as though pulling a rope, so I might find him in the chaos. There – a whole section of the Viking force

is breaking away, heading for the Leven Port. A great white banner flaps over the many carts they pull, and I know Thrain's right there – he's at a safe distance, he's unhurt.

I frown, concentrating. Gofraid... Gofraid is lying in that cart with the white banner flapping over it. I close my eyes, try to sharpen the image Thrain's sending me. Gofraid is pale and bloody, wheezing through a wound in his gut.

Eyes flying open again, I point down at the white banner. "The Viking King is there," I shout to Llewellyn. "He's leaving. Look."

Llewellyn follows where I'm pointing. "So he is," he mutters thoughtfully.

But his attention is quickly stolen away. He and his captains must face this onslaught. He points the arriving archers to their stations, and they spill along the full length of the outer wall, torches held high in a glittering procession. Upon their captains' yelled commands, they begin to loosen volley after volley of arrows at the attacking Vikings.

In the dim light of sunset, our arrows are near impossible to see; they hit the flood of Vikings like an invisible wall, sweeping whole rows to their knees. Some Vikings are almost naked under their shields, spurred on by sheer hot-bloodedness. When they see their friends falling around them, they yell with rage – it only adds to their vigour.

"Niece," comes an imperious voice. I turn, and my stomach drops. Uncle Arthgal is marching along the battlements toward us, regal as ever in his decorated armour. "What in God's name are you doing out here? Father Madog, please. Take her back to her room."

"But Uncle," I protest – I've grown so used to standing alongside warlords that I don't even see why he'd order me away. But the moon is

rising, and my heat with it – that dull, heavy ache weighs in my belly already.

“Come, Princess Tamsin,” Father Madog says sharply, pulling me after him.

I whip my head around, trying to listen as Uncle Arthgal asks Llewellyn for a report. Llewellyn points to King Gofraid’s white banner.

“The Viking King has honoured his word, it seems,” Llewellyn says. “But he has lost control of his army. They must be at least four thousand men down there.”

Uncle Arthgal nods. “Then we must honour our word, in turn,” he says. “Emrys! Take a few men and fetch Ivar Gofraidsson from the dungeon.”

I’m panting as I struggle against Father Madog’s grip. He’s trying to drag me away, but I hang onto a torch bracket, staring as Emrys gathers up some men.

Emrys asks, “Where do you want us to bring him?”

My Uncle smiles grimly. “Right here.”

“Your Majesty, what do you plan to do with him?”

“The Viking King has clearly done his best to respect the terms of our deal. So I will give him his son back, in a manner of speaking.”

“You mean... you want us to throw him?”

“Oh, I think I will do it myself.”

For a moment I’m frozen there, trying to process what it is I’m hearing.

They’re going to throw Ivar.

Over the parapets.

Into that cesspool of Vikings that churns with spearheads and swords.

“No,” I gasp, and then I’m shouting it – “No, Uncle, *please!* The Viking King honoured his word – you can’t do this –”

BAM, comes the thud of a battering ram against the heavily guarded gates

of the outer wall. A tremor shivers under my feet.

BAM.

Uncle Arthgal turns, sees me still hanging there on my torch bracket – he does not heed my words at all. Instead he only shouts, “Father Madog! Get her off this wall, *now!*”

Father Madog pulls me from the torch bracket, ignoring my yells of protest as he drags me back up the battlements, toward the inner sanctum.

* * *

They’re going to throw him.

They’re going to throw him.

I dig in my heels, writhe in Father Madog’s grip as he drags me down a stairway and across the courtyard. The palace doors are open, Mother and Queen Beatha funnelling in as many daughters of Clota as they can. On the other side of the courtyard, the Cavaliers are doing the same at the commoner’s chapel; calling in everyone they can.

“Get off me, get *off me!*” I shout at Father Madog, twisting around. Emrys was behind me on the stairs – he’s here in the courtyard now, trooping across the flagstones with six other Cavaliers.

Heading for the dungeon door.

“*EMRYS!*” I yell, throat burning. “You can’t – you *CAN’T* –”

Emrys looks back at me. His face is full of conflict. But he cannot disobey the direct order of our king. Not when he’s surrounded by six of his brothers-in-arms.

I can’t just let them do it.

I won’t.

The full moon is only just rising, a silver disc laid in the reddish wreath of the sunset. But fear and outrage rise up my spine like a potent wave, my blood heating all at once.

I can feel it. The beast, unfurling like an acrid taste along my tongue, prickling at my shoulder-blades. If I lean into it – I can draw it out, even as early as this.

They can all see me. The women at the palace entrance. The Cavaliers all around. The villagers being rushed from their tents. But right then, for a glorious moment, I don't care.

I won't let them take Ivar.

I haul my knee up into Father Madog's stomach. He staggers, coughing. As I break away from him, the air is crisp as crystals all around me – the world is coming into such sharp focus. I can taste the oiled torches, the sweat of the Cavaliers, that heady animalistic fear.

"*EMRYS,*" I shout, and it is iron that bursts from me – my voice an iron clamp that catches Emrys by the back of his neck. He stills. I hold out a hand, feel for the others, and sever their bodies from them – "*STOP.*"

They do as I say. Six fully-armed Cavaliers, frozen there.

I hold my hand out further, breathing hard. My eyes are hot, so hot – all my focus is on those six Cavaliers as I hold them still.

"*Back,*" I rasp, "*to the palace wall.*" And they are dragged along, staggering until their spines hit the stones of the palace wall, just beside the entrance.

Emrys is staring at me, wide-eyed and terrified.

Everything is silent, like the curl of a wave just before it crashes. I hold them there, content that while I have them, they can do nothing.

But I did not think ahead. Besides stopping them – I didn't think of what

to do with them. And Emrys isn't the only one looking at me like that, now.

Everyone is staring. Everyone can see me.

My kin. My family. All the Cavaliers and village folk, the people I grew up with.

Father Madog grabs me firmly from behind. He's saying *my child, be still now, I've got you* – I yell at him to stop, to get off – but my voice cannot grasp him, I don't feel him in my palm in the same way. Is it God's protection that he wears? I try and try again to command him, but he remains completely unaffected.

Of course. He does not bear the curse; he isn't subjected to the same laws as us.

Fear surges, bright and hot. I remember my nuptial chamber, a mad Christian lord unbuckling his belt. The way he had smiled when I shouted *stop, stop*. How he had ploughed through my command and grasped me anyway.

"We will conquer this together, child," Father Madog says. "It is the devil that has you – we will get him out of you. Shh. Hush now."

As I struggle against Father Madog, I drop the Cavaliers, like beads falling between my fingers. The priest wedges a rag in my mouth, tying a tight gag.

"Help me with her!" Father Madog shouts to the Cavaliers. They rush to his side to help subdue me. Seven men grasp me, lay leaden growls on me, tie my wrists together roughly. And I can do nothing but fight their grip while they drag me through the castle doors.

* * *

What's happening, Mother? I hear the children's voices.

Oh! It's the mad princess!

The mad princess – she's there, look, look!

The castle doors have been shut and barricaded. Every room, every corridor of the castle is choked with daughters of Clota and their children, hugging the walls as they hide from the war outside. That *bam, bam* of the battering ram outside punctuates the silence, but they don't seem to be listening to it now.

All of them are staring openly at me. The mad red-eyed princess, dragging her heels as Father Madog takes her to the chapel.

Through the red door, into the stone sanctuary. He has the Cavaliers take me into the nave, and they chuck me unceremoniously before the altar. I fall on my side on the cold stone floor.

Father Madog chastises them for manhandling me. Then he's kneeling at my side, helping me to sit up, gazing at me with a horribly sympathetic face – the same he's shown me every day he's spent with me, reciting catechisms. Trying to be bring me back into the fold.

“Child,” he says as he grips me firmly again. “It's going to be all right.”

They haven't shut the chapel door. I try to hold onto the thought of Ivar, I have to get to Ivar – somehow – but there are people amassing at the door, blocking the way out. The Cavaliers let in a few, so that soon a crowd has formed. Mother is there, and Queen Beatha, and all of Eormen's sisters. They're standing by the pillars, lining the stone sarcophagi of our ancestors. Giving me a wide berth. The Cavaliers space out, forming a circle around me.

As though I were possessed; as though there were some demon in me that needed exorcising.

This can't be happening.

This *can't* be happening.

I can barely breathe with this gag – I try to grapple for the cloth in my mouth, but Father Madog holds me too firmly for me to move. As I struggle against him, light steps tap across the stones, a cloud of perfume surrounds me.

My mother is kneeling beside us.

I turn and look at her; but I can't do anything else than grunt desperately around my gag.

“I'm sorry, Tamsin,” she says. Her throat sounds tight with sorrow. “This is for your own good.”

Father Madog speaks louder, addressing the crowd: “Please have compassion, and do not judge the princess too harshly. She has a good soul. But she has been living with heathens for months now, and she has been led astray.”

He takes my head in his hands, stares into my red eyes. I'm choking on the gag, trying to breathe – the craze is diminishing with all these eyes on me, their horrified faces, their judgment.

“You have been broken, my child. And the devil has seeped through the cracks,” Father Madog says. “By living among the Vikings, you have seen things, I'm sure, that no girl should see. And you have participated in their way of life, if only to survive. But what is that way of life? How does it affect a person, to sink to such dark places?”

He turns then to the crowd, as though this were a sermon, and I the subject of it; we civilians are all locked in here while the war rages outside these walls. There's nowhere to go.

“The Vikings lead a life of indulgence, and the satiation of animal needs,” Father Madog says. “To live in such indulgence might seem enviable to many

people – it is our weak nature that seeks animal comforts. It is the same weak nature that tells us to spurn the hard work God demands of us. But when you allow yourself to indulge all your basest emotions and desires, are you not renouncing God’s plan for you? Are you not inviting the devil inside your heart?”

He returns to me.

“You’re a good girl, Princess Tamsin,” he says to me. “I’ve known you since you were a babe. I know you have a good heart, and that you are capable of great self-discipline. I want you to remember her – the girl you used to be. Can you do that for me?”

There’s something about how he’s speaking, slowly and calmly – something about how he’s stroking my hair – I want to cry, I can’t think straight, can’t take my eyes off that horribly kind face.

“I want you to picture her for me,” he murmurs. “What would your old self say, if she could see you now?”

The tears burst forth. I hunch forward as they streak down my cheeks, wanting nothing more than to hide away from everyone.

“It’s all right,” he hushes me. “It’s all right. I know this is painful. I know you’re afraid. I will help you come back to yourself, and purge the devil from you. But you must work with me, Tamsin.”

With his thumb, he draws a cross on my forehead. Then he signals to my mother, and she coaxes me down so that my forehead almost touches the ground. She holds me there, kneeling before the altar, prostrated before the golden cross.

I huff at her, eyes wild. *What is this? What are you going to do to me?*

“This is an old ritual of penance,” Mother murmurs. “It is reserved for bitten women, before they’re taken to the convents – I tried to spare you, my

darling. But you would not listen to me.”

Father Madog settles on my other side, lays a gentle hand on my head.

“I know it’s frightening to kneel here, child,” he says. “You’re afraid to even face God after everything you’ve done. But I’m going to ask you to push past your fear, now. To bear this pain. Because you will come out of this so much stronger. Pain is how we show how deeply we love; it is the love of saints, of the purest beings that walk the earth. So you must do the same now; show God how much you love Him, so He will see that your heart is pure.”

I breathe out, my thudding pulse making me dizzy. It’s like I’m hearing him underwater; a mute hum fills my ears, my vision slippery.

I’ve made my choices. He cannot deter me from them now. But he’s been talking like this to me for days, and though I’ve tried to ignore his catechisms, still that old doubt has been banging in my chest, that old voice that has always nagged at the back of my head, wheezing back to life. *What if, what if, what if?*

What if all my choices have been a mistake? What if I have no idea what I’m doing – what if I’m wrong, wrong, wrong about everything because I’m just a misguided little girl, what if, what if –

Saints, but it’s his voice that I’ve heard all these years, isn’t it? Since I was a child, he’s been reciting his catechisms at the back of my mind. *You don’t want to go to Hell, do you? You want to be a good girl, don’t you?*

And there will always be that weak, child-like part of me that weeps, that whimpers, *yes, I do, I do, can’t you see I’m trying* –

Father Madog begins to recite a Latin litany over my head. Gentle hands scoop up my hair, twist my ginger lengths into a great coil. I see the golden scythe glint in the torchlight.

And my mother starts to shear off my hair.

With my bound, trembling hands, I reach for my one little braid, the one coiled with Uradech's ribbon, holding it against my chest alongside the favours of my pack.

Your place is not on your knees, girl, Uradech said to me once.

But I am down here, and I can't move – there is so much weight on my back, the weight of that cross, the weight of everyone's gazes, the weight of Father Madog's Latin bearing down on my spine.

I wince as Mother pulls my hair taut, my scalp prickling. I buck and struggle, but that only makes the scythe bite into my skin, the pain of it making me gasp. She cuts the great mass of hair from me until it falls in long ginger curls all over the flagstones.

"It's almost over now," she whispers while Father Madog completes his litany of repentance. "Just close your eyes. You're being so brave, Tamsin."

Brave? But how can I be brave when I'm frozen – she's making me bald as a boy with a lice infestation, and it bubbles up in me, the panic of ugliness, of being defaced in front of everyone.

The pair-bond is throbbing with rage and a wild rush of confusion. Thrain – he can feel this pain, surely, he sees some impression of this – the hard flagstones under my knees, the long ginger curls that tangle like Celtic knotwork on the ground.

And Ivar. Ivar is still below us in the dungeon. What would he say if he saw this?

Ivar. My eyes fly open. We have no idea what's going on outside, if Uncle Arthgal has sent more soldiers down to fetch him. Somehow just to remember that there's a *war* going on outside this stuffy chapel breaks the spell of the penance ceremony. I can still hear the faint *bam, bam* of the

Vikings' battering ram, and the yells of the Cavaliers on the parapets as they fire at the enemy.

The thought of Ivar's black eyes on me gives me a surge of courage.

I've done so much for my people. So much. I've been terrified that they would see who I really was, and now they have: they've seen me in all my ugliness, they've seen my sin, my red-eyed madness. The axe of their judgment has been hanging above me all this while, and now it has fallen.

Now the worst has happened.

They cannot judge me any worse than this. I have reached rock bottom; there can be no fear of falling any lower.

Mother helps me to straighten. I kneel there, panting, blinking at her. Calm, somehow. Because now that the judgment has been passed, I'm free of it.

A hush falls. She has a familiar cup in her hand, but even that does not scare me now. She looks at me oddly, and a rush of something like hilarity rises in me. I want to smile at her. I want to laugh at how small she appears to me all of a sudden.

I'm not afraid of her. I'm not afraid of Father Madog, either.

For one glorious moment, I'm not afraid of anything any more. All that inhabits me is this brimming urgency – to fetch Ivar, to take on whatever I must. Because if I can survive this, then I can survive anything.

She lays a hand on my face, gazing into my eyes, which have returned to normal now. "Thanks be to God," she says.

And then –

CRACKKK.

The distant noise splits through the air, a crackle of splintering wood, planks groaning as they're twisted from their hinges. Everyone stares at the

chapel's open doorway, eyes wide as they listen.

Footsteps clatter across the corridors.

“*BREACH!*” calls the runner. “*THEY’VE BREACHED THE OUTER WALL!*”

Screams rise, women and children scrambling. Mother shies so violently that the cup falls from her hand, the contents spilling. The Cavaliers who were presiding over the ritual break out of their stasis, moving immediately to quieten the civilians.

“Listen, please! Do not fear!” one Cavalier shouts over the noise. “You are safe here. The Vikings are trapped now between the walls of this fort. Their numbers are already being heavily reduced by our archers. If by some miracle they breach the inner sanctum, they may only enter a few at a time. We have the fort’s defenses well in hand. You will be safe.”

This defuses some tensions, though many of the children are still crying and calling for their parents.

Another Cavalier shouts: “There isn’t enough room in the chapel for all of you to stay here. The princess’s penance is finished; my Queen, may we invest the main hall, and the rooms – ?”

“Of course,” Queen Beatha says, and there is movement as a portion of the crowd is ushered out into the corridor.

I’m left in the lurch, kneeling on the ground. Emrys rushes to me, barking at my Cavalier guard that he can take over from here. The Cavalier leaves to help with crowd control, so Emrys clasps me.

“Tamsin,” he rushes out, pulling me upright, half embracing me as he does it. “Come on. It’s over now.”

I grunt at him, the gag still robbing me of speech. *Ivar*, I try to say, but it comes out too mangled for him to understand.

Father Madog returns to us. Emrys holds me tighter and tells him, "I'll bring her to her room."

"All right," Father Madog agrees. He eyes me warily; in the rush, his kindness has slipped to reveal his fear. "Make sure you lock her in."

Emrys nods and hauls me up. He drags me along the corridors, and I moan at him again, trying to speak, but he does not dare give me back my voice yet.

"What in Hell's name did you do to us out there, Tamsin?" he mutters. "I knew bitten women went mad, but – what the Hell was that?"

I can only groan at him some more.

He frowns at me awhile, but the sorry sight of my baldness and his own curiosity get the better of him. "Listen," he says. "You have to promise me that if I take this gag off – I'm trusting you not to lay that voice on me again. On your brother's head, do you promise?"

I nod emphatically. He hesitates some more, then finally plucks the gag away. I cough and rasp for breath.

"Emrys," I stammer. "We have to go to the dungeon. Get Ivar out."

"But your voice – that voice you had –"

"I can explain everything later. *Please.*"

"Tamsin, the Vikings are coming, I can't just let you out there –"

"Emrys, don't you see? I can use my voice on cursed men. Those Vikings out there, I can have them stand still just like I did to you. I can hold them all down for you."

His eyes widen as he takes this in.

"But it is witchcraft, Tamsin," he mutters. "It is devilry –"

"Does it matter at this point?" I snap at him. "We're at war! Please, you have to let me go. I need to see if Ivar is all right."

Still he hesitates. But I have planted the idea in his mind now, and I can see him turning it over. At last he heaves a great sigh, and unclasps his black cloak from around his shoulders.

“I hope you realise just how far I’m sticking my neck out for you,” he mutters as he drapes it around me. “I’ll take you to the dungeon, but there are high chances Uncle Arthgal sent more men down there to fetch him.”

I shake my head sharply. I don’t even want to consider the possibility.

“Let’s go,” I tell him, pulling the hood over my head. I’m still staggering – so he keeps a hold of me, looking as though it pains him to give in to my demands when I can barely hold myself upright.

“God help us,” he mutters. “Come on, hold onto me. This way.”

* * *

He takes me to a tiny side-door. Outside, a narrow stairway curls around the side of the castle. The garrison that occupies the fort’s inner sanctum are shifting their order, barricading the inner gate. The archers stationed on the inner walls are yelling commands now, shooting at the masses that are boiling between the fort’s walls. Llewellyn is up there – I can hear his voice over the noise.

Emrys presses a large rusted key in my hand. “That is the key to the dungeon entrance,” he says. “The keys to the cells are within, hanging on the hooks. Ivar Gofraidsson’s cell will be one of the big silver ones. Oh – take this, too.”

He slips a knife from his belt, tucks it in my own woolen sash.

We rush down the stairs together. In the courtyard, many Cavaliers are gathering to defend the palace entrance – Emrys escorts me to the dungeon

door, then leaves me to join his brothers-in-arms. I scramble to open it while he replies to his fellow Cavaliers, pretending normalcy, saying something about it being the Queen's orders to check on a prisoner. The others are too busy organising the defense of the courtyard to pay me any mind.

I pull the heavy dungeon door open, hurry inside. Grab all the old silver keys from their hooks, and pelt down the stairs.

He has to still be down here. He has to. The other prisoners are calling out, their voices echoing in the torchlit corridors. They're all demanding to know what's going on. I can't stop to answer – Ivar is in the deepest section of the dungeon, locked away behind at least two more doors.

Quick. *Quick*. I can barely breathe as I turn a corner. Another door looms before me; I fumble through my keys, find the one that matches.

A great squeal of hinges resounds behind me. The dungeon door is being opened again. A single pair of feet scurries in the darkness, coming my way.

I throw a glance over my shoulder, heart in my throat. Are they – are they friend or foe?

“Emrys?” I call out.

No one answers. And then the figure turns into my corridor, and the torchlight shines on Father Madog.

Shit. Did he follow me? He must've done. I pull the door open and slam it after me, breaking into a run. It's not that far, it's not that far, why are the corridors so *long* – I unlock the last door with shaking hands, turn into the isolated section. And finally the gridded cell is in sight.

Ivar is visible within. I let out a cry of relief at the sight of him. He is chained to the ceiling, torchlight flickering on the dips of his body. His head is bowed – when he hears the clattering door, he glances up into the darkness,

trying to make sense of what's happening. Our gazes meet, and he stares straight at me.

Oh, Christ. In my flight, I'd completely forgotten about my hacked up baldness, the scratches of the scythe carved into my head – my hood got swept down with all my running.

And now Ivar can see what they did to me. He sees all the ugliness of it.

I wait for him to recoil, to look away from me. But he does the opposite. He leans forward, his hands twisting up to grip onto his own chains, so hard that his knuckles go white.

There is no pity in the gaze he lays on me.

There is pure fury.

My heart thuds as I hear his breath hitch, see his chest swell as he takes in a great lungful of air. He stares intensely, and then his eyes flicker over my shoulder to my pursuer.

A growl shivers out of his dark cell, full and potent, skittering along the walls.

“Back, you devil!” Father Madog calls out. “Tamsin, come – come away from him, come with me.”

He's close behind me, closer than I thought. He reaches to grab my arm, and Ivar's growl only rises to thunderous rage, his arm muscles tensing up as he leans his whole weight against his chains.

There's that bright crimson colour, blooming in his eyes.

Father Madog pulls at my arm, insisting in a bold voice that can't quite mask his fear, “Child, you must come with me *now*.”

“No – get *off me!*” I burst out, wrenching out of his grasp. I pull out my knife, hold it out between us. “Don't touch me.”

Father Madog stands there in the torchlight, holding up his hands. Still he

wears that face, as though he only meant to help me, as though the sight of me pained him.

I can't let him waylay me, not now. It's only by an enormous stroke of luck that Ivar is still down here at all. Even if the fort garrison is concentrating on defense, Uncle Arthgal could still send more people down here at any moment to drag Ivar to the parapets.

My craze surges at the thought, saliva rising to my mouth.

"Go back to the castle," I hiss at the priest. "Go on! Just *go!*"

"Princess Tamsin," Father Madog says. "Please. Don't let that heathen take a hold of your mind again. You were doing so well. You must come back with me, now."

He speaks as though Ivar were Lucifer himself. My knife shakes in my grip as I hold it between us, breathing hard. The moon is dragging at my blood, the beast snarling at the back of my throat – I cannot command him at all, and the idea that he can slip inside my head again makes my heart drum with fear.

"You're a good girl," Father Madog insists. "I know you are. I know you feel the pull of the light."

"Please, Father. Just go," I beg him, swallowing back the burn in the throat.

"Tamsin," he tries again, undeterred. "I have known you all your life. I know you still hold the answers within yourself. You showed deference to the Lord, you were obedient – and He kept you safe, didn't He? He kept you safe from all this madness –"

"No," I bite out. "You may have known me all my life, but all you ever did was lie to me. You taught us that pain and obedience are the most sacred forms of love – but obedience is not love, is it? Obedience is about control."

“Obedience is about trust,” he says. “To obey is to show that you trust the Holy Father’s judgment. You trust Him to guide you; you trust Him not to hurt you.”

“But He has hurt me,” I tell him. “How can I trust a father who has never been there for me? A father who says I must be silent and submit, while all the horrors in the world pile up around me? How can I trust some benevolent master I cannot even see?”

“You ask a child’s questions – you know the answers already, Tamsin.”

“But I don’t,” I sob. “I don’t know the answers any more.”

“It is faith.” He moves forward, sees how I tremble; he cups his wrinkled hands around mine. “The answer to all your questions is simply: you must have faith. God has been there for you, Tamsin. Always.”

“I said don’t *touch me*,” I snarl, my hackles raised as I shake him off. “You’re telling me I must trust blindly. I must obey blindly. It is all you’ve ever taught us. But it does not answer anything. It isn’t good enough.”

“Not good enough?”

“No.” I glare at him. “You don’t understand anything, do you? What it’s like to be a daughter of Clota. Everyone asks me to obey unquestioningly. Gods and kings, priests and husbands, all of you. But it is always to your benefit. And not mine.”

“Princess Tamsin –”

“I refuse,” I hiss, the craze shivering through my veins now. “I refuse to obey.”

He watches the crimson cover my eyes again. This time his fear shines through.

“If you refuse to heed God then you are damning yourself,” he says. “Would you really renounce God just for the sake of freeing that Viking man,

Tamsin? You must think hard on this, now. Think hard on the consequence.”

Why is it that the choice always comes back to this? To renounce myself, or renounce God; there can be no peace between us.

The stale dungeon air is growing heavy. She’s here with me, my savage ancestor – cloaked in darkness, she who never bowed to a bodiless Father in the sky. The taste of this priest’s fear, the yelling men up above, the clank of metal... I close my eyes as I feel her blood course through my veins.

“I do,” I whisper. “I renounce God.”

“Oh child,” laments the priest, and his hands are on mine again, his wavering voice pulling me, coaxing me, a kindness that grips my guts like a fist, that reminds me of all my failings, of all the guilt I must repent for, how I am as Eve crunching into the apple, how I must repent for simply being a woman at all – Hell, I’m going to Hell, I’m going to Hell –

“*Shut up!*” I yell at him. “For once in your life will you just *SHUT UP!*”

A metallic hiss resounds between us. I’ve cut a deep gash across his cheek with my knife. He staggers back, one hand rising to feel his wound; blood trickles down to his chin, drips like tiny red flowers from my fingers.

The craze is rising in me and yet still I hold back, because I’ve known him forever, and he seems such a frail old man then as he stares at his red-tipped fingers.

“*Leave,*” I hiss at him.

Those wrinkled eyes hold mine. With his bloodied hand, the priest signs the cross over himself.

May the Lord have mercy on your soul, he breathes.

And he turns, and leaves at last.

* * *

I run to Ivar, clatter against the grid, bloody hands gripping the metal. We gaze at each other from across the grid, so close now – *close to the devil*, Father Madog would say, *you were seduced by heathens, don't let him get into your mind again* – but he is not just in my mind, he is in my soul itself, the need to take him in my arms all-consuming.

The priest is gone and I am here, thwarting his every warning – I am damning myself with every step, Eve holding out a hand to the serpent, treading the brimstone at Hell's gate. And yet the warmth ahead only soothes me, like a gasp of summer in the bitter dark.

The door, hisses the chained devil, and I rush to it.

Hands slippery with blood, I try the keys one after the one, trembling as they fall away from the lock. Then one slides in, turns with a *clank* that fills the room.

The door swings inward.

I go to him. Step into his body heat, his vitality, a pulse that draws me in as inexorably as a crimson tide.

But he is no chained devil. He is Ivar, my skáld who sings so well, who plays music in the wild forests, who dances with nimble feet. He is chained now, stripped to naught as I am, and growling in pure animal fury.

I take his beautiful face in my hands. Those spitting red eyes hold mine, his chains squealing as he struggles to lean closer. To see him like this only reminds me that we've been to the edges of madness together; he knows this state just as intimately as I do.

He isn't afraid of it.

To be close to him brings it all back. What it felt like to sit with him over a simmering cauldron of magic; how we stepped across the skies of other

worlds together, hand in hand. He's taken me to the ends of my limits and beyond, always pushing, always encouraging me to explore further, to be brave.

With him, there has never been any shame.

I lean my forehead against his, the witch's son, the one who taught me not to be afraid. I want to be that girl again, the one he said he was proud of. They might've cut away my hair; now I only want him to cut away all the rest, the past self I have no need for.

It's incredible, he told me once. How you cannot go back, once you see things differently. Often it is just a small moment, and the entire world seems different for it.

BAM.

The walls shiver, dust falling from the ceiling. I flinch, glance up at the stones above me. The Vikings must've reached the inner gate; they are hurtling their battering ram against it.

BAM.

Quick. The keys – surely among the shivering pile, there is the set that would open Ivar's shackles. But his wrists are so high above us. I pull a crate closer, step up onto it, and try all the keys I can – but I'm shaking, and there are so many of them.

His voice runs through me. He hisses my name, and I close my eyes as he leans closer. With my added height, he can nuzzle into my neck, lean into my body.

Tamsin, he says, and there is a strangeness to his pronunciation now that his tongue is split; it has more of a hiss, more resonance. *Tamsssin...*

He has been carved lean by his imprisonment; starved of contact, of pleasure, of joy. I burrow into his braids, kiss his tattoos, whining with

impatience. I want to give it all back to him. Give him everything.

Let us find ourselves in each other again.

I find the key at last, ram it in the lock. I'm panting as I work to open up the heavy iron that holds him prisoner. The hinges creak as though in protest of unleashing this red-eyed demon, and then –

CLANK.

His shackles drop to the floor.

Chapter 55



IVAR

Full Moon of September

I hoist her up, carry her to the gridded bars. Slam her against them. Her hands fly out to grasp the iron, bare legs locked tight around my waist; her blood red skirts pour down the bars, adorning them in that vivid crimson.

Loki, the sight of her is as a song in my veins – where are the drums, the blaring bronze lurs that would suite her glory? That red in her eye, on her hands, cascading from her body – it is for me, it is *for me* that she wears it this time.

And they come, the great drums – *BAM*, resounding through the stone corridors of the dungeon. *BAM*, inhabiting the dark spaces like a pulse.

She wraps herself around me so tight, her ankles crossed at my back. Those lithe fingers of hers curl around black metal, spreading a priest's blood there.

My eyes trail in grieved rage along her bare shoulders, the aberration of her shorn tufty head. The red half-moons that the shearing instrument left around her ears, smearing blood over her pallor. She is like a toppled stone goddess, flowers and moss peaking through the fracture lines.

The priest did this to her. Him and his Christian order – he tried to capture her, to tame her. Shave her golden mane as though he wanted to pluck the crown from her head, take her divinity from her. Make her *less*.

I loom over her, stay on the cusp of a kiss. Not so long ago, I was poised to capture her just as well. Snap shackles around her wrists. Make her mine by force. But don't those idiots see it? To grasp her would be like attempting to grasp the gods, or Yggdrasil itself; they would only be diminished in the taking.

The lesson she taught me echoes in me now with such profundity. Try to hold onto something wild and it will wither. So it is with her, as with all her kinswomen, and everything in this green realm.

Only in her wildness can there be joy; only then.

She loosens one hand from the iron bars, lays cool fingers on my cheek. And her touch – it opens the whole world, it shows me the depth of the lesson. There can only ever be surrender; a surrender to the way things are, to the rise of the sun and the rhythm of the waves, and death as it cycles again into life. And we need only keep our hands open, and trust in it; that the sun will rise again, and that what we wish for the most will come to us in its own time.

“*Ivar*,” she intones, and that layered voice rushes down my spine.

Odin, what peace it is to surrender to her. I stand before her now as a supplicant, as Thrain must've done; Thrain, who understood this wisdom far earlier than I.

Has he always known that to love her is to let her dance freely on our open palms? That there should be no hierarchy, no competition between us? She is Freya's daughter, shaped from the living bark of Yggdrasil; her companions must be like the companions of the world tree, each fulfilling different roles. Thrain acts as her guardian and protector, while I... I'm not sure yet what I may bring her.

What is my role? The man asked to the mountain, to the millenia-old ash tree, its boughs dripping with flowers. *What is it you need me to be?*

The daughter of Yggdrasil bristles around me, her long legs tightening around my waist. She has been carved and gouged, red sap running down her neck. She turns her head, bares her throat to me.

I've seen that expression once before. She wants me to hurt her. To strip away this day, the painful past that clings to her; cut away withered boughs to make room for new growth.

I breathe against her neck and accept the honour she offers me, to be the one to break her.

BAM, goes the battering ram, as we are swallowed by the pulsing darkness.

There is one creature whose role it is to destroy. A great black serpent who twists among Yggdrasil's roots and gnaws at them; Níðhöggr is his name. And it is his role I inhabit now as I curl around her, freeing myself from the tangle of laces and linen that separates us, coiling an arm under her knee.

In one merciless thrust I'm inside her to the hilt. Her hands fly out to the wrought iron bars again as I spear her roughly against the grid.

BAM.

Níðhöggr is always painted as a villain. But perhaps we're wrong to paint

him that way. Perhaps his destructiveness is not malicious but necessary, even tender. I stay deep inside her, lap at her throat with my snake's tongue; she tastes of wood ash, the tangy savour of ceremonies.

Somewhere beyond, there is movement. A frightened voice in the corridor, the silhouette of a young Cavalier. *Tamsin! Tamsin...!*

My hiss flattens against her like the slavering open mouth of a beast.

Stay away, it warns.

The wolfsbane-clad boy watches from the other end of the corridor, horrified. He keeps on shouting, something about a gate, the Vikings are almost through, the Vikings are coming, and I must let go of her – but she doesn't pay him any mind, and neither do I.

If there is a war out there, then let it be a consecration of this moment – let the spilt blood be an augury of a rich, plentiful future.

My hands slam into the web of iron, clasp it alongside hers. I give her a savage, bestial rutting until her cries come wild and high. Shouts from the other cells rise – baying dogs in this dark underground.

BAM. The stones tremble, torchlight guttering.

My knot has grown, flushed and aching. Her tightness drags over every inch of it – *Freya*, that feeling, no song could ever do it justice save for the one that falls from my lips now. I bang her hard against the grid as I seat my knot inside her, deep as I can go. The entire structure shakes, basalt dust falling from the ceiling onto her shoulders.

Stone, ash and iron; and a little blinking goddess, rising from it, her face streaked with glittering silver dust.

Gods.

It is like touching the pulse point of the world, to be inside her; Odin, you would give your other eye just to know this once. Around us the black iron

dances before my blinkering mind, as though to form the coils of the serpent, entwined with Yggdrasil's roots. And that is where we are – in the glittering dark, the rich earth from which the world tree sprouts.

That deep drumming, it is the drumming of rebirth, the drumming of a monstrous heart. Something is coming, shivering all around us. Níðhöggr, scaled and enormous, rises up my spine; the teeth of the great snake pushes out of my gums. I coil around her, poised to devour her, deepen her devastation so that she may better rise from it.

I sink into her neck, open-mouthed. Stay there a moment as my teeth grow, savour this silence as one savours the quiet before annihilation.

She tilts her head to the side, lets me linger over the delicate unbroken skin of her neck. The play of torchlight there is utterly hypnotising; the greens and blues of her veins shift beneath, lending her an ever-changing hue. She is becoming, transforming, she is shaking away the ash as her own teeth grow.

And there, beside us... light moving like liquid along a point.

It's metal. Honed metal.

The wolfsbane-clad boy has approached our lair. He angles a sword between the iron bars, pointing it right at my neck.

Bite her and you die, he growls.

I lay my glare upon this human-shaped *nothing* who dares interrupt us. Show him my growing teeth, my forked tongue – earn myself his horror.

He comes before Níðhöggr, a scared little boy with knocked knees and a knife in his trembling hand.

But the goddess deigns to speak to this waste of breath. She turns her head, angles those corrupted eyes at him. He is entranced, his grip flagging.

And she speaks in that ancient, layered tongue with which she commands her lessers –

“Leave us.”

Her voice wraps around his body, forces him to back off. His sword whines against iron as he retrieves it, then walks away, guided by her command. He staggers once he’s far enough, leaning to catch the wall. Glances over his shoulder with an air of pure disbelief.

She grips me closer. We move together, as though pressed into each other by the natural pattern of the air and stars and all the turning world. Mouths open, fangs poised, her breath prickles my throat like a silver mist.

Teeth pierce skin. We savage one another, her blood rushing over my tongue, and that holy taste steals everything away.

* * *

... Tamsin! Tamsin!...

... for God’s sake, you have to listen to me...

... the gate, the inner gate is breached, they’re coming...

... you have to wake up...

... wake up...

... WAKE UP!

* * *

When my eyes next blink open, I find Tamsin in my lap, both of us panting in the aftermath, her red dress all askew. We’re on the floor now, her straddling me, the grid pressed against my back.

How long – how long have we been locked together like this? There’s no knowing, save for the shrinking of my fist-sized knot and her own shivering state.

Consciousness is being forcibly dragged back to the front of my mind, like dragging an unwilling wildling out of the woods. Someone’s still shouting, many people in fact – though whether it’s at us or in the general vicinity, I can’t tell. I’m breathing hard, frowning through the ungodly headache of it, trying to remember – where in Loki’s name we even are, and what my own name is.

Her mouth is burnished with my blood; I can taste hers, wine-sweet on my lips, trickling down my chin. She strokes my dishevelled hair, so foggy in her own afterglow; both of us are all raw as we ride the last waves of climax. Odin, I wrecked her against that iron grid – her back must be a bruised mess.

“Lamb,” I pant. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she slurs, smiling. Then her eyes blink open with difficulty, and she strokes my lower lip, gazing down at it. “You can speak? Is your tongue healed?”

My forked tongue smarts as she directs my attention to it.

“Marginally,” I manage. The moon takes away the pain, so I couldn’t tell her for certain.

Then that voice calls out again from the corridor behind us: “Oy! Can either of you hear me?”

I stir, growl rising. It’s that boy, that meddlesome Cavalier. Tamsin glances over my shoulder and cringes, one hand pulling up the bodice of her dress.

“Oh, *Christ*,” she mutters. “Is that you, Emrys?”

“Yes, it’s me. Are you all right? Are you both conscious now?”

She's sinking lower into my lap, mortified. "I'm fine Emrys, we're fine."

"There are others guarding the dungeon entrance," Emrys goes on, undeterred. "But I don't know how long they'll hold. Is Ivar Gofraidsson conscious?"

I lick my bloody lips. But before I can answer, I find myself staring at the red circle on Tamsin's neck, where I sank my teeth.

Odin. We really...? I reach up to touch my own neck, find the circular wound still wet with blood.

We really did it. We gave each other the bite.

Gods... what is this that I can feel? Twin heartbeats, thudding in sync. The fullness of her belly rounding out mine. And those sore cuts on her scalp, prickling my own head.

I gaze up at her, mute with amazement. The pair-bond must be waking.

Tamsin has all but forgotten the boy beyond as she holds my gaze, feeling out this new connection. Her eyes flicker between mine, answering my smile with her own.

But the boy will not be forgotten. He marches toward us, chainmail clinking with each step, his sword clattering against his belt.

Tamsin jerks up in a surge of self-consciousness – her cleavage is slick with sweat and blood, her seams are ripped here and there where we were too eager. And she is still perched on my knot, though it's shrinking.

To hear another Varg come so close – my growl bursts in my chest to ward him away from us.

"Don't, Emrys," she calls frantically. "Don't come any closer."

He stops. He seems to be shifting something heavy and metallic, as though he were carrying a heavy load.

"Is that man lucid?" Emrys asks again in clipped tones. "Can he

understand me?”

“I can,” I growl. “And I hope for your sake that you have a reason for disturbing us.”

“Oh, do I have a reason!” Emrys exclaims. “There’s a war up there – a full-scale fucking war, or have you forgotten?”

Oh.

Fuck me, that’s right.

“A warlord named Ögmundr has breached the inner sanctum,” Emrys goes on, seething, “and he’s an absolute butcher. We need to get both of you out of this place, and Tamsin, if you really can help us – we could use it. So if you’re quite done here, Your *Grace* – I brought some armour you can wear.”

He sounds like he’s shaking with rage. I press my fingers to my eyes. Loki, that we might have to drag ourselves back to this tedium when the pair-bond is webbing between us.

“All right,” I groan. “I hear you.”

“Hurry up, for the love of God,” Emrys snaps. “I’ll be waiting at the dungeon entrance.”

There’s a dull flump as that heavy metallic something lands by the door of the cell; chainmail, surely. And then the boy turns on his heel and marches away from us.

Tamsin bristles as though readying to slide off me. I dig my claws in her thighs, holding her there a while longer, my cock still throbbing inside her. There is such a delicious shifting of flesh and fluids; without my knot, that absurd quantity of come is seeping down my shaft, drenching her cunt, trickling over my sac.

“Mmm…” I rut within her gently, easing further up into that thick waterfall. She breathes out, shivering.

“Ivar,” comes her feeble protest. “Didn’t you hear him?”

“Yes... but you’re so wet,” I whisper deliriously. “And full of my come.”

I’m still achingly hard; and gods, the scent she wears. I had grown used to it being both enticing and repugnant at the same time, due to Thrain’s claim. But now that I’ve planted my own claim upon her neck, she smells as good as she did when she was a maiden.

Honey and apples and pure sex... *Freya*. There is some note in there of Thrain and I, too; some gorgeous twist of musk that only deepens the pleasure of it.

She’s saying something, some ludicrous notion of there being more important things in the world than this.

I bury my nose in the crook of her neck and hiss, “You smell like yourself again... like the first time I kissed you.”

Her hands tighten around me. She makes a needy little sound, and then she kisses me lightly on the lips, rocking deliciously on my cock. Gods... if we could only stay here, prolong this night as we should – a claiming ceremony lasts until dawn, after all.

But she’s right, she’s right to cling to sanity. There’s a war to face, though somehow she’d managed to wipe it entirely from my mind.

It takes considerable effort for me to peel her off me again.

“We have to get up, lamb,” I whisper to her. “Get up or I’ll keep you down here all night.”

Chapter 56



TAMSIN

Full Moon of September

The dungeon door creaks open. And the whole world gushes in.

War cries resound everywhere, metal clashes, many feet thud across the flagstones. The smell of burning shoots animal alertness up my spine – *fire*. It fills my nose, my mouth, prods at the barely dormant beast; it is skin-level tonight, ready to rise at any moment.

Emrys glances out of the door, keeping it open only a fraction for now. Ivar stands beside me, wearing identical armour to Emrys – the trappings of a Cavalier, black breeches, black leg bindings, black tunic. I helped him tug it all on, over the mess of his whipped back – I understood then, looking at those deep lashes, just how intolerable it is to see them on someone you love.

He'd only grinned at me, like our matching scars were something to make jests about.

His sleeves are too short, as is his chainmail. But the helmet hides his tattoos, his face; his wolfsbane tabard cloaks his identity.

He speaks to Emrys now: “It is Ögmundr then, leading this onslaught? Not my father?”

“It is he, indeed. Your father left for the ships.”

“Last I saw Ögmundr, he had many friends.”

“He does. We estimated near four thousand when they first attacked.”

“And how many are you in the fort?”

“Around five hundred,” Emrys says, with steely grit.

Ivar scoffs and mutters to himself, “He says this with all the confidence of a man at the head of a great Volsung army.” To Emrys he adds, “I sincerely hope you have enough arrows.”

Emrys glares at him. “Are you really going to stand there and criticise us? What were you doing while we were defending the gates, Your *Grace*?”

I grab Ivar’s arm, still wincing with guilt. “Are there very many who’ve breached the inner sanctum?” I ask Emrys.

“Not too many,” he says. “They can only trickle in through the broken gate. Their army is cloven by the fort walls already; each gate acts as a tight gullet. We’ve slaughtered a great number. But now that they’re here – we have to contain the breach, and close it if we can.”

Emrys glances at us both worriedly over his shoulder. Then he pulls the dungeon door wider with a grunt of effort.

“Stay with me,” he urges us. “Keep your shields up.”

We do. I’m armoured, too – Emrys insisted that I wear a chainmail shirt over my dress, and take up my own shield. It’s a Brittonic oval shape, reassuringly heavy against my side. I tug the hood of my black cloak closer over my head.

Emrys leads us out.

The courtyard is manned by a battalion of Cavaliers. Men are rushing

across the living areas, between the tents and roundhouses, heading for the breach. Smoke is billowing, thick and black, from somewhere ahead – the same place all that clashing steel is coming from.

“Come on,” Emrys urges. We join a group of Cavaliers who’ve just climbed down from the battlements. They barely even look twice at us.

And we run.

Past sloped tents; past awnings and roundhouses, cozy living places that have turned into strategic rallying points for our troops. We stop at the first barricade; benches and haystacks have been pulled into a wall. Archers are stationed there, as are a small group of soldiers. Above us, the battlements are swarming with activity, our archers raining down upon the invaders.

Ivar and I hang back while Emrys goes to speak with the others. The crackle of fire is ahead, smoke prickling my nose – the Vikings beyond this barricade are spreading it, using it to destroy the defensive perimeters of wood and hay.

I cough into my cloak, staring around us wide-eyed. It’s spreading so fast. Just leaning against Ivar for more height shows me a burning glow ahead, the flames licking up the sides of the great wall. Black smoke billows into the night sky.

Ivar turns to me, eyes sparking. His excitement pulls at me through our bond.

“Tamsin,” he urges. “I have an idea.”

He touches the drying blood on my chin, and then the dark red residue he wears on his own mouth.

“Do you remember, when we sang the *galdr*?” he says. “Yngvor gave me a pearl of your blood. For potency, she said.”

I hold his gaze. He is covered in my blood, now – he’s taken far more

than just a drop. My heart thrums as I guess his direction.

“What? What are you thinking?” I ask him.

“I know many *galdrar*,” he says. “Many spells. I know one that calls down the rain.”

A wondering smile pulls at my mouth. “You want us to do magic? Now?”

“Why not?” he says, his own grin widening. “Why not try?”

He laces his fingers with mine, pulls me closer. My instincts sing as he squeezes my hand, both of us turning so naturally into each other under the moon. With our pair-bond still new and glittering, and the combat all around – there is such ripeness to this moment. He’s right; I can’t deny the pull of it.

“We will call to Freyr,” Ivar murmurs as we settle in this closeness, standing between stacked hay and shadows, an anonymous cloaked figure and a too-tall Cavalier. “He is the twin brother of Freya, and lord of many things. But he is the one to ask, if one needs the rain.” He cups my neck, laying a possessive hand over his mating mark. “Listen; speak the words with me.”

I watch his lips form the archaic Norse words, let myself be hypnotized. The giddiness of doing magic with him again swells between us, like two children indulging in the forbidden.

He’s asking me to invoke his own gods. To speak directly to them.

It’s strange, for it to be so simple in the end. To step away from one vast emptiness, as though turning away from the open door that the heavenly father left behind him. And to find that there are many other doors, half-open, hopeful slices of light. Many strange footprints in the earth that one may follow, tracking the gods like one tracks deer. Which one will answer me? Which one will show me his face?

Which one will deign to hear me, and earn my trust?

I know our own pagan pantheon isn't entirely lost. Some villagers still honour our old gods in their small ways. But their names are lost to me; distant, like memories folded into childhood fables. We had a god of rain, didn't we? A god of thunder... *taran* is the word... Taranis, that was his name – I know one or two villagers had shrines to him.

But Taranis does not know me. And I don't know how to address him; surely an apology is expected, after years of calling him and his kin *heathen idols*. So I listen to Ivar's Norse, and turn to the pagan god he knows well; trust him to make the introductions.

We speak the *galdr* together; the *galdr* to bring down the rain. Between us, the pair-bond tightens, the air grows thick. I close my eyes, wonder at how the prayer makes me lightheaded, though I do not understand the words.

And then, after many heartbeats – a droplet splashes on my nose.

My eyes blink open. I stare at Ivar, still speaking the words with him. And more droplets fall, one after the other.

Overhead, a great rumbling of thunder rolls through the night sky.

I can't help it – I laugh, and so does he, both of us smiling so wide as the rain begins to fall. It slicks our joint hands, runs down our faces, makes tracks in the blood that covers us.

Emrys returns to us – he and the others have their hands out, blessing the rain as it falls harder still, helping to douse the fires. He tugs at me, oblivious to what we're doing.

“Come on,” he says. “This area's been secured. The commoner's church is ahead – let's head to the next barricade.”

In the rushing of many soldiers, Ivar leans into me, kisses me with rain-slick lips. And we follow the others, my hand held firmly in his, magic still lingering on our tongues.

* * *

The commoner's church is framed by fire. It's climbed to the roof on one side – Cavaliers are chucking buckets of well water, and the rain is helping some. But inside, all the daughters of Clota are trapped.

And they cannot escape without running right into the Viking horde.

Battle is raging ahead, along the sinuous path that leads down to the shattered inner gate. The Cavaliers try to create a corridor, to funnel the girls out of the church doors, toward the palace. But all those daughters of Clota have the scent of the heat.

And the Viking horde can sense it.

I watch, holding onto Ivar, as Emrys and the others protect the church. They form a human barricade, wooden shields and pale faces. With the woodsmoke, our archers on the battlements can't quite help them.

The Vikings run from the shattered inner gate straight up towards the church – following their noses, roaring with glee, axes raised. The smoke gives them cover, makes them bold.

With a yell of encouragement, the Cavaliers engage.

To see Emrys in actual combat is still surreal, when I used to watch him and Rhun sparring with wooden swords. This time his blade is naked metal, and it's singing against the Vikings who confront him.

He always was a good study.

The scents of blood and fear are thick on the air. Metal glints and glances all around. My craze is shivering up my spine again, *Clota*, all those girls – running, wide-eyed, their dresses so thin, offering no protection whatsoever to their soft bodies beneath. What were the dress-makers thinking, when they

made our apparel so delicate, so horribly tearable? The girls disappear into the smoke, heading for the palace, tracing a florid scented trail after them.

That slaving horde. They will go, they will tear the Cavaliers apart, they will follow those girls if I don't stand in their way.

It does not matter what god those women worship. They are still my sisters.

The craze makes me shake and pant, clutching onto Ivar for balance as it rises like a fever. He stays with me as it blooms.

That's it, he purrs. Let it rise. Don't be afraid.

I turn to him, my tall, beautiful skáld – he cups my face so he can see the crimson pool in my eyes. He watches avidly.

“I'm not afraid,” I tell him, and he offers me a slow, awe-struck smile.

There is a phrase, in Norse, he tells me. If you want to address the Vikings in their own tongue.

He tells it to me. And like this, it is so easy to take his Norse words and keep them tucked under my tongue.

Ahead, a fresh wave of Vikings swells out of the gate. They charge into the Cavalier barricade, breaking it up. Emrys's voice rings out – I find him among the scattered soldiers, eyes wide, staring my way. And the scene becomes one that we have all imagined, a story we've heard so often as children.

The Vikings reach the church doors. They pluck women out of it, as a fox plucks hens from the hen house. One heathen lifts a young girl into the air, bringing up a wild cheer from his fellows.

It is Drysi, wrapped in a yellow hemp dress, mouth open in a soundless scream.

I raise both hands and yell for her:

“VERÐA STEINN!”

Loud and clear, the words sweep over them all.

Become stone.

And all our foes turn statue-still.

The Cavaliers keep moving, ploughing through them, only realising after they meet no resistance that the Vikings are caught in my command. All of them, all the way down to the inner gate, those I can see – they are stuck to the spot, some losing their balance and falling to their knees.

Emrys laughs in pure disbelief. Some of the Cavaliers pluck their swords from their motionless foes and look around, trying to understand. I stride to Drysi, help her down from her captor. She pushes him back with all her strength – he staggers, flumps to the floor, eyes wide as he stares at the sky.

She stares at him in utter confusion. Then at me.

“Princess?” she breathes.

Many Cavaliers look my way; they see the cloaked figure with the red eyes, they hear the eerie echo of my voice. But more Vikings are flooding through the gate – the Cavaliers cannot allow any long thoughtful pause. They see that they are unaffected; they see I have neutered their foes for a culling.

Emrys is the first to yell, *GO, GO, GO!* And the Cavaliers follow him, swinging their swords in the guts of the motionless, taking out their rage upon the impotent enemy.

I take Drysi with me, hand her over to the last few women exiting the church.

“Go to the palace,” I tell her. “Don’t look back.”

Drysi does not leave my side, nor does she recoil from me; she only stares in utter amazement, between me and the slaves I’ve made of our invaders.

“Princess Tamsin,” she says again. “What –?”

The other women pull her in. I turn, not letting myself look at their faces, their judgment – the horde is ahead, the horde is spilling through the gate, and we need to stop them.

The newcomers see their fellows writhing in my grip. They’ve seen this witchcraft before; I try to catch them, to turn them to stone so my people may more easily break them. Soon we’ve surrounded the gate – we’ve almost banished them all from the inner sanctum – but a fresh new wave comes, and a yell rises among the Vikings.

VÖLVA!

GET THE VÖLVA!

Ivar comes beside me protectively, his blood-spattered sword angled before us.

Tamsin, he breathes, readying his shield.

The Vikings are no longer headed for the church.

They’re headed straight for me.

Hands out, I halt the first line – only to flinch as arrows and spears cleave through the air. One catches my hood – tears across my cheek as it yanks the hood back.

Ivar pulls me after him. Shields high, we run, and the Vikings take chase.

The moon makes us sharp enough to fly over uneven, rain-slick ground. Behind us, shields collide, Cavaliers covering our flight. The air fills with the clank and clatter of wood and axes, of swords against chainmail.

Several times, we try to find a hidden corner from which I may command the enemy – but this wave is far worse than all the others. The Cavaliers are being swept back, their barricades breaking. Above, roars of battle resound –

the invaders have crawled up to the battlements, an infection gaining more ground.

From on high, they can shoot arrows at us; track us like animals. I can barely see them in the stormy, smoke-ridden dark. I cry out to halt those I can, which alerts the others to my position – and arrows hail down on us.

Ivar pulls me behind a stack of crates, angles his shield over our heads. And we crouch, animals in a makeshift lair, panting together as the Vikings take over.

* * *

We're going to die.

We're going to die.

Ivar holds me close under our shield, his strong arm wrapped around my waist. I nuzzle into his neck, taking his scent to try and stop trembling. Where is the rest of my pack – before the arrow comes, I would've wanted to see them, just to hold them – be with them one last time.

My pack... my pack.

I close my eyes, let out a long breath.

In all the noise of battle, I hadn't noticed the noise inside me; I hadn't turned inward, heeded the bond that links me to them. I turn to it now, fingertips gliding into that glittering stream, the one that binds me to Thrain.

My love... where are you?

The bond tugs back, surges with vitality and outrage. I lean into it, let it guide me across the distance that separates us.

Hoofbeats thud into the earth. He is somewhere enclosed; a long dark tunnel. He's riding Cynan at a gallop, torch held high. At either side of him

are Rhun and Olaf, astride their own steeds – and the pack, our band of Dubliners, running behind. The rumbling noise of them is like underground thunder.

The second passageway. I gasp, clutch Ivar’s arm. It is the one with the eastward opening in the forests; with the siege camp completely emptied out, they must’ve had full access to it.

“They’re coming,” I tell him. “Olaf and Thrain, and the men – they’re coming.”

He stiffens, bewildered by my words. *What? How?*

“The eastward tunnel,” I tell him. “It ends near the stables, just by the Cavalier tower – come on!”

We scabble out of our corner, making ourselves scarce. All around is chaos – bodies colliding, rain washing away the edges of the world. All that exists is Ivar’s hand on my arm – our shields clunking together as we push through, between collapsed awnings, carts and haystacks, and men trying to hold onto their lives.

Thrain’s so close now. I can feel it.

A horn blasts – two short calls and one long high one, the Briton call to arms.

Then a figure bursts out of the tunnel entrance ahead. Olaf, white as a ghost, astride his gleaming steed – he is as bright as a ray of sunlight in the middle of all the carnage. He sweeps his sword to carve a path, towering over them all, eyes red as he exacts his wrath.

Beside him rides Thrain, lifting a banner high into the air, showing the Dubliners’ wolf. He and the others wear a thick white sash around their arm, as though they had torn up their peace banner to wear it into battle.

Above, a voice yells in Brittonic: *IT IS THE MEN OF DUBLIN! HOLD*

YOUR FIRE!

I recognise Llewellyn's voice, yelling himself hoarse as he repeats the command. Rhun rides close behind Thrain, lifting a horn to his lips to blow the Briton call a second time. And on Olaf's roared order, the Dubliners charge straight for the shattered inner gate, barreling into the invading force.

They are like a river, sweeping away the enemy. Back, back to the gate, the Dubliners' crazed frenzy lending them the strength to drag the gates' broken doors shut. They pull shattered pillars and carts across it to barricade it. Still the enemy seeps through, but soon their passage is stoppered completely.

The last stragglers are trapped in the inner sanctum. They battle on, intent on taking down as many as they can with them. Those closest to me resume their hunt for the Völva – they will have their revenge before they're cut down.

Ivar and I are still some way from our pack. All around us, black figures in the rain turn to face us, their lust for the hunt only reinvigorated by their own imminent demise.

I command those I can. Ivar leaps at the ones I've stilled, cuts them down, trailing blood. But for every Viking he kills, more converge on him; they feel death breathing upon them, and it makes them bolder than ever.

Please, I pray to Ivar's gods as I hold out a trembling hand, eyes darting in the rain. Don't take him now. Not now, not so close to the end –

A clatter of hooves resounds ahead. Panting, I glance around.

Thrain is galloping towards us, leaning sideways, eyes fixed on Ivar. Axe in hand, he leaps like a beast, barrels into Ivar's assailants. He is rabid, tearing them apart; he pulls the last one down, bloody fist swinging up and

down. Like this he is unprotected, his shield forgotten on the ground – but Ivar has his back, and Rhun arrives too, his shield raised to cover them both.

Olaf comes last, riding hard in the rain, a wrathful red-eyed giant. Alvsithr snorts, chucks out his hooves, eats up the ground. The stallion's great bulk comes beside us in the next moment, sweaty flanks heaving. His tack tinkles around us, hot exhalations gushing from his nostrils and over our heads. Olaf turns him around, circling us protectively as we regroup, my pack closing ranks around me.

They're here.

They came.

The joy of it spills from my eyes, makes me drop my shield, though we are encircled with blood and violence. I don't know who to reach for first – but Ivar pulls my shield back up, tensed beside me as he keeps his eyes on the darkness all around.

Olaf's deep, warped voice rises from above us: *Thrain. Ivar. Take her up to the battlements. Find Llewellyn and protect him.*

So my wolves gather at either side of me, huge and growling as they place their bodies between me and the night. Thrain takes the rear while Ivar heads for the nearest stone stairway that leads up, up toward the sky, the torch-dotted parapets. I turn back, aching that our pack might have to break again when we were so briefly reunited. But Olaf is turning his steed back toward the melee, barking at Rhun to follow – so my twin climbs onto Cynan's back, and they return to command the Dubliners at the inner gate, swords hanging low.

Chapter 57



IVAR

Full Moon of September

Up in the battlements, the wind shrieks, throwing great gusts of rain in our faces. Men fight along the slippery walkway. Ahead, Llewellyn fights in the pouring rain, his armour shining, his long cape drenched.

Tamsin holds out her hand, feels for the Viking invaders. Grasps them tight. They all freeze, the Cavaliers staggering back in confusion.

“Step up onto the embrasures,” she commands them.

So they do. Leathers creaking, the Vikings climb onto the waist-high ledges, stand facing the great void ahead.

She lines them all up, one arm outstretched. And the Cavaliers watch, open-mouthed, as those Vikings who had the audacity to climb up this sanctuary’s inner wall now leave it again in a wingless flight.

Cries come from below as Ögmundr’s warriors receive their friends from the sky.

The Völva! This is the Völva’s work –

Fall back! Fall back!

The goddess leads us along the cleared battlements. Thrain and I cover her, protect her, shields drawn. Not a single Cavalier apprehends us. They have seen her working her miracles all evening now – miracles or witchcraft, what will they call it? Perhaps they have not reached a consensus yet, on where the difference lies.

We arrive before Commander Llewellyn. He is panting and dishevelled, his armour dented and streaked. Baffled, he cannot help but accept that the walkway has been cleared. So he sheathes his sword. But his hand lingers on the hilt.

Thrain moves, as do I, fingers curled around our own weapons. Both of us wait for the goddess's word.

She and the commander stare at each other a moment. This Christian man, upright and proper, rosary wrapped around his wrist; and the bloodthirsty goddess with her shaved head and her red eyes.

She allows him a moment to speak. But he cannot find anything to say – the whites of his eyes show his fear.

So she turns slowly to face Thrain. Tilts her head, bares her neck to him.

“Bite,” she orders.

My growl spikes. Why would she –? Step out from godliness, step down, make herself less threatening – but there is no protesting her command. Thrain holds her by the neck, sinks blunt teeth into her mating mark. For a moment she holds onto us both, her small hands gripping our chainmail, and we are both buffeted by the pain, the shrinking from power to normalcy.

As she finds herself again, she purrs for us, lays those hands on our necks, our faces, murmuring to us as a mistress murmurs to her beasts; *will you settle for me? Settle, now...*

I let out a breath as I follow her guidance, step alongside her into lucidity.

She has plucked us out of our crazes with a softness I've never known before. With the stroke of a feather, she does what a grown man could not accomplish with all the violence the moon allows him.

She turns to Llewellyn again, lets him see her as a girl, small and unthreatening.

“Commander,” she says, her voice crackly with exhaustion. “My only prerogative is the safety of my kinswomen. I do this for us; for the girls in that castle; for all our people. You have nothing to fear from me, so please don't be afraid.”

Commander Llewellyn takes a moment, licks his dry lips. His archers are still calling to each other, engaging the enemy beyond the wall – we are the one small spot of stillness on the battlements.

“Princess,” Llewellyn says at long last. “It is very dangerous, what you're doing.”

“It may be dangerous,” Tamsin grants him, then throws out a tired arm to the battlements. “But at least the wall is clear, now.”

Llewellyn lets out a sort of disbelieving scoff.

“Yes... the wall is clear, indeed,” he mutters.

“Commander, if I may,” I throw out. With lucidity comes sharper awareness of the defense strategies they're employing; and something is nagging me. “Where is your King? I haven't seen him anywhere in your fort tonight.”

Llewellyn shakes his head. “I lost sight of him some time ago,” he admits. “There's been no time to search for him.”

So the fort defenses have been entirely on his shoulders. No wonder he looks so harassed and fearful.

Brittonic shouts are emerging from behind us, in the fort's living areas. *Clear!... Clear!* The Cavaliers are calling it to each other from different reclaimed sections. Llewellyn turns, inviting us to follow him, and we venture to the overhang that looms directly above the inner gate. After making his own checks, he yells it down at his fellows: *ALL CLEAR ON THE BATTLEMENTS!*

The inner sanctum is safe; the gate is barricaded again. Olaf is some way away from the main living areas; he is corralling the Dubliners, riding to and fro to make sure they don't go chasing the many heat scents that gorge this place.

There is peace down there, at least.

Following Llewellyn's command, we all cross over to the other side of the battlements, gazing out at the dark space that stretches to the outer wall. Down there is a forest of arrows, of pierced bodies, bone-white mounds in the moonlight. The surviving Vikings are in a mindless frenzy; what sane Jarls survived are trying to call for retreat, but it is impossible to pull that crazed horde anywhere now. Not when they'd been given such brazen permission to run amok.

They keep on circling back to the barricaded inner gate, running after the golden scent of heat they glimpsed so briefly – and the archers pelt them with arrows and rock showers and boiling water.

Odin, there are so many dead. Hundreds upon hundreds.

“You still have ammunition?” I ask Llewellyn.

“We're running low,” he admits. “But if we can keep them stuck between the walls until daylight... the survivors will be exhausted. I'm thinking we'll engage them in a melee, come the dawn.”

I squint in the moonlight, trying to ascertain how many are left. There is

movement beyond, a dark ripped cloud gliding across the King's Garden – more survivors, the Viking forces regrouping, covering the retreat of their fellows. Of the four thousand-strong that attacked the fort, it seems only one thousand survived – maybe less still.

The pair-bond whips up into a golden crest of delight, distracting me. I turn and find Tamsin burrowing into Thrain's arms. He holds her tight, runs a gentle gloved hand over the side of her shaved head. There's been no time for proper reunions – we share a glance over her shoulder, he and I.

Thrain. My brother. My best friend. There will be no simple way to restitch this bond of ours after everything. The dark look in his eye tells me as much.

He shifts his attention to Llewellyn and asks, "Where is Ögmundr himself?"

"I don't know. We saw him retreat earlier," Llewellyn says, gesturing into the void. "He is the one with the flaming banner, isn't he? When he saw how his men were being butchered at the inner gate, he left. He held back so the others could pave the way for him."

I click my tongue. "Of course he did."

"We will have to find him," Thrain growls. "Olaf will not rest until we do."

I glance at him. "Olaf? Why?"

The look Thrain throws me then is uncertain. Almost pained.

But before I can interrogate him further, a clarion sound calls our attention to the King's Garden again, and the emptied village of Dumbartonshire beyond. From the moonlit forests it comes again – the Briton call to arms, three clear notes of a horn.

We all lean in the embrasures, watching as the moonlight outlines

movement in the dark forests, seeping out into the deserted village. Difficult to hear much over the Vikings' rampant noise; but before long I can sense a great rumbling headed this way.

Excitement bursts up from my lower back.

"Tamsin, look – can you see this?" I call to her, and she leans between Thrain and I.

There – a pair of riders burst past the roundhouses, followed by a small band of cavalry. They canter through Dumbartonshire, to the frayed edges of the Viking army. They both wear rich armour and gilded helmets – one of them has long blond hair streaming out behind her. She blows out long notes from a horn, drawing attention to them.

It is the Briton royals; Eormen and Arlyn, riding together.

Many dark silhouettes are spilling through the streets. Their helmets glint in the moonlight, their banners high and proud – Strathclyde colours.

Eormen's reinforcements. A huge contingent of Briton cavalry.

Llewellyn lets out a laugh. "She made it. She made it after all."

Tamsin's nails dig into my forearm. "Clota watch over her."

The sea of wayward Vikings begins to catch notice of them. Soon the Briton cavalry are all bristling upon the edges of Dumbartonshire, a long intimidating line, horses chucking up their heads.

Eormen yells something in Brittonic, so loud even we can hear it – she and her brother brandish their swords. And their cavalry breaks into a pelting gallop, straight onto the open grounds of the King's Garden.

Taking the remaining Viking forces head-on.

"*Ymlaen, Eormen! Ymlaeen!*" the Briton archers yell, throwing their fists in the air. They're all sending up riotous cheers as the cavalry charge scatters the wave, splattering the Vikings into the mud.

Llewellyn turns to us, bright with renewed energy. He takes us in a moment, resting his eyes on Tamsin.

“We will have to have many words, once this is over,” he says. “But one thing I know for certain is that both you and Eormen have shown astounding bravery. Both of you have pushed against the boundaries of what we have always believed to be your destinies, as daughters of Clota. You have done so for noble reasons; I am not the only one who sees that. I will endeavour to defend you both, once this night is over.”

Tamsin bows her head to him. “Thank you, Commander,” she says quietly.

He lifts his chin, and this time he addresses Thrain and I. “My lords. I think we should gather our troops and join them out there, to finish this – what do you say?”

Without the craze to sustain me, I am bent and tired as an old plucked-out wicker chair – but Thrain stands tall and ready. Something tells me he is far from having spent all his rage; I see it glinting in his eye, in the lock of his jaw.

“Gladly,” he growls.

* * *

Thrain and I accompany Tamsin down one of the rickety stone stairways. Down here in the inner sanctum, the Cavaliers are hard at work clearing away the smoky debris, dragging bodies, and pulling their men together. Llewellyn calls to his captains, asking for news, and how many they’ve lost; he calls out several times, *the King? Has anyone seen the King?* But no one has anything

to report, so his men busy themselves with each other, reuniting gladly in the post-battle mess.

We head for our own pack.

Olaf is still holding them, he and the elders pacing before the seated warband. All of them are grumbly docile, calmed by Olaf's constant low growl. He has stepped down from Alsvithr's saddle now; he walks, spear in hand to aid his limp.

Odin, he is a sight for sore eyes. It is like the sight of home after a long harrowing journey; the great reassuring bulk of him, though he limps like an ailing old man.

Tamsin pulls her hood closer over her head and rushes to him. He turns around, and he is so huge over her as they face one another. She's smiling, though I see that glint of tears on her cheeks – she's just as exhausted as I am, I can feel it, her urge to collapse into his arms.

“Olaf,” she greets him.

He gazes down at her. He's trying to be curt, but his voice comes out choked as he says, “Princess.”

He knows it is for his sake that she and I are here, that we've both walked down the road to Hel so he might not have to suffer it. He takes her hand, brings it up to kiss it. Then she raises it to stroke his cheek, so he holds it there with his enormous paw.

The Dubliners are calling out to us, cheering to find us alive and in one piece. So she goes to them, touches their shoulders, asks how they are. I should do the same – go and meet with my pack.

But Thrain's brooding presence by my side is like a dark cloud.

I know the first word to come from my mouth will send him in a rage. He is tensed as he would be before a brawl; if I so much as touch him, he will rip

my arm from its socket.

Still. One of us has to make the first step. I may as well be the one to give a courteous opening.

I turn, meet his eye. There is such intensity in that wintry blue glare, the hardness of his features.

“Quite the night, isn’t it?” I say lightly.

A shiver of pure fury runs through his body. He looks like he wants nothing more than to pull his axe from its belt loop. Instead he grabs a fistful of my wolfsbane tabard, and wrenches me into his space.

I just let him do as he likes. Loki, to have him so close after so many weeks – I’m all but basking in it, his potent fury, the deep growl that erupts from the pit of his belly. He’s still dripping with blood from when he saved my skin, earlier tonight – the scent of his rut unfurls against the roof of my mouth, musky and addictive.

Let him lay his retaliation on me. He has every right to be angry.

But he doesn’t say anything at all. Those wintry eyes drop down to my mouth, like he’s imagining the ignominy that was dealt there. Perhaps the idea that I have already been amply punished is enough to halt his own vengeance.

He manages to keep up the dark menacing act for all of two breaths. Then he hauls me against him in a rough embrace, holding me tight enough to betray his own fear.

I close my eyes. Somehow a part of me is still in that dungeon, curled in the hay, cold and alone and wishing for my brothers – and now he’s here, and it feels overindulgent to be allowed so much contact. There is all this chainmail and leather in the way, but he is still warm and solid against me, and he’s here, he’s *here*.

I breathe him in, that scent of safety and familiarity. It's good. Too good – enough to make me flinch away, as with all embraces that last too long.

“Here I was worrying that you'd avenge yourself on me,” I mutter into his hair. “But if this is your vengeance, it's a bit limp, isn't it?”

He bristles indignantly. “Ivar, I promise you, if you start making a jest of all this –”

“I bet you're wishing they'd shut me up properly, now.”

That has him cracking into laughter. “Of course you cannot just let me have this moment, *Lokisson*,” he chastises.

When he draws back he's grinning, which looks entirely at odds with his blood-spattered, dishevelled appearance. He looks like he has not slept since last I saw him.

“Rest assured, I will avenge myself,” he promises me. “But no honourable man would challenge the wounded and poorly.”

“*Poorly?*” I splutter. “Who's poorly here?”

Thrain's eye catches something behind me, so I turn. It's difficult to remain focused on one another when there are so many men milling around us. A few steps away, Emrys and a few young Cavaliers are striding toward the Dublin pack, calling out for Rhun.

We watch as Rhun emerges to the cheers of his fellows. He picks his way through our pack and over to the Cavaliers, looking sheepish. Emrys grins and the young Britons all pile onto him, cheering for him. Tamsin joins them, smiling up to her ears to see her brother so enthusiastically accepted among his peers. The lad fought bravely among them all tonight; there is much back-patting, hair-ruffling and Brittonic spoken so fast and casual that it's utterly opaque to me.

After a moment I can barely acknowledge the brouhaha, anyway.

Olaf is coming toward me, spear clacking on the flagstones.

He's leaning heavily against it as he limps. I wonder how far the craze took him tonight, how painful it must be to return to a lucid state and all his pains. He comes to a stop, standing tall and straight as he can, schooling his face to flatness. He looks me up and down, taking in the Cavalier uniform I wear, as though to make sure everything is in its proper place.

Then, of all things he could've found to say to me, he opts for: "Looks like you're missing some inches of sleeve there."

I crack a smile. This man. I've endured nigh on three weeks of imprisonment, and various creative forms of torture; and that's all he has to say? I'm amazed that he always finds such florid vocabulary with Tamsin when *that* is all he can afford me.

"I'm sure plenty of men out here are missing a few inches of something," I counter.

His beard twitches. "Fair point," he concedes in a grunt. Then he throws out an arm, his blue cape spilling away. "Now will you come here, or are you going to make an old man limp all the way over to you?"

He is a master of façades, just like I am. Though he holds out an imperious hand and holds himself regally upright, there is a deep vastness of feeling that inhabits him. One can glimpse it if one only knows where to look; the slight tremor in his hand, the tight grip he has of his spear.

I go to him. When he drags me into the blue of his cape, the men cheer, and we are allowed a small pocket of privacy under that blanket of noise. Olaf's stoic façade crumbles as he pulls me in with one arm around my shoulders, embracing me with harrowing urgency.

"You idiot," he seethes in my ear. "You absolute, incorrigible *idiot*."

I make fists in his cape, bask in the gladness that he's alive; alive and

well.

“I’m not going to apologise, you know,” I mutter.

“Of course you’re not.”

He keeps a hand on my shoulder as I step back.

“There’s something you need to know,” he says, more somberly now. “About Father. He was injured in our retreat. We took him to his ship, down at the Leven Port.”

I picture it, those last few ships that remain on the river. Father’s longboat will be docked alongside them; I see the great curling lines of the hammer that adorns the sail.

Something beats in my chest, a bird in a vast hollow space.

“Is it a serious injury?” I ask my brother.

“It is,” Olaf says. He’s quiet a moment before adding, “It’s a gut wound. It will take time.”

My eyes glaze over as I picture the proud curve of the ship’s prowhead, and Father sitting on the foredeck. He has his back turned to me in my mind’s eye; the great mass of his body is hunched over his wound.

Olaf is grave beside me; whatever blade pierced Father has caught Olaf on its bloody tip.

“Ögmundr is the one who maimed him,” he growls.

Remarkable how much bloodlust he manages to fold into that small phrase.

“We’ll find him, then,” I tell him, and he nods, sealing the promise.

After that, he turns to oversee our pack. I follow him, mouth clamped shut as the image of that misty longboat floats in my mind. But Olaf’s attitude is clear: Father’s injury is a problem to face when this night is over.

So we cover it for now, this wound we both feel in our own stomachs, while the men rise to meet me.

“Ivar! Ivar!”

“How are you? Come closer so we can see you...”

* * *

Commander Llewellyn stands by the barricaded inner gate, a pale figure before the battalion of Cavaliers he’s assembled. My brothers and I face him, Tamsin at our side, our men hovering behind us.

It is early morning, but battle still rages beyond the walls, Eormen’s men facing what remains of Ögmundr’s rebellious forces.

Commander Llewellyn lays a heavy look upon us. Torch-bearers stand on either side of him, so that his armour glitters with torchlight.

“My lords of Dublin,” he intones. “We have fought side by side, once again. You have aided us tremendously, and you have utilised the curse for good, as we have all seen. I ask you now – will you help us to end this fight? Will you ride alongside us to come to Eormen’s aid?”

Olaf looks back at us all, as though silently collecting our ascent before speaking it himself.

Then Armod calls out, “I will go if the Kátr-Ekkja leads us!”

The pack hollers with enthusiasm, breaking into noise even as Tamsin stands there, bright red and smiling despite herself. They are asking for their Vanirdottir; asking her to take them with her into battle.

“Alongside the Kátr-Ekkja, I would ride into the mists of Niflheimr itself!” calls Orm, and several others shout the same.

Olaf observes her, his beard hitching in a smile. He holds out his gloved hand, and Tamsin steps forward to take it. Then Olaf addresses Llewellyn:

“Will you allow the princess to lead my pack alongside me?”

Llewellyn bows his head. Some of the Cavaliers are muttering, casting glances at Tamsin, though it is mostly curiosity rather than scorn. Then one of the younger ones calls out:

“Witchcraft or no, if she can have the Viking horde fall on their own swords, I would have her come!”

“Aye!” call others still, until their approval rings in the night air.

Tamsin chews on her lip. Tugs her hood a little closer over her head. Olaf and Llewellyn nod at each other, and even as the men decide on the specifics of battle, she still hasn't spoken a word herself.

She waits for Llewellyn to turn away, before speaking. She glances up at us uncertainly.

“Olaf, I don't...” She clears her throat, joins her hands in front of her. “I wouldn't presume to be capable of leading. But I can ride alongside you, and offer my help.”

Olaf affords her that gentle smile again.

“Princess. It would be an honour to have you by our side, in whatever capacity you can afford us.”

* * *

The Britons give us Galloway horses, ink-black shadows in the night. We draw tight together as the inner gate is cleared of its haphazard barricade. With the howling wind and the thunder overhead, the sounds of fierce battle beyond are all but part of the storm.

The inner gates creak and groan as they are opened. That black opening is like a great mouth, choked with bodies and arrow shafts and staggering half-dead men.

Llewellyn heads our party. He kicks his steed to a canter, and we follow him through the gate. Swords brandished, we cut through the sorry remains of the assailants as we navigate the rocky pathway. Rain pours down our faces, Tamsin's voice rings out – and I'm grinning wide, elation carrying me forward as we break our petrified foes to pieces.

Once we're in sight of the outer gate, Llewellyn lifts the horn to his lips, blows out the call to arms. Telling Eormen we're coming.

My brothers and I stay close to Tamsin as our beasts run onward to that great shattered gateway. Rhun and Emrys are galloping side by side, swords brandished, yelling like a couple of lads on their first battlefield, trying to outshine each other.

We ride through the night, through the outer gate, until we emerge on the dark battleground of the King's Garden. Our steeds splatter men into the ground, and Tamsin speaks her commands – and we plunge as one into the meat of the fight.

Freya, are you watching? Are you watching now? This bloodbath, this copper on my tongue, and how your daughter shines – will you bless us with your favour?

Chapter 58



IVAR

Full Moon of September

If one were to tell the tale of that night, the last battle on the King's Garden, it would've been told in two parts. Arlyn's tale, who fought under the great wall; and Eormen's, who pursued the Vikings who ran to the forests. We joined Arlyn's side, reclaiming every bit of the Garden with him.

Morning is a rosy promise on the horizon by the time Ögmundr's army has been crushed into the sodden grass. But Ögmundr himself has evaded us. Briton cavalrymen trot across the Garden, spearing at survivors, searching for his banner.

While Thrain and I are busy regrouping with our men, Tamsin's voice rings out, loud and peremptory in the air. We look around to find a cluster of Vikings beyond. They're all on the ground, collapsed in a circle.

Tamsin is holding them down.

Olaf is beside her, astride Alsvithr – the beast is half-wild with the excitement of battle, and he rears as Olaf tries to collect him. I gaze at that sight, the white beast soaring up, Olaf rising with him, one hand tightly wound in his mane as he holds on.

Alsvithr touches ground again, paws at the earth furiously. Olaf lets him, taking his horse's anger in his stride, as though it were an expression of his own wrath. He is gazing down at a figure in the middle of that kneeling circle.

The giant Ögmundr. They've found him at last.

“Let him up, princess,” Olaf growls. “I want him lucid and capable.”

I have never seen Olaf so gloriously enraged; I lay a hand on my sword hilt, heart thrumming. But he does not ask us to join him in his revenge.

The great bald giant laughs.

“Not really a fair fight, is it, Olaf Gofraidsson? When you can have your bitch hold us down?” Ögmundr spits out. “Though I suppose I should've expected this cowardice. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.”

Olaf says nothing; only steps down from Alsvithr, eyes blazing red, and unsheathes his sword.

“Brother,” I call out, but Olaf's growl brushes away my question.

He wants this kill himself.

They prowl around one another, weapons shining in the rosy light of dawn. Olaf isn't limping now. Or at least, not enough to hamper him. The bald giant sneers, huge in his blood-spattered wolf furs. Then he lunges.

Shields bash together. Ögmundr hooks his axe over the edge of Olaf's, yanking it forward. Olaf resists – twists away – and they break off with many flying splinters and grunts of effort.

This will not last long. The first who gets the other on the ground... both

of them have their heads bowed, sheer power emanating from their massive musculature.

Around us, many Cavaliers have drifted closer to watch. I keep an eye on the crown prince – by rights he shouldn't linger here, he should go help his sister. But he is transfixed, like many of us, by the poignancy of the scene. He slides off his helmet for a better view.

In the middle of this torn up battlefield, with crows circling overhead, the two gigantic Vyrgen men collide a second time.

Olaf's shield smacks flat against his foe's. He runs against it, forcing Ögmundr back. The giant jabs at him with that hook-shaped axe, the point biting again and again into Olaf's chainmail. But my brother keeps pushing Ögmundr, his growl rising to a gravelly yell as he runs.

Ögmundr staggers backward, trying to keep his balance, push back and regain the advantage. But my brother has built too strong a momentum. The bald giant falls – twists in the air, letting Olaf slide off his shield. And then they are grasping each other in the muck, yanking at fistfuls of chainmail, dawn glinting on their bared teeth as they swing at one another.

Cheers rise from our Dubliners. But then Ögmundr surges – topples Olaf onto the ground beneath him. Thrain and I step forward, growls rumbling in our throats. Tamsin shouts a command.

And Ögmundr is frozen there, legs turned to stone. He's straddling Olaf, fists stuck around his raised axe hilt, struggling against her command as he glares down at his foe.

“Fucking coward,” he seethes. “I knew she'd save your crippled arse –”

“*Tamsin!*” yells Olaf. “Let go of him. *Now.*”

“But –”

“*Do as I say,*” Olaf barks at her. She turns her red eyes on him, glaring,

protective. Still she hesitates, holding Ögmundr firm.

“The great Olaf Gofraidsson,” Ögmundr sneers. “Friend of the Britons, eh? Perhaps it’s a good thing I skewered your father. How ashamed he would be if he could see you now. Fighting alongside these Christian weaklings and eunuchs you call your friends.”

Olaf’s growl turns to something monstrous, the kind you would hear from deep in the lair of Jörmungandr, whose great body encircles all of Midgard.

“*Tamsin.*” The syllables are warped with his fury. “*Let him go.*”

So she does.

Ögmundr surges up, staggers back. While Olaf marches toward him like a prowling beast, he aims and throws his axe – Olaf turns, avoiding it by a hair’s breadth.

We all follow its path. Someone shouts, Cavaliers rush forward, shouting *Your Grace! Your Grace!* – but the crown prince does not move in time.

The axe catches Arlyn right in the head.

His whole body arches back, slipping off his horse even as Rhun and his Cavaliers rush to him. Tamsin cries out in shock, and Thrain and I move instinctively to cover her. But the axe has been thrown, the damage done – Ögmundr has no other weapon to duel with.

Olaf roars with renewed rage. They do not stop; they only fight uglier still, until finally Olaf throws down the panting giant. And in one fell movement, he plants his sword straight into Ögmundr’s neck, half-severing it. The man is stuck there on the ground, mouth open and gurgling while Olaf saws cleanly through.

The rest is pure savagery.

In the end, though the bald giant has been defeated, it has only caused more grief. We group around the fallen crown prince, Rhun rushing to kneel

at his side. Many of the Cavaliers are silent, speechless. Rhun has his hand over his mouth, staring wide-eyed at the heir to the throne where he lies in the muck.

Arlyn's blue eyes are stuck on the morning sky. His hand is lying there, his discarded helmet a little way away. Intact. From his forehead sprouts Ögmundr's axe.

Odin, I should've told him. To put his fucking helmet back on. One of us should've told him – gods, why didn't anyone say anything? We're all rough and stupid from the craze, but surely the Cavaliers should've enforced their saintly discipline.

Rhun reaches out, picks up Arlyn's gold-inlaid helmet. Holding it in his lap, he looks across the battlefield to where we last saw Eormen.

The sun is rising. There is almost nobody left to fight. She is riding through Dumbartonshire with her vanguard, returning from the forests – she raises her sword into the air, yelling cheerfully, her voice broken from a full night of roaring orders. *There are none left to fight! We've won! We've won!* And her cheers are echoed by those all around her, and the archers on the fort walls.

Stark dissonance rings in us all, as the cheers of victory fall upon our dismal portion of the King's Garden. Out there in the village, Eormen is caught up in the hilarity; she swings down from her horse, plucks off her helmet, which makes me bristle. Skaði is with her, tall and armoured, looking every bit like a man to anyone who might not know her.

Eormen grabs her, and pulls her in for a furious kiss. The Norse-Irish giantess lifts her effortlessly, to the cheers of the soldiers around. And I cannot even smile for how the sight fulfils my expectations – we are sitting on something that will puncture her joy completely.

“Olaf... Olaf, can you hear me?”

Tamsin’s voice makes me turn. She’s by Olaf’s side; he’s kneeling by Ögmundr’s great bulk, tying up a blood-stained parcel. It is Ögmundr’s severed head; it drips blood as Olaf readies it for transport with large shaking hands.

“Olaf,” Tamsin insists. “Listen to me... settle down. Settle down, it’s over now...”

It takes a moment for him to calm. He takes deep breaths as she stands by him, a hand on his shoulder, purring soothingly.

“I’m sorry,” he pants to her at long last. “I wanted to put him down myself.”

“I know.”

He pushes himself up, leaning heavily on his sword, grunting through the pain of it. His limp is worse than ever now that the craze has waned. She rushes to fetch Alsvithr, so he can hold onto the horse’s mane. Once he has tied his bloody prize to the saddle, he joins our silent, wide-eyed crowd.

“The crown prince is dead,” I proclaim, stating it as fact rather than a bewildering sight that the Cavaliers do not seem to believe. “And your King is nowhere to be found. Is Eormen the eldest, now? Is she next in line?”

“No,” Rhun says, looking up at Emrys. “She has one other brother. Idris.”

The young Cavalier shakes his head. “Idris died at the battle of Dumbartonshire.”

That hits Rhun and Tamsin hard. They share a glance.

“So Eormen is the crown princess, now,” Rhun says.

“Rhun...” Tamsin says. “Technically, you are the next male heir.”

Rhun frowns at her in alarm. “What? No I’m not. You know I’ve never been on the line of succession. I bear the curse.”

The Cavaliers are muttering as they watch this ginger boy kneeling in the muck, a sumptuous gold-inlaid helmet in his hands. They have just fought with him under the moon; the way they stand around him bears respect. But he looks so alarmed by the mere possibility of having such a title that his ears have gone red – as has the rest of his face.

“This war has changed many things,” Emrys says, eyes flickering to Tamsin. “We’ll have to see about it when we get back to the fort and meet with Llewellyn and Queen Beatha.”

Rhun lets out a mirthless scoff. “No. There’s nothing to discuss. Eormen... Eormen is the next in line, the legitimate heir. That’s all there is to it.”

Again we all look across the Garden at the princess. Eormen has been shouldering such a burden thus far; but she will get no rest from this warring. Not now that she has no brothers left.

Tamsin lays a gentle hand on her brother’s shoulder. “Let’s call her over.”

They stay there a moment, as though pondering the repugnance of their task. Then finally Rhun stands, takes a banner from the Cavaliers, and waves it towards Eormen’s party. And she mounts her horse again and canters over, wearing a wide, breathless smile.

My pack and I step back, and let the Britons give her the news.

* * *

The rising sun lights the aftermath with soft pink and gold hues. The crown princess is bent over her brother’s prostrate form. It is a stark morning, with the stench of battle hanging in the air. Everyone has lost someone tonight –

the cheers have abated, and the return to peace brings with it all the considerations of grief.

They will have to clean up their King's Garden, cover the signs of this staggering loss. But our Dublin pack has losses of its own to consider, as well. We agree with the Britons to meet again once the morning has risen further, and our pack regroups so we might head down to the Leven Port, Tamsin riding with us.

By now everyone has seen her baldness; her hood slipped throughout the night. She still opts to keep her hood up as she rides through the deserted camp with us. The men throw sympathetic glances at her, ask me what happened – but I don't even know, myself, beyond some inkling of Christian cruelty. I will have to let her tell that tale, if she's ever willing to reveal it.

Once we arrive on the port, there are only a dozen ships left. Father's oldest allies; the Cathalain's great longboat, our own two ships... and that great sail that bears Thor's hammer. We dismount on the docks, and Tamsin stays with the horses. My chest is heavy as I step beside her, kiss her temple. She knows why we've come here. She keeps a respectful distance as Olaf, Thrain and I head to Father's ship.

Olaf glances at me. "You should go first," he says gruffly.

I swallow hard. Then I detach from him and wander onto that ship.

* * *

My father lies within the bows of the ship, his body embraced by the curved wood. He is lying on a bed of blankets, caged in by rope stacks so he might not be jostled.

Those surrounding him are alarmed to see a tall Cavalier step aboard. So I pluck off my helmet, and they see me, they're glad, they have words to say. I nod at them, bear their well-meaning touches until they file away, leaving me alone with my father.

I've never seen him like this. Like with Olaf, it is utterly alien to see Father lying on his back in this position of complete vulnerability. He must submit, like the rest of us, to the dictates of pain; it sits on his gut now, preventing him from rising.

I stand over him, and my throat is twisted into a knot that I can't undo.

His beard is stained red. He's looking up at the dawn with an absent expression as he breathes. Then a spasm runs through him, and those pain-glazed eyes roll down to me.

He blinks a few times. Then he says, "Ivar? Is it you?"

I let out a careful breath and then crouch beside him. "Yes. I'm here."

His eyes roam over my face. He's so white, as though he were made of wax. His great hand rises, and he touches my face.

"You got out," he murmurs.

I let those scratchy fingers drag over my skin.

"How... how did you manage it?" he says, frowning. "Did the Britons let you go?"

"No. They were going to throw me from the parapets, as a matter of fact. Tamsin got me out."

He gives a *tuh* that only makes him wince, as his torn abdominals contract.

"Looks like I've been a fool," he hisses. "On all fronts."

I can't argue there. There are many fronts on which he has shown himself to be a self-righteous idiot. But this – turning against his own Jarls, breaking

everything apart just on the off-chance that my life might be spared – this is the one time I will spare him that judgment.

That giant's hand of his lowers. I feel like he's play-acting, playing purposefully on my empathy – surely it's an aberration that I would feel this pain my chest for the likes of him.

I stare at that hand. So strange, this urge to grasp it. I fold my fingers carefully over his, guide it back down to sit on his chest.

This will be the last image I have of him.

I let my eyes follow the craggy peaks of his knuckles, the woven patterns of his tunic upon which they sit.

It's impossible to imagine a world that does not carry his weight. But even when the world no longer bears it, I'm certain I will. I'm shaped by it, like clay marked by the imprint of a kneading hand; however invisible he may make himself, he has always been there, imprinted upon me. And I know he always will be.

“Is this... all you have to say to me?” he asks me, when the silence has endured for long enough.

My teeth grind together as I meet those glinting eyes.

“What do you want me to say?” I mutter.

He lets out another of those pained scoffs. Then his hand clasps mine tighter.

“I suppose that's fair,” he says. “I'm just glad... you got out.”

I let him look at me, and I make myself sit there, sit still for his scrutiny, and the weight of him has never felt heavier than now.

“Your mother,” he starts, and I close my eyes, heat rushing to every part of me.

“Don't,” I hiss. “You don't have to do that.”

“Yes I do,” he insists. “Damn you, let a dying man choose his last words.”

Hatred and empathy and remorse twist through me until I’m blinking back the heat, glaring down at this man, and I have to swallow the words, *I don’t care, you broke her life, you don’t deserve my tears nor my patience.*

“I should’ve,” he grits out. “Should’ve taken her in. Should’ve treated her... with dignity. You know I loved that woman... all my life.”

“That was not love,” I snap past my tight throat. “That was just you indulging yourself in some fantasy she never shared.”

That makes him give half a smile. “I suppose... that’s fair.”

I shouldn’t have to listen to this. I shouldn’t have to let him stick in this old rusted knife and twist it in familiar grooves.

“What I wanted to say,” he manages, and his hand rises again to my face. “... is that I’m sorry.”

Of course he’s sorry. Easy to be sorry after it’s all done.

His thumb smudges a line of water that’s running down my cheek. I’m staring down at his beard, unable to look him in the eye any more.

“I know you can’t forgive me,” he adds. “But since I must choose my last words... let them be that I’m sorry.”

Good for you, I want to snap at him. *Growing an empathetic bone in your last moments on this earth.* I want to hurl insults at him. I want to press a hand right on his injury. I want to lean into that huge frame and embrace him like I never have before. Like Olaf does; like a father and son should.

“Take this,” he says, and he lays a hand on the gold torc he wears around his neck. He pulls it wider, plucks it off and presses it into my hand. “Melt it into three pieces. For you and your brothers.”

I nod. Take this symbol of the legacy he’s leaving us, and push myself up.

Thrain is nearby, standing by the mast. I turn away from my father and stride past my old friend. He lays a hand on my shoulder as I pass him. And I leave the ship, let him say his own goodbyes.

* * *

The rain has abated.

It doesn't take much longer for the wound to take Father. As though he had stubbornly waited for us to come and see him, before succumbing to it.

We take out the barrels of pine tar we usually keep for waterproofing, douse the sail with it, apply a fresh coating to the ropes. I stay alone on the ship, torch in hand, to light it. Everything is still damp from the rain; even with the tar, we must wait before the fire starts to take.

Then I hoist up the anchor, and my brothers and I push the ship away. And we stand for a long time on that dock, until the ship is ablaze; until it is a great burning fire upon the water. Many old Jarls are watching; the elder Cathalain, too, have stayed for the send-off.

Olaf stands there, his spear planted on the dock, a hand wrapped around it. The flames flicker on his clear silvery eyes. Slowly, the sun rises higher between the trees, white light climbing up the branches.

“How many times have we stood here?” he mutters at length, his voice deep and sepulchral in the misty morning. “How many pyres, now?”

I can't count. I can't feel, either; always, a pyre burns on the battlefields, and somehow the only pain one feels is the burn of light on the eyes. There are always songs, eulogising how the smoke drapes the dead like finest silk on their way to Valhöll...

No. This time there is no poetry to it. The tar and burning wool drips, disintegrates. Crackling noises, like breaking bones, skitter along the wood. The groans are the groans of an ancient; the groaning of the world.

Ymir, hunched over beneath our feet, moaning with the pains of dying.

Olaf's eyes are bright as jewels. Thrain lays a hand on his shoulder. "We accomplished what we came here to do," he reminds our elder brother. "I know it doesn't feel like victory. But you pulled us through it all, Olaf, despite all odds. This is not your failure; this is what the Norns had planned for him."

Olaf shakes his head. "I thought... somehow, if I lined up all the right strategies," he forces out, though his voice is failing him. "Then I could save him from himself. I could save him from his own greed."

He raises his spear, thumps it upon the planks again. As though to say, *look where that got us*. The gesture has such helplessness to it – I want to go to him, comfort him somehow. But he loved that man in the burning ship, and it is too complicated to touch that.

He feels the fracture between us. He turns, glances back at me. Takes in the distance between us. He lowers his eyes to the planks, and speaks to me with difficulty.

"I took us through a long-winded maze when I could've planted my blade right at the source, from the very beginning. But I couldn't do what had to be done."

"I never expected you to," I manage to say. "You loved him too much."

He shakes his head again. "He was a cruel man. I know that, brother," he tells me with the last of his voice. "I should've done it. Taken his crown. He was going to die anyway... I should've accepted that. I should've done it if only to honour you and Ósk, alongside all the rest."

The acknowledgment of Father's faults bridges the distance between us. Olaf has never said it in those terms before, admitted it so honestly. He knows every bit of my past; every ugly corner of it. But Father wore a different face with him for so long, he cannot help that childhood love he holds in his core; it is the strongest, most enduring kind.

There is so much I want to say. Perhaps it was necessary for it to happen this way – perhaps Father's reign could not have ended in anything else than wanton destruction.

And from those ruins... something new might finally emerge.

I am groping around in the ashes of our old lives, feeling out what strange growths are emerging. This heat in my chest, this feeling – of *sadness*, grief for a man who does not deserve it – I can't make heads nor tails of it. Something has cracked open in there, like the hull of that ship, letting out a black spume. I wrap my arms around myself as though to keep it contained, to keep it from spewing out.

Thrain is next to me, Thrain has water glittering in his beard, but he is like that, he feels, he's used to it – but I'm not, I can't, can't let this stuff out because I don't know if it might ever stop.

He lays a warm hand between my shoulder-blades. "Ivar," he murmurs. "Oy. Come here."

He turns me around to face him, and he can see now what's dripping down my face. It's pointless to try to hide it but I still jerk away, still snarl at him. *Don't look at me*, I want to snap, but it's too late now anyway.

Thrain wraps me in an embrace, and Olaf joins us – and once lodged in the stuffy folds of their cloaks, in that privacy, I weep as though I were that scruffy seven-year-old again, peering into a world where there were fathers who laughed and beamed and told you they were proud of you.

My fingers curl into soft wool. Still that image of the laughing dwarven king is burned in my retinas. Maybe all this while, I was holding onto the hope that I would see the *great man* that Olaf loved so much. And now I have only just glimpsed him; but that is all I'll ever see, and somehow it's so fucking disappointing.

Eventually I manage to clamber back to a reasonable mode of functioning. Olaf is bent with the pain of his leg; Thrain and I support him, help him to sit on some piled crates.

“I swear to Odin,” Olaf rumbles as we sit and gather ourselves. “This is the last war. The last battlefield. There has been too much death; it has to stop some day, surely. That sound and that smell... always a pyre lighting every victory.”

“Mm,” I agree vaguely; everything has been scooped out of me, I cannot manage more.

Steps resound along the planks; it is Yngvor, her pelts sweeping after her as she bows to us. In her hands is a beautifully carved tagelharpa.

“If you would sing him on to Valhöll,” she says. “We will sing with you.”

I frown at the elegant instrument a moment. Then I nod. My brothers give me room while I tune it, and in that silence we can collect ourselves.

Thrain and I share a glance, breaths coming slower now as we let the silence settle. Yngvor rejoins her women, who have taken out their drums. I let my bow glide across my strings. Like this, I can direct the chaos – let it swirl into sound, into something that makes more sense. Little by little, the sounds of the breaking ship and the groans of Ymir are woven into the music, so that the senselessness of it all is woven into a bearable pattern.

The three of us gaze at the burning longboat, and we sing for the Valkyries to come, and for the great golden doors of Valhöll to open for the

waiting dead.

Chapter 59



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of September

Commander Llewellyn comes to the docks mid-morning, bearing news. Queen Beatha has taken back command of the fort, and she's been orchestrating a great victory parade with a feast to celebrate.

And the Dublin warband have been invited.

I'm struck dumb by the shock of it. They will be the first Vikings in our history to be considered so highly by our royal family. Thrain, Ivar and Olaf all bow low as they respectfully accept, while the Dubliners all break into awed smiles, elbowing each other. If the Commander of the fort garrison hadn't been there, I know they would've thrown fists into the air and whooped with glee.

The Queen of the Vanirdøtur herself has asked for their presence. It is all they'd hoped for, all these long months.

We follow Llewellyn back across the deserted camp to the shattered outer gate. Eormen waits for us there, Skaði shadowing her as always. Her captains have all gathered, readying to head the parade; a horse-drawn cart stands among the soldiers, bearing Arlyn's recumbent form, surrounded by flowers.

"Cousin," I greet Eormen, taking in her bruised eyes, the tear-streaks that mar her cheeks. Still she smiles at me, and though I want nothing more than to embrace her, there is a question stuck in my throat. "Does Aunt Beatha really want us in there? And me, as well – after everything?"

Eormen nods, her expression growing soft. "Of course, Tamsin," she says. "Llewellyn and I spoke with my mother for a long time about your role in all this, and what the Dubliners did for us. We all agreed that our people should look upon the faces of their allies, and show you and Rhun benevolence."

I tuck in my chin. I'm not sure I want benevolence from people who stood by and did nothing while I was held down, sheared and made an example of. But Eormen's putting on such a brave smile, trying to encourage me as always.

I will go for her, if nothing else.

* * *

Eormen leads the procession, marching through the outer gate. The Dublin pack and I follow, bringing up the rear.

It's utterly surreal. To be walking along this narrow road with my packmates. Their weapons and armour hiss and clatter as they march, crowding around me protectively.

Eormen leads us up to the inner gate, where ribbons and bunting have been hung. She's barely stepped through it when merry greetings fall upon her, spreading like wildfire.

Eormen! Princess Eormen!

She won us the fort, our darling of Strathclyde... the Cavaliers on the battlements burst into song.

I glance worriedly at my wolves as we follow. They are all so huge, their blood-stained armour and clinking Viking ornaments drawing the eye. Thrain still wears some battle-roughness about him; Ivar is every bit the dark devil with the keen eye; and Olaf is somehow more intimidating with his limp, the spear he uses as a cane punctuating every step with a peremptory *clack*. His is a slow, regal gait, one that demands silence and reverence.

To think they are going from a funeral to a victory parade without so much as a breath of rest.

We pass through the inner gates. March down the main street. Those Cavaliers and civilians who are standing nearby cheer to see Eormen arrive, and she raises a hand to acknowledge them. With her long blond tresses streaming down her leathers and chainmail, she is a sight fit for legends.

All around us, civilians are helping to straighten out the aftermath of the battle. Carts and wheelbarrows are being rolled left and right, carrying away bodies and detritus. Many are sweeping and dousing whatever fires remain. The chapel doors are open, many daughters of Clota huddled within; the young ones are asleep, their elders watching over them, many half-hiding in their shawls as they purr to keep their young calm.

Eormen! Eormen! The cheering goes on all around.

My heart feels so heavy in my chest as the villagers all stop what they're doing to follow the parade. Everyone welcomes Eormen warmly – some

daughters of Clota rush to embrace her. She's overwhelmed as they shower her with this love; after the night we've all endured, it's inevitable that she might finally break and cry.

I gaze upon the virtuous figure she makes, blond hair flowing in the wind, bravery etched in her posture and the sword that hangs at her hip.

"Tamsin?" Thrain's voice is in my ear. I wince – I hadn't realised how tense I am, nails biting into my palms.

"Sorry. I'm all right," I tell him, trying to sound confident.

"We don't have to stay long," Ivar says. "The gates are wide open now."

Somehow, that reminder allows me to breathe more evenly.

We arrive at the castle courtyard. Many tables have been hitched together there, the villagers and castle staff working together to prepare a feast. My heart pinches as I spy Hilda and Cinnie working with the head cook to bring out the meal from the keep's pantry.

We come to a stop.

Queen Beatha is standing on the wide stone stairway that leads to the palace doors. She has neither sons nor husband any more; she makes a pale figure in a black shroud, gazing down upon us all. She rules her fort alone now; she is squat and plump and misty-eyed, tear-stains on her cheeks as she opens her arms for her daughter.

We all watch as Eormen throws herself into her queenly mother's embrace, the crowds cheering loud.

I try to make myself stand still in all this noise and scrutiny. To not shy between my packmates. Some animal wariness still makes me take stock of our surroundings, looking for threats – but there are only cheering Briton women all around us. The Cavaliers are exhausted but content, too, wearing the jolly faces of victors, still ruddy-cheeked from singing. Rhun and Emrys

are among them, and they look out-of-breath and merry too. There is no sign of my mother or Father Madog; perhaps by their absence, they mean to show their disapproval of this parade. It's a good thing really, that they might not see me surrounded by three Viking warlords; I'd rather be spared their judgment, for once.

The Queen is speechless a moment, wiping at her eyes; so Eormen turns to address the cheering crowd.

“Thank you, all of you. Please... you cheer for me, but I did not win this war alone.” They quieten to listen. “I know you've all been through a lot, and I know you'd rather not see another Viking for as long as you live. But I did want to properly introduce you to those Viking lords who saved my life and my cousins' – and who made it possible for us to come home.”

She opens an arm.

“My lords of Dublin,” she intones. “Will you come forward?”

The three of them answer her summons with regal gravitas. I glance at them, heart racing suddenly at the thought that they might leave me behind – but Thrain takes my hand firmly in his, and we walk together around the arrangement of tables.

He's holding my hand. In front of everybody. I stare resolutely at the flagstones, tugging at my hood.

We come to a stop once we're at the foot of the palatial stairs. In unison, the three lords of Dublin take the knee. I stay by Thrain's side, breathless.

Last we were here, all three of them were on a reconnaissance mission, mapping out the fort they sought to pillage. And I was set to be married, preparing myself for pillage of a different kind.

Clota, how things have changed in a single summer.

The Queen waits a beat, as though judging the trustworthiness of her

Viking guests while they kneel at her feet. All three have their heads bowed in deep respect.

Eormen speaks again: “As you have all seen, the Dublin warband have a capacity for exemplary discipline. They are not as lawless as we imagined, not in the slightest. I have been working alongside them these past months, to liberate this place. So let me introduce you to the three lords we have heard so much about...”

And she goes into a retelling of her exploits, her battles under the moon, and the Dublin pack’s involvement in it all. Everyone listens in rapt awe while she turns the war to a folk tale, with these three lords as selfless heroes. All the while I am not quite there – floating, almost, like a ghost in a long cloak.

“And so,” Eormen concludes at last, turning to the Queen. “Mother, would you have these men sit at our table, and break bread with us?”

Slowly, the Queen of the Britons steps down the stairs, one dainty slipper at a time. She comes to a stop before Olaf, staying perched on the last stair to keep some height, though he is so huge that this doesn’t make much difference.

She speaks at last.

“We have long been aware that the God-fearing Irish seek alliances with their Viking neighbours,” she intones. “And now, I think we have all come to understand the reason why: they make excellent, loyal allies. I am glad to welcome the men of Dublin to our table, as our friends.”

She extends a hand, the sleeve of her mourning gown glittering with black glass beads. Olaf takes it reverently – surely he sees her as the mythical queen of the Vanirdøtur, surely they have many fantastical tales about her,

too. He kisses the ruby ring she wears, and with ritual solemnity, she repeats the same gesture with Thrain, and Ivar in turn.

I grit my teeth. She did nothing to ease Ivar's suffering in the dungeon. But he is wrapped in the potency of this moment – so he kisses her ruby without complaint.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Olaf says, his voice a little choked.

“Come,” Queen Beatha says. “After everything you've done for us, sharing a good meal is the least we could do. Take a seat.”

* * *

Thrain, Olaf and Ivar sit at the feast table. The bench creaks under them; they are enormous, even after removing their cloaks and stowing their weapons. We sit with my royal family and several high-ranking Cavaliers, while the Dublin pack takes lunch with the villagers.

It takes a moment for the tension to ease, but the Dubliners turn up the charm, making the most of such a privilege. This is a culmination point for them, I know it, to be invited to the Vanirdøtur's table – they're all clean-faced and smiling, their beards groomed for the occasion. Soon they have many girls blushing to be in their company.

The meal is supervised by marching Cavaliers, but it is festive, and no ruckus erupts. Everyone is too involved in conversation. The women want to know how Dumbartonshire fared under the occupation, if any of the houses were destroyed. Others ask shyly about Dublin, and the men regale their hosts with stories. Laughter abounds, and talk grows louder.

I'm so tired... there's too much noise, too many faces. I wish I could partake in that simple happiness of reunion, of hard-won victory. But nothing

feels simple. I lean against Ivar's side, and he lays a hand on my thigh under the table.

The doors are wide open now, he said. I grip onto him, clinging to that image.

Soon. We'll be out of here soon.

At our table, though there is far more stiffness and protocol, there is still that same air of curiosity. Queen Beatha is facing Olaf, and while they both daintily pick at their honey-glazed mutton, they talk at length about this sanctuary, and the Viking settlers all throughout Alba and Ireland. Eventually she asks him:

“My Cavaliers tell me of your ship burning ceremony. I take it that the Viking King Gofraid Hroarsson, your father, has passed?”

Olaf bows his head. “That is correct.”

“My condolences for your loss,” she says curtly. “Forgive me for being so direct, but I must ask – how has it affected the hierarchy among the Viking settlers? Are we hosting the new King of the Vikings at our table?”

Olaf sits back, then, resting his gravy-specked fingers against his plate. Thrain and Ivar glance at him, as though ready to come to his aid; but he is pensive and cool.

I've seen that expression before. It is what he looks like when he speaks of Vírún; the wall behind which he hides his grief.

“The Viking Kingdom of the Southern Isles was only ever a conglomeration of settled colonies,” Olaf says. “My father rallied them so that together, they could build strength and gain more inland territories. But his kingship was not ancient and dynastic like yours. They followed him because their interests were aligned. They had little loyalty to his blood, nor to his descendants; you saw for yourself how his lords fractured from him.”

He speaks with his usual cool diplomatic tone, as though the considerations weren't painful at all. I let my gaze rest on his regal profile.

Olaf Gofraidsson... King of the Vikings. Right then, groomed and crowned by victory, he looks every bit the part.

"But you surely have a right to his kingdom," Queen Beatha says. "The first concern of every king, even the petty ones, is to secure what he has built through his descendance."

Olaf is stone-still as he mulls over his answer. *Even the petty ones*, she said – it's so flippant of her. Though I'd gladly spit in Gofraid's watery grave myself, I still wish she wouldn't speak so disparagingly when Olaf's grief is so fresh.

But he makes no issue of it.

"Even if I did want to inherit the crown, I'm not sure there is much of his kingdom left to inherit. Thousands have died on your doorstep. The Southern Isles will surely go through significant changes now that most of its men have perished."

Queen Beatha tilts her head.

"So you don't want his crown?"

Olaf shares a glance with his brothers then, as though he was only just coming to this conclusion now, at this table, with gravy on his fingers and victory celebrations filling in the air.

"No," Olaf says at length. "I don't think I want it."

Queen Beatha and the rest of our table seem amazed that a Viking man might *not* take an opportunity for more lands and riches.

If Ivar is surprised to hear this, he doesn't show it. Instead he nods, and comes to his brother's aid: "We've been comfortable in Dublin for years

now. Kingship over multiple territories is not something we have ever particularly coveted.”

Thrain hums in agreement. “There are many places that would be better off without a king,” he says darkly.

His reputation as the man who killed one of the High Kings of Ireland is widely known; his words cast a chill across the table. But strangely enough, instead of rebuking this, Queen Beatha is quiet. A similar darkness seems to have swept over her own demeanour. Her eyes wander over Thrain’s scabbed knuckles, as though thoughtful.

“Speaking of kings,” Ivar says into the uneasy silence. “With all respect, whatever became of King Arthgal? He disappeared last night. Is it true that he died in combat?”

Queen Beatha’s thin lips twitch up just a little. “Oh no,” she says. “No, my husband did not die in combat.”

She doesn’t elaborate right away. Instead, she gazes at her daughters, who are chatting together further down the table. There is protective grit in the lines of her face. Eormen is sitting beside her, looking forlorn all of a sudden. Queen Beatha caresses her eldest’s face and takes her hand.

Heart thrumming, I wait for the story.

“When the inner wall was breached, my husband believed the fort was lost,” Queen Beatha says, still in a calm, collected manner. “He had been fighting on the battlements; he returned to the palace, full of panic and woe. He told me to gather our girls, said that he would take them down to the Leven Port to save them from capture.”

She pauses a moment. The more she speaks, the more angry lines appear on her face.

“So my husband took our girls,” she goes on, her voice tight. “Told them

that it would all be all right. He headed down the secret passageway. And upon coming into the Leven Port, he came face-to-face with Vikings who were fleeing on their ships. So he tried to buy himself safe passage by offering our girls to them.”

“No,” I bite out, eyes wide. My men don’t seem all that surprised; Thrain especially. His jaw is gritted tight as he listens.

“Of course, the Vikings thought it a very rich prize,” Aunt Beatha goes on. “So they fought amongst themselves for the right to my girls. In the commotion, my dear husband realised what a mistake he’d made, thinking he could bring his girls as insurance for his own life. Thankfully, several Cavaliers had followed him down the secret passageway, and they were able to dispatch the Vikings and bring my girls back to me.” Hand tightening on Eormen’s, she says, “My dear husband is now in the dungeon. In the cell you used to occupy, in fact, Ivar Gofraidsson.”

She lets a little silence settle after that. Ivar stares at her, eyes glittering with obvious delight at the reversal. None of us speak right away, but we are all thinking of the same thing: King Arthgal, chained and sequestered right under our feet.

Protector of the daughters of Clota, indeed. I’ve never heard of such a deep betrayal in all of our dynasty’s history.

And to think I knelt at that man’s feet, and thanked him for his generosity. God, it can’t be true – it all feels like a bad dream.

“I take it he has lost his right to the crown of Strathclyde?” Ivar speaks into the stunned silence.

Queen Beatha nods. “Indeed he has.”

“I’m very sorry,” Olaf says gruffly. “I did not think him capable of such a thing.”

“Neither did I,” she says. “But then, there will always be men who see my kinswomen as treasures to barter. I should not have persuaded myself that Briton men were above that.”

Eormen lays a hand over her mother’s, giving her a harrowing look.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you,” Queen Beatha adds, returning to Olaf with a forced smile. “I take it you will be returning to Dublin soon? If kingship in these parts does not interest you.”

“We will,” Olaf replies slowly, wary of her direction.

“We are preparing gifts for your warband, as thanks for all that you’ve done for us. You will have to tell us if you have any preferences. We have much to give.”

“Oh, well,” Olaf starts gruffly, his cheeks going ruddy. “You honour us, my queen. We did not come here for treasures. We only wanted to secure your safety.”

“Such noble sentiments. What irony it is to think that our own men have vilified you for so long, when you are more noble than they,” Queen Beatha says, still with that grit in her tone. “Still, I do hear you Vikings like your gold. I also hear you often take war prisoners to Dublin; that they are used for hard labour, or shipped off to Iceland and Norway for good prices.”

The pair-bond writhes with confusion. Olaf and his brothers straighten and exchange subreptitious glances.

“Indeed,” Ivar says, recovering before the others. “Dublin’s longphort is an affluent marketplace for all kinds of trades.”

Queen Beatha smiles and says, perfectly curtly; “What would you say if we gave you a high-ranking prisoner as part of our gifts?”

I stare at her. Then at Eormen. Both are still holding hands; their knuckles have gone white. Eormen gazes down at the table, and she is gritting her teeth

just as much as her mother; her eyes are still pink from weeping. But she wears that look of deep, deep anger, the kind we're taught to stuff inside ourselves.

"Your Majesty," Ivar says, when Olaf fails to respond. "Are you implying that we take the King of the Britons back to Dublin with us, to be sold for hard labour?"

Queen Beatha's face takes on a shine of righteous fury.

"Yes," she says, with relish.

Silence floods the table. I stare at my aunt, trying to understand – trying to believe what it is I'm hearing.

"I have discussed it at length with my council," she goes on. "With my captains, and my commanders. I cannot think of any punishment that would better fit my husband's crime. He –" She breathes in, collects herself. "He wanted to sell – to *sell* my girls – to save his skin. I think he should taste the chains himself, since he was so eager to clap them on his own children."

Olaf seems rattled by the thought. "Beg pardon, Majesty. But I want to be clear. Doesn't your Christian book forbid slavery? Is it not something your god frowns upon?"

Queen Beatha raises her eyebrows.

"The Lord's teachings are many," she says. "He also says, *an eye for an eye.*"

It's so strange. I know I should be horrified by this whole idea – *they* should be horrified, too. My aunt wants to ship her husband off to be a *slave*, in some Old Testament bout of vengeance – why is Eormen not protesting it? Why isn't Llewellyn, Commander of the Cavalier Order, protesting it on principle?

Could it be that they are embracing change, too – that Queen Beatha, as a

daughter of Clota, is following her newfound Viking allies into ruthlessness?

To be seated here like this with the lords of Dublin and my aunt turned vengeful queen feels like some strange alternate world. I feel so heavy, so foggy in the absence of any familiarity – it seems any new development must simply be endured.

Ivar crunches into an apple and reclines on the bench. He alone of the three brothers seems to entirely appreciate the idea of dragging a king away in chains – especially a king who had him chained up just the same, and utterly at his mercy.

“An eye for an eye, indeed,” he says. “It seems like it is not a good year for kings.”

* * *

They agree to it, in the end. To take my Uncle Arthgal to Dublin along with the carts of riches my aunt is preparing for them. The discussion remains on politics, and the shifting landscape we are all sitting in – nobody looks at me, nobody asks me my opinion on anything.

It’s comfortable to be invisible. It’s quiet. As though my black cloak had magical powers, so people’s eyes glance over me without lingering. This way I can observe, I follow what they say, and I don’t need to react at all; neither outwardly nor inwardly. It’s calming to let everyone else decide the direction of the world – like watching a river flow, and knowing you cannot change its direction.

Peaceful.

And then the conversation turns to Strathclyde’s northern border, and Uradech’s presence there. I bristle, leaning in to listen. He is the one holding

the border for us now, with the remainder of our army. Causantin is on the run with what little men he has left, so they are mainly up there to guard against any desperate, last-ditch skirmish.

I try to imagine their feud. Uradech, blue-painted and vengeful, scoping the hills for his arch enemy's silhouette. He has done so much for us in this war. It's strange to think that all we know of the vicious warring up there has been hearsay and messages, carried across the lands by galloping riders. I wish I could've seen him, just once, so he felt real and not like a dream I conjured.

Eormen's trying to catch my attention, she's calling my name, she's looking at me – and the illusion of being invisible breaks.

"Tamsin," Eormen says again, and my heart races to suddenly be seen – to be asked to respond. "Do you think I could talk to you a moment?"

All three wolves interrupt their various conversations, turning to look at me. Protective alertness bristles through the bond.

A hush ripples across the table, and it is like a wave battering into me – receiving everyone's attention at once.

Ivar is the one who gets up first.

"I'll come with you," he says, laying a hand on his brothers' shoulders in an implication to stand down.

Eormen accepts his presence a little warily; he is still intimidating as ever as he towers over us both. She leads us away from the tables, away from the milling crowds, to the one small space of privacy – the stables. The smell of hay and horses is one token of familiarity, at least; I breathe it in deep. She turns to face me, still looking sheepish; Ivar is standing behind me, looming with his arms crossed.

Resolutely, she unties a parcel from her belt.

“When I was up north, fetching our reinforcements, I saw him again,” she says. “Uradech. He asked me about you. And how you fared under the full moon.”

Both of us stare studiously at anything but each other.

“So I told him what happened,” she manages. “When I got dragged to the Viking camp... and what you became that night.”

“Cousin,” I bite out. “I’m sorry you had to see me like that –”

“You saved my life. So don’t apologise to me. I was just scared, I...” She swallows, brow furrowed. “Anyway. Uradech left me another message for you.”

She hands me the parcel. I take it, unravel the cord mechanically until I realise Eormen is shifting from foot to foot.

“Um,” she says. “Do you want privacy? To read it?”

I gaze up at her.

Privacy. What a foreign concept. I was ready to just go on mechanically doing things under my family’s scrutiny, their judgment as unavoidable as the press of air around me.

“Yes,” I breathe. “I’d like that.”

She nods at me, then curtly at Ivar. And she leaves.

I sag like an old sack. Ivar caresses my back, turning into me; he’s frowning, as though muddling through the dark waters of our bond. It can’t be comfortable for him – it’s barely woken and yet all we can share is this grimy aftermath.

“Come here,” he mutters, and then he hoists me up in his arms without warning. I huff with surprise, sling my arms around his shoulders as he carries me down the aisle between the stalls. He’s so warm... *saints*, I needed this so much.

He finds us a properly secluded niche; a corner where bales of hay have been piled. He sits me on one of them and stands facing me, wedging himself between my thighs, irreverent of all etiquette now that we're alone. I reach up for him, and when he wraps me in another hug, a strangled sigh of longing leaves my throat.

This is all I want. Softness, and to be alone with those who understand me. A purr flows from me, unrestrained, and Ivar all but basks in it.

Our bond is flowing over a jagged bedrock; he has wounds of his own to tend. I draw back, caress his face; he's clean and groomed now, as though he hadn't spent the night covered in soot and singing the dead onward.

"You haven't had any rest," I mutter. "How are you feeling?"

He grins. "I feel like the pair-bond makes that question redundant."

"There's a difference between feeling it and putting words to it, isn't there?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right... but I have no idea how to describe whatever's going on in there."

"Ivar Gofraidsson, lost for words," I try to tease him, and he smiles at the effort.

"A very rare occurrence. Enjoy it while it lasts."

Our only companions now are the lazily munching horses in the stalls around us. In that calm, stuffy ambience, we unravel Uradech's parcel together.

The cloth reveals four Ogham sticks. Ivar shifts, eyes aglitter as he stares at them.

"Shall I help you decipher them?" he asks.

Somehow his excitement manages to make me smile. "I'm not sure I could keep your hands off them," I tease him. "Let's have a look... oh, he

carved a new alphabet stick for us – it’s this one.”

We turn over the Ogham messages, comparing, deciphering. Ivar plucks a charcoal stick from his belt pouches and writes the equivalent Roman letters on the nearest stall door. With the message being so long, he’s soon covered the door in black marks.

I take a breath and read them silently.

Princess Tamsin of Strathclyde. I heard of your exploits in the Viking camp, and I am filled with pride that you have embraced your abilities to the fullest. There is so much more I would want to show you, of ancient druidic magic and the affinities of your kind. If it would interest you to meet with me again, and take this knowledge I have to pass down, then write to me from whatever place you call home. I shall come to you.

I can almost hear his voice... feel his somber presence, the scent of pinewood sap, the mute sense of his power. The fact of having his blessing – that it isn’t so wild and strange, to be who I am, to have a deep interest in these things – it all twists into a ball in my throat.

“What it is, lamb?” Ivar asks. “What does he say?”

I translate to Gaelic for him, hardly capable of getting to the end without my voice breaking. He seems keenly interested in the idea of druidic magic – but his concern for me is more prevalent.

“It’s just,” I manage. “Uradech said to write from ‘whatever place I call home’. But I don’t know what that place is any more.”

Ivar comes back to me, and I melt gladly into his embrace a second time.

“When I’m here,” I croak into his shoulder, “when I have all those people out there staring at me – I just feel insane. Maybe they’re right to call me the *mad princess*. It’s like there’s a fever in my mind... like nothing is right, nothing is safe any more –”

Ivar holds me tighter. Though he says nothing, the pair-bond glows with deep empathy.

“I just want us to leave,” I whisper. “I want to go somewhere where no one knows me. Somewhere peaceful and quiet... and away from everyone else.”

“I know, lamb,” he says roughly. “We’ll leave soon for Dublin; I can’t say it’ll be quiet, but it’ll be away from here, at least.”

Dublin... I see the images he painted for me, of a green, overgrown place, with a gilded hall and doors carved full of Norse dragons and vines. I see the flowery fields and Irishwomen tending them, and the normalcy of living among Vikings there.

I suppose it was always obvious for them, that I might follow them there after all this. But it is only now that I realise that that is where we’re headed, now. Irish shores; a new life entirely.

“Dublin, then,” I whisper.

He hums in agreement, then cups my face, rubs his thumb along my lip.

“I know of many hidden places out there in those green lands,” he says. “Secret places you can find peace; I seek them out, too. I’ll bring you there, if you like.”

I smile. “I’d like that a lot.”

Chapter 60



TAMSIN

Waning Moon of September

By mid-afternoon, Queen Beatha's gifts have all been made ready. Treasures from the palace have been brought out and piled in horse-drawn carts; bolts of patterned wool, gold and iron pieces, jars of pickled and preserved Brittonic specialties. And among all this extravagance stands one rickety trap, just large enough for a prisoner and his guard.

It is so strange to think my uncle is in there. Last I left this place I was the one all gilt with precious metal and trapped in a cart, leaving for foreign shores.

And now it's his turn.

For all that they wished to return with cartfuls of Vanirdøtur at first, now the lords of Dublin are bringing back the Briton King instead. But the Vanirdøtur themselves do not need to be corralled into carts at all, as it stands. While the Dubliners are being ushered to the gates with friendly but

firm intent, some daughters of Clota follow the ones they took a liking to – I spy some girls leaving tokens in Viking hands.

Then – Christ, is that Drysi? Flirting with Orm the blackbeard? She wears her dress pinned in a way that flatters her, and cosmetics that make her look older – I march over to them, and she shies as I grip her by the wrist.

“Kátr-Ekkja,” Orm greets me, ruddy and smiling. “We were just talking about you –”

“She is thirteen, Orm,” I tell him. His face turns ghost-white, his lips slack. He lifts his eyes away from her and gives a despairing kind of laugh.

“Thirteen!” he says. Then he bows to her and turns away, as though he can’t bear to look at her any more. “Thirteen. Freya have mercy.”

“*Princess*,” Drysi seethes at me. “Let me go – I wasn’t doing anything!”

I let her go and glare at her. She glares right back, sullen.

“I want to get out of this place,” she says. “I want to travel like you. I’m sick of it here.”

“Drysi,” I admonish her.

“No – you have no idea, princess,” she says. “So many of the girls have been talking about you. You have no fear at all, and you can handle yourself. You have the freedom to leave and to go with your warband to Ireland.”

I blink at her.

“I want to get out of here, too,” she says fiercely. “I want to be like you.”

Her words kindle something hot and uncomfortable in my chest.

“In case you haven’t noticed, everyone thinks I’m mad here,” I tell her.

She just huffs. “So what?”

I stare at her some more, and let out a weak kind of laugh.

“Look. Maybe one day, you’ll get to leave,” I tell her. “Things are changing. But you shouldn’t just go traipsing off on the arm of some man

you've barely met – and in the meantime you should enjoy what you have here. You're *thirteen*, Drysi. Maybe when you're older –"

"Yadda, yadda, yadda," she rants. "*Maybe when I'm older*. Everyone's always saying that."

"Well, they're right to," I insist.

Her mother eels through the crowd, coming toward us. She looks at me like all the adult women do – with a kind of quiet wariness. I give her back her daughter, and Drysi looks back at me with sullenness that hides her yearning.

I want to be like you.

I hold onto those words, turning over the iron ring she gave me.

Near the gates, the Dubliners are all gathering under the supervision of their three lords, and Llewellyn. It is not really supervision; the atmosphere is relaxed, the men laughing and talking together as they prepare to depart.

Eormen is there too, speaking with Rhun. I join them, eager to say our goodbyes and be on our way. God, it's so strange to think of how much I yearned for home – and now I can't wait to be out on the road again, regardless of the dangers.

Eormen smiles at me as I arrive. We clasp hands, and for a moment all three of us are quiet.

"You're really going back to Dublin with them, then?" she asks us.

"I am, yes," I tell her without hesitation. Then I turn to Rhun, faltering.

He and I never spoke of this. What we intended to do after the war. Though the Dublin warband took him in, he's been a prisoner for many long weeks; perhaps he wants to be free of them, after all this.

He tilts his head and then makes a noncommittal noise. "I don't really know."

When he says nothing more, Eormen encourages him gently; “You did seem to get along with the Dubliners quite well.”

Rhun scoffs. “Those of them that are capable of coherent speech, at least.”

“Rhun,” Eormen insists. “And you, Tamsin – you do know that you have a place here too, don’t you? I don’t want you both to go sailing off because you feel like you don’t belong here.” She adds with a wobbly smile, “I could use your company. Nobody else here really knows what it was like out there.”

Oh, bless her. I want to reach out and give her a hug. She’s so protective of us, as ever. But she is utterly irreproachable in every way – she doesn’t know how it feels to be smeared with judgment as we are. It clings to us like mud; it will not be so easily wiped away.

“Cousin,” Rhun says, his brow furrowed as he stares at the flagstones. “You know neither of us belong here. Tam’s bitten, and as for me – well, by rights there is only one place I should be.” He gives a self-derisive laugh as he adds, “Since I’m already running from the bogs then I may as well keep running.”

Eormen looks at him for a long time then, chewing on a thought. I remember how appalled she was when she first learned what happened during the bog rituals.

“It isn’t fair. It isn’t fair that you should be cast out, Rhun,” she says at last. Then in a fit of inspiration, she takes his hand. “Here. Come with me. There’s something I want to try.”

* * *

A few paces away from the crowded gates, Queen Beatha is rallying a party of Cavaliers. Eormen tells us they are to be sent north, to thank Uradech for his collaboration, and to offer him food and ammunition.

“Mother wanted a royal emissary to go,” Eormen says. “I offered myself up, but she refused. Even though I’ve been up there once already, she doesn’t want me to put myself in danger.”

She eyes Rhun.

“I think perhaps you should go with them. As our royal emissary.”

Rhun frowns in alarm. “What? But, Eormen –”

“You’ve earned your place on that battlefield thrice over, cousin,” she says. “You still want your tabard, don’t you?”

Rhun’s panting as she lays that painful prize before him. “Of course I do, but –”

“Then let me win it for you.”

Rhun’s mouth shuts again, his eyes wide with something like torturous hope.

We come before the Queen. The Cavalier party turns to us curiously; Emrys is part of them.

“Here,” Eormen says to her mother, gesturing to Rhun. “Here’s your emissary, Mother.”

Queen Beatha takes in the sight of her blood-spattered nephew. Surprise makes way for quiet contemplation.

“It isn’t right that Rhun should be cast out from the Cavalier Order,” Eormen adds. “Even without wolfsbane, he’s capable of self-mastery just like the Vikings are. I saw him on the battlefield – we all saw him.”

We’re all quiet then, the Cavaliers too. Emrys is looking at Rhun with deep empathy etched on his face; many of them are.

“We’ve already made drastic changes around here,” Eormen goes on. “What if the fate of cursed boys could be made different, too? What if those who fail the wolfsbane trial could still be pardoned, if they showed themselves to be willing and capable of self-mastery?”

By then several villagers have drifted to listen. Women and daughters of Clota gaze upon Eormen as she stands there, defending the idea of mercy.

“Imagine how many boys we could save,” Eormen says. “If we only gave them the chance to prove themselves. Some of those cursed boys would never hurt anyone. But they aren’t even given a chance at all.”

The atmosphere is growing heavy with emotion. Women beyond are buzzing with muttered chatter, some of them reminiscing about boys they knew, boys they lost to the bogs. *He was a good lad... wouldn’t have hurt a fly.* It’s a deeply taboo subject, and everyone harbours deep grief that they must hold inside themselves.

Llewellyn has approached us, now that we’re attracting all this attention.

“It is a very old debate, Princess Eormen,” he says. “Letting cursed men roam without the wolfsbane comes with great risk.”

“Risk, perhaps,” Eormen says. “But our Order exists to maintain strict discipline. I think it shows little faith in your own abilities, to think yourself incapable of teaching a cursed man to apply his mind correctly, when the Vikings certainly can.”

The Dubliners are looking our way too, my wolves watching curiously. While the crowds buzz with vivid discussion, Queen Beatha goes on staring ponderously at Rhun. Then she steps forward, and a hush ripples out.

“Nephew,” she says. “Take the knee for me.”

“Y–Your Majesty?” Rhun stammers, alarmed. He’s all clenched up, fists at his sides, expression pinched. He’s overwhelmed now that everyone’s

listening in, watching – I want to take his hand to encourage him, but this is his moment, his redemption.

“Prince Rhun. Please,” Queen Beatha insists with a gentle smile.

So he kneels. He bows his head, staring urgently at the flagstones, as though he can’t believe this is happening. Queen Beatha holds out a hand, and one of the Cavaliers offers her a sword. Under the eyes of the many onlookers, she unsheathes it and lays the naked blade upon Rhun’s shoulder.

“Let this be the first time a member of our royal family pardons a cursed man,” Queen Beatha says. “I pardon you, Rhun, son of Beddwyn. As a cursed man who has shown temperance and strength of will, I give you the right to roam freely, on condition that you continue to show rigorous self-discipline.”

Rhun’s panting in disbelief. He lifts a hand to her sword, kisses the blade. A wave of chatter sweeps across the populace; questions rise, some women clutching each other as they realise what this means for their own cursed boys, that they might stand a better chance to live.

“With this pardon, let me create a new rank in the Cavalier Order,” Queen Beatha calls in a burst of inspiration. Eyes on Rhun’s blood-spattered armour, she goes on: “A place for all those boys who fail their trial, but who have the heart and the bravery to set themselves right. Let them be known as soldiers of the Red Hand – after the red right hand of God.”

When Rhun rises again, Emrys lets out a whoop that many Cavaliers reciprocate. Her decision does not draw unanimous approval, but those Cavaliers around Rhun are riotous with glee.

“Looks like you’ll be getting a tabard after all, eh?” Emrys says, reaching to scruff my brother’s hair. Rhun swipes him away, only to linger there with a hand over his mouth, half-laughing in disbelief.

“Prince Rhun, you will lead our Cavaliers north,” Queen Beatha intones. “I will give you a scroll with my blessing, and my son’s armour. So the commanders will know to respect your station, as a Briton prince and a soldier of the Red Hand.”

Rhun bows deep. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Who’ll make him that tabard, then?” hollers Hilda, and a few young women shout eagerly in response – Cinnie trumps them all, claiming the mission. “It needs to be good!”

I’m smiling, overjoyed for him as they all cheer for him; Emrys hauls him into an embrace, thumps his back and cheers with the others. But it is still so difficult to stand among this crowd, working through all this posturing so that they might accept us. Eormen is so good at this type of thing – she has somehow convinced our people to give their whole-hearted acceptance to Rhun. And just for a moment I find myself wishing that she could work her magic on them for my sake, too.

But I know I would not trust their acceptance. Not a second time.

* * *

Finally the time comes for the Dublin pack to leave.

Queen Beatha stands before our pack by the shattered gates. She carries something in her hands; a beautiful sculpture of a carved rearing horse, gilded with gold. She hands it to Olaf, as a symbol of their alliance.

“Our kingdom is entering a new era,” she intones. “We have long entertained a frayed relationship with Alba as our only allies of significance. But it is time we let go of old disloyal allies of that kind, and recognise those who offer us genuine friendship.”

Olaf bows low as he accepts her gift.

“My lords of Dublin,” she goes on. “You understand, it is highly irregular for us to open our doors to Norsemen. So you must forgive me for cutting short your sojourn.”

“Please, Your Majesty,” says Olaf. “The moon is not yet past; we understand entirely. We would not impose on you at this time.”

Queen Beatha nods at him with a smile.

“We are weakened and hurting from this war,” she says. “We need to regroup and count our losses. But I can assure you, once we have built our confidence again, I plan to honour this friendship. Let it be known that the kingdom of Strathclyde opens its doors to the lords of Dublin; and that we may hope for many fruitful collaborations, going forward.”

A murmur goes through the pack, and the watching women. I wonder... if this really means this sanctuary will keep its door eased open, just a little, to allow the daughters of Clota to breathe. Step out into the world. Discover themselves, perhaps. From the wide-eyed smiles of some of the younger ones, surely that’s what they’re hoping for.

Many people are clasping hands and saying goodbye. Rhun is standing among the Cavaliers. His gaze sweeps across the Dublin pack; having already made his goodbyes, he’s taking one final look at them. When he sees Nýr, he pauses, both of them sharing a heavy, wordless moment. Then Rhun breaks away for good, brow furrowed, and his attention swivels to me.

Christ. That’s right – I’m going to be leaving him behind, aren’t I?

I have to say my goodbyes, too.

I take him in as I go to him. His face is dappled by the morning sun; he wears a tabard with a red hand stitched in the place of the wolfsbane flower, now. Coupled with that gold-studded chainmail and Arlyn’s crowned helmet

under his arm, he looks every bit the Briton prince, though he's tugging nervously on one sleeve.

We stare at each other for a long time.

This summer has all but wrenched us apart. Even now I feel like we've only just begun to stitch our bond back together. I've never felt so separate from him, seeing him have his own experiences and growth without me.

It hurts. But it's the same for me. What I've gone through... I've had to experience without him.

And now we're going our separate ways. And it's a choice this time.

For a moment we just stand there, sniffing and trying to find something to say. Then I remember the Ogham stick I've got thrust in my belt. I pluck it out, press it into Rhun's hands.

"Since you're riding north to see Uradech," I tell him. "Will you give him that? It's a message from me."

He raises his eyebrows. Looks at the white ribbon I've tied around the carved wood. Then with a half-laugh he says, "Far be it from me to judge you, Tam, but are you sure? Don't you have enough on your plate as it is?"

He nods at my three wolves, who are a few paces behind me. I flush.

"For God's sake, it's nothing like that," I protest, and he shakes his head as he ties it to his jewel-studded swordbelt.

"I'll try not to forget," he teases. Then we're back to uncertain silence again. He looks me over, and nods at my bristly head. "I still can't get used to that. To think I actually have more hair than *you*. I never thought it'd be possible."

I afford him a smile, then reach up to give him a vengeful scruff. "I'm going to grow it all back, you know. If I have to look like you in the meantime, well, I suppose I'll have to bear through it."

Rhun's grinning, patting down his curls self-consciously. Clota, even with that boyish expression he still looks so regal in all his resplendent armour.

"You look like a crown prince," I tell him. Then, hoity-toitily: "His Highness Prince Rhun, Captain of the Red Hand..."

He clicks his tongue at me. "What about you, then? *Lady Tamsin of County Dublin?*"

The appellation is so strange. Is that really what I'll be known as? I shake away the thought; it comes with implications that are far too heavy.

"You'll come see me though, won't you?" I ask him. An impression of *deja-vu* sweeps over me with that phrase, and suddenly it seems like we're standing on the cusp of summer again, before the war, before we bore all these wounds.

"Of course I will," he says, just like he did then. "I'll visit you all the time. At least, as much as my princely duties permit."

I should smile, go on throwing jibes back at him. But just for us to speak like this, like before – it breaks any kind of poise I was trying to have. I pull him against me, and he hugs me back tight.

To think that tomorrow, next week, next month... we will both be somewhere far away, so far from one another that to write would mean sending couriers overseas.

At least it'll give me time to make sense of everything I want to say to him. It's all in a muddle now, nothing emerging except the urge to say, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I love you so much, I'll miss you* – but he'll make fun of me surely, for being too honest, too girlish.

"You'll be fine," he huffs out through a tight throat.

"So will you," I bite back. "I'm sure of it."

Chapter 61



IVAR

Waning Moon of September

The scene is as we always dreamed it. A victory worthy of our legends; there they are, the Vanirdøtur in bright summer colours, standing at the gates and waving us gladly on.

We are all astride gleaming black Galloways, save for Olaf and Tamsin, who straddle their own steeds. The gifts of the Vanirdøtur trundle on around us, riches bouncing and shaking in their carts. My men wear their own private tokens, ribbons around their wrists, bracelets and trinkets; they raise their hands to hail those women they have already fallen in love with.

They all speak of next year, next summer market – *we will have to invite them to Bealtaine*, calls Sigbrand, and another agrees, all them cobbling together the preparations – *we will invite Aed Finliath's finest musicians to impress them*, adds Finngeir, *and the jewel-makers of Airgialla* –

“You will need more than Aed’s finest musicians to help you, Finngeir,” I call at the grinning lovestruck fool, “if you want to impress them.”

And they roar in contempt of me, redoubling on their strategies of courtship. Some are quieter though, at the thought of home. We left with our warband at three-hundred-strong, and we are returning with few; there will be sorrow, too, upon our homecoming.

I ride close behind my lamb. There’s too much noise to heed the pair-bond as much as I’d like, to explore its scintillating promise. But I don’t need the bond to tell me she’s been in distress for the duration of the parade. At least now she wears a faint smile as she rides among the riotous men.

“Are those barrels of ale back there?” calls Armod, gesturing at one of the carts where many deep-bellied barrels are strapped down.

“Ale it is,” Olaf says. “And aged Frankish wine, and their own elderberry mead.”

This naturally draws great interest; we haven’t touched much alcohol at all since we first arrived.

“The Queen has left us enough to fill Aegir’s cauldron,” Orm moans in delight. “I haven’t had ale in an age. Sweet pale ale...”

“Are those the barrels with the white stamp? There aren’t enough there for one man, let alone a hundred –”

“You’ll take what we give you,” Olaf rumbles at them. “I’ll not spend our last night here knocking heads.”

But the Dubliners send up shouts and jeers, already organising brawls over the right to the precious pale ale.

“I think we might have to save some of that ale for you, brother,” calls Thrain. “Looks like you’re going to need it.”

Olaf sighs a gravelly sigh. “I have not drank since June. But perhaps

tonight is a good occasion to take a soak.”

Thrain laughs. “A soak, or a drowning – I think we’ve all earned it.”

Tamsin has not said a thing. I cast a side-long glance at her.

Still she will not draw back her hood.

* * *

We spread out on the Leven Port beach, dragging logs and furs for seating, adding kindling to the firepits until they burn hot and high. There is a lot to store in our two longboats; we work to transfer our cartloads aboard, leaving the drink and sweet meats out on the grey sand.

The King of the Britons is a delicate matter. We decide to chain him to the mast of one of the longboats; I do it myself.

He does not speak to me; does not even look at me. He wears the face of a shamed Christian man, one who struggles with his own self-deprecation; so much so that I’m not sure he properly appreciates that I am the one chaining him here.

“There,” I say once he’s snug against the carved base of the mast. “Comfortable?”

He affords me a glare from beneath his messy grey curls. Then he turns his head aside.

I catch him by the jaw. Make him face me, though he will not meet my eye.

“The irony is not lost on you, I believe?” I hiss at him. “For you to be my prisoner now.”

He grinds his teeth and still stays mutinous.

“I suppose I should thank you for your hospitality, my King,” I tell him with relish. Then I press a wet kiss to both of his cheeks, making him squirm and grunt with disgust. “It will be my pleasure to offer you the same in my halls.”

I rise after that, and he is panting now with fear as he glares at the planking. I drop a water bucket next to him unceremoniously, and leave him there with a small crew to guard him.

In the other longboat, men are working to hoist up a hemp marquee. They tell me that they are making a nest for the princess – so I join them, pulling at the ropes until it is upright, a snug cabin filled with what furs we could find.

Tamsin is on the beach with my brothers, sitting by one of the campfires. All around, the Dubliners are cracking open barrels and passing around horns – but it seems the talk at that firepit is solemn, still. I hop down from the boats, lope over to join them.

Olaf seems to be in a bout of evening contemplations – his horn of ale sits in his hand, half-forgotten as he stares at the flames. In his other hand is Father’s golden torc. His fingers play across the worn, ancient thing, the gold burnished to a bright yolky yellow by the sweat of its owner.

“... the Southern Isles are empty of their men now,” he’s saying as I get to their fire. “Odin only knows how our relationships with those clans will fare. Once we get to Dublin, we will have to touch base with all the warbands who partook in this war, those who survived. See where they all stand after this mess.”

“Never fear, my Jarl,” Sigbrand says, knocking his cup against Olaf’s. “We have the might of the Irish behind us, still, and Strathclyde now too; we have good allies, regardless.”

They go on speaking of our diplomatic relations – Armod sees me and

throws up a hand.

“Ivar! You’re here. You have to help us – Olaf is all politics, still. We have to get this man drunk already!”

I grin as the others let out a whoop of agreement. Thrain and I find the biggest barrel of mead, roll it over to the firepit. Then someone gives us an enormous drinking horn of ridiculous proportions, so we open the tap, start to fill it while the Dubliners chant and slap their thighs –

Drink! Drink! Drink!

Olaf is finally grinning as we hand him the horn. Tamsin watches us with an envious smile as we and the men pour ourselves some, and then it turns into a contest with many a sloppy spill while the others cheer on the drinkers.

Once Olaf has imbibed his full horn of mead, the men break into applause. He sways as he lowers his horn. Tamsin holds onto him while they immediately jump in for a refill – he’s laughing as he tries to protest.

“It is barely the medicinal quantity!” the men say as they pour. “Another full horn at least –”

“But you’ll kill him!” Tamsin protests, leaning across his lap now as she tries to stop them.

Olaf’s rumbling laughter is so good to hear. “I’ll be all right, pet,” he tells her, and I’m surprised to see his large ringed hand drift down her waist, holding her there in a casual embrace.

Once satisfied that Olaf is safely on his way to the complete obliteration of his senses, the men turn to find other targets. Music is struck, and in the noise we can find privacy – just the four of us again, leaning this way and that with drink.

Tamsin pushes gently out of Olaf’s drunken embrace, straightens her hood.

“Why do I have to be the only sober one?” she mutters. “It isn’t fair. I want to drink, too.”

“You know why, my love,” Thrain says. Her heat scent is starting to deepen; he and I are both crowding her as we enjoy the glow of the firepit.

Gods. There were so many scents in the belly of that fort today, and yet I was immune to them all. It makes a smile drift at the corner of my mouth, to think that Tamsin’s claim may be so brutal, so final and unapologetic. It has changed how the world smells, how it feels.

“We’ve lived through a whole war, and I can’t even drink,” Tamsin protests, her hand stroking over her belly. “It’s ridiculous.”

“It is a great injustice,” I agree with her. “Of all of us, I think you’re the most entitled to it, lamb. But it is what it is.”

She affords me a moody little smile. “I missed being with you all,” she mutters.

We bask in that admittance a moment, my brothers and I quiet. Olaf and Thrain still refrain from asking her any questions about her time in that fort; perhaps they know she wants to enjoy the evening and the freedom from it all.

I let my gaze rest on her shadowy face. I want to look at her properly, see her without the cloak swallowing her features. Reaching up, I run my fingers down the edge of her black hood.

“Perhaps it’s time you took this down,” I tell her softly.

She bristles, glances around at Olaf and Thrain in turn. She looks so forlorn; fear and shame twist through the pair-bond.

“We’ve seen it already, cariad,” Thrain says. “It’s all right.”

She tucks in her chin. He is the one who gently pulls back her hood, revealing the mess beneath.

Anger sparks in my belly at the sight of her. Olaf sucks in a breath, and while Thrain endeavours not to react, he still stiffens with indignity.

Around our campfire, a hush falls as some men catch sight of Tamsin's unevenly shorn head. The harsh scrapes of the scythe curve around her ears, reaching her forehead, as though a beast had slashed her there.

Thrain cannot contain his growl any longer; it stutters from his chest as he looks at the mess from up close for the first time.

"Who did this?" he rumbles. He does not ask why it was done; he has some inkling, surely, that her people might punish her for consorting with Vikings.

Tamsin shakes her head. "I don't want to talk about it," she says. "It was a penance ceremony... please, I wish you wouldn't look at me like that." She withdraws further into herself, her brow furrowed. "I wish you wouldn't look at me at all."

Thrain soothes her with his deep rumble: "I'm going to look at you, Tamsin. Hair or no hair." He strokes down her bare neck, presses a kiss there. "Battle scars and all," he adds, and that makes her smile just a bit.

"Whatever kind of *ceremony* it was, they did a shoddy job of it," I mutter. "Come here; I'm sure it'll look quite good if we even it out."

Tamsin looks at me in surprise as I coax her closer. I have her sit in front of me, the firelight glinting golden on her wounds. And the pair-bond pulses between us, the deep relief of closeness rising with the moon. I wash her head, palms running gently over her skin. Thrain brings me what I need, and her sorrow gradually wanes to calm as I take Thrain's linen oil and massage it into her scalp.

Around our firepit, the reverential hush holds as I take up my shaving knife. Her eyes are closed as she lets me bring it up to the slicked-down tufts,

and carefully start shaving them away.

“Don’t worry,” I murmur. “I have plenty of practice.”

“I’m not worried,” she says.

“You’re going to look just fine. Add a few tattoos and it’d be perfect.”

That makes her laugh. “Please don’t.”

“We’re watching him, princess,” Olaf says.

Tamsin’s fiddling with the one braid she has left, staring into the fire as I work. It takes a moment to even things out, so once the novelty of the scene has waned, our men resume their chatter. Soon the Dubliners wander further away to assuage their rising rut, and Tamsin is only made more comfortable by how the attention has lifted away from her.

Olaf’s gaze is heavy as he watches me work.

“Princess,” he murmurs. “I wish I could’ve spared you this ordeal. It must’ve been very hard for you, this homecoming.”

“It was hard,” she agrees quietly. “But at least now I know. Now I’m sure of what I want.”

Thrain is stroking her hand, staying quiet to leave her room to elaborate.

“In a way, they freed me,” she murmurs. “Some part of me always wanted to feel like my place was among them. Even if it meant forcing myself. But now I see it’ll never work. You can try and twist into the shape they want, and still they’ll insist on twisting you further.”

I stroke her fuzzy head, trying to temper the anger that surges as I imagine how she must’ve been held down for this penance ceremony. Her brow furrows as she tries to push on.

“This is the only place I feel like I can be entirely myself,” she says. “In the heart of this pack, with the three of you.”

Tch. She will insist on saying these things precisely when I can’t hold her

the way I'd want to – steal away with her to dark, private places. Olaf lifts his chin a little, eyes shuttered as he wordlessly takes this in; Thrain's hand tightens on hers. But I haven't finished my shearing; so they both rein themselves in until I'm done.

“There we are,” I murmur as I move away, turning her around so she can face me. I touch a finger to her chin, and she lifts those moss-green eyes to mine. The lines of her face come into such beautifully vivid focus without her hair to hide behind. My eyes roam over her heart-shaped face, her delicate ears, her long neck entirely bare now.

The rut is riling in me as she holds my gaze, a pink flush rising to her cheeks. Thrain is staring, too, as is Olaf. Her eyes flicker between us.

“What?”

“It suits you,” I tell her.

“I know you mean well,” she says, stroking her own bristly head. “But I just look like a highway bandit of some kind now, don't I? Christ, it's really all gone –”

“You look nothing like a highway bandit, or anything of the sort,” Olaf says, his gaze still intense as he takes her in. Then with a smile he rumbles, “I see only fair Rhiannon, journeying between two worlds. In all the tales, one leaves a piece of oneself behind; is it not so?”

She's smiling wide now as they share some private understanding. I glance at Thrain, mouthing *Rhiannon?* But he shrugs one shoulder. In the next instant Tamsin has shuffled across Thrain to get to Olaf, and she throws herself into his lap, embracing him around the middle. He chuckles, ruddy with drink and gladness, one hand curling naturally around her waist again.

She's half-lying across him and Thrain, now; I stir from where I sit by her feet, trying to strangle the yearning in me. Her heat scent is pulling at my

nose, giving me all sorts of dark impulses. I don't understand how Thrain can be content to sit here, a hand on her thigh, smiling down at her as though her heat weren't calling us. Perhaps he's more used to bearing through it, as it was never cut away from him as it was for the rest of us.

Olaf carefully caresses up her bristly head, making her shiver.

"It feels so strange," she says with a little laugh. "No one's really touched me there before."

"Mm." Olaf's eyes are shuttered with both drink and tenderness as he cups her ear with his large hand. "You know, it will not seem so strange once you're among the women of Dublin. As per our Nordic customs, some of them shave themselves partially or completely. Thrain's mother Kætilví wears this style herself, too."

"Oh, that's right! Ivar told me as much." She realises something then, glancing up at Thrain. "When we get there tomorrow, she'll meet us at the docks, won't she?"

"Don't worry, cariad," Thrain says with a grin. "She'll love you, I'm sure of it. Even moreso now that you look most like her daughter-in-law."

Tamsin laughs then. She's apparently intent on staying in their laps and making the most of Olaf's good mood, for she goes on asking questions about what to expect once we arrive. Some of the other greybeards sit to partake in the discussion, reminiscing as they drink, all of them impatient for home. And Tamsin shifts to face them, still staying cocooned against Olaf as she listens with delight.

I drink to kill the rut, trying for patience. She wants us all to stay together, I can feel it in the bond – so I can only strangle that jealous animal that wants her for myself. Glancing at Thrain, I find him still revelling in her, slowly stroking down her thigh, but he's dropped out of their conversation. He

seems thoughtful, some shard of pain lodged in his expression now that she isn't looking at him any more. Sensing my attention, he meets my eye.

“Ivar,” he mutters in quiet Norse. “Can I talk to you a moment?”

I crook an eyebrow at him. “I couldn't tell you anything more about her penance ceremony,” I tell him, following him in Norse. “I was in the dungeons, wasn't I? Couldn't really see much at all from down there.”

He ponders this awhile, his eyes flicking down to my mouth.

“There are other things I wanted to talk about,” he says at length. “Can we go somewhere? The nest in the longboat, perhaps?”

His quiet insistence flickers along my nerves. “This is a ploy to get me alone, isn't it?” I say with a smirk. “I know you've been biding your time to exact your vengeance.”

“Ivar,” he sighs. “There is no ploy.”

“Fine, then.”

Returning to Tamsin, he leans over her to tell her that we're going to her nest to talk. She stirs, looking forlorn that we might break the unity of pack; but he assures her we won't be long, pulling a blanket closer over her.

Olaf nods at us both, a low growl already rumbling in his belly which has Tamsin blinking sleepily. She burrows against him, and we leave them to their conversation and drink.

Amidst the noise of the revelling Dubliners, I follow my brother, a few paces behind him. I gaze at the long fall of his hair, his confident step as he leads us with a torch in hand, a piece of the fire he brought to light us.

He climbs into the deserted longboat, extends a hand to help me up. The torchlight glows on his handsome features, betraying nothing of his intentions as he lays that thoughtful look on me.

I take his hand, let him haul me aboard.

Chapter 62



IVAR

Waning Moon of September

The night is dark; the marquee's entrance closed.

All around are fluffed furs covering the wooden deck, and crates containing our belongings alongside Tamsin's. Above, a rawhide lantern sways gently from the ceiling; Thrain takes a moment to light it.

I know he has not yet spent that anger he holds inside him. But for now he moves slowly, gently, keeping that fire carefully stowed as he has done all day; a bright light cupped between large, careful hands.

I sit in the furs, take a drink from one of the buckets of water that sit by the crates. Once he's done, he shakes the brand to extinguish it, then comes to sit in front of me.

"Well? What is it?" I ask him, trying to pretend that this silence of his isn't daunting at all. "I'll say it again, if this is about Tamsin, then I can't tell you much –"

“This isn’t about Tamsin,” he says.

I swallow past a dry throat as he looks down at my mouth again.

“Show me,” he commands.

As with every time someone directs my attention to my tongue, something in me recoils violently, an animal impulse to hide my wounds.

I try for time: “Show you what?”

“What those bastards did to you.”

The gravelly fury in his tone fills the space between us.

“You already know,” I mutter. “You saw it through the bond, didn’t you?”

“I want to see it with my own eyes.”

“Why?”

He glares at me, growing impatient. “To see how it’s healing. To see if there’s anything I can do –”

“There’s nothing you can do about it, Thrain.”

“Just – for the love of Freya, will you show me?”

Everything in me cringes. *Leave me be*, my instincts roar; I want to push him away, even when I know it is concern more than anything that moves him; I *know* that. We always tend each other’s wounds after battle.

But this one... somehow this one is the worst I have had to share. It affects everything; speech and taste and intimacy alike.

Grudgingly, I open my mouth for him.

He takes me gently by the jaw, angles my head toward the light. I curl the twin tips of my forked tongue for him, so he can see better; his brow furrows, eyes lighting with outrage at the sight. A deep growl wakes in his chest.

“By the teeth of Fenrir,” he seethes. “I swear I will do the same thing to the Briton King before we depart.”

I smile grimly. He lets me go so I can speak.

“You will not,” I tell him. “If anyone is to make him taste hot metal, it will be me.”

His growl rumbles on as he stares at my mouth in disbelief.

“How was it done?”

“A knife heated over a flame.”

“Cauterised, then. No risk of infection.”

“No.”

He shakes his head slowly. “I’m surprised you can speak.”

“To be honest, so am I.” Leaning back, it is a relief to hide it from him again, to have him look away as he reaches for one of the water buckets. “It doesn’t really hurt much any more. It’s healed quite fast, all things considered... what are you doing?”

He’s dragged linen cloths and water bucket next to him, as though readying for a bath. He nods at my Cavalier tabard.

“Show me the rest.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “Gods, there is no privacy with the pair-bond,” I mutter. “Unless this is just you trying to get me undressed –”

“Yes, Ivar,” he deadpans, giving me an unimpressed look. “I cannot possibly have anything else than sex on my mind, even after you were *tortured* in their fucking dungeon.”

“All right, all right,” I huff, moving to unbuckle my belt. It is a sullen undressing; the music and drunken shouts of the Dubliners outside fill the silence as I roll up my tabard, chainmail and tunic. Underneath are bandages the Briton healers left around my torso; they’re grimy now with sweat and blood.

Thrain sits cross-legged behind me and works to cut them away. He

uncovers me with ritualistic slowness, peeling away sweat-soaked fabrics, discovering my body again after these long weeks.

I cannot find any deflection, anything to say as I show him my scarred back. He traces the lines with careful fingers, and I have a passing thought for how those scars must spoil some of my tattoos; but I can't find it in me to ask him. Not when his touch is sending goosebumps all over me, my rut making me want to arch into his palms.

“These have healed well, too,” he says. “Does it hurt if I touch you like this?”

“No.”

With one of the linen washcloths, he wipes away the sweat and grime, the things that accumulated over the time we spent apart; loneliness turned to a texture on my skin. I enjoy it wordlessly, inhabited by some deep calm... calm that is not only my own; the pair-bond is glittering darkly. I turn to gaze at the wall of the marquee, in Tamsin's vague direction. Thrain follows my gaze.

“She's asleep,” he mutters. Freya, what a marvel it is that we can even feel the patterns of her dreams, like shifting sunlight on the sea floor.

His hand drifts to my neck, and my pulse quickens. I know he's staring at that red ring of teeth, planted in the tender place where neck meets shoulder.

The mating mark Tamsin gave me.

“When did you even manage this?” he asks.

Images of Tamsin caught against an iron grid, spilling crimson skirts, fill my mind.

“They were breaching the gates, I think,” I tell him. “Tamsin came to save me from the dungeon. She was wild, and so was I... though I can't remember much of it.”

He lets out a little huff.

“Only you would stage your claiming ceremony in the middle of a full-blown siege,” he says, amusement in his tone.

“Trust me, there was no *staging* of any kind. It was quite possibly the worst thing we could’ve done when battle was looming. But we were out of our minds.”

“I suppose you’re glad it happened that way,” he says, teasing now. “The more dramatic the better.”

“Excuse me?” I protest, but he’s not wrong; it is a scene I want to have engraved for posterity. “You cannot lecture me on dramatic flair, Thrain Mordsson, O great terror of Ireland.”

That makes him laugh, cracking his moroseness at last. He wipes down my back with dry linens, and his hand lingers, caressing down my spine until it stops between my shoulder-blades.

I breathe out, frowning. Wait for him to say something, but he stays resolutely silent.

Nervously I ask him, “You don’t mind it, then? That I bit her?”

“No. If we were all agreed on it, then I see no issue.”

It’s so quiet in here compared to the chaos outside; quiet and calm. His hand moves, hesitant, around my flank, across my stomach until he’s embracing me from behind. My blood rushes through me as his great warm bulk closes all around me, covering my scars like a heavy blanket.

I grip onto his forearm, closing my eyes. Great terror of Ireland or no, I can’t remember the last time I felt so safe.

He noses into my neck, taking my scent.

“I did not bring you here to judge your choices,” he tells me, his breath hot on my ear. “I just wanted to make sure you were all right.”

The night is deepening, and so is our rut; he speaks to me now with the gentleness he usually reserves for his wife, and it does something to me, to be held like this. It fills me with a kind of ache, a deep contentment I don't recall ever feeling before. Gone are the snide asides, the clinging to façades; these past few weeks have been brutal, and I have no energy left to deflect any more.

He's holding me so warmly. All I want to do is stay like this.

The hour grows later; the rut is riding us both, making us focus on skin texture and scent, the minutiae of one another. Before long, a blooming pressure against my lower back betrays his waking interest. But I don't move away; we are wrapped in this warmth, listening to the music outside, luxuriating in all these simple sensory pleasures.

I rock back against him, and his growl wakes again, this time deep and velvety with arousal. In this haze of closeness, he follows the black trail that leads down my abdomen; he finds me hard and aching beneath my breeches, and the touch of his hand there robs me of my breath – pleasure is a forgotten taste, a fruit I have so scarcely had on my tongue this past month.

He cups me with that large hand, rubbing me slow and soft as though he's only half conscious of what he's doing; only following the imperatives of the rut, to touch, to please, to follow the cues of my body. When I lay my hand over his to keep him there, he wakes from his torpor.

“Sorry,” he growls, shifting for comfort. “It's the rut.”

I grin. He says sorry to me like we did not spend last moon naked in the dirt together, in far more shameful postures than this.

“It's fine,” I tell him. “But I'm in no fit state to be holding anyone down tonight. I don't know how any of the men have the energy for it.”

He's quiet for a time. The feel of him all hot and hard against me only

adds to the headiness of the moment; I lean back, just to reiterate that I'm not uncomfortable.

His lips hover at the back of my neck.

Then he says, "If you want... I could hold you down."

Every instinct in me surges at once, as though rearing to cover up what he's offering to part and reveal. I turn my head to the side, mouth parted, speechless.

I heard that right, didn't I?

He's never offered to do that. It was never our dynamic; he knows I would never have accepted. It is not the natural order, for one's pup to reverse the dynamic.

"So it *was* your plan all along," I throw him off automatically. "To get me alone for this -?"

"It wasn't," he insists. Then, quietly, his tone rough and intimate; "But if you'll allow it... I'd like to."

I bet you would, comes the flippant response, but I catch it back. There is such raw sincerity to this moment; I don't want to spoil it, to claw through it with the usual sharp push-back.

He presses a kiss to the back of my neck, and desire floods my body, making my cock throb. We have never done this before, but... perhaps he needs this; to press his own dominance over me, so he might reclaim control after everything spiraled to madness. Like a form of catharsis.

He has graciously borne my rut many times now, himself. And he bore the pain of our disappearance, our flight into the fort. If this is his only demand, after everything I put him through... then perhaps it is a favour fairly owed.

"Fine," I murmur. "But only this once."

His hand grips what he has so thoroughly woken. He squeezes, unlaces, and frees me – I sigh, grateful that he’s behind me, that he can’t see me, so I don’t need to uphold any appearances as I let him pleasure me with deft fingers.

He moves us both before long, like a tide rolling over me until I am face-down in the furs. Alarm shoots through my body as he holds me under him, waking the bristling beast that will not let itself be overpowered.

My growl bursts from my chest, warding him off.

He holds himself over me, casting his shadow over my back as I lay there, tense in the furs. Like this he is seating his dominance upon me; it emanates from his entire posture, this space he claims above me, the way his growl rolls over mine like thunder.

He waits for me to settle. I close my eyes, try to temper my instincts. Like him... it’s been some time since I allowed a Varg to breathe on the back of my neck.

“Tell me to stop,” he murmurs. “If you want me to stop.”

I nod.

He kisses the tattoos that dot my spine, his long silky hair falling across my back. He’s caressing my scars, as though his true purpose here were to replace this map of pain by one of pleasure. Slowly he comes to the dimples at my lower back, pulling down my breeches little by little, uncovering more ground... until he is following the bind-runes that line my hips, kissing along each cheek, *Odin* – I’m panting as he presses the washcloth into that crevice, rubbing me there with wet linen.

Then his mouth replaces the cloth; his tongue finds those sensitive places, drawing a broken moan from me.

Fuck. That mouth of his, as ever... if this truly is his vengeance, *Odin*,

I've never known one so easily borne.

My thighs twitch open, my breaths coming short as he burrows, licking me until there is not one ounce of resistance left in my body. And then his hand comes to replace his tongue, and I huff in the furs, too riled by that point to be able to think at all beyond the dictates of pleasure.

He pushes a finger into me, then two, returning to loom over my back again. His face hovers by my neck, as though to savour my muffled sounds, or listen for a protest. Still he hides where I cannot see him; I do the same, moaning into the furs as he strokes that tender spot within me.

He moves, loosening his laces – the implications have me tensing again like ice. So he slows, lets me accommodate his demands at my own pace.

What is he doing, taking his time like that? A dominant Varg would've lain many growled orders on me by now – to lift my hips, to stay still, to please him in whatever way he wished. Thrain has me where he wants; he can reap all the benefits of my submission, spend his anger as he likes. As I've offered him to.

But he does nothing of the sort.

He is only present; achingly attuned to me, staying quiet so he might heed me. Giving me control even while he has me pinned here.

I can't make sense of it. My eyes stay open, staring in confusion at the furs as I grapple for the usual codes. But the only codes I find are those of our own friendship, the deep respect he affords me.

“Ivar,” he breathes in my ear as we both wait on the cusp of penetration. “Will you allow it?”

I grit my teeth. “I told you already. It will only be tonight; so take what you want.”

He is silent for a beat.

“I’m not interested in taking anything,” he murmurs. “I only wanted to stay and take care of you. If you’ll have me.”

I sigh, brow furrowed. *Shut up*, I want to snap at him, *stop talking in riddles, stop being so damned gentle* – like an animal unused to any tenderness, I can only bristle under him, bracing for the breach.

“Are you going to make me wait all night?” I hiss at him, and he gives a small indignant huff.

And it comes.

* * *

The heel of my hand skids against the deck; my knees are parted, my head bowed.

He fills me completely; fills me with pleasure, and it is too much at once, like a mouthful of honey after a drought. He holds me firm, his arms a strong support into which I sag, breathless, face contorted while he cannot see.

If he is avenging himself, it is upon the space that separated us; the traces of pain that another man left; the shadow of my batterer. He surrounds me as he would in combat, chasing away those memories until he is all I feel; his warm firm grip, his steady attentiveness, like a guardian at my back.

His every touch bears this reminder, that pain is only passing – that our bodies are meant for this, for the soft touch of a lover, the grasping hand that says *I missed you*, the warmth of summer nights and the taste of mead and merriment – that it comes back, it comes back, once you leave that dark cell behind.

Gods. *Gods*. He has me arching like a pup, crying out as he brings me to the peak – this wretched body of mine gleams now with the exultance of

climax, as though coming alive all at once, a snake shedding its skin to emerge full of radiance.

I'm panting afterward, sensitive all over. He waits, breathing. Listening.

Loki. To think it could be like this. No words at all and yet he brings me to this state; he knows something, that man, he has a deeper understanding of these things than I; why am I only discovering it now?

This depth of feeling has always terrified me. But it is more valuable than anything in all the world; I feel it now, the way it makes me shake, the way it resounds in me like the echoing voice of a god.

"Ivar," he pants, hand over my heart. "Can you take more?"

I close my eyes before anything can spill; "Yes."

* * *

He turns me around at some point; he wants to see my face.

Though my defenses have melted in the molasses of many consecutive climaxes, still my instincts surge – my growl rises as he looms close. He waits for me to settle, his forehead against mine, long hair cascading over one side of us.

Biting my lip, I let him see me, let him see what he does to me when he enters me again. I know he's devouring me with his eyes, but it's too difficult somehow, to look up when we're like this. To meet his gaze when I am under him.

How am I meant to – to keep my poise, to stay dignified at all, when he's doing that to me? When he's so deep inside me I can barely breathe –

He cups my face, patient as always, until I give in.

To look at him is to open an old wound; one that never properly healed. It is the wound he gave me when I first saw him, all those years ago; when the sight of him transfixed me, and I knew how deeply I craved him, and how I could never fulfill that craving.

There are some cravings that are bottomless; that cannot be accommodated in any civilised society. Better to ignore them than to indulge them too much, because he could not possibly want me as much, anyway – however I may impress him, or try to control him – that is what I always told myself.

Now his every gesture says otherwise, and I don't fucking know what to do with any of this – I pant against him, snarling as he buries himself deep. He stays there, rocking slowly, his knot flush against me.

His eyes drop to my mouth. That tremor runs through me again, that urge to recoil.

“If I kiss you,” he breathes, “will it hurt?”

The idea sends fear skittering through my nerves – but it's insane to think I cannot kiss him now because of what was done to me. It's healed now, after all. I thrust up my chin, grapple for courage.

“Try,” I tell him.

He's tentative; tastes my lips first, stays on the surface. My brow furrows as the cumbersome feeling of wrongness prevails; not painful but alien, a snake's tongue I swapped for my own. He tries to go deeper but I resist him; I can't give him this, can't subject him to this strangeness.

He draws back, lays a gentle look on me.

“Open your mouth,” he whispers.

With difficulty, I do.

He laps his tongue against mine, slow, tender; I rise to meet him,

following old patterns without thinking. He moans in surprise as I catch him, both tips surrounding him.

We break off. He's smiling, and so am I; and then we break into laughter at the utter queerness of it.

"It feels like there's two of you," he says. "It's bizarre –"

"Bizarre, yes, everyone wants to hear that about themselves in bed –"

"No," he catches himself. "Let me try again, it was... it was good."

So he does. And it doesn't hurt; it isn't so strange this time.

He comes to enjoy it quite thoroughly. Soon I have him moaning into my mouth, plundering for more, until he hardly stops for breath. And to think he would still kiss me so deeply, even as I am now – it makes me pull him close, frown into his kiss. It doesn't bother him; if anything, it only arouses him more.

I gorge myself on the sight of him as he climbs his peak. Experimentally I curl the tips of my tongue over my lip for him, and just that is enough to push him over the edge. He drops into my neck with a deep growl, and it's all I can do to hold on as he pummels his climax into me.

Breathless and grinning, I ask him; "Would you say it's an improvement, then?"

He shakes his head. "Don't you go putting words in my mouth like that."

"I think you're the one putting sizeable things inside the other person, here –"

He cracks into laughter. "For the love of Freya," he chastises. And then; "Would it be strange to say that I like it?"

I rake his hair back, hold him tighter. "I'm the one with the snake's tongue, Thrain; do you really think I'm fit to be calling anyone else strange?"

That makes him smile. When he starts again I can only throw back my

head and try to take it. He still has much of his rut to spend, and he is only more invigorated by this; it is all I can do to hold on and survive.

* * *

By the time he's through with me, I'm flat on my back in the furs, eyes following the swaying lantern, fingers twitching as I try to map out what on earth my nerves are doing. He's lying beside me, propped on one elbow, watching me; of course the bastard's unbearably smug now that he's flattened me entirely into the furs.

He traces the arrowhead tattoos along my chest with one finger.

"Good?" he asks.

Good? Is he trying to find the most euphemistic descriptor? I try to sort through what I could say; there are too many good things, his body, his cock, his tireless capabilities – this night, that look in his eye, the fact that he spilled his love all over me with reckless abandon – like I know what in Odin's name I should do with it.

"Mm," I agree grumpily. "Good."

"Remind me why we've never done that before?"

I scoff. "My own self-preservation instincts, probably."

He chuckles at that. Then, idly he adds, "Did you mean what you said, when you said this would only be one time –"

"Yes."

He lets a little silence settle. I try to glare at him, only to find him still gazing at me with shuttered eyes and that insufferably knowing smile.

"Stop looking at me like that," I snap at him, turning to show him my back.

He takes to tracing my runes again. His gentleness sends shivers through me, making me curl my fists in the covers. There's a question I've been meaning to ask him; a question I will never be able to ask on another night than this one.

"Thrain..."

"Mm?"

"All those years ago..." I swallow past my dry mouth. "You never told me. What is it that you felt for me?"

He breathes softly in the dim light. The rawhide lantern sways overhead, the longboat dipping a little on the waves as we lay in each other's company.

"You were a prestigious skáld who had everyone dancing to your tune," he rumbles. "I think you know I was enamoured by you, just like so many others were. There may have been a point when those feelings became... more, I suppose. But I assumed it was improper to feel that way towards one's pack leader."

Freya. How is one meant to reply to something like that?

His fingers follow the line of my spine. "Men grow so close under the moon," he mutters. "But then they go home to their wives... I have never known of any man who took another as a spouse, and lived together as such. So what are we meant to do with those bonds we share? Are they always meant to remain memories, something we feel nostalgia for, but that we may never seriously pursue?"

I stare at that swaying lantern. Those are not considerations I have ever made room for; it is as he says. There are codes. Men do not live together like spouses; men do not love one another in that way. That is what my own master taught me, when I was initiated to the feasts as a pup; that is the code we are all taught.

“You know what is said of men who dally together beyond the moon,” I mutter. “You will be called *argr*.”

Argr – unmanly, effeminate, the worst possible thing a man can be. It is all well and good to fuck; necessity and the shortage of women excuse it. But to love one another like spouses in every day life, in plain daylight – that would be unthinkable.

“Mm,” he agrees quietly. Uncertainly. “What do you think of all that?”

I click my tongue. “You forget, you annihilated all my capacity for thought tonight.”

He huffs at that; I know it’s unfair for me to deflect when he was so open with me. So I turn and gather him against me, pulling the covers over us; and it is just like it used to be, him and I at the end of a rut night, sweat-slick and sated. He wraps a heavy arm around my waist, and we breathe each other in as we come down together. I let my chin rest on the top of his head, staring at the dust motes glinting in the lantern light.

What are we meant to do with those bonds we share? he asked.

I wish I knew, myself.

* * *

“Princess, they’re sleeping, we can’t disturb them –”

“Shh, it’s all right. We’ll be careful, come on.”

“I swear to you, I can sleep outside.”

“After you drank a whole lake of mead? I want to keep an eye on you, Olaf.”

I stir, blinking toward the marquee entrance; Olaf is hunched under the lantern, Tamsin propping him up, both of them rosy-cheeked as they stumble.

“No, Olaf – Olaf, this way – oh, *bollocks* –”

Before I can even rise, they’ve fallen into the furs, catching themselves – crates rake across the floor, Tamsin squealing as she tries to prevent disaster. By the time Thrain and I have pushed ourselves up, Olaf is spread on his back, his bad leg lifted as though he managed to save at least that – but the rest of him is flumped in the nest, with Tamsin half lying across him.

He’s laughing, his belly bobbing and lifting Tamsin’s whole body; she’s dissolved into giggles too as they both lay there in complete disarray.

“What in Hel’s name –?” I mutter, blinking. “Brother, are you all right?”

“’m *fine*,” Olaf slurs.

“He’s very, very drunk,” Tamsin says.

“I’m not *that* drunk,” Olaf corrects, lifting a peremptory finger in my direction, though he cannot pluck his eyelids open. “The *skjeppe*... how do you say *skjeppe*? *Fjandinn, hvernig segirðu það?* Anyway, brother, I swear there was still plenty in there –”

“They made him drink near half the barrel,” Tamsin tells me.

Ah, Freya.

I crawl over to them, help her to roll him onto his side, take off his belt and cover him properly. He rambles some complete nonsense, speaking in thick Norse now as though Tamsin could understand him – she nods along, trying her best to repress her smile as she holds his hand.

“Yes, Olaf. That’s right, yes, you just get comfortable now,” she says patiently. Then turning to me: “What in God’s name is he even saying?”

I’m trying not to laugh by then; “I have no idea.”

Thrain combs back his messy hair, laying a worried eye on Olaf. “Should we make him puke?” he asks me.

I feel my elder brother’s skin, look at his demeanour. “Eh... he should be

all right. He's drank twice as much and survived."

We take care of him and repair the nest until it is all properly made for us to sleep in again. By that point Olaf looks halfway asleep already; Tamsin cosies up to Thrain in the furs while I tend my brother, settling beside him to watch him. He keeps blinking back to consciousness, wading in and out until finally he recognises me.

"Ivar," he grumbles in Norse, reaching for me. I give him my hands, lean closer. "Ivar, is that you?"

"Yes, Olaf. I'm here."

"We're going home, aren't we... we're going home now?"

"We are. As soon as dawn breaks."

"Odin, I'll be in no state to steer –"

"It's fine. Thrain and I will steer."

His hands tighten on mine, and he pulls me closer, brow furrowed as he tries his best to hold onto consciousness.

"I wanted to tell you," he slurs. "Before... before I forget. You're the finest brother a man could hope for. I don't tell you that enough..."

Ah, Odin, here we go. I've never known Olaf to be one for drunken declarations, but it seems I'm in for one.

"I don't tell you that enough," he repeats doggedly, giving my hands a little shake. "You're a good man, do you hear? Do you hear me, Ivar? You're a good man and I love you – and if it should all happen again, I would gladly give my life for yours, just as you did for me –"

"Olaf," I say, clutching the oaf's beautiful head, leaning in to kiss his brow. "I hear you. I hear you, don't worry."

"I wanted to say it... wanted you to know, because I don't tell you that enough, and... what you did for me... what you did..."

“Hush. Listen to me,” I soothe him. “You’re my brother and I love you, but you are piss-drunk, Olaf. Lay your head down now, that’s it.”

Tamsin watches us with a little smile, her hand balled against her chest. Once I have him down properly, it hardly takes a moment before he falls straight to sleep, regaling us all with a contented snore.

Thrain laughs at the sheer volume of it, and they invite me among them, all of us keeping an eye on the great lump that is Olaf – potential King of the Vikings, slumped in deep restorative sleep.

“Will he be all right?” Tamsin asks.

“I should think so. It’s us I’m more worried about,” I tell her, pointing to the next great snore he gives, which makes her giggle into the cushions.

We settle together under the woollen blankets and furs. She lays her hands on us, a mistress and her hounds. And she purrs for us all, so that we all sink into the same dazed contentment as Olaf while she takes her pack with her into the realm of dreams.

* * *

Olaf is a wreck the next morning. While Thrain and I direct the men to the rigging, he sits outside the marquee, pinching the bridge of his nose through his anvil-like migraine.

The men jeer at him, but half of them are in the same sorry state – it is a feat to command them to their stations. But eventually we manage to glide out into the river, and unfurl the sails.

Tamsin drifts to the stern; she’s pulled up her black hood again by some force of habit. I follow her, both of us squinting in the sunlight as we take in the view. We’re sailing past the fort, perched upon its rock as it is. As we

drift along the river, we can better see the wrecked lands around it, patches of burnt forest, roundhouses with caved roofs.

They must be busy up there, cleaning up, rebuilding. For all the traces of destruction, they are bustling with industriousness – before long we see faces, we hear their shouting voices. Raised arms wave at us from the parapets; the Britons waving goodbye.

Our Dubliners throw up their hands, calling back. Though we can barely see the tiny figures up there, our men all imagine that their sweethearts have scrambled to the parapets for them; so they call out women's names and well wishes and all sorts of merry nonsense.

Tamsin does not wave.

I glance down at her as she takes in this place she used to call home, the place we helped to save. And to see her standing on the deck like that... she bears her own scars, her own burnt groves. My eyes slip down her hooded head, her straight back, the way the strong winds pull at her black cloak and yet she stays rooted there.

Her chin is lifted as she gazes upon that fort. Oddly, it is the look of a victor, as though she had triumphed over it.

“You look like you're never coming back here,” I tell her.

She ponders that a moment. “I don't know that I am,” she says softly.

I know exactly how she feels, to be turning her back on her childhood home. The pair-bond rocks between us, a perfect bittersweet twist.

“I think I understand better now,” she adds. “What you meant that day. When you said that fire doesn't destroy you, but changes you instead.”

I smile then. “Fire can still destroy you if you let it. It takes strength to pull through.”

She gazes up at me. “I know. I don't think I could've pulled through all of

this without you, Ivar.”

I click my tongue. “You say that, but you’re the one who dragged my arse out of that dungeon. I’d be dangling on somebody’s upturned spear by now if it wasn’t for you.”

She smiles, squeezes my hand. “You know what I mean.”

I do know. For all the fear of those first days, now she stands tall and courageous on this deck, firm in her convictions. I pull her in, press a kiss to her hooded head, pride singing within me as ever.

“Rare are the days I’m told I can have a positive influence,” I mutter, and she laughs. “But I’m glad I could’ve helped you find your courage, in some small way.”

“*Some small way,*” she echoes, throwing me an amused look. “Modesty doesn’t suit you, Ivar Gofraidsson.”

I grin at her. Then her gaze is pulled away by the fort again as we drift past it.

“If there’s something you want to say to your kin, you should shout it now,” I remind her. “They won’t be able to hear nor see you once we pass this curve.”

She waits, pale-faced, as though strangling many things in her throat; discarding one phrase after the other, never the right thing. Then, little by little, wave by wave, the fort vanishes behind the landscape – and it is too late.

She closes her eyes. Lets out a long breath, as though letting go of all those half-formed words.

Then she sweeps down her hood, baring her bristly head. She runs her own hands over those bristles, feeling them, stroking down her neck as though to learn her new shape. When she tries to unfasten the cloak, the

brooch gets tangled in the fabric; so she turns to me, and I help her unpin it, sweep the black from her shoulders.

She raises the cloak up into the wind. It flaps in the high velocities like a long black banner, rippling and snapping above us. We gaze up at it awhile, the crew and I pulled into this ritualistic silence as we watch it ripple in the wind – and she lets it go, so that it swirls like a last plume of smoke into the sky.

[The story will continue in **Book 4!**]

Be sure to sign up to my newsletter to keep up with my writing process, and to get exclusive sneak peeks & ARC opportunities:

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Cast of Characters

The Britons

- **King Arthgal** - King of Strathclyde
- **Queen Beatha** - Queen of Strathclyde
- **Eormen** - eldest daughter of the King
- **Arlyn** - eldest son and crown prince
- **Princess Aphria** - sister to King Arthgal
- **Tamsin** - eldest daughter of Aphria
- **Rhun** - twin brother to Tamsin
- **Hilda** - nursemaid & castle servant
- **Cinnie** - Hilda's daughter & castle servant
- **Captain Llewellyn** - open-minded Cavalier captain
- **Captain Garreth** - spiteful Cavalier captain
- **Captain Heddwyn** - Cavalier captain on dungeon duty
- **Emrys** - young Cavalier, Rhun's childhood friend
- **Kelwynn** - young Cavalier, younger brother to Emrys

The Albans & Picts

- **King Causantin** - King of all Alba
- **Queen Matilda** - Queen of all Alba
- **Prince Domnall** - eldest son and crown prince
- **Lady Catriona** - sister to King Causantin, lady of Dál Riata
- **Lord Aedan** - son of Lady Catriona, Tamsin's late husband
- **Uradech** - enemy of Causantin, heir to the separatist Pictish kingdom of Fidach

The Dublin Pack & Norse-Irish Vikings

- **Thrain Mordsson** - Jarl of Dublin
- **Ivar Gofraidsson** - Jarl of Dublin, son of King Gofraid
- **Olaf Gofraidsson** - Jarl of Dublin, son of King Gofraid
- **Kætilví Valkadottir** - Thrain's mother & acting Jarl of Dublin
- **Ósk Ranogdóttir** - Ivar's mother
- **Vírún** - Olaf's late wife
- **Sigbrand** - elder karl, critical
- **Armod** - elder karl, grey-haired & cheerful
- **Nýr** - karl & Rhun's full moon partner
- **Orm** - karl, blackbeard
- **Mikjel** - karl, a youngster
- **Finngeir** - karl, nine-fingered
- **Skaði** - shieldmaiden of the Cathalain clan
- **Yngvor** - Völva of the Cathalain clan

The Southern Isles Vikings

- **King Gofraid** - King of the Southern Isles
- **Grímbjorn** - Jarl, close advisor to Gofraid
- **Aurvandill** - Jarl, close advisor to Gofraid
- **Ögmundr** - Jarl, critical of Gofraid's rule

Notes on Historical Details

- As Strathclyde is a closed, secretive kingdom in this series, I allowed myself the liberty of giving them slightly advanced technology; hence the stone fort and its stairways & individual rooms, as well as the river chains, which in reality would appear in later centuries.
- In recorded history, Dumbarton fort was burned and destroyed by Olaf and Ivar (Thrain being my original character). As they brought a great host of slaves back to Dublin, it is supposed that the Briton royal family was dragged away too. Dumbarton fort then disappears from all records for several centuries. I wanted to keep at least a couple of these elements; the burning, the dragging away of the Briton King; though I changed things here so that the Britons survive and an alliance is struck instead.
- All magical elements were based on the Poetic Edda, in the interest of being as close to Norse mythology & the sagas as possible. Ivar's tattoo, *the gods are under me and over me*, is based on an existing protective spell found on the Kvinneby amulet.
- You may have noticed me referring to dwarves as no different to humans in terms of size - this is deliberate, as dwarves in Norse mythology are not described as particularly short.
- Rhiannon's story is taken from the first branch of the Mabinogion (a

compendium of medieval Welsh tales involving Celtic mythology & Arthurian romance).

Acknowledgments

This book has been one hell of a journey. Now that it's finished, I am very grateful for everything it's taught me; both writing-related things as well as fundamental lessons in time management, self-care, and self-love.

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I would also like to thank you, who's reading this right now, for sticking with me all throughout the time it took to deliver this book! I hope you've enjoyed the journey, and that you're ready for the next one.

About the Author

Originally a fantasy/SF writer, I took a sharp left turn in 2020 and got lost in the omegaverse. This probably explains why my smut ends up being pretty plot-heavy, as you can tell by now if you've gotten this far! The writing process for this book was mainly fuelled by Rustique camembert, my undying love for historical reenactment, and folk bands that I am currently obsessed with.

If you enjoyed this book, don't forget to leave a review! :)

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THE VIKING OMEGaverse

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[A Meeting of Wolves \(Book 2.5\)](#)

[The Summer Siege \(Book 3\)](#)