

an abduction romance



alien viking's

ALUNDERER

CALISTA SKYE

ALIEN VIKING'S PLUNDER

AN ABDUCTION ROMANCE

CALISTA SKYE

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Epilogue

- **BRAGR** -

The shaman bowed. “The oracle is ready, Chief.”

Bragr sighed. “Then let’s get it over with, Heidran. I have a raid to prepare.”

“Of course, Chief. It will only be a short session, the way you prefer it. This name of this seeress is Hjordis.” The shaman walked ahead to the stone arch and pushed open the heavy, double doors that led to the wide spiral stairs going down. The eight guards, full *huskarls* all, saluted with their swords, and Bragr returned it by slapping the side of his.

The small stone building on top of the mountain was the most tightly guarded location on the planet, but nobody lived there.

He started down the stairs, illuminated by flickering torches mounted to the rock wall. “Why is it that the oracle can never tell me anything about our enemies’ plans or when they will attack, Heidran? All I get are vague predictions about natural disasters and shifting trade alliances.”

Heidran followed him down with three steps between them. “Those predictions can be useful, Chief. They are never wrong.”

“But they are almost always too vague to use right. Last year she said there would be a big flood wave on a certain date, but she didn’t know where. So I took a chance and evacuated the whole coast on that date. Only to have the flood wave take place on the other side of Hjalmarheim, where only *dfergir* and *vettir* live.” Bragr’s words resonated from the bare stone walls.

“Very true, Chief. It is in the nature of the oracle’s crystal that its predictions are always correct, but sometimes have too few details to be immediately useful. I think your principle of doing whatever you can with the counsel you’re given is wise.”

“I hope so, Heidran. Evacuating villages comes with a big cost, especially the ones where the shipyards are located. But I’d rather lose money than the lives of my people.”

“Your stance on that is well known, and it does you great credit,” Heidran said. “Certainly I can think of other earls who would think nothing of sacrificing their people for even a small financial gain.”

“Your thoughts keep going to Earl Gornt,” Bragr growled. “One might think you miss him.”

Heidran was too old and experienced to be flustered by the veiled accusation. “There is no ruler I miss less than Earl Gornt, Chief. And I dare say that’s true for your entire people.”

Bragr grunted, knowing it was probably true. Heidran was not given to flattery, and whenever he had a feeling about what the people of Hjalmarheim were thinking, it was usually correct.

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Bragr opened the next door himself. Beyond was a small, circular cave carved

out of hard, gray rock. It was ringed with a trench along the entire circumference of the wall, where an eternal fire was burning. The fire only provided light — the heat was completely absorbed by the rock wall behind it, making the cave feel chilly.

In the very middle of the cave a roughly hewn stone pedestal grew out of the floor, topped by an irregular rock the size of a man's torso. It was completely black and reflected no light, making it look like a hole in reality. It was the most precious object on planet Gardr, and one of the several things that made the realm of Hjalmarheim so important.

Behind it stood the oracle herself, draped in a long, silvery white robe. She was a seeress, and her blind eyes seemed to pierce him with more force than seeing eyes could.

“Greetings, Earl Bragr,” she said and gave a shallow bow. “It has been a year since your last consultation. We are gratified to see you are still our earl.” Her voice was creaky with age. It took a lifetime of experience and wisdom to correctly read the crystal.

“As am I gratified to be in the presence of the Seeress Hjordis,” Bragr continued the traditional exchange as he stepped over the fire trench and came to a stop five paces from the pedestal. “What do you have to say about the future of my earldom? We bid you to consult the crystal.”

“As my chief and earl commands, I shall consult the crystal,” the oracle said and bowed again.

Bragr stared at the crystal. It was still in the original position where it was first found deep inside this mountain, more than a thousand years ago. The whole cave had been dug out around it. The small dome on the top of the hill, the squad of warriors that guarded it, the landing pad and the staircase that led down

into the heart of the hill existed only because of the crystal. It had been there for centuries, and every earl of Hjalmarheim had made use of the oracle's predictions after it was discovered. Sometimes with spectacular success, mostly with only minor advantages.

Now, the yearly visit from the earl was tradition, one Bragr felt he could have done without. He would rather let his loyal shaman do it alone. But he knew his people felt safer if he would keep doing things that chiefs had always done, and he saw the point of those traditions.

Thankfully, this seeress wasn't big on gestures or theatricals. She simply walked over to the crystal and stared into it with eyes that saw no light.

"Chief Bragr of the clan Einungar, Earl of Hjalmarheim," she said, her voice flat and lifeless. "Your earldom has many enemies. There will be battles in the coming year, and you will lose two of them. You will win three."

The crystal didn't change. It was completely black, as far as Bragr could tell. But the seeress's face was brightly lit up with rapidly changing colors, as if the crystal was showing her all kinds of things. Her eyes moved quickly, as if they could see.

Bragr knew better than to go closer and look into the crystal himself. People had gone permanently mad or blind doing that.

"The crystal shows that the harvest will be rich this year. The *rogn* trees will grow strong and be of special importance. It shows the discovery of a pool of clean water deep under the town of Fromun, making it possible to water the dry plains and grow many plants."

Bragr listened as the oracle gave many minor predictions, aware that the old shaman behind him was writing it all down.

“The crystal shows...” The oracle faltered and went silent for a moment. “It shows grave danger for you, Chief. Very grave danger. And...” the oracle’s voice trailed off again. “The crystal offers a Prophecy!” The loud statement echoed from the walls.

Bragr stiffened and turned to throw a glance at Shaman Heidran. A Prophecy? He’d never had that before. It had been almost a century since the last time the oracle had offered one. A Prophecy was more than a prediction; it was something that was certain to happen in less than a year and would be of the greatest importance to the earldom and all of Gardr.

Shaman Heidran shrugged, just as clueless as his chief.

The oracle was still quiet.

Ah. She was waiting for a response. Not every earl wanted to hear a Prophecy when it was offered. It could be really bad news that he’d prefer not to know about in advance. For instance, only suspecting that you’d lose a war was better than knowing it for a fact. Hjalmarheim had been an earldom where earls didn’t last long.

Bragr searched his memory for the correct phrase. “I, Earl Bragr of Hjalmarheim, will hear the Prophecy as stated by the Seeress Hjordis.”

The seeress stared into the crystal, her face now lit in an eerie light blue. “This is the Prophecy: The clan of Einungar will lose the earldom of Hjalmarheim. But there will come a Meistr from outside, a mighty warrior who may help the Einungar clan keep their lands. The crystal is now dark.” She stepped back and stood still with her hands folded over the clasp of her wide belt, eyes once more blind and unmoving.

Bragr had to concentrate to not stagger backwards from the shock. Lose the earldom? How? When?

He was sorely tempted to ask for more details, but that would be undignified — the oracle had told him everything she could see and never answered questions.

“The seance is over, Chief,” Heidran whispered from behind him.

Bragr pulled himself together. “I thank the oracle for the predictions and the Prophecy.”

The seeress didn’t move, just stared right through him with her blind eyes.

Bragr turned his back to the crystal and the woman, walked out of the oracle cave and up the stairs ahead of Shaman Heidran. He was suddenly full of unease and worry. Lose the earldom?

It had been in the Einungar clan for centuries, and they had often had to fight to keep it. But never had they come close to losing it.

He walked out of the hut and stopped, drawing in the sharp mountain air. In front of him lay the earldom with its steep mountains and long, turquoise fjords that snaked their way between the green hills out to the ocean in the distance. It was a craggy and rocky island, where the living was tough and the land fought them every bit of the way. But that made his people equally tough and hardy. Apart from the crystal and the longships, there wasn’t much of value in the earldom, despite its considerable size. But it was home.

He turned and looked into the mountains. There lived the dfergir and the vettir, terrible creatures that were always

harassing Hjalmarheim, forcing them to keep a strong force of defenders on guard at all times.

And beyond that... Bragr forced himself to peer into the distance, past the tallest peaks, always silvery white with snow. Beyond lived even worse things of unspeakable horror.

He forced a grin, as he always did when looking that way. That horror must always see him confident, never afraid. Not that he could be seen from that distance, of course. But it was a good habit to have, keeping himself from worrying unduly about that enemy. Hjalmarheim had a formidable army. It was small, but fierce. And it would fight any invader.

“Whatever happens, there must be as little bloodshed as possible,” he said, thinking out loud. “My people have suffered enough.”

“I’m most surprised about this Prophecy, Chief,” Heidran puffed, winded after the walk up the stairs. “Not just that it was offered, which is extremely rare. But what it said. Clearly it can’t be Gornt who will reclaim the earldom. He is as much Einungar as you are.”

“Someone else, then,” Bragr seethed. “Someone will exploit the conflict between Gornt and me and swoop in to conquer Hjalmarheim.”

“That’s always possible, Chief.”

“Is there some trickery here? Perhaps the Prophecy is not to be taken literally. Perhaps it really means something else.”

“No, Chief,” the shaman said with certainty. “The Prophecies of the oracle are always literally true. There is no trickery involved. Your clan *will* lose the earldom before the next time the oracle speaks.” His willingness to contradict his chief in

private was one of the reasons Bragr liked the old man. But he wasn't thrilled about what he was hearing.

"Has a Prophecy ever been wrong, Heidran?"

"Never, Chief. The crystal is always right."

Bragr sighed. He knew roughly how it worked — the crystal was of an extremely rare type of stone that trapped light inside it. Some of the light came from the future, by some magical way that nobody had been able to explain to him. The light formed images that could be understood by a seeress. They were always old women with decades of experience in interpreting the strange, churning images the crystal would show those who knew how to see them.

All the oracles were blind — losing their sight was the seeress's sacrifice for the gift of being allowed glimpses of the future. It seemed a terrible sacrifice to Bragr, but no oracle ever regretted her choice — seeing the world through the crystal was said to be much more fulfilling than seeing it with ordinary eyes. The crystal allowed a carefully-trained seeress to see the future of the world as it truly was, which was why it was maddening to someone not prepared for it.

"I'm 'in very grave danger'," Bragr pondered, absentmindedly adjusting his sword belt. "It has an ominous ring to it."

"The oracle has said you were in danger before," the shaman reminded him. "Such as last year, and the year before. It clearly doesn't mean you will be dead in a year, Chief. It is simply part of the oracle's duties to state whatever she can see about the earl's life. An earl is always in danger, especially one who keeps having to defend his people and insists on leading his army from the front."

Bragr smiled patiently at the old man's need to over-explain. "The oracle has never before said I was in 'very grave danger', only 'in danger'. That in combination with my clan losing the earldom is what makes it ominous."

"Of course, or course," Heidran wheezed. "But not all hope is lost. As the Prophecy said, a Meistr from outside may help us."

"Do we know any great warriors from outside the earldom?" Bragr asked, staring out towards the distant horizon where mist hid the ocean. Beyond that ocean there were other realms, earldoms, dukedoms, kingdoms, empires. Many of them were friendly, but the others would not hesitate to conquer Hjalmarheim for its crystals and its wondrous longships, if they saw any sign of weakness.

"There are some," Heidran said, leaning on his long staff. "But they are mostly old, and they owe their allegiance to other rulers. I doubt any of them would fight for your clan."

Bragr looked out at his country. It was springtime. The farmers would be plowing and sowing, the fishermen would be preparing their boats for longer journeys on the seas, the hunters would be preparing their weapons, the livestock would be grazing on fresh, new grass, their newborns would be learning how to use their legs and trunks and tails. All prospering in peace, all being left alone to live their lives and raise their children.

"My people have sacrificed too much to give in to some conqueror," Bragr said darkly. "When I deposed Gornt and banished him, the people supported me and fought for me and died for me. And I was ready to die for them. We didn't go through all that just for some random warlord to come and oppress them at will. The people thought I would be a better

ruler than Gornt. I have done my best to prove them right, Heidran.”

“And you have succeeded, Chief, as I’m sure you know. They will fight for you again, and they will fight fiercely. The last thing anyone wants is another earl like Gornt. If I may say so, you are the most beloved earl Hjalmarheim has had in all my day. And there have been a good few.”

“I don’t want another war,” Bragr growled, instinctively lifting one hand to stroke along his horns, checking their pointiness in a primal reflex. “But I also will not let anyone conquer the people I have sworn to protect.”

He straightened, banishing the worries from his mind. “You took note of the predictions? Proclaim that I have seen the oracle and that the predictions will be of great value to the land. And discreetly find out where the best warriors on the planet are right now. Perhaps it will become obvious which one it is that is the Meistr who might help us.”

Heidran took notes. “I will, Chief. If I could choose among our own warriors, there would be many options. But a warrior from outside will be harder to find.”

“Indeed our warriors are the best on Gardr.” Bragr glanced up at the sky, where the brilliant circle that was the sun Straum shone with its ferocious, cloud-penetrating light.

He felt the power it sent coursing through his arms and legs and on an impulse drew his sword. Bright sparks played along the sharp edge as he tossed it rotating into the air and caught it again.

He ached to make use of those powers against the enemies who wanted to enslave his people. “Look at Brisingr, Heidran! Its blade shines like never before. I wonder if Straum isn’t

getting ready to erupt in a Big Shine. Its tantrums are usually connected to better predictions from the oracle, it is said.”

Heidran glanced at the sword in Bragr’s hand, frowning. “I was hoping there would be no Big Shine in my lifetime, Chief. But I think you’re right. Already I feel its strength in my bones. I can only hope the pain won’t be too bad when it starts for real. And,” he turned to stare at the glittering mountains, “those who live *there* also tend to act up when the Shine is on.”

“So they say.” Bragr nodded. “If they do, we shall stuff their heads and hang them on the walls of our *gildeskal*, so that when we have our feasts, we may still mock them.”

The shaman made the sign of warding off evil spirits. “They might make good trophies. But I hope never to find out. I assume the spring raid is still on?”

Bragr climbed into the open shortship that was waiting on the grass, his weight making it bob up and down on its springs. “Of course. The preparations are almost complete. Our longships are ready. We have a new target this spring, a realm that we have not raided in many an era. It could prove a thickly wooled *saudr*, ready for the shearing. Come on, wise one. I’ll take you home.” He reached down to grab the old shaman’s hand and help drag him aboard.

Grabbing the shortship’s iron levers, he felt the worry fade. There was still hope. Perhaps the oracle had always been right before, but who said it would always stay right? Sooner or later, it might be wrong. This could be the time.

He wouldn’t give up the earldom and leave his people to some unknown ruler just like that. He’d fight to the death, if necessary. In the quick, but brutal war against Gornt, he had

been ready for that. And in a way, he'd been ready for it ever since.

But first he would go on the raid. A spring raid always energized his warriors. And when they returned with the plunder and spoils, the whole earldom got richer and everyone celebrated.

The shortship jumped into the air, and Bragr heard the nervous yelp from Heidran as he had it plunge down the mountainside, skimming right above the rock and the moss. The wind forced tears from his eyes, but he was grinning. Flying the shortship was fun, but he couldn't wait to get back to the rudder of his longship. The *Kraken* was the grandest ship on the planet, and he thoroughly enjoyed the raids it took him on. One in the spring to fill the treasury and the stores after a long winter, and then one in the fall to prepare for the cold times.

“The mighty warrior from the outside might save the earldom,” he said out loud. “When I find him, that Meistr and I shall fight together. And we shall win!”

- JOSIE -

“Look at this, Josie.” Aretha pointed to the old-fashioned flat screen on the main optical scope. “Does that look like anything you ever saw?”

Josie bent closer. “That small point of light? It might surprise you, but I *have* seen stars before, Aretha.”

Her friend tapped the screen with a fingernail “But *is* it a star? Look at the spectrum. Ignore the peaky gigahertz stuff. That comes from the pulsar behind it. Which is more than weird enough, in its own way. But we’ll look at it later.”

Josie studied the graph. It couldn’t be real. “That is some intense blueshift. *Too* intense — it indicates a speed faster than light. It’s way off the spectrum. There has to be a mistake.”

“I’ve been checking that for three hours,” Aretha said, a small tremble in her voice. “Everything checks out. The hardware is fine, the software, too. The AIs have no problems, they all confirm it. Something is barreling through space at ten thousand times the speed of light. Coming straight for us. Straight for Earth.”

Josie took a step back and looked at the giant, curved screen that showed what the telescope was pointing at. Just stars,

millions of them. Many more than could be seen from the surface of Earth. Which was why the space station *Unity* was bristling with telescopes of all types.

That was not the purpose of the station — it was mostly a launch platform for spaceships going into the solar system for exploration or to mine the asteroids. But it had grown steadily in the years since construction started, and now it was pretty much a city in orbit around Earth. A city of six thousand citizens of all professions and nationalities. It was always being built and added to, and the astronomy section was one of the smaller ones.

That was Josie's beat. Like most people on *Unity*, she had two jobs — one was her main one as astrophysicist, and the other was a squad leader in the Security forces that kept the peace inside the station. That job didn't require much from her. Not just anyone was allowed to work on or visit *Unity*, and the people aboard were mostly disciplined. Drunken brawls among miners fresh from the asteroid belt were not uncommon, but every Security officer had a way of dealing with that.

"If this is true, it's one of the biggest discoveries ever made," she finally said. "You may have discovered tachyons."

"Oh, this is bigger than just a particle," Aretha said. "This is a heavy thing coming at us going faster than light. A *really* heavy thing. Which is... yeah. I don't even know."

"Have you asked for time on the other telescopes?" Josie asked, getting excited. "They may give priority."

Aretha zoomed out on the image. "I haven't, and I won't yet. I want to be sure about this. And if it *is* an actual discovery, I'm not about to share it with anyone but you."

Josie grabbed her friend's shoulder and squeezed. "Hey, you saw it first. But I'd be happy to have my name on that paper, if you're being *this* generous. Damn, this could be our ticket out of this depressing can! Did you run a Tambs analysis?"

"Exactly!" Aretha exclaimed. "They can't keep us here on the Unity any longer if we just made the most important discovery of the century! Anyway, I was thinking *you* could do that analysis." She zoomed in again. "Good grief, if this thing doesn't slow down, it'll be here in less than an hour."

Josie sat down at the bank of secondary screens in front of the main screens on the wall. "How close will it pass?"

"Close," Aretha said tightly. "I'm actually getting nervous."

Josie looked at the numbers that filled her screen, quickly focusing on the important ones. "No deviation in any direction? Just straight towards us? As in, not towards Earth, but towards *Unity*?"

"Looks like it," Aretha said. "That's the only thing that could sink the discovery — accuracy like that is too improbable. It screams instrument error or miscalculation."

"Unless it really *is* something coming at us," Josie said, frowning at the displays. Whatever it was, it looked real. Still, she was confused. "If it were really moving that fast, it should be here before the light it emits. Why can we see it?"

"It's a mystery," Aretha agreed. "But really weird things happen when something gets close to light speed. No, wait — the spectrum just changed. Now it's below light speed. Way below."

"But still on collision course," Josie said tightly. "And much closer than before. I make it... two AUs. Closing fast."

Aretha glanced at her. "Should we tell someone?"

Josie had the same thought and hit the side of the small headset by her ear. “Dispatch, this is Fourteen,” she said, using the code number for her Station Security position. This was looking a lot like a Security matter. “Astronomy is seeing an object coming straight at the station at great speed.” She checked the screens. “Almost a quarter of light speed now. It’s slowing down, looks like. Recommend notifying the station manager and the Security chief. There might be a collision.”

“*Copy collision warning,*” the dispatcher said quickly. “*What’s the time frame?*”

Josie looked at Aretha.

“Six minutes,” Aretha said, pointing at a graph on the main screen. “It’s slowing down, but not enough to not hit us. One percent of light speed, slowing fast.”

“Six min—,” Josie said into the comms, but didn’t have time to finish before the collision warning sirens began wailing all over the station.

“*Sounds like the automatic collision sensors are picking it up, too,*” the dispatcher said. “*What exactly is it? A rock?*”

Josie frowned at the screen, zooming in. She could see the object now. It was red and had curious, regular streaks swooping away from the center. “Probably. But it looks like... some kind of a ship?”

“*A spaceship?*” the dispatcher asked.

“It’s... a sailing ship,” Josie said, incredulous. Then she heard how ridiculous it sounded. “No, it has to be a rock. It’s bigger than any spacecraft we have.”

“*Copy that, Fourteen.*” The dispatcher closed the comms,

Josie frowned, looking from screen to screen. “Ari, please tell me I’m not seeing a pirate ship coming at us.”

“You’re not,” Aretha said calmly as she turned off the collision alarm in the room. “That thing just has some parts of it that look like old-timey ocean-going ships. Sure, it looks like a hull made of planks and there are masts, I guess. But if so, where’s the sail? Actually, now that I think about it, smart people have proposed making spaceships that would use sails, driven along by the solar wind. Maybe this is something like that?”

Josie was starting to feel queasy. “So we *are* seeing a spaceship being flown? Being controlled?”

“Absolutely. It looks nothing like a rock.”

“And it looks nothing like the ships that we use for mining or exploration?”

Aretha scoffed. “Of course not. This one is bigger than those spindly little things. And heavier.”

Josie took a deep breath. “So it’s some kind of *alien* spaceship?”

“That’s how it looks, but don’t say it out loud. Are you still sure you want to be co-author of that paper? Look, it’s going to come to a stop right next to us.” She pointed at the display.

“I have to go,” Josie said. “Put your headset on. Just in case.” She ran to the first airlock. This was definitely a Security matter, and she’d spent too much time just gawping at the thing.

The airlock was open, but it cycled closed when she exited into the station proper.

It was in chaos. People were running around, and there was a good amount of yelling over the collision sirens. But there was

no panicked screaming. The manager ran collision drills on a monthly basis, so people were used to them and knew what to do. If they had known there was an alien spaceship coming, things might have been different.

Josie ran towards her cabin, wanting to change into her Security uniform. It had crossed her mind that if that was an alien ship, it just might contain aliens. And whatever it was that was happening, the people of the station might need help.

She got to the second airlock and cycled it, touching her Security ID to it so she could use its emergency function.

“This is the station manager,” the familiar, calm voice said over the loudspeakers mounted everywhere on the station. *“There is an unknown object approaching our station. For your own safety, follow the collision procedures. Stay in the section you’re in. If you can, get into your pressure suit and stay in your cabin. Hold on to the collision railings or any hardpoint, marked in orange. If there is a loss of pressure, locate the nearest seal, marked in red...”*

The instructions went on while Josie ran. The station clearly didn’t have any pre-written safety instructions in case alien ships came to visit.

She touched her hand to the door. It slid open, and she ran inside her cabin, getting into her Security uniform, including boots. The pressure suit instruction didn’t apply to Security, only to other staff and visitors. In a heavy, bulky suit like that, it was hard to do anything useful. But it kept people in one place and made them safe in case their part of the station would be pierced and the air would leak out.

Safe for as long as it takes you to use up the air in your suit, Josie thought to herself as she grabbed her baton. *After that, it’s goodbye.*

As she left her cabin, she had to grab hold of the door jamb as there was a loud, metallic screech and the whole station rocked hard, back and forth. That must be the collision they'd been waiting for.

"Fourteen reporting," Josie said into the comms as she walked fast along the corridor. At least the artificial gravity was working still. "I'm in Section Twenty. Request orders."

The collision alarms stopped blaring.

"Fourteen, make your way to Section..." the dispatcher paused while she looked it up. *"Eleven. Repeat, Section Eleven. Hull breach reported, but no loss of pressure. Check out what's going on. You're the closest, but there will be backup arriving."*

"Copy Section Eleven. On my way."

Shit. That's where she had just come from. It was the Astronomy section, where Aretha was alone with her computers and instruments.

The corridors were nearly deserted now, and Josie felt like she was running through an empty ghost station as she made her way through airlocks the same way she had come.

She hoped Aretha was safe. There were pressure suits in that section that she could easily get into. But whoever heard of a hull breach with no loss of pressure? Outside the station, there was only empty space—

The station shuddered again, and this time the screech was much closer.

Josie's heart beat in her ears when she approached the airlock into the Astronomy section and slowed down. The lights on the airlock were green, and nothing looked strange.

She hefted the telescoping baton in her hand. She had a feeling it was better to be prepared.

The airlock cycled, and she stepped out. “Aretha?”

She turned the corner and stopped in her tracks. The control room was empty, with no sign of Aretha.

There was a strange smell in the air, as from burned metals and singed plastics

The source of that was obvious: there was a big hole in the wall, big enough for a car to drive through. Beyond it there was just darkness, but she saw a flickering glow as if from a fire.

The screens were still on, some of them showing a live image of the alien ships from the side, some from the front. There were four of them. They couldn’t possibly be sailing ships, but they did look a lot like they were. Long and slender, they were bright red and curved up at both ends. Every edge had intricate patterns that looked like they had been carved into the ships, then carefully painted. Warm light streamed out of a half dozen portholes and small windows along the side. The masts were bare metal, gleaming in the starlight.

“Fourteen to dispatch,” Josie said into her comms, voice trembling. “The hull breach in the Astronomy section is a huge hole. Burned through, almost completely round. There is something outside it— shit!”

There was movement in the hole, and before she knew it, a man was making his way through it. He was so big he had to bend his neck to get through.

It was not a human man, Josie determined as she backed off fast, extending her baton to its full, two-foot length. He was too big for that. But he looked like an ancient warrior, with a

horned helmet and animal skins around his shoulders. He had an immense sword in his hand, long, braided hair, and a scraggly beard. Colorful tattoos filled the parts of his skin that Josie could see.

“Stop right there!” Josie yelled, managing to keep her voice steady.

The man stood on the deck, looking around and blinking against the light. When he saw Josie, a grin spread on his face.

“*Dablideh morro ikvel,*” he growled in a deep voice as he came closer. “*Komit.*”

Josie backed off, but not too far. “Intruders in the Astronomy section,” she reported through the comms, making her voice flat to keep it from trembling. “Not from Earth.”

The man was still grinning at her, having to still bend at the neck because of the low ceiling. He faked a pounce, but Josie didn’t move, just lifted her baton in warning.

The man chuckled. “*Ikesah letskrem to.*” He feinted to one side, then pounced for real.

Josie’s training kicked in, as did her special enhancement. She acted automatically, watching the opponent move as if in slow motion. Taking up a better position, she stepped to the side and crouched down while holding the baton at an angle that would keep it ready.

The alien’s hand missed her completely. He stumbled as his knees hit a padded part of her uniform, lost his balance, and crashed forwards over Josie’s back. At the same time she straightened to add speed and force to his fall, ramming the tip of the baton into a place on the alien’s body she suspected would hurt.

The crash when the giant alien hit the bulkhead with a hard *thud* shook the whole station. He must have weighed five hundred pounds, Josie guessed as she spun around, ready for more.

Her assailant turned around on the floor, clutching his hands to his upper stomach where Josie had stuck the baton, deep in behind his ribcage. Gasping for air, he stared at her with wide, shocked eyes.

“One intruder down,” Josie said quickly into the comms. “I could really use some backup here!”

There was no reply.

“Dispatch, this is Fourteen,” she tried again. But nobody responded. There wasn’t even static.

Two more men came out of the hole in the wall, grinning and laughing loudly as they spotted her.

Josie turned to run, but the enemy she had taken down was partly blocking the exit, coughing and gasping. She put her foot on his shoulder and pushed with all her might, making him roll away.

As she was about to sprint out, someone grabbed her from behind and spun her around.

This alien wasn’t as huge as the first, but still a good seven feet tall.

With one arm still free, Josie punched him on the chin. She was glad she was wearing gloves with hard pads over the knuckles, or she might have broken her own hand.

The man wasn’t too impressed by it and fumbled around for her wrist.

Josie grabbed his beard and yanked at it with her full weight.

The man roared in pain and let go of her, giving her the split second she needed to swing her baton and connect it with the side of his neck, right under the ear.

Her assailant grunted as his knees gave under him, slowly sagging to the ground until he was sitting on the deck with his legs splayed out, looking at her with unfocused eyes.

The third man stood in the middle of the deck with his hand on his hips, a bemused smile on his face. He slowly lifted a massive hand and pointed at her with a big finger.

“Doar enshi keli raker,” he rumbled, making Josie’s chest tremble. His eyes were the most vivid blue she had ever seen, and his hair was a chaos of gold and silver. Like the two others, he had two pointy horns, but Josie could see no helmet. It was as if they grew straight out of his head.

“Dito darvis teikvem diherjame,” he chuckled.

He made no move to attack, so Josie ran to the exit and got out of the room.

“Dispatch!” she yelled into the comms. “Come in!”

There was still no reply. But there was a lot going on in the station — she could feel the deck shake, and there were faint noises that she didn’t like at all. There were voices, screaming and yelling and even bassy laughter.

Suddenly the corridor went dark as the sunny, full-spectrum light was replaced by the pale, ghostly glow of the emergency lighting.

She reached the main rotunda in the station, and her heart sank in her chest. The aliens had boarded the station in many places, and now there were blonde, horned giants running around all over the place, laughing and talking cheerfully to each other as they made their way further into the station.

She spotted Security people too, but some were on the floor and some had plainly given up the fight before it had started. She ran over to a group of them who were still up, being ignored by the attackers.

“Where is everyone?” Josie asked.

“Spread all over the station,” one officer said, gingerly touching a big bruise on his cheek. “This happened too fast for anyone to make any kind of defense. And what can we do, anyway? They’re eight fucking feet tall!”

“We can totally take these guys,” Josie assured them. “I knocked out two myself. Come on!”

“The only order we were able to get before the comms went out was to let these guys do their thing and not interfere unless they start killing,” sighed another. “We don’t have any weapons that work on them. The batons don’t make much of an impression. And we don’t want to provoke them into using those swords. We have no means to use deadly force.”

“We’re not prepared for this at all,” the first said. “Nobody expected we’d ever be raided by fucking space Vikings.”

“Can’t we—” Josie began, then spotted the blue-eyed raider in the distance. He was exchanging jokes with some of his men, but he was also looking for something. When he spotted Josie, his face broke into a big grin.

Josie felt a spear of ice settle in her stomach. That was a predator’s grin. He was looking for *her*.

She ran again, towards the control section. The horned man called behind her, laughter in his deep voice.

Shit. If he was going to hunt her down, then she’d have to fight him. But he’d seen her fight, and he seemed a more thoughtful

man than the others. He might have understood that Josie was more than she seemed.

- BRAGR -

Bragr saw her in the chaos, despite the darkness. The whole station was ringing like a bell as his warriors plundered it.

“There’s gold, Chief,” one of them said in passing, carrying alien-looking containers on his shoulders. “Just there for the taking.”

“There’s every metal you can think of,” said a shieldmaiden, tapping the roll of copper she was carrying. “These small aliens must be some eager miners. This whole place is so full of goods I wonder how they can move around.”

“Then relieve them of their burden, Ragnhild,” Bragr said and slapped her on the shoulder, trying to not lose sight of that other female in the crowd.

She was running now, away from him. He walked after her, aware that the corridors in this space station had a low ceiling where it was hard to run without hurting his head.

The female ran with light and fast steps, her hips swinging because of their ungainly width. The roundness of that behind! The smoothness of her face! And she moved with such speed that there had to be something special about her. She was as swift as an *alfr* and as alluring as a *huldr*. Perhaps, he thought

to himself, that's what she was. A huldr, a woman of irresistible beauty, who would lure any man close into her arms and only then show him her real, troll-like nature before locking him up underground forever.

No, a huldr wouldn't fight. He had seen this one fight two of his largest huskarls, his most ferocious warriors.

And she had *won*.

It boggled the mind. It had been incredible to witness, a spectacle so delightful that it had just about stunned him. A small female, beating up two of his huskarls while barely trying! Certainly females could be fierce fighters — he had several shieldmaidens among his most trusted *herjere*. But this little alien was different. She wasn't used to fighting, he was sure of that. There was no swagger, no getting the measure of an opponent before she struck, no posturing, no base stance she returned to. This one simply threw herself into battle without hesitation, the way untrained people would when threatened. But it plainly worked for her, when she could move as fast as that.

She had passed into a corridor, and Bragr followed, speeding up to a crouched jog. He should take part in the plunder, but he had to know more about this female.

Already it was clear that none of the other aliens were like her. They didn't fight, and they most certainly didn't win. She had the warrior spirit, and there was fire in her eyes. There was something different about her, something that filled Bragr with curiosity and desire.

The corridor was dark and tight, and he had to keep his head down. Up ahead it forked, and he picked the left one at random.

Ah, there she was, standing still to see if he followed.

“I am coming for you,” he called. “I will take you to Hjalmarheim!” His voice echoed from the walls.

She bolted off into another corridor, and he followed.

But she had deceived him — she was standing still just behind the corner, and when he came around it, she slammed the thin end of her stick into his stomach.

It hurt, but Bragr was half-prepared for this trick and he slapped the stick away. But he was still out of balance, falling forwards and grabbing the female at the same time.

As they fell, Bragr twisted around so she would not be underneath him — he was much bigger, and his weight might crush her.

They crashed to the floor as one, and Bragr quickly grabbed both the female’s wrists. He would prefer to keep that stick away from him, and her other hand away from his beard.

She wriggled and kicked in his arms, but he kept hold of her, enjoying her resistance but surprised at her strength.

“You are a lively one,” he groaned as he slowly got to his feet with the female pulled close with her back to him. “Like a wild vette hatchling.”

She suddenly threw her head backwards, but Bragr was prepared for everything now and narrowly avoided having his nose broken by the back of her head. He lifted the female off her feet and carried her back the way they had come, enjoying the scent and the warmth of her body. She hissed and sprattled and kicked, moving her limbs so fast they were a blur while yelling an unbroken rant of something that had to be terrible curses.

“I would ask you where you learned to fight,” he told her as he carried her, “but I don’t understand anything you say.”

He was able to drag her back to the central area of the orbital station, where the inhabitants of the station were standing around watching, offering no resistance, their bodies slumped. His raiders were returning to their ships with their arms full of loot.

“That’s a fine female, Chief,” one of them said, nodding. “Is she part of your plunder?”

“My *entire* plunder, the way it looks now,” Bragr chuckled, having to use a lot of strength to keep the female in check. “She’s keeping me too busy to do much looting.”

“We’ve never taken living plunder before,” the other man said. “But here, it would seem like doing them a favor. Have you ever seen a more lifeless and miserable place to live? Hjalmarheim will seem like a paradise to her.”

Bragr smiled, encouraged. “Very much so, Arn. We will see. She’s coming with me, anyway.”

He shifted his grip on the female and carried her to his ship, passing through the round boarding tunnel that made an airtight connection with the station. Back in familiar surroundings, he quickly carried her to his stateroom and tossed her inside.

“Don’t break anything in here,” he admonished, chuckling at her crestfallen look. “I think you will like where I’ll take you.” He closed the door before she could pounce, then stood for a little while as she kicked and hammered at the door from inside. Her angry shouting was muffled, and the door seemed able to take it.

Bragr grinned and returned to the looting. This was not the richest target he had ever raided, but everything was so easily available, stacked up as if just waiting for Hjalmarheim raiders to come and take it. But there was no rush. They seemed to have the run of the whole place, and the defenders were puny and pitiful.

Except that one female.

Bragr chuckled to himself. She might provide some entertainment on the way back.

His crotch swelled at the thought of it. She was the most female creature he'd ever seen. And still she had flattened two of his best fighters.

He called to one of his warriors. "Siv, is there much left?"

"Not much, Chief," she replied, carrying a rolled-up piece of fabric. "We got all their stocked-up metals and materials. They don't have weapons, and their other items are fragile and silly, like toys."

"Are we leaving the previous owners food enough to survive?"

"As you ordered, Chief. They'll be fine. They'll just be poor. We left all their spare parts, and we didn't loot their personal cabins." She glanced at the roll over her shoulder. "Well, not much, anyway."

"Then let's be on our way. I think for our raid in the fall, we will consider landing on the planet itself. If this station is typical of the inhabitants, then it could be easy pickings."

"Badly defended riches is something I can learn to like," the shieldmaiden said as she walked on.

Bragr did a quick final inspection of the station, finding the obviously critical parts still in working order. There was no air

leak. The last thing he wanted was to leave thousands of aliens without water or air when he left.

Coming across a straggler, he urged him back to the ships. “No reason to stay here longer than necessary, Sigurdr. It doesn’t smell so nice.”

“Sour smells are very common on stations like this, Chief,” the warrior agreed. “They use the same air again and again, and soon they don’t notice the smell. Makes me happy I live in a place where the wind brings fresh air every moment of the day.”

Bragr slapped his shoulder in agreement. “Indeed we are fortunate! Now let’s get into our ships. We still have a long way home.”

He made sure all his raiders were onboard, then stepped into the *Kraken*.

“Cast off,” he ordered. “Make sure we don’t leave any leaks. These aliens were kind enough to give us everything they had without resistance. Let’s not show our gratitude by killing them.”

“Aye, Captain,” the crew responded, using Bragr’s correct title for aboard ship.

The crew got busy, everyone having done this before. Soon the ship shook as it detached from the station and slowly backed away from it.

“Seals secure?” Bragr asked, squinting at the holes where the ships had been attached to the station.

“No leaks, Captain,” Sigurdr reported, leaning over the side of the ship to inspect it properly. “It will leak less than it did before we came here.”

“Raise sails!” Bragr took up his position by the rudder and grinned at a man next to him. “No need to sulk, Eystein. Being beaten up by a girl half your size is simply a lesson for you: don’t judge an opponent by her size.”

“It always worked before, Captain,” the huskarl muttered, leaning up against the wall and gingerly touching his head. “Perhaps this one was *too* small.”

“Perhaps,” Bragr laughed. “Small and ferocious. I feel some of her anger myself.” He touched his own stomach. “We will have some bruises, nothing more. It was an easy lesson.”

“Yes, Captain.” Eystein forced a smile. “At least I’m still able to walk. Haraldr is not so lucky.” He made his way towards his position, hunched over.

Bragr shook his head. He had a strong urge to let someone else take the helm and return to his stateroom, so he could give the female there a thorough check.

But this was a crucial time in the voyage. All four ships had to be properly aligned, the sails had to be facing the exact right way, and the rudders must be dipped into the River just right. If not, they could end up far from Gardr, needing years to get home. It hadn’t happened for a long time, and Bragr wasn’t worried. He’d done this dozens of times, and so had the captains of the three other ships.

“Sails?” he yelled forwards.

“Sails out and flat,” came the response from the sail master, standing amidships.

“Rigging?”

“Rigging is taut,” yelled the boatswain.

“Anchor?”

“Anchor is secured,” the anchorwoman reported.

“Chart is clear,” he himself announced, glancing at the saudr skin map that was nailed up on the wooden bulkhead beside him. The small crystal that was carefully sewn into its center was the same type as the oracle crystal, more shadow and void than stone. But even Bragr could understand this one. It would simply put a black point on the map exactly where the ship was going to end up, depending on where the bow was facing.

Bragr didn't bother his brain with how it worked — if he was going to do that, the ancient longships themselves contained so many mysteries it could drive anyone to madness trying to figure them out.

He worked the rudder until the point was right next to the symbol for Straum, then stuck the rudder into the River until he could feel it being pushed back as the sails were pulled forwards.

Making a small adjustment to put the point of light right in the middle of Straum, he let the ship go faster and faster, checking that the other three ships were following. Only the *Kraken* had a chart for this route, and the others had to follow him as best they could.

The River was the many strange streams through empty space where longships could travel from Straum to other suns. It was said that it was magical, but Bragr was certain it had something to do with the sun Straum itself. And only the longships could use the routes.

Keeping an eye on the chart, Bragr looked forward, into the blackness of space. Straum could not be seen yet, but a good steersman could see the River and would choose the right path by

making tiny adjustments with the rudder. There had to be a steersman on duty at every moment — the River could be bumpy, and it would try to knock the rudder out of alignment.

Slowly the blackness changed as the ship picked up speed. Space around the *Kraken* became swirling mists, first gray, then colorful and bright. It was like being inside a feverish dream, disorienting and unpleasant. Warriors going on their first raids would go pale and nauseous, and would spend most of the voyage down below where the nightmarish River could not be seen. For Bragr, it was still unpleasant, but after many raids he was so used to it that he could handle it without problems.

The fine adjustments gave him time to think about the female in his cabin. He could feel his crotch swelling at the thought of those hips, that incredible roundness of her behind.

She was far from the first alien female he had seen, but none of them had ever interested him, not even remotely. But this one, with her hornless head, her intoxicating shape, and her incredible fighting skills — she intrigued him in a way that was new.

“Sigrid,” he called for his best steerswoman. “Take the first watch. Keep a delicate hand — it’s always harder to go home than out.”

“Of course, Captain,” she said and took the rudder, grasping it with the light touch that the ship responded best to. “We’re going fast already.”

“And we shall go faster still,” Bragr said. “It’s spring time in Hjalmarheim. The fruit trees are blossoming, the seeds are in the ground, the grass is coming out. We want to miss as little of that as possible.”

The steerswoman grinned. “Yes, Captain.”

He gave the ship a final check, found everything in order, and walked to his stateroom, excitement rising.

- JOSIE -

Josie had seen spaceships before. Apart from the *Unity*, she had been inside two, first the one that took her to the *Unity*, and then one that went to the asteroid belt to pick up mined metals. Both had been bare and sterile on the inside, all composites and aluminum, filled with gauges and instruments and thin screens, all to save weight. Everything was slender and fragile and thin. The walls would flex when you touched them, and every move you made would cause the entire craft to tremble.

This one was completely different. It was like being in a log cabin in the woods. Everything was wood, even the deck. It was all roughly hewn and uneven, as if with an ax. Thick skin pelts hung on the walls, and in one corner there was a heap of them. Some white, some brown and some bright red.

“Are you kidding me,” she groaned when she spotted the fireplace. It looked well used, too. “*Fire* in a spaceship? And we can’t even have stun guns!”

On any spacecraft, including *Unity*, the last thing anyone wanted was anything that could make sparks. People were carefully checked for lighters or matches or even certain metals before they were allowed to even get into the rocket

that would lift them off Earth. A fire inside a spacecraft could turn to total disaster in seconds. And here the aliens were clearly lighting fires in their fireplace. The little pile of firewood beside the fireplace confirmed it, as did the faint smell of smoke.

The room was dominated by a big, round shield hanging on one wall. It was bright blue and was emblazoned with the red profile of a curled-up dragon, wings and all.

Josie didn't spend much time admiring the interior of the room. She had already tried to open the door, including breaking it down with her full strength. The locking mechanism must be on the outside, and she didn't waste much time on trying to find it.

She'd dropped her baton when the brute had grabbed hold of her, and she carefully searched the room for anything she could use instead. This was clearly not a room where anyone actually lived; it was just a place to sleep and maybe sit and enjoy the fire.

There wasn't anything loose except for the firewood, so she grabbed the most suitable of the pieces, just to have something to throw or whack with whenever that horned guy returned. Then she got busy with the shield and managed to lift it off the wall. But it would be too heavy and cumbersome a thing to fight with.

Planning how to deal with the man, she realized there was nowhere to hide. She'd have to go for a frontal attack.

And then what? Even if she were able to ward him off, or even knock him out, she was still aboard an alien spaceship full of enemies.

She leaned against the wooden wall. The horror of the situation was lurking in her mind. Aliens had attacked *Unity*. What was happening to the station right now? When those ships left, the holes they had punched would drain the station of all its air in thirty seconds or less. All six thousand people could be dead now.

The thought made her nauseous. No, she couldn't dwell on that. There was nothing she could do about it.

Whatever happened, this was one of the most important moments in the history of Earth. And it occurred to Josie that she was uniquely suited to record it. If she could make a vid from this, that would also strengthen her position if she ever got back to Earth. It would be worth millions, enough to pay her way off *Unity*.

Security personnel carried tiny headsets by their left ears, and they all had cameras and microphones integrated. In the chaos back at the station she hadn't turned them on, but now she flicked the small switch at her ear.

"This is the inside of an alien spaceship," she began, then stopped. There was a strange hissing in her earpiece, as if the comms had started to work again.

"Um. Josie?"

She frowned. "Aretha?!"

"Hi. So, are you aboard an alien ship, too?" It was clearly her.

Josie checked her comms. The main switch on the headset had turned it on at the same time as the camera. "That's right! Where are you?"

"In a cabin somewhere. They burned through the wall and dragged me out. It's so crazy, it's all wood in here!"

Hearing her friend's voice made Josie feel a hundred times better. The comms could work independently from the station's systems, but that was usually not the way it was used because it drained the batteries faster.

"It's insane," she agreed. "I'm glad you put your headset on. Are you locked up?"

"Totally," Aretha said, her voice as cheerful as ever. *"Josie, there's a damn campfire ring here. On the floor! With a hole for the smoke in the ceiling! It's all charred and burned."*

"I've got a fireplace," Josie laughed from relief. "Is this for real?"

"I think it is," her friend chirped. *"And if so, I'm happy you're here too. I mean, not happy that you're abducted. But you know what I mean."*

"Hey, the feeling is very mutual. This is too crazy. They're aliens, Aretha! They have actual horns!"

"And they look just like Vikings. I mean, it is the craziest fucking thing that's ever happened, pardon my French."

"I know. I'm recording it all."

"Oh yeah. You have a fancypants camera and everything. I should maybe watch my language, then? I don't want to be known all through posterity as 'that girl that swore a lot'."

"We'll both be known for that, I'm sure. Shit, I'm glad to hear your voice."

"So what do we do? I don't think I can get out of this room. And I think we're moving."

Josie had also felt the slight tremble of the floor, but for her own peace of mind she had ignored it. "That's how it feels.

We're actually being abducted by aliens, Ari. Whatever happens, let's try to find each other and stay together."

"Sure. Hey, I always wanted to explore the stars. This is not what I had in mind, but we'll make the most of it. Also, I was just thinking... maybe keep our um... special enhancements... secret from them as long as possible?"

"Our neural lace enhancements? Definitely—" Josie began, but then she heard heavy footsteps outside. "Wait, someone's coming. I'll be back."

She turned off the comms, not wanting her captors to get any clue that she was in contact with someone else.

Holding two pieces of firewood, she stood sideways at the end of the room, ready to fling them at anyone entering.

The door opened, and a big man came in. It was the horned alien from before.

Josie hid both the pieces of wood behind her back, ready to surprise him.

He stepped inside, having to bow his head to get through the door. *"Dooerer forsat."* His voice filled the room as the door closed behind him and he took in the mess. *"Odoar raset sovromeh mit."*

Some of the words had a familiar ring to them, but Josie didn't need to know the language to guess what he was saying: *you wrecked my room.*

"I'll wreck *you* next," she said sincerely, tensing her muscles and feeling the extra strength in them, more strength than her own body could make on its own. Her enhancement was working as it should.

The man came to the middle of the room and put one hand on his chest. “Brrragrrr.” He raised his dark eyebrows.

It was an obvious gesture: ‘what’s your name?’

“Josie,” she replied. “The girl who’ll beat you up. Again.” Among the tattoos on his stomach, she saw the bruise where she’d rammed the baton.

“*Yosi*,” the man repeated slowly. “*Markli men ikeu muli.*”

Josie threw the first piece of wood while he was still talking. It happened so fast he barely had time to throw his hands up before it hit his forehead with a hollow thud.

Bragr staggered backwards, exclaiming something that had to be a vicious curse.

Josie lunged at him, raising the other piece of wood to give him a good whack across the mouth.

This time he was quick enough to fend off the attack. He grasped both her hands, turned her around, and pushed her back, sending her flying at the heap of furs in the corner.

She curled up to gather energy for the next pounce, then threw herself at his legs as he approached.

Catching one massive calf, she tried to yank at it, but it was like embracing the trunk of an oak.

On a primal impulse, she bit into it instead.

The alien grunted in pain and shook her off him, grabbed her around the waist, and tossed her back into the pile of furs. Then he stood over her, eyes shooting blue lightning.

Yeah, he was stronger than her, despite her hidden power. But she couldn’t keep relying on it — her body could only take so

much at a time. Already she felt the distant burn that was the sign of having over-used the enhancement.

For a couple of heartbeats the alien was clearly trying to control himself from grabbing her and snapping her spine over his knee. Then he just growled and looked down on his calf. “*Dubyte mah.*”

She let her limbs relax. This chance had passed, but there would be other times when she could escape. “I guess you win this round.”

Bragr bent over to swipe his fingers over the bite in his leg. They came away without any blood on them.

“*Doyeer ikeop,*” he rumbled. “*Litkree gerar doidah.*”

The words felt more and more familiar to Josie. That was another side of her enhancement, one she had only tried once before. Soon she would understand the meaning of a sentence he spoke, then she would understand single words, and then she would be able to speak them herself. Finally she would be fluent. This was all placing immense demands on her brain, and she would need to compensate for it.

“Food,” she said, pointing to her mouth. “Sugar. Water. Now.”

Bragr straightened, looking down on her. “*Ruverdo blik vitma?*”

Josie shrugged. “It’s just common courtesy for an abductor to keep his victim fed. Come on, Horns.”

He gave her a lopsided smile as if he knew what she said. Then he opened the door and yelled something into the dark hallway.

I should have thought of this before, Josie thought. If she’d waited and thrown that first piece of wood now, she might

have been able to run past him while he recovered. But her muscles were overworked.

Bragr closed the door and went over to the shield, hanging it back on the wall. He re-stacked the pieces of firewood and put the room back in order.

It gave Josie time to get a better look at him. He had to be nearly eight feet tall. He was wearing suede pants that ended right above the ankle and were tight around his massive thighs. His belt was wide and thick, which it probably had to be to hold up that giant sword. A small bronze buckle drew attention to his general crotch area. That was unnecessary — that twitching bulge drew her gaze to it all by itself and made her wonder what he had in mind.

His torso was bare, showing thick, hard muscles all over. The shoulders were covered in furs, like some kind of primitive armor. His golden tattoos were extremely intricate and looked like they were inlaid with purple optic fibers, giving them an inner light.

His neck was so thick it was hard to tell where it ended and the head began. His face was not human, but it was hard to say exactly why — it had to be the proportions. The eyes were bigger than on Earth men, and wider set. His beard was thick and long, darker than the hair and still shining like gold in the dim room.

His most alien feature was the horns that stuck out of his mass of curly hair, curved and pointy, with a silvery sheen to them.

He was far too unconventional to ever be a model on Earth, despite the muscles. And yet, Josie reflected, he was strikingly beautiful, in the way of a deadly predator, like a panther or a wolf. Or a fighter jet.

He did look a lot like a Viking, just like Aretha said. These ships were like Viking ships, too. That couldn't be a coincidence. Maybe these aliens had visited Earth before and made such an impression that whole peoples had wanted to be like them.

There was a knock on the door and Bragr opened, then brought in a tray that he set on the floor out of reach for Josie.

“*Stoleh rikehelt podah,*” he said as he took a metal jug from the tray and poured a liquid into two glasses. “*Vilike atvik nooser noh.*” He held both out to her, making her choose.

“I don't think you'd poison me,” Josie said as she picked one. “It doesn't seem necessary. But I appreciate the gesture.”

She sniffed the liquid. It didn't contain anything that weird, she was sure. But she waited until Bragr had drained his own glass before she took a sip. It was fruit juice, slightly fermented and with added spices. It reminded her of mulled wine.

“Pretty good,” she admitted as she held the empty glass out for a refill. “And there's sugar in it, which I really need right now.”

Bragr gave her a little smile and filled her glass. “*Ikesov ersva?*”

She drained the glass and held it out again. “I'm just hoping it's not going to get me drunk. It wouldn't help you, though. You're not my type. Like, at all. I was never into kidnappers.”

Having refilled her glass again, Bragr took a plate from the tray and held it out. “*Pruvd eteh.*”

Josie wasn't sure if it was the situation or if her enhancement had already partly decoded his language, but she knew exactly what he said: *Try this.*

She didn't have to ask what it was. The pieces of chocolate-covered marzipan were still wrapped in their pink foil, revealing them as expensive items from the commissary store on *Unity*.

"You're offering me candy you just stole from my station, you fucking jerk," she said as she grabbed a handful. Still, she unwrapped them and quickly ate them, one after the other. The sugar in them would go a long way towards restoring her energy after the fighting.

She balled up the wrappers and threw them at his chest.

He shrugged, picking them up from the floor. "*Mohva resiker pohatdo nytdeh.*"

Had to be sure something something, he was saying. From his demeanor she could fill in the blanks: he didn't want to risk giving her his own food, because it might not be good for her.

"Fair enough," she conceded, nearly regretting having thrown the trash at him. "But you're still a jerk. What the hell do you think you'll get out of this, anyway?"

He gave her a thoughtful look as he took a sip from his glass. "*I understand something something.*"

"You do? Understand this, then: take me back to the station right now and give back the stuff you stole." She looked him right in the eye, not an easy feat with the intensity of his gaze.

"*That* I did not understand," he said.

Just like last time, Josie was astonished how fast her enhancement could decipher another language after just a few samples of it. It almost made it worth the pain of having needed it in the first place. And the horrific cost.

Almost.

She looked him over. His stomach was bruised, he had bite marks on his calf, and his face bore the angry red imprint of the piece of firewood she had thrown. Still, *she* was completely unharmed, despite his obvious strength. He had been showing restraint, and Josie had seen enough trouble in her time to appreciate it. Not many men could do that. In fact, not many men could mix strength with a capacity for thinking, like it seemed Bragr could.

No, she told herself. I'm not going to start admiring my kidnapper. I'm going to get back home, and that's that.

Bragr unwrapped a piece of candy for himself, tasting it with his tongue before making a face. "That's sweet—"

The ship juddered so hard Josie had to support herself on the floor to not be thrown over.

Bragr was on his feet in a split second, then shot out the door.

Seeing the door open, Josie wasted no time in grabbing the rest of the candy bars and running out into the hallway.

- BRAGR -

“What is going on?” he growled at the boatswain.

“We crashed into something, Captain,” the man reported.

Bragr frowned. “Here? In the River?”

“It was another ship,” Sigrid the steerswoman said tightly. “A longship, but not one of ours. There it is.” She pointed ahead.

“It was suddenly in front of us with no way of avoiding it.”

Bragr knew what it was before he looked. Most of the longships on planet Gardr belonged to the earldom of Hjalmarheim, but not this one.

“The *Dead Son*,” he stated. “Gornt himself. Not here to congratulate us on our raid, I suspect.”

The other ship was coming alongside and shooting grappling hooks over the *Kraken*.

“It would be a strange way to do it, Captain,” Sigrid agreed, teeth clenched as she tried to keep the ship on course while the other was pulling them closer.

“Signal the others to continue on their way. We’ll catch up,” he ordered. “Get ready to be boarded.”

The signal flags were hoisted and the three other ships raced past at a safe distance, their ropes taut but their sails invisible. The crews hung over the railings, yelling support and encouraging words to him.

His crew calmly readied themselves, joking with each other.

It made him smile. No other crew would be this unafraid when boarded by Gornt and his forces.

Still, he was uneasy. He was carrying a lot of goods now, heavy metals and other plunder. And one small female.

He frowned. Had he locked the door behind him? He wasn't sure. But he had to check and make sure that Josie was safe.

He walked fast to his stateroom, noticing that the boarding party would enter any moment. They were the usual Gornt underlings, called *skrymtir*. They were blood-chilling things, the only ones that would fight for him.

Bragr felt a sting of pity for the former earl of Hjalmarheim, but nothing could be changed now.

As he approached his stateroom, he noticed the door was open. Josie was no longer inside.

He slammed the door jamb with his palm. "Damn!"

She was loose, somewhere in the ship. That in itself wasn't bad — she would have no way to leave it. But now they were being attacked by enemies, she could easily get herself into bad trouble.

He heard the sounds of clashing blades and the yells of boarders and defenders from the deck above him. He had to get back there.

But with Josie loose on the ship...

He ran forwards, kicking at every unlocked door to check if she was inside.

There was no sign of her, and he couldn't start searching the cargo hold or the bilge for that small female. There were many places she would be able to hide, and he had to lead his warriors in the fight.

As he emerged on the deck, he drew his sword and yelled the short battle poem he had made for it.

“Sharpest steel

Cleave the foe

All will know

Brisingr is out!”

Despite the terrible noise from the battle, some of the enemies turned when they heard him. But Bragr was quick and cut down one, severing its head from its body with a single blow.

“Brisingr is out!” his crew chanted as one, greeting his sword.

“My *herjere!*” he thundered in response, egging his warriors on.

With a trained eye he realized his crew was doing well, and the enemy had not made much headway onto their deck.

Grasping Brisingr with both hands, Bragr swung the long blade as if cutting corn, clearing big arcs and mowing down the attackers.

He had no problem shedding the sparse blood of these opponents. They were not really alive. Gornt had taken up witchcraft in his banishment, taking dead men and other creatures and bringing them back to some kind of nightmarish life. It was only their bodies, moved by some dark, ungodly

force. The men whose bodies they had been were long gone, to Helheim or Valhalla or wherever they belonged. Now their bodies were mindless and soulless *skrymtir* only.

Still, they were dangerous enemies because they cared not at all for their lives. They would throw themselves at his blade, overwhelming him. But Bragr was aware of it and sought higher ground, using ropework and railings to get above the fray.

After he'd cut down a half dozen enemies, he became suspicious. The enemies were not fighting as fiercely as they could. They were simply wasting time.

Bragr turned and ran to the bow. Here the boarders had knocked holes in the deck and were milling down into the lower decks. What were they doing?

The next moment they started to come back up, carrying the lighter of the items that Bragr's party had plundered from the station.

He cut down a couple of them when he heard a familiar sound.

"Getyur dam hands afme, ya ogur!"

That had to be Josie. Bragr spun around.

There she was, held by four of Gornt's mindless brutes.

He grabbed a loose rope and swung himself over to them, thrusting Brisingr straight through one and then cutting the arm off another. He didn't dare to swing at the two others — he might hit Josie.

She pulled at her arms and legs, but the two remaining *skrymtir* had a good grip on her and didn't react to her kicks and punches.

Someone yelled a hoarse command, and more skrymtir came running to grab her, the other pieces of loot dropped and forgotten.

Bragr cut them down, but more and more of them came at him. Finally he roared in fury and cut down three of them in one slash, his vision tinged with red. “Stay away from her, unholy monsters!”

Limbs and heads and bodies fell to the deck, but the skrymtir were still coming, forgetting everything else and throwing themselves at Bragr.

He slashed and thrust, seeing Josie being slowly carried away towards the enemy ship.

“Bragr!” she called, her voice the brightest and clearest sound of the battle.

It made him furious, and he mowed the enemies down with no regard for his own safety.

“I’ll get you!” he shouted. “Courage!”

Finally he’d had enough. He turned and ran to the main rigging, climbed up, and swung himself over to the deck of the *Dead Son*. There were no enemies there, except the two that were dragging Josie.

He ran forwards to the bow, ready to thrust Brisingr right through the skrymtir holding her. But they were smart enough to stay so close to her it was too risky to try.

Josie gave him a look, then yanked hard on the arms holding her and dropped to the deck. It got her out of his way for a split second, and that was all Bragr needed. Almost lazily he cut down the two skrymtir.

Taking Josie's hand, he pulled her behind him, away from the enemies that were now throwing themselves back to their ship, dirty blades bared.

Bragr was about to turn and run when he saw a tall, pale figure standing at the rudder of the *Dead Son*. The man was staring at him with an expressionless face, holding a long, thin blade — the legendary sword Sjelbrand. Between his horns hung the thick chain of silver that was the symbol of the Earl of Hjalmarheim. Both should by rights be Bragr's.

It was Gornt himself, the former earl that Bragr had deposed.

For a moment they stood staring at each other across the mass of skrymtir.

Gornt had changed since Bragr had sent him on his way, banishing him from Hjalmarheim forever. He was thinner and paler, and his beard was gone. But he didn't look older — there was something ageless about him.

Bragr felt coldness gather in his stomach. Gornt was a witcher now, using dark powers to give life to skrymtir and to do other forbidden things. Extending his own life may well be one of them.

Then Gornt smiled, a barely perceptible twitch of his thin-lipped mouth. But it was not a smile of recognition or joy. It was a smile that said only one thing: *I see a weakness in you.*

Bragr looked down at Josie's face. A weakness? This random alien female? Nonsense.

He turned his back and ran along the side of the ship, cutting the ropes to all the grappling hooks. Then he jumped back into the *Kraken*, using his legs in a mighty heave to push the two ships apart.

His crew cut down the half dozen skrymtir still on their ship, then got busy putting distance between the longships.

Bragr held Josie out from him and looked her up and down. “Are you injured?”

“*Ahm fein,*” she said. “*Dadwus skeri, doe. Ardey sumkyna gosts?*”

“Captain, we’re free of the *Dead Son*,” Siv called to him. “The sails are up.”

Bragr let go of Josie and took the rudder, plunging it deep into the River to outrun the *Dead Son*. But when he looked back, Gornt wasn’t even trying to catch up. His sails were slack and his course was all wrong.

“Such a strange thing,” Sigurdr fretted, coming over to him. “They attack us in the River, for the first time, then just let us go. And that was Gornt himself, as clear as day. If he came on that voyage, it must have been important.”

“I think he changed plans midway through,” Bragr said, peering at the chart to get the course right.

“They got some of our plunder, but none of the gold. Can’t understand why he would change his mind that suddenly.”

Bragr gave Josie a glance. She was staring past him, back towards the *Dead Son*. “Strange indeed.”

“That was an interesting fight, Captain,” Siv said, wiping blood off her ax and giving Josie a curious look. “I’ve never seen you take risks like that. Jumping into the other ship, too.”

He shrugged. “It worked, and we’re still all alive.”

The shieldmaiden pointed at his thigh. “You’re nearly not.”

Glancing down, he saw that a skrymtir blade had gone through the skin of his pants and made a slash across his leg. One finger's width closer to the inside and it might have cut an artery. "That little scratch? It's not bad. Not enough to even call an injury."

"It's the worst injury I've seen you get from skrymtir, Captain," Siv said as she replaced the ax in her belt. "But you got your captive back, so hopefully it was worth it." She gave Josie a look with ice in it.

Josie was holding on to the railing of the ship with both hands, knuckles white and eyes clenched shut. Bragr understood it well — the first time on deck while in the River, it could be an unpleasant experience.

He remembered the first several voyages he'd been on from Straum to another sun. He'd barely been able to tell which way was up. It would slowly get better, but nobody was completely comfortable with this strange onslaught on the senses.

"Her name is Josie," he told them. "Take her down below. Don't lock her up."

Herjolf looked her up and down. "She is a captive, yes? She used to be one of their warriors, but now she's part of our plunder? Seems dangerous to leave her free to run around."

"She has nowhere to go while onboard," Bragr explained. "There's not much she can do to harm the ship. And she's not happy being out here with the River all around us. Actually, Sigrid, you take the rudder. I'll see to her myself."

He carefully exchanged positions with the shieldmaiden and took Josie's hand. Her alien eyes flew open at the touch.

“Let’s get you somewhere you’ll feel better,” Bragr said and led her towards the hatch. She followed without resisting.

He took her down to the little wardroom and sat her down at the table. “You’ll be safe here.”

Josie’s legs dangled from the too-high chair. “Who they was?”

Bragr’s head snapped back. “You can speak Garda?”

“Not can speak much,” she said uncertainly in her bright voice with a hint of hoarseness. The words were understandable, spoken slowly with an exotic alien lilt. “But understand much speak. Who they was?”

“That was Gornt, the former Earl of Hjalmarheim. He wants to kill me and take back the earldom.”

“Gornt,” Josie said. “Bad earl.”

“Bad earl,” Bragr agreed sincerely. “And those were his skrymtir. He has other warriors too. But they are getting better. He’s practicing his dark magic with them.”

“Skrymtir. They take me.” She pointed to herself.

“They *tried* to take you,” he corrected. “But I took you right back.”

“They injure.” She pointed at his thigh, where the blood had soaked through his pants and made a dark trail all the way to his ankle.

“Being cut by a skrymtir is not honorable,” he grunted, feeling the sting from the cut. “Nor is cutting them down. They are dead already. I got careless.”

Josie opened a small pouch attached to her belt and took out a roll of a loose, white fabric wrapped in a transparent film. “I attack the scratch.”

Bragr had to stifle a smile. Her speech was incredibly cute, like that of a child. She clearly used the most fitting words she knew. “Attack it if you want.”

She jumped down from the chair and pointed to it. “You.”

He sat down, sensing the heat that her round body had given it, offering his thigh for her inspection. He let his arm hang down behind the chair, ready to slap her away if she tried something silly. She *was* a captive. And this was unusual behavior for a captive, offering to heal her captor.

“You hold,” she said and indicated she wanted him to keep the cut fabric out of her way.

He grabbed the cut in his pants with both hands and ripped a long rend in it, exposing the injury and giving her space to work.

Then he watched as she poured on a liquid, cleaned the cut, and then fastened a folded-up pad of the white fabric on his skin with sticky pieces from another roll. It only stung a little, and he could see from her movements that she wasn’t used to doing this.

And she must be able to see from the movements in his crotch what he was feeling. Her touch was light and cool, and he couldn’t stop the swelling and twitching that happened all by itself.

She didn’t comment on it, just worked quietly.

When she was finished, he was no longer bleeding and the wound was covered.

“Thank you,” he said, prodding the white patch. “That feels better.”

“You need *stitches*,” she said, using an alien word. “Is better.”

Bragr got up, partly to alleviate the awkward pressure in his crotch. He got a pot of *myod* from a stack and poured for them both. “As an injured man, I need something to strengthen myself on.”

Josie sniffed the brew. “You not is bad injured man. What this?”

“That’s myod, which we sometimes drink for celebrations. Perhaps we can celebrate winning the fight against Gornt.”

She put the cup back on the table without touching it. “Not celebrate we,” she stated, looking him in the eye. “You attack. Injure men. Plunder me.”

It was clear that she wasn’t talking about Gornt.

“It was a good raid,” Bragr said, taking a sip of the sweet drink. “We filled four ships with metals and other loot.”

“And me.”

He shrugged. “And you.”

“What you will do with me?”

He looked her up and down, thinking about the possibilities. The images that filled his head made his crotch twitch again.

Her gaze shot down his body, and she frowned at him.

- JOSIE -

“Should I be flattered?” she asked in English.

He just gave her a little smile. He was very excited about something, that was for sure. And Josie suspected it might be her.

Taking the cup from the table, she sniffed it again. It wasn't unpleasant, just unusual. Like beer mixed with cheese, with cloves added on top. It was a different drink than he had given her before, and she was pretty sure it was booze.

Josie's head was spinning from everything that had happened. Helping him dress his wound gave her something to focus on, and that was partly why she'd done it. Another reason was that she knew she should make him like her. She was completely at the mercy of these guys, and Bragr was plainly their chief. The way things were, she had to walk a fine line between standing up for herself and not antagonizing him too much.

He was a big man, strong and capable. She saw him fight off dozens of those creepy attackers. They kind of looked humanoid, but they were cold to the touch and their eyes didn't move right.

If he hadn't fought his way through them and grabbed her, really bad things could have happened. Those creeps were definitely not there to rescue her.

His touch was warm, though. Warm and gentle, even when dragging her away from the enemy.

He got injured, too. Why did he take that chance just to get her? Was it just because of the bulge in his pants and what he thought he'd be doing with whatever was pitching that tent?

She was not going to encourage anything like that. He may be a powerful alien raider with an incredible spaceship, and he may have a curious little glint in his eye, and he may be the hottest male she'd ever seen in real life, but there was no way he'd get into her pants.

"I'll return topside," Bragr rumbled and drained his cup. "We must catch up with the other ships and guide them home."

"Wait," Josie said in English.

Bragr raised one eyebrow.

"You plunder me," she said slowly, hoping the meaning came across. "You not honorable. I will attack you."

Her enhancement was at the stage where it would help her understand just about everything they said, but she could only make primitive sentences from words she had heard them use or words the enhancement had made up as being probably right. She didn't know the word for 'revenge' yet, but she thought it was only fair to give him the warning. She was not going to just take this abduction like a docile slave. And she had to get him to think of her as more than plunder.

"There's no dishonor in plundering, nor in being plundered. But I understand your intention, as any warrior would."

“You kill people.”

He tilted his head to the side. “Hmm?”

“You kill *my* people.”

“Oh, on that stinky old station? No, we didn’t kill anyone. Those holes you saw were all sealed up before we sailed away. No air was lost. Killing thousands of helpless people *would* be dishonorable.”

She watched him walk out, suede pants stretched and flexing with the muscles of his remarkably pert butt. The torchlight made his intricate tattoos glitter as if he had been wrapped in golden threads.

Josie let out the breath she had been holding, lowering her shoulders. Bragr had this way of totally commanding all her attention. Everything else shrunk away and became unimportant the moment he stepped into a room. Partly because he was clearly deadly, and he activated her prey instincts. And partly because he made strange things happen to her. She knew she should be furious that he abducted her, that he attacked her station, that he had turned her life upside-down in a matter of minutes. And she *was* furious. But she also enjoyed having him close to her. He was a force of nature, like an earthquake, but an extremely confident and sexy one.

She was relieved he hadn’t left *Unity* to leak all its air into space, killing everyone. Of course she had to take his word for it, but he wouldn’t have any reason to lie.

She couldn’t help wondering what his other sides would look like. When he had rescued her from those zombie-like creatures, his touch had been warm and careful. He had gotten that cut because he had deflected a sword slash that had clearly been meant for Josie. It would have killed her; she knew that.

She activated the comms again. “Aretha, you there?”

A minute went by, her comms filled with creepy, wailing noises.

Then Aretha replied. *“Hey. I’m still here. Just had to go somewhere they can’t hear me talking. Hey, Josie! How you holding up?”*

“Still alive, and right now that feels like the best we can hope for. Ari, are you on a Viking ship?”

“See, I didn’t want to be the first to say it,” Aretha chirped. *“But this is totally a Viking ship in space. They let me walk around, too. There are masts and sails and a rudder. But there’s no air and no wind, so how does it work? Anyway, have your Vikings told you what they want with us?”*

“I don’t think they know,” Josie said, feeling much better after hearing Aretha’s voice. “Looks like a spur-of-the-moment thing. They say *Unity* is fine, though. They sealed it up again, apparently. Hey, was your ship attacked by zombies just now?”

“Zombies? Not that I know of. Pro tip: if you go up on the deck, don’t look at the sky or at anything around you. It’s not good for the brain. Anyway, why do you ask? Are you okay?”

Josie sat down on the high chair. “I’m fine. Just trying to figure out if we’re on the same ship or not. Sounds like we’re not. It’s okay, the zombies lost. Good lord, Ari. I’m sitting in a wooden chair with dragon carvings. In space. With actual Vikings that have horns growing out of their heads. Is this a dream? Is it some kind of simulation? A game?”

“It’s not a dream,” Ari told her. *“Could be a simulation, but I’ve never been in one without knowing it was fake. I know you and I are the lowest of the low, but I can’t imagine they’re*

allowed to run sims on us without our consent. We have to assume it's real. What do we do?"

"I guess we'll have to see where we're going and then find each other. My captor is called Bragr. Big blonde guy. Yours?"

"We haven't been introduced," Aretha said. *"Anyway, you're still recording everything, right?"*

Josie checked her headset. "Until the batteries give out."

"Because when we get back to Earth, those vids will be worth a huge fortune."

"I think so too," Josie agreed. "And I like that you say 'when', not 'if. We *are* getting back home, Ari. We won't rest until we're back on Earth. We can both pay for our enhancements and get out of *that* whole scam."

"Of course! This is just an unexpected field trip with a real nice reward at the end of it. All right, I have to show myself before they come looking. I want to know more about those sails. I think they're dipping into another dimension or even another universe, which makes them invisible in ours. They're being pulled along really fast. You're not limited to the speed of light if you can do that. Anyway, if I can figure it out, that's my fortune made. Earth space travel, meet your revolution. You could zoom from Earth to Jupiter in minutes. Minutes, Josie!"

"Umm..." Josie scratched her cheek. "Have you *seen* these guys? They're Vikings! They use swords! They drink something that looks like fucking *mead*! But *you* think they're dabbling in cross-dimensional superluminal propulsion?"

"Hey, the idea isn't new. Lots of smart people on Earth have proposed stuff like that. Come up with a better idea, and I'm all ears. Josie, if we look apart from the abduction part and

the attack part, this is actually kind of exciting! Anyway, talk to you later.”

There was a click as Ari turned off her comms.

Josie smiled. Only Ari could even think of calling this an exciting field trip. Her friend’s optimism was rubbing off on Josie, and that felt better than the dread she’d had of where exactly this was going. She might as well look at the bright sides, such as they were. Nobody had died in the raid, and that made her feel much better. These guys were maybe space Vikings, but they weren’t murderous.

All right. She had her little headset, some utility stuff in various pouches in her belt, an opened first-aid kit and... not much else. She doubted her Security badges would make much of an impression on the Viking aliens. Her baton was long gone, and she hadn’t even put on her helmet.

She got out of the chair and looked around. This was some kind of cafeteria, like they had back on *Unity*. Except this one was all wood and fireplaces and animal skins. But it also looked like a place where cooking was done.

It took her ten seconds to find the first big knife, then twenty more to find another that was more her size. She wrapped the blade in gauze from the medpack and stuck it inside her waistband. Josie had never trained with edged weapons, but she had been well trained in using the telescoping metal baton. With a knife she was more deadly, which seemed appropriate right now.

She went out into the corridor.

“Wood everywhere,” she said softly. If she was recording, she might as well provide some commentary. “I don’t know what

to make of any of this. A wooden ship shouldn't be able to travel in space. How does it stay airtight?"

The corridor looked like it ran the length of the ship from the bow to the stern. She slowly made her way back to where there was an open wooden hatch in the floor.

Getting down on her knees, she looked into the space below.

"That's a lot of metals," she said tightly. "Plundered from *Unity* station. These bars were mined in the asteroid belt and were taken to *Unity* before they would be sent down to Earth. Looks like these guys timed their raid well, just when the station was really full of all kinds of goods." She remembered being notified many times in the past month about the station having to use its small rocket engines to keep it in the same orbit. All the goods scheduled for transport to Earth were making the station heavier, causing it to drift closer to the planet.

She got back up and walked along the corridor, finding several more hatches to the cargo hold. But they were closed and far too heavy for her to lift open. In the middle of the hull the bottom part of the mast went all the way down to the keel. Josie kept her distance to it — she had never seen metal glow white like that without giving off any heat. The keel itself was also metal, but it didn't glow.

She made her way back to the deck. The crew were about a dozen aliens, mainly males, but also a few females. Now they were mostly sitting around chatting, while Bragr stood at the rudder way in the back.

Up here, the mast still glowed in white and the sails were invisible, but they pulled on the ropes in the rigging. The whole ship creaked and swayed. Maybe Aretha was on to something when she was talking about other dimensions —

whatever was going on with those sails, it was unpleasant to look at.

Josie also made sure to not look too closely at the swirling insanity in space around the ship, noticing that the crew members had the same idea. Only Bragr in the aft of the ship was staring into the chaos ahead, some mysterious wind blowing his golden hair out behind him.

The other crew members all turned to look at her.

She had a sudden urge to duck back down below the deck. Those were some intense, alien eyes they had. And she was acutely aware that all those Vikings were much taller than her, including the females.

She forced down the impulse to flee and walked over to the nearest group. The wooden deck was vibrating under her boots, but not enough to bring her off balance.

She noticed the warriors discreetly putting their hands on their swords as she approached. It made her feel better, for some reason — maybe they were a little bit scared of her, too.

“I be Josie,” she began in their language, helped by her enhancement. She met the hard gazes from them all, concentrating to not flinch. “I want ask something.”

The neural lace had clearly processed more of the language, and now she was expressing herself better. Not bad when dealing with a totally alien language. She knew the lace was good, but she was starting to suspect she had not been told everything about its capabilities.

“Then ask,” said one of the males, looking her up and down.

“I speak bad. But I want speak not bad,” Josie said. “Is word I not know. Is word for attack an attacker. After he attack and

injure me. Long after, I attack because he injure me. What is word?"

They looked at each other, clearly confused.

"*Hefn*," one of them finally said.

Josie's face immediately filed it as the right word for 'revenge'.

"*Hefn*. I want you know, you plunder me. Is bad. I will get *hefn* on you all." She looked them in the eye, one after the other.

It might not be the best icebreaker, telling them all she would get revenge for them abducting her. But Josie was determined to have these guys see her as a person and not a piece of loot.

"Seeking revenge is a dangerous thing," one of the females said, slowly getting to her feet. "Especially when you warn your enemy in advance." She towered over Josie, casting her in shadow.

Josie swallowed. She was on thin ice here, suddenly realizing that anything she said might offend someone and cause them to kill her. She had to remember that they were aliens, and not all of them would be as slow to anger as Bragr.

"Are you enemy?" she asked, keeping her voice steady. "I not know. Revenge is fair when plundered. You plunder me, I get revenge. Is fair. No need be enemy." It made no sense, but it was the best she had right now.

The female frowned, hand clenching around the handle of her ax. "If it is revenge you want, perhaps I should give you something worth avenging—"

"Siv!" came a thundering yell from the aft of the ship. "Sit down and take your hand off that ax!"

The warrior looked back at Bragr, jaw tight. “Yes, Captain,” she growled and let go of her weapon. “It’s not honorable to slaughter an unarmed *thrall*, I suppose. She doesn’t have the marks of a warrior at all.”

Josie knew the meaning of the word: slave.

“I am not thrall,” she said calmly. “And not will be.” She glanced back at Bragr. Was that the idea? They raided the station to steal not just goods, but people, too? She had a vague recollection that the ancient Vikings on Earth did just that. She suddenly felt much less admiration for Bragr. Was he a slave trader? But he had probably just saved her life. That Viking woman wasn’t one to trifle with.

“She may not have the marks of a warrior,” one of the others said, running his finger along the tattoos on his chest, “but she beat up both Eystein and Haraldr. With a small stick.”

The woman warrior frowned, glancing at the two men Josie had met on the station, sitting by the railing of the ship. “*She* beat them up?”

“Look at them,” said the man. “They can barely stand up.”

“So? She has no Marks,” the woman scoffed. “She will never be a warrior. Or do you propose she go through the Trials and the Ice Caves and get some? It would kill her.”

“I propose nothing,” the man said calmly. “Just that having gone through the Ice Caves doesn’t seem to shield anyone from being defeated in combat.”

Shielding her eyes against the worst of the disturbing images outside the ship, Josie spotted three dark specks ahead. They looked like other ships, and they kept getting closer.

“They friends or bad earl again?” she asked and pointed.

Nobody replied, because it wasn't necessary. They were catching up with the ships fast, and they were obviously of the same type as this one.

Josie made her way to the railing at the side of the deck. Aretha was probably aboard one of those ships.

She could see people aboard them now, huge Viking aliens sitting down and standing around, not having much to do, except for the ones manning the rudder.

Josie's ship overtook the rearmost of the others.

"What news from Gornt?" called a man on the other deck.

"He is thinner and paler!" Bragr yelled back. "And he kept us for a very short time!"

"That is the way we like him," laughed the other. "Take the lead, Chief."

Josie squinted. The ship was just a little bit too far away to see the details, so she zoomed in with her camera. Its images were projecting onto her retina, letting her see it as a display inside the image from her own eyes. And as she thought, there were Earth girls aboard. Two of them, as far as she could tell, sitting close together next to the mast, looking pale. She didn't know them, but she didn't need to. They were maybe not in the same boat literally, but in every other way their fates had become intertwined.

Josie waved with her whole arm. "Don't worry, girls! We'll get home to Earth before you know it!"

They both gave her a careful wave, then sent anxious glances towards their captors.

At the next ship, the same thing happened — Bragr yelled something that probably passed as a witticism to Vikings, and

Josie looked for more girls. She spotted two, sitting together in the bow of the ship. She yelled the same thing, wanting to encourage them.

One of them got to her feet and waved back with both arms. “Yeah! We’ll escape the first chance we get!”

Okay, so at least one of them had the right spirit.

On the last ship they passed, there was only one Earth girl.

“Heeey!” Aretha yelled, standing by the railing, long hair blowing in the wind. “This is kind of fun, if you don’t look outside the ship too much!”

“There are four more girls back there!” Josie yelled and pointed. “We’ll bring them home, too!”

Aretha jumped up and down as her ship fell behind Josie’s. “Definitely! And we’ll get so fucking *riiich!*”

Josie laughed. That girl was just crazy. But in the best possible way.

The encounter perked her up. Now these guys knew that she was not broken and that she wasn’t giving in to despair, in spite of the difficult situation. They had to know she was not a ‘thrall’.

Bragr called a command, and the crew got busy with the masts and ropes. After a while the swirling images that was space around them had slowed down and become less frantic.

The ships behind them were staying back there, so probably they were getting close to their destination.

Josie touched the handle of her hidden knife. She may have to assert herself in a convincing way, if they were about to get to where these guys came from. She didn’t like the ‘thrall’ thing at all.

Bragr gave more commands, and the ropes went slack. Soon the space around them was back to its normal black with millions of stars. The sails were no longer invisible, but hanging limply from the ropes. They shone as silver and looked as thin as facial tissue, the light from the stars behind them shining through.

Right ahead of them was a planet, blue with oceans and white with clouds. It looked so much like Earth that Josie's heart skipped a beat — she'd had that exact view of her home planet many times from *Unity*.

“Gardr ahead,” Bragr called from the rudder. “Soon we'll be home, my *herjere*.”

The crew cheered. On closer inspection, the planet was too much ocean and not enough land to be Earth. There were no major continents that Josie could see, just several large islands grouped together.

The ships behind them had also slowed down.

Josie hoped they were going to the same place — if they landed on different parts of the planet, it might get really hard to meet up with Aretha.

The planet came closer fast, and now she could see details. The larger islands had mountain ranges and lakes, plains and even deserts close to the equator.

If she was going to make plans for the arrival, she better think of something smart. Just running might be an option—

A yell from Bragr made her spin around. He was pointing to the side of the ship, frantically trying to draw his sword while also keeping his hand on the rudder.

“Skrymtir!” the other Vikings called and ran towards the middle of the ship.

Josie saw them now — two of the creepy zombie things must have attached themselves to the outside of the hull and were now climbing the mast. They were holding huge, scythe-like blades that they used to cut the ropes as they climbed.

The ship veered to the left, and Josie saw Bragr struggle with the rudder.

There was a chaos of cries and commands. A Viking was climbing the ropes, but fell to the deck when the skrymtir cut the line he was holding. Another tried to climb the mast itself, but it was too thick and slippery and he fell, too.

The two enemies kept cutting ropes, and soon the sails came loose. They fluttered and flapped wildly as if caught in a storm.

The Vikings ran to stay at a safe distance when the sails came crashing down.

And they were *crashing*, Josie couldn't help but notice. The crumpled-up sheets of seemingly tissue thin material hit the deck with hard bangs, breaking through the deck planks as if they were lead balls dropped from a thousand feet. They had to be from an incredibly exotic material to have that kind of weight, the science-oriented part of her mind reflected.

Bragr yelled something urgent, and she looked up. One of the sails was about to come loose from the mast, and she was right underneath it.

She quickly stepped away, but her foot got caught in the rat's nest of ropes and she tripped onto the splintered deck planks.

The sail came fluttering down towards her, looking as light as a bedsheet. She tried to roll out of the way.

Something big hit her hard, knocking the wind out of her. She sensed she was tumbling, but she couldn't move and it was

dark around her. Dark and warm, she noticed. Both hard and soft.

Then the sail hit the deck and splintered the wood.

- **BRAGR** -

Bragr got back on his feet and pushed Josie away from him, still holding her arm. “Nothing crushed?”

She looked down herself, wiggling her fingers. “I not think crushed.”

He had let go of the rudder and thrown himself at her to get her away from under the falling sail. His foot ached where the edge of the heavy sail had hit him, and he was pretty sure something was broken. The ship’s deck was all broken from the falling sails, and the mast wasn’t standing straight anymore.

“Not crushed *yet*, anyway,” Herjolf said grimly. “But we’re out of control, Captain. We are going to crash.”

Their home planet Gardr was now filling all of the sky above them, and it was spinning in a way that Bragr didn’t like one bit. Sigrid was at the rudder, fighting to regain control. But it was clearly not happening.

“We were on course for Hjalmarheim,” Bragr said, his voice calm. “We won’t land too far away.”

“*Crash* land,” Siv pointed out as she replaced her ax in her belt. “At least we got those two skrymtir.”

“We don’t want to bring those home,” Bragr agreed, then gave a warning yell and grabbed Josie again as the unsupported mast suddenly fell to the side, splintering the ship’s sides and cutting the vessel in half, pieces of wood flying.

Grabbing Josie, Bragr threw himself to the deck and got hold of a coil of rope. He wrapped one end around his wrist and the other around the carved dragon’s head in the bow of the ship, tying it tightly.

“This will get interesting,” he yelled to be heard over the terrible noise of the ship being shaken to pieces and the thin air starting to whistle past them.

Josie looked up at him with big, scared eyes. Her mouth was moving, but he couldn’t hear her. He bowed his head to get his ear close to her mouth.

“You have killed me,” she said in perfectly clear Garda.

Bragr was already worried, but her words made him feel even worse than the idea of crashing to the ground.

“If so, then I apologize,” was all he could say. “You have a warrior in you and deserve better. But we’re not dead yet. Hang on to me.”

Normally, he knew, falling through the thin layer of air around Gardr would make anything burn. He had himself seen many rocks from space make bright streaks across the night sky. And he was sure they would both make much shorter streaks.

But they were clinging to the *Kraken*, a Hjalmarheim longship that could travel the River. And close to it, anything could happen. The fact that they could still breathe and speak was a good sign, he thought. He would hope that they would be saved by the dragon’s head in the bow, the strongest and most magical part of the ship apart from the mast.

They fell fast, and the roar of the air became almost too much to bear. He made sure to pull Josie firmly into him, while he clung to the carved dragon's head with his other arm.

They were falling straight down, with the ship's bow first.

He could just see the other parts of the wreckage, tumbling wildly while his warriors were hanging on to the pieces for dear life. The three other ships were tiny specks in the distance, helpless witnesses to their chief's ship breaking up this close to home.

The ground was coming up to meet them very fast, and Bragr was pretty sure the island they would crash into was Hjalmarheim. That was good. Less good was that all he could see was snowy mountains and small lakes, some covered in white ice, some partly thawed with open water in the middle and ice along the banks. It looked like they would land in the *vilmak*, where the *dfergir*, *vettir*, *trolls* and other terrible creatures lived.

He checked that Brisingr was still there, resting safely in its scabbard. Then he tightened his grip on Josie and closed his eyes while all Helheim was breaking loose around them.

- - -

He woke up shivering, surrounded by ice cold stuff. Above him the sky was blue and clear.

Clearing snow and ice out of his mouth, he slowly sat up, his pants creaking from frost.

It *was* Helheim, then, the icy realm of the dead. Not the expected afterlife for a warrior chief and earl. Had he not died in battle, and had the valkyries not found him worthy to spend eternity in Valhalla?

It took him a while to remember what had happened. Indeed it had not been a battle that had killed him, but the ship coming apart over Hjalmarheim. He did feel that perishing while on a raid *should* count as a warrior's death. It would certainly have been violent enough. Perhaps the valkyries just hadn't found him yet.

A thin groan behind him tore him out of his dark reverie.

The alien woman!

He got up on stiff, frozen legs, noticing the ache from his foot.

Ah yes. It had been hit by the falling sails as he had pounced to get the female out of the way. What was her name?

Josie. An alien name, just about impossible to pronounce.

She was splayed out on the snow right behind him. Ten paces further along, the entire bow of the Kraken was half buried in the snow and ice. Only the proud dragon's head was sticking up, as straight and fierce as ever.

Bragr kneeled down beside Josie and put his hand along one round cheek. It was warm to the touch. They could not have been here for long, he realized, or they would both have frozen to death. This wasn't Helheim after all — it was cold, but too bright and too real. And there was no chance a longship as old and powerful as the Kraken would follow him to that pitiful afterlife.

The female's eyes flew open, and she exclaimed something.

“Yes, you’re still alive,” Bragr told her, guessing at what she had said. “That may be good news or bad. I can’t be sure yet. This is the vilmark, and we’re far from home. Our deaths may have been simply postponed.”

He straightened up and felt for Brisinagr. It was still there, and that made him feel better. It had cleaved the skulls of several dfergir and vettir in its day.

Josie got up, slowly testing her knees and legs before she trusted them.

“The wilderness,” she finally said, looking around. “It’s cold.”

Bragr grunted, taking stock of the situation. They were on a frozen lake, the ice covered by a thick layer of snow. The marks of their landing stretched all across the lake and then upwards on the side of a mountain. Way up there he could spot the deep gouge of their first impact. That had saved their lives — they had fallen onto a steep slope and then slid and rolled down the hillside, being slowed down until they had rolled out onto the flat lake. The marks were clear to see.

It was impossible to imagine a luckier way to land. Certainly the magic in the *Kraken’s* dragon’s head had saved their lives.

Around the lake was a sparse forest of pines and small birches, the terrain rising up into tall peaks that glittered with snow.

Looking up at the sun Straum, he could easily determine which way they should go. They had to go west to reach the coast where his people lived. To the east there were only mountains and wilderness before the land abruptly dropped down into the ocean.

Josie was staring up at the sun. “That strange.”

Bragr shielded his eyes. “What is strange?”

She pointed at the sun. “That. Is two streams. It’s a *pulsar*.”

“We call it Straum, not *pulsar*.”

“You call it Straum. Fair. But it *is* a *pulsar*. Two streams.”

Bragr looked back at the mountain they had rolled down. Those marks stood out against the white landscape all around them. And if it was obvious to him, it would be obvious to others, too.

Indeed there were some dark shapes on the side of that mountain. They moved downwards, along the marks the ship’s bow had made. The shapes were small, but moved quickly.

“Dfergir,” he said. “We have to get away. Shall I carry you, or can you walk on your own?”

“I can walk,” Josie said quickly.

Bragr gave the dfergir another look, then started walking in the opposite direction. “Then follow.”

The snow was deep, but a finger’s width under the surface there was a frozen layer that carried them. They quickly got to the forested shore and started to climb the hill.

Bragr looked back. The dfergir were now out on the lake already, shuffling fast along the marks from the bow. He fretted at the thought of the magic dragon’s head of the legendary *Kraken* falling into their hands.

He stopped and looked back. He *could* go back there and let Brisingr play among the dfergir, leaving them all as small red splotches on the snow. But it was a risk. They outnumbered him bad. It would also be a waste of effort and of time. This place would be crawling with dfergir not so long from now. They were not good to eat or to use as firewood. Their axes and hammers were exquisite, but often cursed. He’d have to

go on, find a village or settlement, gather a hunting party, and then come back to rescue the dragon's head. Or what was left of it.

Josie looked the same way he was. "What are they?"

"Enemies," he said darkly.

"What they called?"

He turned to walk on. "Dfergir. They live here."

He had to make a plan. Josie was keeping up with him so far, but she was so small that she would struggle when the terrain got steeper and more stony. Dragging her along would also make it harder to fight off all the enemies they would attract.

It didn't change anything. They had to get over the mountains and make their way to the fertile valleys where his people lived. It would take days. They would need food and fire to survive the nights.

"We'll keep walking," he told Josie. "Let me know if you feel too tired to go on."

She nodded. "How long walk?"

"Days."

She pointed ahead to the peak of the mountain they were climbing. "There?"

"Over the mountains, yes. Josie, how do you understand what I'm saying? And how can you speak Garda?"

She looked away. "Not hard. Easy speech."

He gave her a searching look. He knew there had been raids going to her planet before, and perhaps those ancestors had left traces of Garda in the minds of the raided. That had happened

before. But he had never heard of aliens *speaking* Garda. There had to be more to Josie than met the eye—

A screech from above made them both flinch. He spotted the black shape over the treetops.

“Vettir,” he growled.

Josie drew closer to him. “Bad enemy?”

His hand found the hilt of Brisingr. “Bad enough.” One vette wasn’t much of a problem, but they never attacked singly. That screech would attract the whole swarm.

She touched his arm. “If you speech more, I speech better sooner.”

“That screech will call the rest of the swarm,” he said, surprised at the touch of her gloved hand.

“And then they attack?”

“They attack, but I defend.” He slapped the side of Brisingr as he walked on. “We should get as far as we can before the attack begins.”

“Bragr.”

He looked behind him, strangely excited about hearing his name spoken by her bright voice in that alien way. “Don’t worry, we’ll fight them off.”

“You have...” she pointed at his sword. “I need fight them off, too.”

“You want a weapon? You won’t need one when Brisingr is around.”

“I want a weapon,” she echoed. “Not need a brisingr.”

“You like fighting with sticks,” he said. “I can make you a stick.” He drew Brisingr, marched over to a suitable sapling,

chopped its branches and top off, and then cut it off at the root. “Here is a weapon for you.” He handed it over. It was as long as Josie was tall and dripping with sticky sap. But it was thick and heavy, a good club.

She smiled as she took it into her gloved hands. “What I say when you give?”

“Thank you’,” he told her.

“Thank you for my stick,” she chirped, swinging it through the air at an imagined enemy.

He let a smile play at the corner of his mouth. There was something about this small female that made it difficult to think of her as a captive.

A shadow crossed the sun. There were no more screeches — the vettir had heard the first one and were circling in the sky, waiting until they felt they were enough to start attacking.

They had reached the edge of the tree line, and further ahead there was only snow with no cover.

“We’ll stay here,” Bragr decided. “The trees will get in their way. Stand under this one and try to be out of sight. Better to surprise them than show yourself.”

Josie walked as close to the tree as she could without her feet breaking down through the snow. She would get some cover, at least.

Bragr smiled at the way she gripped her stick and scowled up at the vettir. She wasn’t that scared of them.

The first of them suddenly swooped down, then broke off just above the treetops. In its screech he thought he recognized the word ‘Bragr’. Yes, they would know the earl of this land when they saw him.

“Bragr, Bragr, Bragr,” the others started cawing.

The vettir weren't as mindless as some other creatures, but they also weren't deep thinkers.

Two of them came diving, aiming between the trees and screeching to intimidate their target. Bragr kept Brisingr in its scabbard until they were almost within striking range. Then he pulled the sword in one fast movement and slashed it at the nearest one. It neatly cut the vette in half. The other beat its wings frantically to stop before it came within his reach. It was too late — Brisingr chopped the vette's head off, and it fell to the snow like a wet rag. Thin, blue blood stained the snow.

The vettir circling overhead first went quiet, then started screeching wildly as they all rose much higher: *“Brisingr! Brisingr! Bragr! Bragr!”*

Bragr looked back the way they'd come. The dfergir were not yet in sight, but he didn't want to have to fight two enemies, one coming from the air and the other very close to the ground.

“Let's go,” he said and walked out from the trees, keeping the blue-stained Brisingr visible to the vettir.

Josie had the sense to stay close as they went up the incline. Bragr had spotted a field of large rocks halfway up the mountains, where it would be easier to find cover and perhaps even hide from the dfergir. Straum was getting close to the far mountains, and neither dfergir or vettir liked to be active in the dark. But there would be other dangers.

The vettir kept circling, high above. Two of them broke off and started circling over the woods, marking the place where the party of dfergir would be trudging through the snow on

their short legs. They had not gained much, Bragr was satisfied to note.

The hill got steeper and more slippery, with more ice and less snow.

“Take my hand,” he said, offering it.

“Not need,” Josie said and trudged on, her boots never slipping on the ice. “But thank you.”

They reached the first boulder, big and rough, with sharp edges. The mountainside was in shadow now, and the valley below was darkening fast. In the middle of the lake Bragr spotted the ship’s bow with the dragon head. He couldn’t see if the dfergir had defiled it, but he doubted it. They would be repulsed by the power it held.

“Josie,” he said and pointed, “look at the bow of the ship.”

She turned and looked down at the lake. “It’s still there.”

“Is it ruined?”

She touched the small black shape at the side of her head.

“Look same as when close.”

Ah. So she had sharper vision than anyone he’d met. Now he wanted to know how sharp it was.

“See the dfergir on the other side of the lake?” There was nothing there that he could see.

“Nothing move,” she said after a little while. “Rocks only. And mark from bow falling.”

“How many rocks?”

She put her fighting staff between her legs to hold up her fingers. “This many.”

“Nine.” He had already counted them when they were down by the lake, worrying that the dark specks were dfergir, too. From here, he couldn’t even see the rocks, much less how many there were. Josie had better capabilities than he thought, and that could be important in a fight. The vettir were still keeping their distance, but the dfergir were known to move just as fast through difficult terrain as on flat ground.

They made their way among the boulders, climbing over and crawling under rocks when necessary. Bragr noticed that Josie struggled much less with it than he did — her small size allowed her to squeeze through openings between the boulders where he had to walk around.

The vettir suddenly realized that they had to attack now or it would be too late.

One came swooping, so quietly Bragr didn’t hear it. Only an urgent call from Josie made him look up.

Too late, he knew in the same instant, seeing only the outstretched claws of the flying horror.

- JOSIE -

There was a meaty *whack* as Josie's staff hit the vettir and sent it flopping lifelessly in among the rocks. She had hit it right in the middle, a split second before it would have been on top of Bragr.

From a distance, the vettir looked like birds. But they were actually the size of Josie herself, covered in feathers like birds but with huge, bat-like wings. They had big, curved beaks and round, black eyes.

The creepiest thing about them was the sound they made, a high-pitched screech with words in it. Now the words were '*Stick! Stick!*' and '*Peck her! Peck her!*' in Bragr's language as they circled ever higher.

"Good hit," Bragr said, straightening from his instinctive crouch. "That should make them think twice."

Josie examined her stick. It was still in one piece, but the impact had sent a real shockwave up her arm. "Stick not break. Hard wood."

"Hard and soft at the same time, Josie," Bragr said, scouting down the slope. "Best kind."

"Talking about you or about stick?" Josie inquired.

The huge Viking frowned, then quickly glanced down at his crotch and back up. “What do you mean?”

“Bragr hard when plunder and fight skrymtir,” she said, looking up at the vettir. “Then soft when defend Josie. Try so say it like that. Josie.”

“A warrior must be like your stick, Yosie.” Bragr said, turning around and looking up the slope. “Hard when he fights his enemy, soft when he protects his village. Brisingr is the same way, or it would snap at the first cut at a tiny *musr*. It yields but still cuts.”

“*Dddjosie*,” she emphasized. “I am your village then, Bragr?”

“*Brrragrrr*,” he replied with hard, rolling r’s. “You may not be my village or even of my people. And yet I have protected you as well as I have been able. It seems to me that you have also protected me, the way you just knocked a vettir out of the sky. I think you’ll find every person of worth is both soft and hard. Now we must keep going to keep the dfergir away.”

He walked on, and Josie followed. She remembered enough of their landing to know that Bragr had saved her life by curling up around her and had kept her safe, while he had been beaten up pretty bad. He had bruises and little cuts all over him, and his limp made her think he had hurt his foot. That could have happened while he was pushing her out of the way of the falling sail. After he had taken her back from the skrymtir.

“So if my math is correct,” she mumbled to herself, “he has saved my life a fuckton of times.”

But that was only fair. He had also abducted her from Unity, so keeping her alive was the least he could do.

She had turned off the camera and the headset — there was not much to record while walking, and she wanted to save the

battery. She felt for the knife hidden in her belt. She didn't want him to know about it, in case he were to change into a jerk. And she had wanted a weapon like the stick — it was better to keep those vettir at arm's length.

There was much less snow here among the boulders, and they were so tall she had trouble knowing which way they were going. It was like being inside a labyrinth, hoping not to meet a dead end.

Somehow they were always able to keep going without doubling back. The rocks gradually became smaller, until they were walking on frozen gravel as the layer of snow thinned out. It was also getting dark fast.

The vettir were nowhere to be seen, their screeches silent.

“As I hoped,” Bragr said and pointed ahead. “That should be easy to defend.”

Josie had no idea what he was talking about until she spotted a crack in the mountain, tall and narrow. “What is that?”

“It's a crack in the mountain,” he explained. “I saw it from far below. And hopefully it is a cave. We can't keep going in the dark. There are worse things than vettir and dfergir.”

They slowly made their way up the scree slope. Two vettir circled the boulder field far below them, but most of the monsters seemed to have left.

Bragr looked into the crack. “There's no troll smell. It would be too narrow a crack for them anyway.”

Josie frowned. “There are *trolls* in these mountains?”

“This is where they live,” Bragr confirmed. “Wait here. Scream if you see anything. The dfergir will soon be here.” He

got down on all fours and crawled into the crack, which was too low for him to walk upright.

Josie looked at him going in. He had some incredible muscles, and they flexed with every move. What would it be like to run her fingers down those thick back muscles, pulling him closer, pulling him into her—

There was a soft sound behind her, as if from a down pillow being shaken.

She spun around. The whole swarm of vettir was coming at her from the darkening sky, claws stretched out in front of them. She barely had time to lift the staff and swipe it at the nearest one.

“Bragr!” she yelled. “Vettir!”

The last word drowned in the insane screeches from the descending swarm. Josie couldn’t even aim at them, just swung her staff at the mass of claws and beaks. She hit some of them, but they just screeched and beat their wings to stay right in front of her, but out of reach.

Josie retreated to the rock face, pushing her back to it. But the vettir were coming closer, diving at her and trying to get a hold on her hair with their claws. A big vette grabbed her stick with both its claws and yanked at it. She didn’t let go, so she was pulled away from the rock face, losing her balance.

Immediately a cloud of vettir was on her, grabbing her arms and pulling her to the ground with their sheer weight. Others pounced on her feet and ankles and the fabric of her uniform.

They all beat their wings frantically, and despite Josie doing her best to kick and punch and scream, they slowly lifted her into the air, their screeches deafening.

“Bragr!” Josie screamed, panic tugging at her as the ground vanished beneath her. All around was a nightmarish whirlwind of leathery bat wings, flying feathers, pointy claws, sharp beaks and black, fierce eyes.

“*Murder, murder, murder!*” the vettir screeched as they lifted her higher.

She knew they meant it. She was dead. All they had to do was let go of her and let her fall.

A hand suddenly gripped her ankle, holding her firmly.

It was Bragr, standing on tiptoe as he reached into the deadly cloud of vettir to keep Josie from being carried away.

With an insane cacophony of screeches, the vettir who weren't lifting Josie attacked the Viking. He swung his sword at them, but clearly couldn't use it properly while also holding Josie's ankle and trying not to hit her.

Josie punched blindly into the screeching mass of gray and orange, dislodging several of the vettir. But others took their place, gripping her with their claws and pecking at her with their beaks. “*Murder her!*” they screeched. “*Murder! Murder!*”

Bragr shook her once, a hard movement that made her teeth rattle. And it worked. Several vettir lost their grip on her.

“More!” Josie screamed. “Harder!”

Bragr obliged, shaking her as if she were an umbrella that refused to open. Josie sensed she was drifting lower to the ground, until there were only three vettir left and Bragr could pull her closer to him.

She fell to the ground with his hand still clutching her ankle.

He left her on her back, finally able to swing his sword in earnest. Dead and injured vettir fell from the sky as Brisingr cut through three, four, six at a time. It rained black feathers and cold, blue blood for a while until the vettir had to give up. Those that remained screeched wordlessly, circling higher before they vanished into the darkness.

Bragr let go of Josie's ankle and looked quickly around. Then he bent over her, white teeth lighting up his blue-stained face. "Still here?"

"Still here," she confirmed, getting to her feet. The uniform had held and had no holes, but those beaks and claws had pinched her all over and she was sore.

"They really wanted to take you away," the Viking chief said and picked up a dead vettir by its thin neck, running his sword through its plumage to clean the blood from it. "I suppose I can't blame them. I did the same thing. But I succeeded."

Josie spotted her staff and picked it up. Her hands were trembling, but thanks to the gloves it wasn't obvious. "You succeeded in taking me away from them, too. Thank you." Her voice was trembling, as well. But she wasn't ashamed of it. That was the most nightmarish experience she'd ever had.

He looked up at the sky, where the stars were coming out. "Troll hour is here. Go inside the cave. I'll follow."

Josie could get through the crack without needing to crawl. It was cold inside, and so dark the night vision function of her headset activated by itself. It showed everything in green. The cave was much bigger inside than the crack. To her surprise there was a ring of stones on the ground, as well as a wooden box. She turned off the headset again. That night vision would burn through the battery in no time.

“The dfergir aren’t coming yet,” Bragr said, crawling inside before he could stand up. “I don’t know where they are.”

“The vettir chased them,” Josie suggested.

“Perhaps. Zhor knows they’re not friends.”

“Who is Zhor?” Josie asked, peering into the depths of the cave.

“Zhor is the god of war,” Bragr said, opening the box. “And of other things, too. Thunder, for instance. Ah, it is as I hoped.” He took some pieces of firewood out of the box and tossed them into the ring of rocks. “This cave is sometimes used by hunters, and they make sure to have stocks of firewood ready. Oh, and kindling, too. Very considerate.”

“Did they have fire ready?” Josie asked. She certainly had no way of making fire. Anything that could produce sparks was banned from the *Unity*. Including stun guns, lighters, electrical appliances, and certain metal items. In the oxygen-rich atmosphere on the *Unity*, a single spark could mean a big fire, which would be the end of the space station and everyone inside it.

Bragr prepared the fire, took his sword out, and knelt down. Rubbing the blunt side of his sword against the metal decorations on the outside of the scabbard, he produced a rain of sparks. Some of them landed on the kindling.

“Don’t worry, it’s not Brisingr that’s shedding its steel. It’s the sheath.” Bragr bent down to blow on the kindling, and soon the fire was burning merrily. The smoke rose to the top of the cave, then followed the crack out.

The fire made the cave brighter, if nothing else. Josie didn’t need a fire to stay warm. The uniform had circuits for both

heating and cooling, powered by the micro-movement of the fabric itself.

Rummaging through the wooden box, Bragr came back with more firewood that he stacked by the rock wall. “Enough for one night.” He also found two pots the size of big Coke bottles. “And some drink. Remind me to find the hunters using this cave and reward them richly.”

Josie sat down with her back to the rock. It would have felt cold, but the uniform was good insulation. “Reward them richly with metals plundered from my home?”

He gave her an alien look, then opened the pots and sniffed them. “See if you like this.”

He crawled out the crack and disappeared.

Hmm. Maybe she should go easier on the accusations, at least until they were safe from those creepy vettir. For now, she should maybe go with the flow and act like a part of the team until they were safer than this. The *Unity* hadn't actually been much of a home. More like a cage.

Okay. She had to find Aretha and ideally those other girls, too. It would be better to be part of a group than alone among aliens. With her uniform, Security training, and not least the neural lace enhancement, she was probably the best placed of the abductees to do something about their situation. But she had to get out of this damned wilderness first and track down the others.

She hugged herself, not thrilled about being alone in this cave on an alien planet.

Opening one of the pots, she sniffed the contents. It was similar to the myod Bragr had given her in that cafeteria on his ship. She did need some sugar right now, too. She had used up

a lot of energy, first climbing the side of the mountain and then fighting those creepy vettir.

She shuddered at the fresh memory. That had been too close. It probably would give her a mental trauma. If it hadn't been for Bragr, grabbing her at the last possible moment, she would be dead now. Or in some kind of vettir nest, being pecked to death by those beaks...

She took a sip of the myod. She had been pinched all over, but the uniform had taken the brunt of the sharp beaks and claws. Bragr had only been wearing those pants and the belt, and he had been pecked and scratched. The blue vettir blood had mixed with his own, making violet streaks down his torso. He had to be the most protective kidnapper in the history of the universe.

If she had met him under other circumstances, she could have liked him. As in, *really* liked him. Not only was he big and powerful and ripped, he also had an easy smile and a manner so confident that she could feel it resonate deep inside her. It wasn't fake, either — he seemed completely genuine.

There was a scraping noise from the entrance, and Josie grabbed her stick and stood up, ready to whack anyone who might come through.

“Stay your hand, stick-maiden,” came the deep voice. “I’m not here to murder you, unlike someone else we know.”

Bragr crawled through and stood up, seemingly filling the cave. It looked as if he had used snow to clean the worst of the blood off him.

“The vettir are gone, and the dfergir must be waiting for daylight,” he said, drawing his sword. He picked up two big pieces of firewood and chopped pieces of them until they were

planks. “These should be better to sit on than the bare, cold rock.” He placed them side by side by the fire and sat down on one of them.

“Cold rock not good to sit on,” Josie agreed and sat on the rough plank. She didn’t really need it, but it *was* more comfortable. “We stay here until daylight?”

“We will leave while it’s still dark. It’s better to avoid the dfergir than fight them. I doubt the vettir have given up, and they know where we are. But we will rest here for some time.”

Josie studied the Viking’s face and upper body. “You injured many places. How is that?” She pointed to his foot.

“My foot? I’d rather not know,” he admitted. “It aches.”

“Bad?”

He shrugged. “I can walk on it.”

Josie got what he was really saying: *if you can’t fix it, there’s no reason to look*. He had a point. It wasn’t like they could call a medevac helicopter. They had to walk, and that was it.

She took out the opened medpack. “I can look at the other injuries.”

He prodded the place where she had put on a small bandage. “This feels good. You have good healing skills.” Another half-spoken message: *I would like you to do that*.

She turned towards him and positioned herself so she could see by the fire light. She had to suppress a gasp when she saw his back. “They picked pieces off you!”

He looked at her over his shoulder. “Pieces of skin? It felt like they were picking off *something*. That’s what those beaks are for.”

Josie winced in sympathy. Those vettir really had ripped strips of skin off him. And he hadn't complained or even made a sound, just held on to her ankle while the monsters did their worst to hurt him. His arm wasn't much better, and she spent a good while dabbing multi-purpose antiseptic fluid on him. Using medical tape and the gauze, she patched up the worst wounds until the medpack was empty.

His skin was warm, and his massive muscles worked underneath it whenever he'd move to present some wound to her gaze. He let her do her thing without trying to control or even check what she was doing. That easy trust made her feel more warmth for the huge male than she wanted. There was an innocence to him that was a sharp contrast to the Viking raider that he was.

His tattoos puzzled her. They were immensely intricate and precise, their centers gleaming with gold. She couldn't imagine how it was done. They even went deeper than the outer skin, because even where the vettir had gouged strips of it, the pattern was intact. Almost as if it was a part of him, not superficial.

"That's all I can do," she finally said and crumpled up the plastic gauze wrapper. "You not fight vettir again."

Bragr inspected the white patches on his arms and chest. "I may not be able to avoid it. I've never seen them try to carry a person away. They say it can happen to babies, but not adults."

"You fight them and took me away from them. Very considerate," Josie said, not sure if the word was the right one. Then, on impulse, she leaned closer and placed a little kiss on his cheek, right by his mouth.

He gave her a surprised look, and she withdrew, having surprised herself even more.

Well, if a gesture like that would help him keep saving her life, then it was a smart investment. But she knew that wasn't really it — he was a magnificent male, and she had simply wanted to kiss him. It wasn't a rational decision at all; it was all primal. He had filled her thoughts and feelings since the abduction. In ways that she would never have expected.

She was fully aware that he didn't need to be this nice. He had all the power here, and if he had been an absolute jerk, there wasn't much she could have done about it. Actually, she would probably have been dead by now. No man with jerky tendencies would have taken her back from the vettir.

Still, he *had* abducted her. She had to worry about what he had in mind for her when they reached a safer place than this. An ice-cold part of her knew that her best chance may lie in taking advantage of Bragr's various injuries and escape from him at some point.

Bragr reached for the myod. "Did you try it?"

"It's good," she said.

They shared the rest of the pot in silence. It was enough to make Josie noticeably tipsy. And drowsy. She was drained, emotionally and physically. There was a lot to process, but the important part was that she was still alive. For now.

The fire crackled calmly, filling the cave with the warm light from its flickering flames.

She jerked awake and straightened, lifting her head from Bragr's shoulder. Her ear was hot with the warmth from his skin. She must have fallen asleep. "Sorry."

"Not a bad idea to get some rest," he rumbled, picking at the fire with a long stick. "I think you will need it."

Josie blinked and yawned as she came properly awake. She would have loved to stay like that, using him as a big, totally steady pillow.

He took the stick out of the fire and handed it to her. It was the one she had used as a weapon. “I sharpened the end of it and fired it to make it hard. Now it’s a spear *and* a club.”

Josie examined the tip. It was needle sharp and burned black. “Thank you.”

“Now sleep more. Get comfortable. I will stay awake.”

There was only one way she could see that would be really comfortable, but she didn’t want to sit on his lap. Not yet.

Instead she curled up on the plank and put her head on his thigh, facing away from him.

She felt a warm hand on her upper arm, holding it loosely and not moving. It was his way to say ‘*don’t worry, I won’t get any weird ideas while you sleep*’.

His touch calmed her and allowed her to let go.

When she woke up again, she sat up, feeling well rested.

Bragr handed her a dark brown piece of something hard. “This looks like wood, but it’s meat. Dried meat that you can chew.”

Josie knew she had to get as much energy as possible to face the day, so she gingerly bit into the meat and ripped off a piece. It was similar to beef jerky, but sweeter.

She rubbed sleep out of her eyes. “The hunters prepared well.”

“This cave is one of many that the various villages have prepared all over the mountains,” Bragr rumbled and got up, stretching and placing the palms of his hands on the ceiling of the cave, ten feet above the ground. “It means we still have

days of walking ahead of us. Hopefully we can keep finding caves like this one.”

Josie understood every word, and she was able to form whole sentences in her mind. That sleep had been good for the neural lace — it was the way she remembered it working. It was when she slept that it would make major strides in learning a language.

She looked out of the entrance. It was as dark as ever. “Do they hunt vettir? Or dfergir?”

Bragr folded up a piece of the jerky and put the whole thing into his mouth. “Not if they have a shred of sense. Those things are dangerous to eat. Their flesh is all poison. Same with trolls. There is a lot of game here, though. A good hunter can gather all the meat his family needs for a whole winter from one good hunting trip to the mountains. I have done it many times myself. But I don’t recognize these mountains. We must be in the south of the island.” He replaced the unused firewood in the box and stomped out the embers. “Now I think we should get going. There will still be some minutes of darkness left.”

Josie studied the tip of her spear. It was razor sharp. “Where are we going?”

“To Hjalmarheim,” Bragr said. “Now, this *is* Hjalmarheim, of course. The whole island is. But this part is all vilmark. We need to get to the coast, to the settlements And to my jarlagard, the earl’s estate.”

“And then what happens?” Josie lifted her gaze to look him in the eye in the dim cave.

“Then we eat and drink and recover from the walk,” the Viking said and went over to the entrance.

Josie didn't move. "And then what happens?"

"Then we'll see," he rumbled, got down, and crawled out.

Josie hadn't gotten a reply, but she wasn't too interested in staying in this dark cave alone. She walked after him out of the cave.

Outside it was night, but the sky was clear, showing an intense myriad of stars. She recognized some constellations, but some were distorted and some were new to her.

Josie felt a sucking feeling in her stomach. One of those little pinpricks might be the Sun. Her home had to be light years away. Possibly hundreds or thousands. There were no pulsars close to Earth, as far as she knew, unless one had gone undetected.

She shook off the dark thoughts that pressed on her mind. She *would* get home. *They* would get home, Aretha and Josie and the other girls. If nothing else, those primitive wooden ships had shown them how easy space travel could be. All they needed was one of those, and they'd be on their way.

They stood still for a while, just looking and listening. The air was cold, probably below freezing.

"We'll be quiet," Bragr whispered. "We don't want the vettir or the dfergir to hear us leave." He walked along the rock face, going uphill. Josie followed, clutching her spear and looking up and behind her. She wouldn't let those vettir surprise her again, so she kept a sharp lookout upwards.

The snow crunched softly under her boots as she kept following Bragr's giant shape along the side of the hill. The stars gave more light than she'd ever seen, casting him as a black shadow against the sky. He wasn't limping anymore, she noticed. But he was walking with a heavier, more lumbering

gait, swaying from one side to the other with each slow step. It had to be his injured foot that did it.

She kept looking down, wanting to step in his footsteps. But they were deeper now than before, not individual foot prints but two continuous furrows, as if he was shuffling along.

She squinted. Was he really this big and wide? Where had his horns gone? His tattoos? And when had his arms grown long enough for his knuckles to drag along the ground?

Ice settled in her stomach as she froze in place. Whatever it was she was following, it wasn't Bragr.

The shape stopped, too, then turned around and gazed at her with one red-glowing eye, placed to the side of the head.

"Harlok ter kresn mansblo," came a slow voice, sounding like stone crusher.

Josie raised her spear in an instinctive defensive movement. That wasn't Bragr at all, or anyone like him. It looked most of all like a troll.

A dark shadow came out of the darkness right at the edge of her vision, leaving her no time to protect herself.

- **BRAGR** -

He'd thought Josie was right behind him, but when he turned to check, there was nobody there.

Did she lose sight of him? Or was she making some kind of escape?

He retraced his tracks, having to bend closer to the ground to see them in the darkness.

There was the cave, and there were his tracks. There were Josie's much smaller ones. They followed his for three paces, then veered to the side.

He sped up, seeing her tracks very closely.

And there... a set of much bigger tracks, going deep into the snow. Marks of feet with only two wide toes on each one.

A chill went through him. Josie was following a troll.

He wanted to yell a warning, tell her to turn back. But that would warn the troll, too.

He ran, limping on the foot which had now swelled badly inside his boot.

Before long Josie's tracks vanished and only the troll's were left. It must have lifted her in its arms and was now busy

carrying her away. He hadn't heard as much as a peep from her, so the troll must have used its ability to move its long arms with surprisingly great speed, grabbing her.

Bragr kept running, following the two deep furrows through the snow. They were going towards the ridge where the next valley would begin. It was more than likely that the troll was going back to its cave. And trolls never lived alone.

The tracks became less furrow-like and more like footprints, meaning that the troll was walking faster, lifting its feet. Carrying a small female like Josie wouldn't slow it down much.

He spotted it, not far in the distance, a dark, lumbering shape moving across the snow. Over one round shoulder it carried something much smaller, like a pack.

Silently drawing Brisingr, Bragr hurried to catch up, stepping in the troll's own footsteps to keep the noise down. The snow was already compressed in those tracks and didn't creak.

He would have loved to cut the troll down from behind, but that would be dishonorable. Trolls were thinking things, and he had to challenge it before he attacked.

Quickly packing snow together to a ball, he threw it at the troll's left shoulder, while he sprinted around its right side.

The troll grunted and stopped, turning left to see what had hit it. When it slowly turned back, Bragr was standing right in front of it.

"Drop the female, and you may live," the Viking chief said, pointing Brisingr at the troll's huge nose.

"Huh?" the troll grunted. They were never the smartest of creatures. This one had a single eye mounted askew on its face

and long, straggly hair. Its bulbous nose was the size of Bragr's fist, and a small, withered bush grew out of one ear.

"Drop her," Bragr said, having never had conversations with a troll and already losing patience. "She is mine."

"Found," the troll managed after a pause, looking between the unconscious Josie and Bragr. "Found this."

"Mine," Bragr said, taking a step closer until the tip of the sword was a finger's breadth from the troll's nose. "Drop her!"

"Not," the troll said, its eye rolling. "Found." Then it swung its long arm at Bragr, faster than he would have guessed it could move. The big fist came at him from the side, and he ducked beneath it, placing Brisingr in its way.

The impact made a hard, unpleasant *clang*, as if he had struck stone.

But the troll felt it, too, and in the light from the brightening horizon Bragr saw it drip black blood on the snow.

"Found this," the troll said again. "Wife." Once more it swung its fist at him, and once more Bragr met the long arm with the blade of his sword. This time the troll roared with pain.

"Drop her, and you can go home," Bragr said. "It's either that or I kill you."

"Wife," the troll said.

"She's already mine," Bragr said. "She can't be yours, too."

The troll swung again, and this time the Viking had to step back to avoid the punch.

"Widow," the troll decided, having had an idea. "You dead. She widow. You die. She widow. My wife. You die. She my wife. You die. You die," the troll droned on slowly.

Bragr sighed. He could hack at this thing and hope to give it a real injury, but it had incredibly thick skin and the wounds didn't seem to bother it at all.

He may have to hit the eye and push the blade further in, hoping to pierce the troll's tiny brain.

He hadn't finished the thought when something hit him at the side of his head, so hard he staggered and fell to the ground.

It was a second troll, having snuck up on him while the other was droning on.

Bragr bounced back on his feet, furious with himself for having fallen for it. He was about to ram Brisingr into the first troll's eye when he saw that Josie was awake and struggling to get down from the troll's grip. She was doing well, too — the troll had to use both hands to try to keep her in place.

Bragr didn't hesitate. He ran at the second troll and swung the sword at its face, forcing it to pull back while he placed a hard kick in its stomach. Overwhelmed, the troll fell backwards, sitting down in the snow.

That danger gone for a moment, he ran at the other troll, ducked under its swinging fist, and slashed Brisingr at its side. The blade connected, and while the troll was trying to understand what was happening Bragr used his other hand to help push Josie off the troll's shoulder.

“Kick him!” he urged.

She got it and placed a hard kick at the troll's head. She fell to the ground behind it, head first. Bragr just had time to notice that she was still clutching her spear.

He saw no reason to continue the fight. No honor was at stake here. He ran around the troll, avoided both of its windmilling

arms, grabbed Josie, threw her over his shoulder like the troll had, and ran uphill as fast as he could.

Behind them the trolls were grunting furiously to each other, but they were too heavy to run. They didn't even try to follow.

Bragr stopped and let Josie down to the ground, looking her up and down. "Hit you on the head?" He gently touched the side of a red mark at her temple.

She smoothed down her clothing and checked her spear. "I didn't know how long his arms really were. I didn't see that fist coming."

He peered over at the horizon. It was brightening. "Trolls can move their hands fast. But nothing else about them is quick. For instance, I wonder if these two know the danger they're in."

Josie quickly grabbed his wrist, looking up at him with her crystal-clear eyes. "Don't kill them! Let's just get away."

He liked her touch and put his own hand lightly on top of hers. "Of course I won't go down there. The danger comes from Straum." He nodded towards the horizon, which was getting so bright that it was hard to look at.

Josie stared down at the trolls, who were now lumbering away down the slope. "Why?"

"If they don't get to their cave before it rises, its light will kill them."

She raised her thin, finely-curved eyebrows. "Don't tell me they turn to stone?"

"Ah, you have trolls on your planet as well?"

She pulled her hand away from his arm. "We don't have trolls there, but we have stories about them. Stories that everyone

knows are not true.”

“Raiders from Hjalmarheim went to your planet a long time ago,” Bragr said as he turned around and looked up at the top of the ridge. “More than once, I think. Perhaps they even stayed there for some time. They may have told your people stories about Gardr.”

The trolls vanished from sight and Josie turned around. “I suppose so. A lot of this feels familiar.”

Bragr started walking up the slope. When they got up to the ridge, he’d know if they had reached the coast or if they still had more valleys to walk across. “Your Garda has improved a great deal since yesterday, Josie.”

She looked away. “Sleeping helps when you want to learn to speak. The words and meanings can become clear.”

He became more and more convinced that there was more to Josie than met the eye. The way she fought, the way she learned so fast, the way she could move more quickly than anyone he’d seen... that couldn’t all be warrior spirit.

He glanced behind them as they climbed the steep hill. His foot was aching more than yesterday, and the vettir had really torn him up. He had a secret hope that the others from the *Kraken* would have landed close by and were as unharmed as he was, so that they could get to the coast together. But it wasn’t looking promising. He could only hope that the dfergir hadn’t woken up yet. When they did, they’d follow the tracks Josie and he made. The vettir he was much less worried about — they wouldn’t follow them into a new valley, and anyway they had probably forgotten about them by now.

He stopped and turned around, waiting for Josie to catch up. “Straum is about to rise. Don’t look straight at it.”

The female turned and leaned on her spear, looking back the way they'd come. "That's a bright sun."

"Brighter than yours, anyway," he agreed. "But Straum is special in every way."

As usual, it felt like a flash going through the world when the first sliver of the sun's disk came above the horizon and struck their eyes.

He heard Josie's little gasp.

"Even the way it rises is special," he said. "I've seen suns on many worlds, but nothing like Straum. It makes sure we know it is in charge."

The usual dizziness went through him, and a burning sensation tracked the marks of a warrior all over his body. Right on its heels came the feeling of strength and might. He drew his sword and saw the edge sparkle.

"Bow to your earl, Hjalmarheim!" he yelled into the valley. "Bragr and Josie are here!"

His voice echoed from the mountains around the valley. Every creature must have heard it, but they were about to leave this valley and so it didn't matter. This valley knew who owned it.

Josie clenched her hands to her ears, looking up at him with big eyes.

"I'm done," he assured her with a grin. "Sometimes a man has to make his presence known. If only right before he's leaving."

"I already know you're here," she said, picking her spear back up. "But I get it. That sun of yours — you call it Straum?"

"That's right."

“Because it makes it possible for you to travel to other planets? Like sailing on a river? A stream? Or a *straum*?”

“That must be why it’s called that,” he agreed. “Many things come from that *straum*. What did you call it before?”

“A *pulsar*,” Josie said and shielded her eyes against the intense light. “Those two bright streams it points out into space are pure energy, and they reach very far. But I’ve never heard of one spinning this slowly.”

They turned their back to the sun and climbed the last distance to the top of the ridge.

At the top, Bragr sighed. “Another valley.”

“That’s not your home?” Josie asked, her hair being blown out behind her from the sudden breeze.

“It is my earldom, but no men live in that forest. The coast is beyond those mountains on the other side.”

“No men live there,” Josie said, “but other things do?”

“Many things do,” he said. “Wood trolls, *dfergir*, *alfir*, *vettir* and all kinds of creatures. As well as game. We’ll eat better in the forest than in the mountains.”

“Maybe hunters have left food and *myod*,” Josie suggested.

He bent down to adjust his boot around the aching foot. “There will be hunter’s huts in this forest. From here I see a few places where huts are likely to be built. They will be tiny shacks.”

Straum was rising fast behind them, and the entire forest valley was bathed in its bluish light. Behind them there was no sign of the *dfergir*, but Bragr knew they were there, following them. They were annoyingly tenacious, and would follow them to his own doorstep. If they didn’t attack first.

The new valley was wide and covered in dense woods. That would provide some cover from vettir, but it would also make it easier for some enemy to sneak up on them.

He looked over at Josie. If he'd been alone, he would not at all be sure he could make it home alive. He was injured, and he had never spent a lot of time in the woods of Hjalmarheim. But with Josie with him, simply keeping her safe would take most of his effort and attention. She had a way of attracting all kinds of creatures, from skrymtir to vettir and trolls. The woods were crawling with things like that. Their chances weren't good.

But he was the earl of this valley, too. Straum gave him strength, and he should act like the owner that he was. If his foot hadn't ached, he would have felt much better about the whole thing.

Josie was still looking at Straum, one of her slender fingers touching the black thing by her ear. "Does that sun ever point its streams at this planet?"

"Sometimes," Bragr said, offering her a piece of dried meat he had saved from the cave. "We call it the Shine. Several ages of men go by between each time. Most of us hope never to experience it. But I think we're getting close."

She took the meat and put it into her mouth, chewing it cheerfully. "It is bad?"

He thought about it. "It is bad and good. Like everything in life, it depends on how you look at it. This time I've decided it will be good."

Josie slowly turned around on one heel, taking in the whole landscape around them.

His crotch was swelling again. What was it about this alien woman that made her so alluring? Certainly her shape and her scent and her softness made her attractive. And then there was this warrior spirit in her that he'd seen from the first moment, that defiant look in her eye. She was not complaining about any of this, she had simply promised that she would get revenge on him. Then she handled vettir, caves, myod and trolls as well as any warrior Bragr had ever seen. He was sure most of his men would have whined more than she had. She may be small and round, but she was as tough as any herjer.

If she hadn't been a captive, he would have tried seducing her at some point. But the way things were, she had been forced into this and it would be dishonorable of him to attempt anything. She had kissed him, though. So she couldn't be *all* repulsed by him, despite having vowed revenge.

She nodded to the dark mountains in the east. "Why is there no snow on those mountains? They look really high."

"They're hot," he explained curtly, not wanting to think about that part of his earldom right now.

Throwing a final glance down in the valley they were leaving, he spotted the dfergir far down the slope. They were just specks against the white snow, slowly moving up the hill.

Bragr grabbed Josie's wrist and pulled her with him. "It's time to leave."

They ran down the other side of the ridge, at just enough of an angle to keep their balance on the steep hill. The tree line was still a *rost* away. On this side the snow was much softer, and they sank into it to their ankles. The only comfort was that the dfergir would struggle even more, with their short legs. On the other hand, they were lighter, so—

“Look!” Josie yelled behind him. He spun around, hand fumbling for Brisingr.

She was pointing down the hill, to the edge of the trees. There were many dark shapes coming out from the woods and up the hill. They moved fast, but with a stiffness that told him exactly what they were.

“Skrymtir,” he fretted. “Skrymtir in Hjalmarheim!”

He quickly went through their options. They could turn and go back to the first valley. That meant running into the dfergir. If those delayed them, they might have to fight the skrymtir anyway. Fight them from below, while the enemy would be coming from uphill and so have a great advantage. *And* he had to protect Josie while also fighting.

This was not looking good. But she could not see his concern. He had to act with perfect confidence.

“Finally some entertainment! We will fight our way through them,” he said, forcing a grin to encourage Josie. “Like a red-hot blade through a tin of butter.”

- JOSIE -

She looked at the stick in her hand. It wasn't a red-hot anything. But it was more than she'd had last time.

"Yes," Bragr rumbled calmly. "Now you have a weapon, and they won't take you by surprise."

She looked down at the skrymtir. There had to be a hundred of them, coming up the hill to meet them.

Bragr walked up to her, confident as ever. "You're a good fighter with a staff. Aim for their heads and whack as hard as you can. Use the tip of the spear to run them through. And remember, you're not killing anyone. They're not alive. It's just witchcraft."

"I know," she said, his confidence making her feel better for the fight against the zombies. "Let's find a place that's higher, so it's hard for them to attack."

"Perhaps," Bragr said, looking up the slope. "It would help us waste less time on these things. Being at the very top would be better, but it's too far to go now. There, that looks like a steep part."

They made their way to the spot he had pointed to. It looked no steeper to Josie than most of the other places, but she was

happy to help him maintain that illusion for them both.

She tried to pack some snow into a snowball, thinking it might be possible to start a small one rolling down and then grow much bigger by the time it hit the creepy skrymtir down there. But the snow was far too dry.

Bragr gave her a little smile. “This will be too easy to be a worthy test of your warrior skills, Josie. But it’s better than nothing. Try to see it not as wasted time, but as a simple drill for fighting against more serious enemies. I can picture how you beat up two of my biggest huskarls, Eystein and Haraldr. They still can’t believe it!” His deep laugh rolled over the valley. “Which reminds me. When we get back, you must give them both a horn of myod and loudly thank them for the sport and for letting you win. It will help them recover some of their honor. Everyone will know that you won fairly, of course.”

“They were on the ship when it broke up,” Josie said, swinging her stick through the air and thrusting it like a spear. “Do you think they survived?”

“I would be very angry with them if they didn’t,” Bragr said. “And they know better than to face my wrath.”

The skrymtir made their way up the slope. Even from this distance, their movements were stiff and unnatural. Some of them were almost as big as Bragr, but most were smaller. They wore rags that hung off their rotting bodies. Here and there bare bones were visible. They all carried some kind of weapon, long rough knives or cutlasses or simple metal rods.

Josie was horrified. “They’ve been robbed from their graves!”

“It’s a frightfully evil thing to take the dead and turn them into wretches like that,” Bragr seethed. “Gornt must be stopped!”

Josie was creeped out by the sight of the zombies, but she started to feel the same anger as Bragr. “I think you’re right.”

The first of the skrymtir were now almost close enough to reach. They moved silently, lifeless eyes staring ahead and not moving.

Bragr took Josie’s hand and looked into her eyes. “Remember that fighting a skrymtir and destroying it is a good deed, restoring dignity to the man or woman whose body it was.”

Then he turned around.

“Sharpest steel

Cleave the foe

All will know

Brisingr is out!”

Swinging his sword, he cut into the first two skrymtir and sent them tumbling down the hill.

Josie stood ready behind him while he quickly dispatched the first dozen attackers. Then the main wave of zombies reached them, some from below and some coming in from the side.

Josie took aim at the nearest, swung her staff, and connected at the side of the zombie’s head with a sound like a wooden bat hitting a bag of potato chips. Its knees gave way under it and it sagged to the ground, sliding a few yards down on the snow.

“Good hit!” Bragr yelled. “Soon you must name your spear!”

The next one swung a metal rod at her, but it was badly aimed and she ducked out of the way before she carefully thrust the point of her spear through the zombie’s chest and pulled it back out. The zombie collapsed, thankfully without spraying

blood. Or bleeding much at all, Josie noticed. That was fine with her.

Glancing at Bragr, she saw he had cut down two dozen zombies and sent them rolling and sliding down the steep hill. It was a machine-like fight, mechanical and routine, and he clearly took no joy in it.

But it was challenging. Josie had to stay on her guard and think several steps ahead, even with the neural lace helping to make her moves quicker and harder than otherwise.

The key was to keep the zombies far enough away that they couldn't reach her with their weapons, and for that purpose her long staff was just about perfect. She could swing it like a long baton or she could stab with it when presented with a bare, undefended chest. She still had the kitchen knife in her belt, but she was hoping to never have to use it for combat.

Some of the skrymtir were female, she noted with a shudder. Shit, if she were to see Aretha's face on one of these things, she'd faint on the spot.

She whacked a big, lumbering zombie at the knees, then stabbed the spear into its throat and pushed so it toppled down the hill.

Bragr looked behind him and smiled. "I'm starting to think you like this."

"I hate it," Josie said sincerely. "But at least they're not as good as the other ones."

"Gornt himself was there when he boarded our ship," Bragr said, thrusting through a skrymt and kicking it off his blade. "He keeps the best skrymtir close to him. And I imagine his witchcraft is weaker if he's far away."

“I almost wish he were here,” Josie replied, swinging her staff like a baseball bat and sending two small skrymtir somersaulting down the hill. “Then we could perhaps save more dead bodies from being... *desecrated* like this.”

“Desecrated,” Bragr said slowly, as if tasting the English word. “I like it. Yes, Gornt must be taken out, one way or the other.”

The onslaught of skrymtir was thinning out, and they had no problem dispatching the final dozen stragglers.

The very last was a huge male carrying a rusty ax.

Bragr stood aside and gestured invitingly, a tight smile on his face. “This is the biggest of them all. I think *you* should finish this battle and complete the victory.”

Josie waited until the zombie was close enough to strike at her. It swung its ax, but she stepped quickly aside, then lunged in closer, swinging her stick like a tennis racket. It hit the side of the skrymt’s neck with a sound like uncooked spaghetti breaking. For a second the zombie stood there on straight legs, swaying, its long-dead eyes staring emptily at the sky. Then it toppled backwards and fell down the slope, end over end until it started to roll.

At the edge of the woods below, the snow was dark with unmoving skrymtir.

“I’m glad they don’t bleed much,” Josie said as she stuck the tip of her spear into the snow and twisted it around to clean it as well as she could.

Bragr stuck his blade all the way down in the snow several times, then replaced it in his belt. “The blood doesn’t give them strength anymore. It’s only Gornt’s witchery.”

Josie didn't believe in witchcraft, but until she could explain how those zombies worked, she wouldn't try to contradict his superstition. She was pretty sure it had something to do with that pulsar in the sky, but she would have to think more about it. "Why were they here, if he's not?"

"Could be just to harass my people," Bragr said. "Or we surprised them. I don't think they knew we'd be here. How are you feeling?" He looked her searchingly up and down.

"I'm feeling good about winning," she said. "I thought it would be much harder, but as a first battle, I guess I couldn't have wished for more."

Bragr plucked a piece of skrymtir fabric off her hair. "Oh, this was not your first battle. The first, that I know of, was against me at your station. Your side lost it, but then you were on the winning side against Gornt some time later, on the ship. We'll count fights against vettir or trolls, so this was your fifth battle. And you scored a great victory, while releasing all those bodies from Gornt's hold. You will do well on Gardr, Josie. It's a world for warriors."

For some reason, his words warmed her. "I never felt like a warrior until right now."

He reached out again, this time gently stroking Josie's cheek with one knuckle. "We fight well together. I can't help wondering what else we might do well together."

The breath caught in her throat. She'd had the same thought, and in her mind's eye she kept seeing glimpses of some really hot times with him. "I'm sure you say that to all your warriors."

He laughed, the deep voice echoing from the mountainside. "Just the ones I really like. Now we must leave. Those dfergir

must be close to the ridge.” They started walking down towards the woods, aiming well to the side of the mass of lifeless skrymtir.

Before they went in among the trees, Bragr threw a glance up the hill. “There they are. They will keep following us.”

“What do they want?” Josie asked. “They’re not animals, are they?”

“They are thinking creatures,” Bragr said. “What they want is usually not possible to understand. Their language is strange, and none of my people speak it. Now I think they follow us because we were in their valley and they have nothing better to do. Once they start doing something, it takes a lot for them to stop.”

Using the headset, Josie could easily spot the creatures against the snow. They were short, but wide as they trudged through the snow, leaving deep tracks. “Are they dangerous?”

“They’re good fighters. But they will not want to marry you, like the trolls did.”

“They just want to kill us?”

Bragr walked in among the trees. “Or take us captive. It has been known to happen, but nobody has returned to tell us why. Our best guess is that they like to eat us.”

In the woods the snow was still loose. Close to the roots of the trees Josie could spot the bare ground, five feet down. The trees themselves reminded her of pines. They were tall and straight, with a dark sternness to them that made the forest seem dark and forbidding. She could easily imagine more of those skrymtir lurking close by.

She walked on, staying six feet behind Bragr, being alert for new sounds or shadows up above. The skrymtir were bad, and

they could obviously do really serious damage. But they were also slow and didn't seem able to think fast — they were mindless. The vettir were much worse, and she'd prefer to not have anything more to do with them.

They walked fast among the trees, Bragr sticking to a mostly straight line. He often had to duck to get past trees with low-hanging branches, and Josie started to worry about how he would fight when the trees were that close together. How could he swing his sword?

Huh. Here she was, an abductee worrying about the welfare of her abductor. Well, for now, she relied completely on him to survive on this alien and remarkably hostile planet—

Her head whipped to the side. Was that movement?

She stopped and stared.

No, nothing. She was just too tense, seeing things that didn't exist. She walked on, jogging to stay close to Bragr and making absolutely sure it was his tattooed and wounded back she was following, not some creature from out of the fairy tales.

Another imagined movement got her looking the other way. Again there was nothing.

Damn, was that how this walk would be? Always so tense that she started to see things—

On instinct she spun around.

A shadow was coming right at her, and all she could see was fur and teeth before she yelped and clumsily thrust the spear at the attacker. The oncoming predator, discovered at the last moment, ducked under the stick and went for her leg. White fangs closed around her ankle before she could change her grip on the spear and whack it across the attackers back.

But the creature didn't let go. It started to growl and shake its head as if to tear Josie's foot off.

Getting a better grip on her stick, Josie swung it again, hitting the predator's softer underside with a glancing blow.

It let go with a whine and bounced away on light paws. It was shiny, pitch black, and looked like a wolf, but it was smaller and had six legs and two tails, both standing out straight behind the creature.

Josie got ready to swing the staff again, as the not-wolf ducked its head to the ground and growled at her. Then it jumped to the side, tilted its head curiously, and lowered its head once more as if expecting Josie to attack.

Just as she understood what was happening, Bragr came running, getting between Josie and the predator and drawing his sword with a deadly, metallic *zhinggg*.

"No!" Josie yelled and grabbed his upper arm. "He's only playing!"

Bragr stiffened and shook her off him. "Strange way to play. He almost tore your foot off."

"No, he didn't." She showed him the boot that was a part of her uniform. There were shallow tooth marks in the outer layer, but that was it. "He wasn't even trying."

"A *fenr*," Bragr said as he checked her boot to confirm she was okay. "A young one, a pup, or it wouldn't have attacked alone."

"He's not attacking," Josie said. "Look at him!"

The fenr jumped into the air again, as lightly as a kitten. He didn't growl anymore, just blinked its yellow eyes and twirled his tails up as one, then untwisted them again.

Josie opened the pouch on her belt and took out one of the pieces of wrapped candy Bragr had offered her back on his ship. She unwrapped it and held it out to the young fenr. She knew that dogs weren't supposed to eat chocolate, but this was an alien creature and the marzipan piece only had a thin coating of chocolate on it. "Let's try to make friends with him."

The fenr took two slow steps closer, then bounced right back before it tried again. It was clearly scared of Bragr, so Josie moved away from him and offered the candy bar again. The fenr came closer, its head close to the ground as if sneaking up on prey. When it was three feet away from Josie, it bounced into the air and jumped back before starting to sneak forwards once more.

It kept getting closer, but Josie wasn't confident enough in her judgment about alien predators to want its teeth close to her again. She tossed the piece of candy towards the fenr, intending for it to land on the snow so the creature could decide what to do with it. To her astonishment the little six-legged pup pounced at the small brown bar while still in the air, caught it between its teeth, and crouched down on the snow with it between its clawed paws, gnawing at it with great concentration.

"He thinks it's a game," Josie said, smiling at the sheer cuteness of the puppy.

"Dangerous game," Bragr growled and scanned the woods for more of the fenrir. "His pack must be close."

The pup got up, gave Josie a yellow look, and trotted away with the candy bar in its mouth.

Josie stared after the black creature. "Are there many of them?"

“There are some packs in the woods,” the Viking said and sheathed his sword. “The only consolation is that they are no more friendly with the dfergir than with us. Hopefully that one will find better prey than you. He’s going in the right direction.”

“I don’t think he’s looking for prey. He could have done much more damage to me than he did.”

“He could,” Bragr agreed. “And a fully grown one could do even more.”

“How big do they get?”

He put his hand by his shoulder. “Up to here, ten times the weight of that one. We’ll stay away from those things if we can. Their meat is sour and stringy.”

They walked on, Josie looking over her shoulder to not be surprised again, and she noticed that Bragr did, too.

The pulsar climbed in the sky, but it didn’t get much warmer. They had just crossed a frozen river when Bragr stopped and waited for Josie to catch up.

“This is as good a place as any to wait for the dfergir to catch up. It’s better if we choose the place for the fight, not they.”

Josie looked around. She could see why this would be a good place for an ambush. The frozen river with a thick layer of snow over the ice formed a flat surface without cover, while the river bank they had just climbed up provided cover that Bragr and she could hide behind.

“Do you have anything to throw?” she asked, looking at her own spear.

Bragr looked at the trees around them. “We don’t throw things at an enemy. We fight face to face.”

I'll take that as a 'no'. “Can we fight those dfergir and expect to win?”

- BRAGR -

It was a question he would have loved to know the answer to.

He stared back to the spot where he expected the dfergir to appear. “They’re following us, and my guess is that they are catching up. We are getting hungry, but I can’t hunt for game while they’re this close.”

“I can go for longer without eating,” Josie said. “And I have these.” She opened a pouch on her belt and took out a handful of the small pieces of wrapped candy that he’d offered her back on the Kraken.

“We can *walk* for longer without eating,” Bragr agreed. “But *fighting* gets harder when you’re hungry. It’s just how it is. And we have to expect more fighting in this forest.”

He took in the landscape and decided on a plan. He and Josie would keep walking on this far side of the river so that their tracks appeared to continue. But then they would turn to the side and double back here. The dfergir would see their tracks continue and would not be alert for when Bragr suddenly jumped out of the snow and came at them from behind, Brisingr swinging.

He grabbed Josie’s hand. “Come on.”

They did as he planned and were soon back in the same spot, having made convincing tracks continuing into the woods across the river from where the dfergir would appear.

“They can be here at any moment,” he said and started digging into the snow under a tree where the signs of activity would not be visible from a distance. “We have to get out of sight.”

Josie helped dig, and soon they had a shallow ditch they would both fit inside. Bragr cut branches off nearby trees and used them to line the ditch. That way they wouldn’t have to lie directly on the snow.

They laid down and made themselves as hard to see as possible. Bragr would have preferred to simply hide behind a tree, but their trunks weren’t thick enough to cover him completely.

Josie was on her side and pushed her behind into him. “It’s going to get cold,” she whispered.

The soft, warm touch immediately caused his crotch to swell, to the point where he worried about the bulge in his pants being visible above the snow.

“Let me know if the cold gets too much,” he replied. “I can embrace you closer.”

This close to her, it was impossible to ignore the warmth from her body, the sound of her quick breathing, her racing heartbeat, her little movements, and the sweet scent of her. She didn’t smell alien at all, just female. A sweaty female who had walked through the wilderness for hours and days. It was an intoxicating mixture of sensations that made it impossible for him to control his body’s excitement.

“How will we know when they’re close?” Josie whispered.

“We’ll know,” he grunted, not really sure. Then he heard something and squeezed Josie’s hand so she’d be quiet.

It was the fast footsteps of dfergir walking in line. The soft shuffling sound resonated through the snow and came closer. They must have passed the frozen river and climbed the bank, and now they were following the tracks into the woods.

To Bragr’s surprise, he could hear their voices as they spoke their harsh, guttural language between them as they walked. It was usually not a good idea to speak too much in the woods, to not attract enemies. But perhaps that was different for dfergir — perhaps they *wanted* to be heard, perhaps that was a way to keep attackers away.

The sound of their speaking slowly faded. Now Bragr didn’t have much time. The dfergir would soon reach the spot where his and Josie’s tracks would turn and go back here. That would alarm them.

He counted to twelve, then quickly rose up from the snowy trench and drew Brisingr. Just spotting the back of the last dferg among the trees, he ran after them, fast and silent.

There were eight of them, short and wide, walking with a waddling gait on their short legs. They carried their axes and mattocks and hammers over their shoulders, each weapon almost as long as its dferg owner was tall.

“Brisingr is out!” Bragr shortened the sword’s battle poem as he came within striking distance.

The rearmost dferg was so shocked he fell to the side while trying to whirl around, his heavy ax dragging him to the ground. The next one spun and raised his mattock in a strange defensive stance.

Bragr couldn't hit an enemy who was down, so he jumped over the first one and swung his sword at the next. The dferg had plainly never used his mining tool for fighting before, and he held it with helpless clumsiness. Bragr adjusted his first swing to cut the wooden handle off in the middle. It splintered, and the heavy mattock fell from the dferg's hands and sunk deep into the snow.

Bragr ran past the dferg and attacked the next in line. That one was holding a heavy sledgehammer with a metal handle, and he was already mid-swing when Bragr jumped in close and punched the dferg in the nose with his left hand. The dferg lost his grip on the hammer, and it flew into the distance, slowly rotating in the air until it hit a tree.

The first dferg had collected himself and finally answered Bragr's challenge with a guttural war cry of his own. He lifted his ax high over his head, as if preparing to chop wood, then ran at Bragr with a loud yell.

Bragr would have sidestepped, but in the deep snow he couldn't move as fast as he wanted, and the dferg's crazy assault surprised him. Not wanting to cut the dferg down, he took a step back but misjudged the distance to a tree. He hit it with the back of his calf, tripped, and fell awkwardly back. The dferg ran in close and aimed his ax at Bragr's foot, deep-set eyes wide over the bearded face.

Bragr pulled the leg to him and tried to get up, but the ground was slippery near the tree, and he couldn't let go of Brisingr. He succeeded in pushing himself further back, but the dferg only came closer and brought the ax down.

There was a wooden *bang*, and the ax missed his foot by a finger's breadth. The dferg's eyes rolled up, and he toppled forwards on the snow.

Behind him was Josie, spinning around to slam her weapon into the face of another ax-armed dferg behind her.

Bragr slowly got to his feet, not sure if he could believe his eyes. The small female whirled around on the snow, the thick end of her spear a blur as she fought the dfergir with vicious ferocity. The three remaining dfergir tried to form a battle circle, standing back to back, but Josie moved the spear faster than the eye could follow, and they couldn't aim their weapons before she whacked them around their heads and chests, breaking their attempts to swing their weapons. One fell down and two ran, panicked by the whirlwind of pain suddenly among them. It was as if Freyja herself had appeared in their midst, Bragr thought, a goddess of battle chasing the dfergir home to their mines. It was an incredible sight, and he didn't even consider helping out — Josie was in total control.

The last dferg hobbled away and Josie bent double, breathing hard.

Bragr ran over and supported her. "Did they get you?" But there was no sign of blood anywhere on her.

"I'm... fine," the alien female managed. "Just... need rest." Her breath came with a hollow rasp, and she was paler than Bragr liked to see.

He grabbed her and sat straight down on the snow with her on his lap. It took longer than Bragr had expected for her breathing to slow down to a normal rate, her throat still squeaking with each gasping breath. She started reaching down to scoop snow into her mouth, first with one hand and then with both, as if in desperation.

Bragr helped, offering her big handfuls of hard-packed snow. She ate it all with a hunger he'd never seen before, not even at after-raid feasts in the gildeskal, the feast hall at his estate. He

opened the pouch in her belt and took out the alien pieces of sweets he had stolen from her station. She pulled off a glove, and with slender, trembling fingers she tore off the wrappers before she pushed whole bars into her mouth, looking up at him with fear and urgency in her eyes as she chewed, brown-stained spittle running down her chin.

“Eat it all. You’ll be fine.” He quickly unwrapped the rest of them, then cursed himself for not having more to offer her. The fight had plainly drained her completely and she needed food and water.

Bragr spotted dark items in the snow, things that the dfergir had dropped in their haste to get away. Gently putting Josie down on the snow, he sprinted over, hoping they had dropped something useful. One of the items was a rough bag made from bark, and he ran back with it. Tearing open the neat knot that held it closed, he found a pack of still green leaves and opened it. It was clearly food, although he couldn’t identify it. It looked like a dried stew, the kind of food that would keep for a long time and be ideal for travel.

He squatted and held it up to Josie’s face. “It’s food for dfergir, but they grow strong, so it can’t be all bad.”

Josie grabbed a piece, briefly sniffed it, and then bit into it, chewing with less urgency now. “Good,” she managed between mouthfuls. “Get some for you, too.”

“When you’re done,” Bragr said. “You just defeated a full band of dfergir all by yourself. Some rest is necessary.” As a last resort to feed her he briefly considered opening one of his veins and letting her suck blood from him, but her insane hunger seemed to have abated.

She nibbled on a snowball. “That was crazy. Sorry, I used too much energy in the fight.”

He sat down and unceremoniously lifted her onto his lap again. “No need to apologize. That was a legendary victory. I’m tempted to compose a *drapa* telling of this battle.” He thought for a moment.

“*Bright was the day and cold was the snow,*” he droned softly, the way Heidran would when composing heroic verses about some battle they’d won.

“*Dfergir they followed the earl and his spear.*

Josie was she, a maid from the stars.

Well, it’s a beginning.”

She laid her head on his chest. “Is that poem about me? I hope it will give me some *agency*. And tell them I look really good in this *uniform*. Maybe fit in ‘*curvy*’ a few times?”

Bragr gathered her closer to him and stood up with her in his arms. “First I must learn what those words mean. I’ll ask you to teach me when we’re sitting in front of a nice fire.”

“Fine.” She closed her eyes, curling up against him, letting him carry her.

He picked up her spear and quickly examined it. It had a good few marks of impacts with dfergir helmets and vettir claws, but it was perfectly intact. He wondered if anyone would ever believe that this small female had defeated eight dfergir with a wooden stick. Holy Zhor, the way she had moved!

Well, they weren’t trying again. Nothing moved among the trees. And if they did, he would be much less gentle with them. He had announced his presence with his war cry before he attacked, and there was no need to do that again. The dfergir knew that this was his land.

Only the position of the sun told him which direction he was going. One tree looked much like the next, and with the snow covering everything it was hard to make out any landmarks.

But when the afternoon had passed and the shadows were getting longer, it was clear that he was walking uphill.

That was good. From the other side of the valley, he had spotted a few places where hunters may have built a hut because the terrain would help keep it hidden. He was approaching one of those places now.

Soon he was on top of a gentle hill, covered in trees and bushes. On the south side another round hill was growing out of it, covered in green moss with a dusting of snow, much smaller and with a curious regularity to it.

He walked over and kicked at its side. It was stone, but not bedrock — it was several smaller stones stacked on top of each other, carefully laid in a circle. The walls curved inwards until they met at the very top, forming a dome. On its eastern wall hung a small iron hammer — the sign of Zhor, to keep evil away.

It was a hut, a hunting cabin carefully built by men long dead. Nobody built huts from stones anymore, but many centuries ago Hjalmarheim had been devoid of trees. Rocks were the only material to use, and all those huts were still standing unless they had been deliberately razed. Today nobody knew how to build them.

There was no door in the walls, but the hammer showed where the entrance was.

“Josie,” he whispered to the sleeping female.

She opened her eyes to moist, clear little slits. “More dfergir?”

“Hopefully not,” he said. “Are you able to stand up?” He set her down.

Josie grabbed hold of him for a while, testing her legs. “I think so.”

Bragr handed her back her spear and got down on all fours, digging into the snow under the hammer. Reaching the ground, he widened the hole until he could open the wooden lid. Under it was a tunnel that went into the hut.

Ducking back up, he scanned the woods for dangers. “Yell if you see anything.”

Josie swung her spear through the air. “Easier if I just hit them myself.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. But all our enemies will have learned how to deal with us. Or rather, how not to.” He got back down and crawled into the hut.

It was surprisingly big, and he could stand upright under the middle of the dome. Light came in through dozens of tiny transparent crystals carefully placed in voids between the bigger stones. The hut must be ancient.

There was a fireplace with a pyramid of wood and kindling, ready to light. Several wooden chests and furs were pushed up to the walls. This was obviously a hut that was still in use by hunters among his people. If so, they had probably modified it... yes. He spotted the added wooden wall and small door.

“*That* would be pleasant,” he muttered to himself, checking the chests and finding them full of unspoiled meat, dried fruits, and pots of frozen myod. To his surprise, there wasn’t a single sign of rodents. These huts were extremely well built, so that not even a little *musr* could sneak in. And yet the air was fresh

and the smoke from the fire could escape through the tiny cracks in the rocks above the fireplace. He crawled back out.

Josie was looking over at the setting sun, shielding her eyes. “When do you expect that Shine you talked about?”

“Probably not this year,” he replied, not seeing any threats nearby. “My *skaldr* tell me there is no way to tell exactly.”

“Your bards?” Josie asked, a curious little smile on her lips. “*Those* are the ones you ask about Straum?”

“They are the ones who know the lore,” he explained. “From the old poems, the drapa, the stories about other Shines. Anyway, I hope the oracle would have told me if it will happen this year. Want to see the inside of the hut?”

He let her crawl first, enjoying the sight of her behind when she was crouched down.

She was appropriately impressed. “This is really *cool!* It’s like a stone *igloo!*”

“A *kull igglo,*” he agreed, happy to see Josie back to her energetic self. “We will be safe from vettir and fenrir in here. Dfergir would never raze a stone house. Only trolls could destroy it, but if they haven’t done so until now, they never will. I see many runes here, the signs of Zhor and Freyja.”

“Built by hunters, right?” Josie said, finding one of the small crystals in the wall and putting her eye to it. “You can see outside, too. Snow and trees and a red sky. No trolls.”

Bragr lit the fire and put a pot of myod on one of the chests, dragging it closer to the fire so the liquid would thaw. “And they stocked it well. Again I want to reward the hunters who use it.”

Josie sat down on the hard-stamped dirt floor, cross-legged. “Seems like the hunters here like to be ready, stocking the huts and caves in case they need them. Or in case *we* need them, I guess.”

Bragr blew into the fire as it caught and spread. “Those who use this hut will be glad to know that it was of use to their earl, especially when he really needed it. The same is true for the cave. And yet I will reward them and honor them for having made such preparations, for having kept their hunting cabins in good condition, for having stocked them with food and drink, for having foresight. Not for me, but for themselves, for their next hunting trip. Look, the fire was ready. All I had to do was light it. I *want* hunters like that among my people. I *want* farmers like that. I *want* shipwrights and blacksmiths and potters like that! I want them all smart and prepared, strong and healthy, I want their children happy and growing, I want them all to prosper and to live happy lives in a safe land where they are left alone.”

- JOSIE -

There was so much passion and feeling in Bragr's voice that Josie had to look up.

He was staring emptily into the fire, hands on hips, his thoughts far away. He was obviously very serious about it.

That didn't surprise her. It fit with the rest of his personality, that need to protect and keep safe, even if it meant injury to himself. Being one of Bragr's people meant having him shield you from trouble as well as he could. Josie had been on that side of him for a while now, and she didn't like to think about losing that sense of being taken care of and protected. She'd never have thought something like that would be addictive. But then, she'd never needed a protector before, except very recently.

"You didn't leave *Unity* alone," she pointed out mildly.

He poured myod into two cups and gave her one, filled to the brim, some of it still frozen. "*Unity* is the space station? Where was *their* earl when I came with my longships to raid them? Where was the warrior who would rather die than have someone conquer and oppress them? I didn't see him. I only

saw one warrior there, and I brought her with me. Perhaps I felt that she was too good for that place.”

Josie took a sip of the fluid, still being both hungry and thirsty after that intense battle with the dfergir. She noticed that Bragr didn't say 'your station' or 'your earl'. He was already thinking of Josie as one of his own. She should be annoyed at how it warmed her. But she also realized it was a mark of honor — they had fought together, and she had saved his good foot from the ax of that dferg. It was his way of showing that she had earned his respect.

“The station chief never expected longships to come,” she said. “Nobody knew that the station might be raided.”

“They had forgotten that we came before,” Bragr said, starting to prepare food. “In fairness, it was a long time ago.” He got up and crawled out without another word, holding a big iron pot. When he came back the pot was full of hard-packed snow.

“We need water for cooking,” he explained. “And for something else, I hope.” He opened the low door in one side of the hut. It led to another part that had been walled off. Inside there it was dark, and Josie wondered if it was some kind of bathroom.

Bragr ducked his head to go through the door. “Ah. Even better than I thought.” He got a piece of burning wood from the fire and took it into the other room, then lit something in there.

Josie craned her neck to look inside, but it was still dark. She just saw some glimpses of bare wood, like shelves. “What's in there?”

Bragr came back out and closed the door. “You'll see. Now, you finished all the sweets you brought. But these dried fruits

should be sweet, too.” He offered her a big handful of dried berries that looked like blue raisins. “If you’re still hungry.”

Josie accepted them and tasted one, then popped half of them into her mouth and chewed. They weren’t as sweet as raisins, but the tanginess made them at least as good. “I still am. It was a long day.”

He looked at her, blue eyes glowing in the dim hut. “And a short battle. No blood drawn, even. The dfergir ran as if chased by a furious Freyja.”

Josie shrugged, enjoying the sweetness of the berries. “They were not used to fighting, I think. Not that kind of fight, anyway.”

Bragr laughed. “Nobody would expect a small female to move so fast and to whack them around the ears with a club! They were more shocked than hurt. They must have thought you were some kind of new enemy, a valkyrie or a vette. How is it that you fight so well? Or rather, move so fast?”

Joise wasn’t sure if she wanted to give away that secret of her neural lace just now, so she settled for a half-truth. “Your pulsar gives me strength.”

“Straum gives you strength? You? An *alien*? Did your old sun do the same?”

“Not like this. Our Sun is *very* different from your Straum. I’m not sure if I even fathom how different.”

He gave her a long look, clearly not believing her. Damn, it was so hard to deceive honest people.

“Straum gives you strength, and still you need to eat and drink like a crazy woman right after. Straum gives me strength too, but not like that.”

She looked away. Would it be a bad thing if he knew? She was still not sure about his intentions with her. But she had a feeling he wouldn't betray her.

Such a weird thing to think about my kidnapper.

The hut was quiet except for the crackling from the fire and the soft hissing sound from the boiling pot. It smelled good, like a spicy casserole.

Bragr drained his cup of myod and refilled it, as well as Josie's. This time there was no ice in it. "When Gornt was the Earl of Hjalmarheim, he was not well liked by the people. He was callous, uncaring. He would go on raids to other planets and tell his men to murder as many aliens as possible. After the raids, everyone had to show him the heads of two dead aliens before they would be allowed to get aboard the ship to go back home. Those who could only show one or none were left behind on the alien world, having to face the anger of the raided people. Many families lost their sons and daughters that way."

Josie changed her position to get more comfortable. She could tell that this would be a long story, and it felt right to her. This was how humans on Earth had lived for many generations, in small huts and caves, telling stories around the fire after the day's work was done.

Bragr grabbed a fur and tossed it over to her. "Sit on this. The floor is too cold. Other families lost their fathers when Gornt came to their farmstead to claim taxes and they didn't have the full amount that he thought he was owed. He would kill the oldest male and take the rest of the family captive, selling them as thralls to other realms on Gardr. He would set his eye on attractive women and force them to join him in his jarlagard. Most of them were never seen again. He would

stage raids on his own lands, stealing from his own people and killing them if they resisted. He married three women and murdered them all, accusing two of them of faithlessness and having them executed. The third he poisoned.”

Bragr paused and drank from his cup. “He was the most terrible earl Hjalmarheim has ever had. Hjalmarheim was in a state of despair. For the first time, there was famine. The raiders came home with only dead aliens but nothing of real value. The vettir and trolls dared to come closer to the coast, dfergir raided homesteads and took everyone captive, and even darker forces were seen in the east, coming from the dark, hot mountains.”

“That must have been a difficult time,” Josie said, wishing she had something more profound to offer. All she could do was sympathize.

Bragr grabbed a rough clay plate and loaded it with steaming food from the pot. He took a wooden spoon from one of the chests and handed it all to Josie. “Be careful. It’s hot.”

She tasted the casserole, finding it spicy and savory. “It’s really good.”

Bragr got a plate for himself. “It’s a simple meal, but nourishing. It’s only dried meat and vegetables. My hunters know what’s needed after a long day in the vilmark. Yes, it was difficult. I spent as much time as possible away from the jarlagard. Gornt was never evil towards me, but as I grew up I realized that he was hated by everyone else. And that they had every reason to hate him.”

He took the pot off the fire.

“Late one night, I was traveling in the land with a shortship. My two warrior companions and I found an abandoned barn

and slept there. In the middle of the night, I awoke and the barn was full of men and women. They were holding torches, but not swords. I asked them what they wanted with me. They said they wanted me as their earl, as their chief and their captain. I said they already had those things in Earl Gornt. They said they wanted him gone and me earl in his stead. ‘And if I refuse, you’ll kill me,’ I snarled, thinking I understood their errand. I drew Brisingr to defend myself to the last. But they showed their empty hands and said that if I refused, they would all leave, return to their homes and wait for Gornt’s men to come and kill them for having been to see me. It surprised me. I think they saw that on my face.”

Bragr frowned, a thousand miles away.

“They asked me to come out of the barn. I did, and outside was an ocean of torches in the night. Thousands of people had come from all over Hjalmarheim. To beg me to rid them of Gornt and to take his place as earl. It was all completely silent. Just torchlights as far as the eye could see.”

Bragr stopped, staring into the fire as if reliving the moment.

“Was it a hard decision?” Josie asked, already knowing the outcome. He must have agreed, or he wouldn’t be earl now.

“They were asking me to commit treason. I knew Gornt’s shortcomings, but I also knew his weakness: he loved his son. Perhaps his son was the only person he ever loved. Loving someone is not a good idea if you have enemies. And Gornt had many. Yes, it was a hard decision. But I did not refuse. I took up arms against the earl, waged war and deposed him, taking his place as earl. It was a quick and bloody war. Gornt was so surprised that he couldn’t mount a solid defense. I had hit his only weakness, and I hit it hard. When it was over, every elder and lendmann of Hjalmarheim came and accepted

me as their earl, even if the old earl was still alive. It should have felt good, I suppose. But it was only hollow. Because only I could have betrayed Gornt and won.” He sent Josie a quick, blue glance that spoke volumes.

“Only the son he loved could defeat him,” Josie added softly, having figured it out. “He was defenseless against his son. Against *you*.”

The flickering light from the fire danced on the Viking chief’s bearded face. “Defenseless. Yes. Only his men fought for him, while he stayed mostly out of it. He only took part in the last battle, when it was clear he would lose the war. Everyone urged me to kill my father, but I couldn’t. I banished him from Hjalmarheim and let him have the longship *Dragon’s Fire*. He renamed it the *Dead Son*.”

“His way of saying that you’re dead to him?”

“Or that he’ll kill me. Or something else that only he knows.”

Josie reached out and put her hand on his knee. “Thank you for telling me this.”

Bragr shrugged. “Everyone else knows. I thought it only fair that you know, too.”

“Do your people regret asking you to take over?”

“I don’t think they do. But I suppose I would be the last to know if they were unhappy.”

“If your father was that bad as a ruler, you seem to be completely different from him,” Josie pondered. “I think you made the right decision. Your warriors clearly admire and trust you. You made sure nobody died on the *Unity*. And the way you just talked about your people a little while ago... if it’s true, then I think you’re a good ruler.”

“I’m different from him on the outside,” Bragr said slowly. “But I *am* his son, and I feel it every day. When I say those things, it’s mostly to remind myself of the earl I want to be. I have certain... urges that I don’t act on. It’s sometimes hard not to. And of course, some I *do* act on.” He sent her another quick glance.

“Taking me from the *Unity* was an urge you acted on?”

Bragr leant forwards to pull the boot off his injured foot. “I’ve never taken captives before. I stopped that practice as soon as I became earl. But with you, I didn’t even think about it before I was sitting in the *Kraken*, trying to feed you sweets. I just wanted to bring you along, and I couldn’t resist it.”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t?”

He thought about it. “When I get an urge like that, one that I know comes from the part of me that is my father... it’s usually enough to simply think ‘that’s something Gornt would have done. And I’m not Gornt’. When chasing you, I didn’t think that. I just... I decided not to think that. I didn’t want to let you get away.” He spoke slowly and haltingly, as if saying these things out loud for the first time. “Those urges are stronger than you probably think. Waging war on Gornt, cutting down his men, seeing their blood, hearing their screams... it gave me pleasure. I *enjoyed* it. It horrified me, and it delighted me. More blood was spilled in that war than was necessary, and that was because of me. Since then I have done my best to control those urges.”

“How many people know about this?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, nobody knows about that constant fight with myself. I can’t tell anyone. I’m their earl, their chief. I can’t burden them with my weaknesses. Not even

old Shaman Heidran knows. Though he is wise, so he probably suspects.”

“But you’re telling *me* about it.”

He pulled at his boot again. “Perhaps I want *someone* to know. Perhaps I feel that you should know why I forced you to come along, even though you fought me. I know my reasons for taking you aren’t very good. But it’s all I’ve got. I wanted you. That was it.”

Josie could tell it wasn’t easy for him to talk about this. He was admitting a weakness, one that he struggled with and one that he’d never told anyone about. His words came slowly, as if he had to fight for each one.

“Let me help you with that.” She changed her position to help pull his boot off. “It looks like it hurts.”

“It’s not pleasant,” the Viking rumbled and clenched his teeth. “But it’s time to see how bad it is.”

They slowly pulled the boot off, and Bragr quickly unwound the white rags that he wore instead of socks.

His foot was swollen and red, but it wasn’t as bad as Josie had expected. “Maybe try to cool it down,” she suggested. “Stay here.”

She found an empty clay pot and crawled out of the hut. Outside the air felt icy cold, and the trees were silent, dark shapes all around her. Straight up the sky was dark and filled with glittering stars.

The thought of escaping barely crossed her mind. She had no idea where to go or how to get home. But she was on friendly terms with probably the only man on the planet who could help her. Of course he was also the man who’d put her in this situation.

“Complicated,” she muttered to herself as she filled the pot with snow. “But they say that changing the system is easier from within than from the outside.”

She crawled back in and placed the snow-filled pot on the ground. “Put your foot in here.”

“I wondered if you had run away,” Bragr rumbled as he stuck his big, swollen foot into the snow, digging the toes into it. “And I’m happy to see you didn’t.”

“*Someone* has to keep you safe,” Josie said and sat back down, draining her cup of myod and refilling it herself. “You’re an injured man.”

“We will keep each other safe,” Bragr rumbled. “The cold snow feels good. I wonder, are you a healer?”

Josie stretched, the warmth of the room making her drowsy. “I had some first aid training. But the medpack is empty.”

“*Fursade tranin,*” Bragr repeated thoughtfully, badly mangling the English words. “Is that when you put your hand on an injury, let the warmth from *Straum* fill you, and then heal it?”

“Not exactly,” Josie said, thinking about how to explain it when she saw the mischievous look on his face. “Oh, I see. You want me to try that now.”

“Would you?”

“Only if you promise me not to murder me with your sword when your foot doesn’t get better.”

The hurt look on his face made her immediately regret that thoughtless joke. “I mean, I know you won’t,” she hurried to say. “Sorry. I’ve had too much myod, I think.”

Bragr nodded. “Myod makes the heart speak its truth, they say. While your mind knows I won’t hurt you, perhaps your heart isn’t so sure. I fear it will take time for me to convince it. But I will try.” He got to his feet, one of them still in the bucket where the snow had mostly turned so slush. “Now I invite you to join me behind this door. You may enjoy it.” The huge Viking chief untied his pants and pulled them off in one movement, then stood naked in the flickering light from the fire.

The breath caught in Josie’s throat. It was the most magnificent thing she’d ever seen. His legs bulged with muscles, looking like perfectly sculpted tree trunks. The firelight caught the tattoos and made them shine like golden lightning down his whole body. From his middle something big and exotic jutted out. But Bragr turned around before Josie could properly check it out without staring too blatantly.

Bragr opened the door. A wave of searingly hot mist washed over them.

“A little too chilly in there still,” the Viking rumbled. “But it will soon be better. Join me? Clothes are not worn in here, for reasons I’m sure you’ll understand.”

- BRAGR -

He left the door half-open and sat down on the wooden bench, checking the contents of the water buckets. That was also something the users of the hut had made ready, with six big wooden and lidded buckets that had been frozen to ice when he first checked the room. He had put one of the buckets over the fire, and now the ice had melted and some of the water had been turned to steam.

He took one of the other buckets and stuck his injured foot into it. The water was still cool.

Josie came to the door and peered in.

“If this is too hot for you, we can make it colder,” he told her. “Or hotter. It’s your choice.”

She disappeared again.

Bragr sighed. She wasn’t going to follow him in here. Oh well, he could enjoy it by himself, the way he had many times. The *bastu* forced sweat from him, making the body cleanse itself. And the snow bath later would be extremely pleasant—

Josie tiptoed into the room, holding a fur in front of her. The rest of her was clearly bare. “It won’t get any hotter, will it?”

“Not if we don’t want it to,” he said, unreasonably happy to see her. “If we pour water on the hot rocks, there will be more steam to heat us up. If we don’t, it stays like this.” He patted the bench beside him.

Josie quickly sat down, holding the fur tightly in front of her. “I like it like this.”

He smiled. “Do you often take *bastu*?”

“Is that what this is? No, never done it before. I have heard of it. It’s big in Finland and Russia, I think.”

“Ah. Then it was about time you tried. We will not make it hotter than this unless you ask for it.”

They stayed in silence for a while, the crackling and hissing from the fire the only sound.

Bragr leaned back and relaxed for the first time since before the raid. Things were finally starting to get better after the crash. A crash that Gornt had made happen when he had two skrymtir hide on the outside of the *Kraken’s* hull. It had been a perfect attack. Nobody should have survived. But Bragr had. And Josie had. Hopefully they all had.

It was becoming necessary to deal with Gornt for real. Banishment was clearly not enough to keep him from being a menace to all of Hjalmarheim. He had clearly started to send his skrymtir here, and if Bragr and Josie hadn’t defeated that company of them, Zhor knows what those horrors would be doing now. Probably making their way to the coast, to the settlements, planning to attack-

“What is the word for a very young man?” Josie suddenly asked. “Or small woman, not big. Before they get big. Sons.” She held her hand over the ground as if to show the height of someone.

“Child,” Bragr said. “We are first babies, then children, then adolescents and then adults.”

“Child,” Josie repeated. “Good. When I was a child, I hit my head.”

Bragr nodded slowly. “It’s a common thing.”

“It is. But I hit my head hard. There was ice. I was running and my foot lost its hold.”

“You slipped,” he said calmly, ready to listen. The bastu was a place where secret stories were often told. He had sometimes wondered if it came with the nakedness or the heat. Or both. Or maybe because it was safe. It was the height of bad form to mention the bastu stories outside of the bastu.

“I hit it so hard that I couldn’t remember anything,” Josie went on. “I didn’t remember the faces of my family. Of my... adults. Father and woman father.”

“Your parents,” Bragr supplied softly.

“I couldn’t remember the faces of my parents. I would look at them and not know who they were. I could no longer read. I could no longer play. I could no longer tie my shoelaces. I was always crying. Could only walk very slowly. Could almost not eat. And the *doctors*... the healers said it would not change. I would not get better. Never. There was nothing they could do. The injury was too heavy. Too bad.”

Bragr reached over and placed his hand on the bench beside Josie, palm up, offering it for her to take hold of if she needed it.

“But one healer said there was a way. A new way, one that had never been tried before with my injuries. It had only been tried with other injuries. Never with the head injury I had. But he

said it could heal me. My parents said they would try anything. They were sad to see me like that. Very sad.”

“I can well imagine,” Bragr said calmly. “They must have been distraught.”

“The healer wanted to put something in me. It’s called a *neural lace*. He wanted to put it in my head. Made from...” Josie looked around, then pointed at the iron oven. “Made from that.”

“From iron,” Bragr suggested. “From gold. From metal.”

“From metal,” Josie said. “It was like a *spider’s web*. Very small. Thin. Thinner than this. Impossible to see.” She showed with her fingers, making a miniscule opening between her thumb and forefinger. “It would heal my injury, the healer said. It was put in my blood, and the healer slowly made it travel to my head.”

“Your healers are different from ours,” Bragr marveled. “Please go on.”

To his joy, Josie casually let her hand fall onto his, keeping it there. He lightly squeezed it.

“It worked,” she went on. “I was very strange for many days. I remember it now. Many colors, many voices, many pains, much crying. I was alone in a strange world. I was very afraid. Then, one day, I saw a face. It was my female parent. I knew it was her. I said ‘mama’. She cried bad because I had not said it for a long time and she knew I was being healed.”

“Your mother was relieved,” Bragr said softly.

“Relieved,” Josie echoed. “Very relieved. Still it took time to be back to what I was before. I had to learn again. To walk, to read, to play. I did. And then my parents saw something strange.”

“You moved faster than before,” Bragr guessed. “You were quicker. You learned faster. You spoke better.”

She looked up at him. “Yes. They were surprised. But they also knew it would happen. The healer had said so. Because the lace was... hmm.”

“Valuable?” Bragr suggested. “Your *lace* would have to be valuable. Priceless, I would guess.”

Josie nodded. “Priceless.”

“And there were conditions,” Bragr guessed, wanting to give Josie the words. “That *lace* had to be paid for. You had to do certain things to pay for it. Things that were useful for your earl. Or for your king, since you told me you don’t have earls.”

Her eyes were big and clear. “How did you know?”

He shrugged. “Just a guess. It is the way of the world. Very few things are truly free. Those that are should be treasured. What were the conditions?”

“I had to go far away. To a place where children learn things. Children with lace in their heads. They told us how to use the lace right. It took a long time. After that, I had to work for them. They sent me to *Unity*, and I worked there. Aretha was there already. She has a lace, too. We became close friends.”

“How long had you been on *Unity*?”

“Six years. And had to stay there for this many years more.” She used her fingers to quickly show him. Five fingers shown six times, then four fingers shown once.

“Thirty-four,” he said, shocked. “Forty years in that smelly old place?”

“It was in the conditions my parents agreed to when they were distraught about me. I have to work for the *government* — like

the king, although we don't have a king — for forty years. To pay for the lace. Until I'm old. Anyway, the lace makes it possible to be in space for years and years with no problem for the body.”

Bragr squeezed her hand, words failing him. She was going to spend forty years of her life in that dirty little can. She had been in desperate need to be rescued.

“But we had some time off,” she added. “Ten days per year.”

“At least that's something,” he managed. “You were a warrior on the station?”

“Sometimes warrior. Or *Security*, as we call it. Not real warriors, as you know.”

“There was one real warrior among them,” Bragr said. “She was so out of place in that stinky station that I grabbed her.”

“You had an urge,” Josie said calmly. “Perhaps soon you'll have the urge to put me back there.”

He looked away, knowing that wouldn't happen. “That's not how my urges work, Josie. But you'll see. Anyway, earlier today you chased the dfergir away. Did you know your lace would make you that fast?”

She took a deep breath, and her grip on his hand tightened. “I was surprised. And I was scared. It has never done that before. Also it has never let me learn to speak a language this fast. It is working better than it should. I'm scared, Bragr. With all that's going on. The lace is doing things it should not be able to. It's in my head. I can't get away from it. I don't know what's happening. I don't feel... safe.” Her voice cracked at the last word.

Bragr calmly changed hands so he could embrace her narrow shoulders while still holding her. “If the lace turns you into a

warrior who can defeat a whole band of dfergir alone, then I wish I had one myself. But knowing our healers, mine would probably be made from oak and weigh twenty *fjordungr*. It would have to be worn on the outside of the head like a hat the size of a fish barrel.”

Josie sniffled and chuckled. She reached up to stroke one of his horns. “You have something like it, I think.”

“You think my horns are like your lace? Perhaps. If so, know that it is probably Straum that makes your lace better than it was. Our sun can do strange things. And we sense its rays with our horns, although that is all they sense. I can’t feel your touch now— ah, *that* I can feel.”

Josie had let her hand slide down the horn until her hand was buried in his hair. “What’s it like to have horns?”

Bragr shrugged. “It’s normal for us. It feels... right. When Straum is up, it makes them glow. Not really, Josie. That’s just the way it feels.”

She let her hands slide down his body, along the Marks. “These are beautiful.”

Her touch made his crotch swell again, and he couldn’t do anything to hide it. “We think so, too. They’re the Marks of a warrior.”

“Mmm,” Josie said, tracing the Marks down his torso.

His manhood stood up straight and pulsating.

She let her hand slide off him. “I’m feeling pretty hot.”

He had forgotten they were in the bastu and it was her first time. Sweat was running down her face and the part of her body that he could see. “Then let’s cool down. Come with me.”

He got up and held the door open for her. She left the fur on the bench and walked out, fully naked and without trying to hide herself. After she passed him, his eyes followed the fluid jiggle of her magnificent behind as she stood in the middle of the hut. “Do we go out?”

“It’s the only way.” He strode across the room, cock bobbing ridiculously at his crotch, crawled out the tunnel, and took Josie’s hand to help her stand up when she followed him out.

Then he dove into the snow, laughing while he rolled around and felt the snow melt under his heated body. Josie sat down in the snow and scooped up handfuls, rubbing her arms with it.

“That’s not the way. You have to cool down properly.” Bragr pounced on her and pushed her into the snow sideways, rolling her over.

She squealed and went with it as he kept rolling her around, laughing with delight. He was careful to keep enough distance to her to not touch any of those places she had hid with the fur when they were inside. Her body was pinkish with heat, soft and still firm. She was a wonder of womanly roundness and warmth, and he had to focus on not giving in to the urges that tugged at him now. Her sweet, round behind, the generous chest, the mysterious black triangle where her thighs met... even in this cold snow, his crotch swelled harder than he had thought possible.

He saw her eyes glint in the starlight when she clumsily grabbed his hand and pulled it to her chest. “I’m feeling hot *here.*”

That was an urge he couldn’t resist. Slowly cupping one soft breast, he stroked it and wondered how hard his cock was going to get.

Josie moaned softly at his touch, prompting him to squeeze the other breast as well. Both of her nipples were rock hard, but not from the cold — she was still hot to the touch.

He casually leaned in, keeping his eyes on her face to make sure he wasn't misunderstanding this. As his lips engulfed her nipple and his tongue swiped across it, her soft moan told him he had understood her perfectly.

Sensing Josie cooling down, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the tunnel. She crawled in first, allowing him a split-second sight of her charms that nearly had him erupt on the spot.

Following her inside, he took her hand and led her back into the bastu. The fire had gone out, but the room was still hot.

Placing her on the bench, he kneeled in front of her so he wouldn't keep having to bend his neck.

She leaned back, her eyes glassy with an arousal he could smell in the humid air. He leaned in to kiss her breast again, and she grabbed both his horns and pulled him to her.

His hands had nowhere to go except down the sides of her body, ending up at her wide hips.

He worked his tongue on her breasts, marveling at the softness and the smoothness.

She responded with moans and little jerks of her body, rubbing her thighs together in a way that couldn't be misunderstood. Bragr moved down, kissing a trail down her front, luxuriating in the sensations and her sweet, dry scent.

With his hands he gently pulled her knees a finger-length apart, and the scent that came wafting to his nose told him she was more than ready for this.

He made his way down her front, slowly kissing and licking until her thighs were hampering his downward progress. Leaning back, he pushed gently at her knees to move them apart and give him the access he needed.

She whimpered and resisted the move, biting her lip.

Ah. He thought he knew what was going on. She was simply not used to it, and like too many females she was worried about what he would think about her if she relented too easily.

Putting more force behind it, he pushed her knees open.

Her resistance melted away, and her whimper became a moan full of anticipation. “Yesss...”

He didn't know that alien word, but he was willing to bet it meant she had wanted him to win that little contest of strength.

Adjusting his position, he grabbed the discarded fur and placed it under her behind. He lifted her off the bench so he could put her hips on the edge. She cooperated fully now, leaning back and letting her legs fall fully open.

Bragr saw no reason to wait. The dense hairs tickled his tongue when he ran it softly up her sex.

Josie trembled and bucked when he passed the hard little nub at the top. He smiled to himself. So this alien female wasn't all that different from the Gardr females.

Seeing no reason to wait, he kept licking and flicking his tongue on her sex, enjoying the taste and the scent of aroused woman. He noted what got a reaction and what didn't, and soon he had Josie trembling on the edge of a climax. He kept her there for a while, because he could and because having this power over her was immensely satisfying and made his crotch throb harder.

Josie whimpered and moaned and said incomprehensible things, plainly delirious with need.

He took mercy on her, reached up with his hands to stroke her nipples while he focused his attention on her clit, using a light but constant touch.

When she started holding her breath, he knew she had reached the point of no return. She was quiet for a short moment, then groaned as the climax took her. Bragr intensified his efforts on her sex, noting with his deep-plunging tongue that she was unusually tight.

He kept going for a while, varying the intensity of his touch to give her several waves of bliss. She was an easy instrument to play, responding well to him. But it was always possible to learn an instrument better.

Pushing her legs closed again, he sat down beside her and held her while she rode out the last of the waves.

“Thawuz insain,” she finally mewled. *“Ahm sohat now. Kanvi go owtsy?”*

- JOSIE -

Her body varied between hot and cold, sweat and goosebumps. Her limbs still trembled a little after that orgasm.

“Let’s cool down,” Bragr said just as she was about to think harder about how to say ‘can we go outside?’ in his language. Her brain had partly shut down and needed some kind of reboot.

He took her hand and held her steady. Her knees wouldn’t carry her right away.

He led her out through the main room of the hut, and they crawled out into the snow.

Josie lay down forwards in the snow, cooling down her front after that sauna experience. Then she rolled over and enjoyed the sight of the myriad of stars above. It was a much more impressive sight than from Earth, which led her to lazily think that the sun Straum was either part of a star cluster or closer to the galactic center than the Sun. She was starting to think that Gardr was further from Earth than she first guessed.

The thought should have made her panic, but she just smiled at the remarkable sight of Bragr doing a naked forward roll in the snow. Holy cow, he was good back there in the sauna. And he

didn't seem to mind that certain parts of her hadn't seen a razor in just about forever.

She couldn't help it. He was so big and strong and larger than life. He'd protected her and kept her totally free of injury, while he had taken a lot of knocks instead of her.

And, most remarkably, he made her feel good about herself. As if she was worth protecting, as if she was some kind of warrior. If this was what being abducted was always like, then she almost wished it had happened before.

Bragr bent down, took her hand, and pulled her to her feet. "Let's go inside. You'll sleep well tonight, I think."

Back inside, the hut seemed warm and inviting. It was annoying that it didn't have a real door, but she finally figured out why. The way it was built, like an igloo with small stones instead of big ice blocks, the structure couldn't handle any weak point. If they wanted a door, they'd have to find a long, thick slab of rock that would act as a crossbeam above it. It would ruin the smooth look of the dome. So it was fine the way it was, she decided generously.

"It's a good hut," she stated for no particular reason as she sat down on a heap of furs. "Is your home like this?"

"My home is the jarlagard of Hjalmarheim," Bragr rumbled as he scooped up more of the casserole onto her plate. "It's bigger than this. And much newer, although still ancient. But I agree with you. This is a good hut."

He handed her the plate and she dug in, then took the time to completely drain a full cup of water that he handed to her. Then another.

"Good," he said with approval. "The bastu makes us sweat, and the old water must be replaced by new." He drank several

ladlefuls himself.

She glanced up at him. He was still visibly aroused, and she felt a sting of guilty conscience. She came so hard, and he hadn't. She wanted to be nice to him, but what if she didn't do a good job? She supposed she could ask him to teach her, but he sure didn't need her teaching him, so it would feel weird.

Well, he kidnapped me, an impish side of her pointed out. Maybe it's only fair that the sexual satisfaction is a little uneven right now.

But I want to, she argued with herself. Look at that thing! It's the strangest body part I've ever seen. And it's really hard. Because of me! I want that in my mouth. I want to see what kind of noises I can force out of him, the way he did to me.

The thought made the tingles down below start again.

"How is your foot?" she asked to avoid throwing herself at him. Again.

"It feels better," he said, rotating the ankle. "The snow helped. Still I'm curious to see if you have the abilities of a healer. They sometimes use their hands only."

"We can try." She changed her position on the fur.

Bragr sat down in front of her and carefully placed his foot on her lap.

It was a big foot, as it had to be on a giant like him. Still there was a delicacy to it, and the fine tattoos amplified that feeling.

"When did you get these?" Josie asked, tracing the fine gold lines and curves. They didn't seem to depict anything, and when she followed one line, it kept splitting into finer ones that soon became too thin to track.

“The Marks? It was many years ago. It’s a part of the trials that every warrior must pass through.”

Josie carefully massaged his foot, trying to avoid putting any pressure on the swollen parts. “Because they’re painful?”

“Oh, getting the Marks in the Ice Caves is very painful indeed. But it’s quick, and it’s the last part of the trials. When you have them, and if you don’t die while getting them, you’re a Warrior of Hjalmarheim and you will forever be recognized as one, all over Gardr.”

Josie put her hands around the widest part of his foot and just held them there, closing her eyes and willing everything inside to heal. As a good scientist she didn’t believe in healing by touch, but a better scientist would experiment. Her lace had never shown any tendencies to have healing properties, but it seemed that it was coming seriously off its leash on this planet, so maybe it was worth a try. “How can it be quick to get tattoos like that?”

“*Tatus?* You have these on Earth, too?”

“I thought so, but now I think it’s something else.” She hid a wide yawn behind one hand. “Sorry, I’m not bored. Really not. But that *bastu* of yours...”

Bragr grinned, white teeth shining in the dark room. “Sleepiness is a known effect of the *bastu*. I’m sure you’ve done all the healing you can now.” He withdrew the foot and stood up. “Feels better already. Thanks.”

Josie yawned again. “I don’t think it worked. How did you get the marks, did you say?” She lay down and curled up on a fur, still naked. The fur was soft and delicate against her, warming that side of her, while the other side was slightly cooled. She was feeling really mellow and drowsy.

“It’s when the trials are nearly over,” Bragr rumbled, his deep voice having an even more calming effect. “The young man or woman must walk into the Ice Caves. Nobody can come back out without Straum having put its mark on them...”

- - -

When she woke up, the hut was much brighter and the fire was crackling. There was a delicious smell in the room and the sizzle of meat being fried. Rays of sunlight crisscrossed the room from above, passing in through the many transparent crystals set in the round walls. In the smoky atmosphere of the hut the rays looked like finger-thick laser beams in blue, green, red, and yellow, depending on the color of the particular crystal.

There was a fur covering her. She didn’t remember having pulled it over her, so it had to be someone else. She didn’t spend much time wondering who.

Bragr sat at the fire, his pants back on. He was busy frying meat and didn’t seem to notice Josie being awake.

The sight of him made tingles shoot down her front. Damn, he had been good. That tongue of his *had* to have some kind of alien texture. And the climax had thrown her for a delightful loop in all its unexpected intensity.

She stayed under the fur, wanting to get as much rest as possible before they would keep walking. She knew she needed it after the fight with the dfergir. That had been a weird experience.

It had all seemed to happen so slowly, as if the dfergir and the whole world had moved in slow motion and given her all the time she needed to hit them with the stick and easily avoid their weapons. But the hunger afterwards had been downright scary. Her body had been desperate for nourishment. Her muscles had been used to the limit of their capabilities, a limit that lay much higher than most people realized. They had been dangerously drained.

That was one of the effects of the neural lace. It was a wispy spider's web around her brain, mostly ceramics and exotic metals. If balled up it would only be the size of a small pinhead or a grain of sand. It had no processing power; it just made connections in the brain that would normally not be made. It helped her body work better, from the brain to the muscles. She had been warned against using the lace too much — it optimized the muscles and made them stronger and faster, giving them much more stamina. And it prevented the loss of muscle that could be an effect of long stays in space. But it was easy to over-use the muscles. That had happened to Josie a few times before, and it was always a temptation.

But not like yesterday. That was a level the lace had never worked at before. Josie had enjoyed it, the exhilaration mixed with worry that the lace might run away from her. She'd felt powerful and strong. Now she felt the muscles ache all over, and she was as stiff as a board.

“There's water by your head,” Bragr rumbled, not raising his gaze. “And there's more where that came from. Not just melted snow, either. I found a well.”

Josie slowly got up on her elbows, keeping the fur around her chest. Her muscles protested against the tiniest movement, and she winced. She grabbed the big cup of clear water on the

floor and drained it, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “That’s the cleanest water I’ve ever tasted. Did you go out?”

“It’s best to hunt before sunrise,” he said, turning over slabs of meat on a flat piece of iron over the fire. “The prey is less alert at that time.”

“Are we walking more today?”

A beam of light stroked Bragr’s face, and his blonde beard seemed to shimmer with golden threads. “We will stay here for a day. We need the rest, and this hut is safe. The builders used many runes all over it to ward off trolls and such. Even the well is surrounded by stones with wholesome runes carved into them. There’s an altar to Zhor nearby, too. We could probably stay here for many days. But we don’t have time for that. I must get to my people.”

And I have to find Aretha, Josie thought. “One day of rest should be good.”

Bragr got busy with the cooking and soon handed her a plate with a sizzling piece of meat on it. “It’s a simple meal, I fear. There’s not much else to find yet. The trees have no buds on them, and the ground is covered with deep snow. No herbs will grow here until it melts, and it could be weeks.”

Josie bit into the meat, careful about not asking what kind of alien animal it came from, in case it was some kind of reptile or giant insect. She was hungry and needed the energy. It was quite tender and tasted of smoke and pine needles. “I didn’t even know you went out.”

“You were tired after a day full of... experiences,” Bragr deadpanned. “You even slept through most of the story of how

I passed the trials and got my Marks. Such a pity you missed it! It's a very heroic story."

"I'm sure it is." She chewed. "But I'm awake now. Try telling me again?"

"It's not a story for daytime," the Viking said and bit into a piece of meat, considerably less cooked than Josie's. Red juice dripped from his chin and hissed on the cooking plate. "Such stories need a campfire after a long day, so that the audience is less prone to asking questions about the most heroic parts."

"Questions are for daytime, then," Josie decided. "And I have one for you. My friend Aretha was plundered by your people, too. She was on one of the other ships."

"Strange question," Bragr rumbled. "I didn't catch it at all."

"I didn't get to the question yet," Josie said. "But here it is: when you and I get to wherever it is we're going, will I meet Aretha there? Or is she on the other side of this planet?"

"She will be in Hjalmarheim. I think that was Bjornar's ship. He lives close to my jarlagard."

"And the other girls?"

"All the ships belong to my huskarls and have Hjalmarheim as their home port."

That sounded pretty promising to Josie, and she felt her mood improve. The girls and she would get together and... what? Plot their escape to Earth?

The thought left her strangely cold. Getting back to *Unity*, the daily grind in the sterile station with its stale air, the lonely little cabin at night, everything made of paper-thin plastic, knowing she'd be there until she retired... right now, it wasn't that tempting.

She put the plate down, and Bragr tossed her uniform to her. "It's cold outside. Better wear something." He must have guessed her most urgent need right now. "And bring your spear. Holy runes can't keep *every* danger away."

She pulled it on, noting that the Viking turned his back and didn't peek. Not that she had that many more secrets from him, but still the considerate gesture reassured her. Whatever else he was, he sure wasn't a creep. In fact she would have liked him to be a *little* more creepy than this.

"The door is open now," she said in English as she pulled her top on. "We are being sexual. And I want more of it."

Bragr nodded thoughtfully, clearly not understanding a word but playing along. "I have something for you." He handed her a strip of braided leather, tied in a circle.

"Thank you," Josie said, confused. "It's very nice."

"For your hair," Bragr rumbled. "To keep it in place."

"Oh!" Josie gathered her hair in the back and used the leather hair tie to fasten the ponytail. "I needed that."

"I noticed."

Josie crawled out into the day, slowly because her muscles ached with every little movement. The moment she got out in the sunlight, an inner warmth filled her, tingles ran up her spine, and she felt strong and invincible. The light from the pulsar was blinding, and the snow reflected it with trillions of little facets that flickered like stars. The deep marks of last night's rolling around in the snow were still there, making her smile with the memories.

She turned her back to the hut and located a suitable bush, not particularly wanting to look at that sun. Those two streams of pure energy beaming out of it at opposite sides were beautiful,

but absolutely deadly. And if Aretha was right and they did contain tachyons, particles going faster than light, then that might explain a lot of things. This pulsar was unusual anyway, in that it only rotated very slowly. Most pulsars that could be detected on Earth spun around several times per second. One of those streams looked like it was getting pretty close to planet Gardr.

Oh well, Aretha would figure it out. She was incredibly smart.

The forest felt less threatening today, for some reason. The air was fresh and dry, and the hut felt like a sanctuary. From a short distance it was just a bump in the landscape, its top covered by snowy moss, and you had to get pretty close before you could see that it had to have been built by someone.

Bragr's old tracks led off into the woods and back, so that must be where he'd found the well.

Despite the bright day, she wanted to get back inside. Because *he* was there.

She took a deep breath of cool air, hoping to clear her mind. She was obviously falling for this guy. Or rather, she *had* fallen for him. As if it was possible not to. He was an alien, an abductor, and a pirate. But he was also a protector, a carer, and a *Viking*. And he made her feel good about herself.

This was an alien planet, and she should be scared out of her mind. The fact that she wasn't, that she wasn't feeling more out of place here than on *Unity*, was all because of him. Had he seen that she needed a different life than on that station? A different life than a job she'd had no choice in accepting, and where she was contractually obligated to stay for her entire career because of the lace?

He had even eaten her out like a champ. And he had seemed to enjoy it, to enjoy exploring her body and her reactions. There had been something uncontrolled about him, as if he were feasting on her.

“That was crazy,” she muttered to herself, noticing the tingles that ran down her body whenever she thought about it. Well, perhaps that didn’t have to be the last time—

Josie jerked. There was movement in among the trees.

Clutching her spear, she slowly backed towards the hut. If there was to be a fight, she wanted to be as close to Bragr as possible.

Suddenly a small head stuck out from behind another tree. Josie saw yellow eyes and pitch black fur that shone like polished piano wood.

She stopped. She’d seen that before. Yesterday.

The whole animal jumped eight feet into the air, all six legs flexing as it landed. Then it stood on the snow and looked at her, tilting its head.

Josie smiled. That had to be the young wolf-like predator that had tried to play with her. A fenr pup, Bragr had called it.

Again, there was nothing threatening in the young fenr’s behavior. It snuck closer, pretending to be sneaking up on her, despite her staring right at it.

It came to within ten feet, looking at her as if asking her to play. When Josie made a small movement, the pup jumped back, pretending to be startled.

“You’re a little cutie, aren’t you?” she said, conscious to not let the thing get too close yet. Alien wolves with six legs might not work the same way as dogs on Earth, and this whole cute

spiel *could* be some kind of ruse. “The chocolate I gave you doesn’t seem to have harmed you.»

The pup snuck closer again, turning its ears this way and that, giving off a little whimper.

Then Josie saw the injury. The right flank of the fenr had a deep, red gouge in it. It looked fresh.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed. “You’re really hurt!” She went down on one knee, making sure to have her spear ready in one hand if the pup were to suddenly attack.

It came closer, then withdrew, then came closer again until it was right in front of her. Josie was tense, but not afraid. She got one glove out of a pocket and pulled it onto one hand. If she had totally misjudged this and the fenr would bite her, at least the glove would give some protection. Then she reached over to the pup’s muzzle. “Hey.”

The pup sniffed her glove and looked up at her, ears still up, so she stroked her hand gently along the fenr’s head. It crossed her mind that this was something that probably no wild wolf on Earth would tolerate, and she also doubted a wounded wolf would be this eager to seek contact.

The pup whimpered and looked up at her with big, yellow eyes. It smelled of wild animal, but not very strongly.

Josie took a chance and leaned in to stroke the creature’s back, avoiding the injury. The fenr didn’t seem to object, so she carefully pulled it to her so she could look at the wound. It was deep, revealing bare muscle fibers. It seemed to follow along the side of the spine. The fenr was limping on one of its middle legs, so probably the muscles for that leg had been ruined.

Suddenly the pup jumped six feet back away from her, then withdrew backwards, head by the ground.

“Cute little thing,” a deep voice rumbled behind Josie. “Cute little things grow to be much bigger things that aren’t cute at all.”

She glanced behind her. “He’s injured, Bragr. There’s a deep wound in his back. He must have been in a fight yesterday.”

“It looks like the work of skrymtir,” the Viking said, hand resting on the grip of his sword. “Some blunt blade, anyway. He shouldn’t pick fights with them. By all means try to heal if you want, but I’ll feel better if Brisingr and I are nearby.”

That was not what she had expected. “You’re fine with this?”

He looked at her with his sky-blue eyes. “You plainly have talents when it comes to healing, and it would be a strange thing to bid a gifted woman to not use her gifts.” He grabbed one of the band-aids Josie had put on him and ripped it off. Beneath was a wound that was clearly halfway healed.

“That’s fast,” Josie said, surprised. “Are they all like that?”

Bragr ripped off more bandages and balled them up, revealing that all the injuries from the fight with the vettir were healing, as well as the cut in his thigh. “And that’s not all.” He bent over and pulled his boot off. His injured foot was still red with purple spots, but it was no longer swollen, and it looked better than the night before. “The old myths speak of healer warriors sometimes fighting along with their kings. I’d never seen one before I met you.”

Josie was astonished. None of those injuries should have healed this fast, unless the Vikings were completely different from Earthlings. “I’m not sure that’s because of me. But

there's not much I can do for that pup anyway. The medpack is empty."

"Perhaps it's not the covering of the wound that's important," Bragr pondered as he pulled his boot back on, "as much as the caring touch. Look, he's coming closer again."

It was true—the fenr pup was doing the same thing as before, coming closer, then pulling back, then coming closer.

"I'll be right over here," Bragr said and walked a few paces away. "Until I see that he's not playing tricks."

With the huge Viking chief at a safe distance, it didn't take long before the pup was right back with Josie again, sniffing and whimpering.

She pulled off the glove and gently placed her fingertips on the fenr's spine, its fur soft and smooth. The pup looked back at her, but didn't move as she put the other hand behind one long ear and scratched the way she knew Earth dogs liked. This one didn't seem to mind.

The fur around the wound was stiff and rusty red with congealed blood. Josie put her hand across the deep gouge and tried to focus her thoughts on it, wishing it healing and seeing in her mind's eye as it closed and healed, the fur whole and back to normal again.

"That's all I can do," she said softly and took her hand off the animal. "But maybe he can do more." She looked over at Bragr, who was standing a few paces away, absentmindedly tossing his sword spinning ten feet into the air and catching it again without even looking. "Do you have any meat to spare?"

Seeing how the fenr was clearly harmless, Bragr sauntered into the woods and came back dragging a big, disgusting mass of red, black, and purple. He dumped it in front of the fenr. "I

hunted a *keigr*, but I usually prefer not to eat its guts. I buried it in the snow to rot, but he's welcome to it."

The pup attacked the heap of frozen guts with great energy, growling and gnawing and ripping pieces off it.

"He seems to like it," Josie said, taking a couple of steps back to not be sprayed by old keigr blood. "Is it common in Hjalmarheim to give names to animals?"

"We name our ships and our swords and our children," Bragr replied. "I've never heard anyone name a fenr they meet in the vilmark."

"Then we will be the first," Josie decided. "What should we call this one?"

"He behaves strangely for a fenr. Perhaps it were right if he had an alien name."

"All right," Josie said. "His fur is black, and remember how he was sneaking up on us that first time? How about *Ninja*?"

"Names that end with 'a' are usually for females," Bragr sighed, "and he's clearly male. But it sounds perfectly alien. Ninja it is. Although I doubt you'll see much more of him."

"That's fine," Josie said. "He's a wild animal. I don't expect him to come when I call."

"He should be wilder than *this*," Bragr said. "He acts like he's tame. Perhaps he can feel your alien-ness or your healing gift." The Viking chief turned his back and went to the other side of the hut, out of sight.

"Ninja!" Josie called, just to check. The fenr didn't react, just kept eating from the heap of offal, his muzzle and face dripping with dark blood.

“Fine,” she muttered. “Just try not to kill us when you grow up, all right? I’ll be miffed if you do.” She looked around the forest. There was nothing in particular she had to do here, and her muscles were still sore.

“I’m going inside!” she called into the sky.

“Best place for you,” the bassy rumble came from the other side of the hut. “Can’t attract all kinds of predators from in there.”

“Except for *you*,” Josie muttered as she crawled through the short tunnel. But the thought of what they might get up to inside that sauna made excited tingles shoot down her body and up her spine. She hadn’t really explored his Viking’s body that well yet. And now that he was healing... *hmm*.

She drank water and helped herself to fried meat. She would have loved some coffee and maybe a roll or two, but she couldn’t expect an alien planet to have the same selection as *Unity*. Which had never been that good, anyway. At least not for her. The way the arrangement worked, she had to pay for her neural lace with labor. It meant that she wasn’t paid that well. So while miners and refiners from space could splurge on eggs and bacon and fine dishes sent up from Earth at great cost, that was totally out of reach for people like her.

She was grateful for having the lace, and she knew she would never have been able to pay for it in some other way. Still, she sometimes thought that she was a slave to *Unity*, unable to leave except for short, yearly vacations. Unable to advance much in her career, unable to enjoy herself much outside of the VR games, and unable to form any relationship because *Unity* was a place that people would only stay for a short time before they moved on. Except for her and others in her situation.

On impulse she put her headset on. “Hey, Aretha?”

There was only static, which was expected. Aretha would have to be somewhere close, somewhere in this forest, if they were to get in touch on radio.

Maybe that was why she wasn't panicking over this abduction? Because she had been feeling trapped on *Unity*, and this was an escape?

"Or because that Viking is the best man I've met," she muttered.

"Alien words from the old hunting hut," came a muffled rumble from the door. "I must check it out... ah, it's you." Bragr came in from the tunnel, stood up, and blinked against the darkness. "Talking to yourself?"

"I guess I have to, if I want good answers," Josie sniffed.

He sat down by the fire and drank water from the ladle. "A good start if you want answers is to ask questions. Perhaps try that?"

"Perhaps. I know you're not sure why you plundered me from the station. But why do you go on raids at all?"

He shrugged. "It's tradition. We've always gone on raids. It's an important part of who we are. It's how we gain glory and wealth. It's how we test our courage in battle. I don't need more reasons. Do you?"

"How about those you plunder and steal from? Do you not think about them?"

- **BRAGR** -

Bragr scratched his beard, thinking about it. “Sometimes. Mostly not. They’re not my responsibility. We stopped killing them, anyway. And we leave them enough to live. It’s a dangerous galaxy, Josie. We are not the worst things in it. Not by far.” He sent a glance to the east, towards the dark mountains on the edge of his earldom. “Usually, those we raid learn to defend themselves better. Against us and others.”

Josie leant forwards, her face eager. “So there are many planets with people on them?”

“There are many planets with some kind of aliens on them. I wouldn’t call them ‘people’. Not most of them, anyway. But they all have things we need. Things we can sell to other realms on Gardr.”

“How did you get those ships that can travel in space?”

“We’ve always had them. The shipwrights repair and renew them as they get old. Now it’s my turn to ask questions.”

Josie sat back. “If you want.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Are you engaged?”

“No. You?”

He shook his head. “Neither engaged nor married. My clan keeps nagging me to secure heirs to the earldom, but I’ve resisted.”

“Why?”

“I see we’re back to you asking questions again. All right. Because getting married is... special. My clan wants me to marry a princess or a duchess from another realm on Gardr. To strengthen ties between us and them. But I don’t like any of the princesses. They’re not special. They think they are, of course. Because they happened to be born to some king or duke or earl. But where is the connection?” He stared into the embers of the fire. “If there’s no connection, there can’t be a marriage. I need more than that. I need my One. Maybe even my Karest. But it’s very unlikely I’ll find her. Now you can answer the same question.”

“Why I’m not married”? Josie replied. “Because I’ve been on *Unity* my whole adult life. People come and go so fast that it’s not possible to even check if there *is* a connection.”

He leaned back to drink and took her in over the rim of the ladle. She was back in the same dark, figure-hugging clothes that looked utilitarian, but still smelled faintly of the stale air in that alien station. Her own scent overpowered it, thankfully. It was a remarkable scent, heady and mysterious. If somehow she got away from him, he would keep seeking it for the rest of his life.

Her face was clear, with a small nose and cheeks that would go pink whenever she had some strong emotion. Or if she’d been in the cold, like now. Her movements were fast, but not

nervous. Her voice was bright, still with a bit of a rasp to it which he found heart-achingly attractive.

As was the rest of her. Sweet Valhalla, his crotch was in a constant state of high alert whenever she was close by. That shape, those moves, the scent... it was all too overwhelming. And now that he'd seen all of her, and tasted her and witnessed her climax, he needed more.

"You named the fenr, but you still haven't named your spear," he observed, crossing his legs. "It needs a name to be a weapon in full. May I see it?"

Josie handed him the stick he had cut from a *rogn* sapling, knowing it would become hard, yet flexible once the sap inside had hardened. Now it was the way he had anticipated.

"This is not ideal," he told her and pushed his thumb against the point that he had sharpened and hardened in the fire. It was still hard, but dull. "Would you like me to change it to a harder point?"

Josie shrugged. "If you can. I don't use the point much, except against skrymtir."

He showed her the piece of flint he had picked up. "The old hunters who built this hut sharpened their stone spears right outside it. I dug down and found hundreds of flakes like this under the snow. Take it."

Josie took the flake and turned it over in her hand. "It's sharp. But it's so thin. Won't it break?"

"It will break if you hit it against a stone," Bragr agreed. "But not if you thrust it into a skrymt or a vette. I'll fasten it to the end of the spear, and you will become much more dangerous."

Josie handed the stone back. "I never thought I would be dangerous."

He laughed. “You were extremely dangerous to my warriors. To their pride, anyway. And on Gardr, there’s a word for those who are not dangerous.”

“Thrall?” Josie suggested.

He gave her a glance. “We haven’t kept slaves for a long time. Don’t let Siv’s teasing on the ship annoy you. She’s easily made jealous, and you made the mistake of making eye contact with Sigurdr. No, the word I had in mind was ‘dead’.”

“So you don’t intend to keep me as a slave? Or the other girls?”

“That would be silly,” Bragr said, fastening the flint blade to the spear with a long piece of sinew from the keigr he had hunted down. “And if that were the case, I certainly wouldn’t be arming you. Did you think of a name?”

“A name for a spear... does your sword have a name?”

“Brisingr,” he told her. “An old name for a new sword. I forged it myself right after I got my Marks. But Brisingr is a better blade.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means ‘fireblade’. It’s also connected to the goddess Freyja. Do you know about her?”

“Not really,” Josie said. “I don’t think anyone worships the old Viking gods anymore.”

“Pity,” he said. “From the way your people didn’t defend their station, I think they would need a warrior goddess.”

Josie sighed as if exasperated. “Nobody expected to be attacked by Vikings, Bragr! We had no weapons because those are far too dangerous to keep on a station. But let me tell you this: if we’d been allowed to use the kinds of weapons we

have on Earth itself, not one of your warriors would have returned to their home. Including you.”

“Ah,” he said. “These are ranged weapons of which you speak, yes?”

“Ranged?”

“Weapons that are used from a distance. Like arrows can be shot from many paces away, so that the shooter can’t look into the eyes of the man he’s aiming for.”

Josie held up her hand with one finger extended. “Imagine an arrow that’s half as long as my little finger coming at you, ten times as fast as the tip of your sword moves when you swing it as hard as you can. Imagine that little arrow hitting you right between the eyes and coming out the other side or your head. Now imagine twenty of those being shot at you in one heartbeat. Would you be coming home after that?”

Bragr shook his head. “Such an honorless way to kill. Where’s the skill in that? The art?”

“Most of us think that the art and the honor are less important than winning the battle. Yes, I know we lost. But next time you go there, your ship will be met by a hail of ‘arrows’ of all kinds long before it can get close to *Unity*. We call them ‘missiles’.”

He smiled tightly and held the spear up so the new sharp point caught a blue sunray. “Then I better not go back. And when others come, aliens who are not as nice as me, your old planet will be ready for them. See what a favor I’ve done for them? Here, your *missile* is finished. It needs a name and a battle chant.”

Josie scratched her head. “It’s the first time I name a stick.”

“This is much more than a stick! It’s a spear and a club. A weapon that you have already used to great effect. How about ‘Skrymtir-piercer’?”

Josie shuddered. “I don’t want to be reminded of those things every time I look at it. What about ‘Rose’?”

Bragr frowned. “Too short, surely. What does it mean?”

“It’s a red flower we have on Earth, very beautiful.”

“A *flower*? This is a battle weapon!” Bragr protested. “It should have a fearsome name. It will be famous, and other warriors will know its name and chant it. Like ‘Skull-cleaver’!”

“Roses have thorns, you know. Anyway, it hasn’t cleft any skulls. How about ‘Violet’?”

“Another flower?”

Josie crossed her arms over her chest. “Maybe.”

Bragr just scoffed. “Dfergir-hammer.”

“*Must* the name contain all the bad monsters? How about ‘Willow’?”

His eyes went narrow. “More flowers?”

“No, it’s a tree.”

“Is it a war-like tree? A battle tree?”

“Oh yes. The willow tree is in all the wars. It’s fierce.”

“*Wiwow*,” he tried. “It doesn’t sound hard enough. It must be a name with an edge! Like ‘Bone-crrusherr’!”

“I don’t think so.”

“‘Blood-brrringer’!”

“That has to be a joke.”

“Vettir-killer’!”

“Again with the monsters. Wait.” Josie examined the new flint tip of her spear. “When I fight, I feel like a *tornado*. Spinning fast, impossible to stop.”

“What’s a tornado?”

Josie moved the tip of the spear in quick circles in the air. “Big wind that does this.”

“A whirlwind,” Bragr pondered. “That’s what you looked like to me during the dfergir battle. *Tornado*. An alien word, but easy to say and with a ferocious meaning. And it is reminiscent of Zhor, the god of war. Not bad. I think you have it.”

Josie let the spear rest across her thighs. “Tornado the spear. All right.”

“It will need a chant to go with it,” Bragr said, standing up and stretching to touch the ceiling with the palms of his hands. “When you go into battle, you will chant it so the enemy knows who he’s dealing with and can start to panic before you’ve even swung your weapon once. But there’s no rush. That spear is already famous among the dfergir, even if they don’t know the name.” He got busy preparing more food. They had a lot of meat from the keigr, and they couldn’t bring it all with them. It was better to eat as much of it as they could before they walked on.

They ate while he asked her questions about Earth and she asked him about Hjalmarheim. Neither of them were in any hurry to get up. Bragr enjoyed the sight of Josie happily eating a big keigr steak, her hair drawn back and shining in the occasional ray of colored sunlight. He made sure to sit in a

way that made his excitement obvious. She should know the effect she had on him.

Finally he got up. “I’ll go out and get something.”

Josie just nodded, her eyes following him and snagging on his crotch.

He crawled through the tunnel and stood still, scanning the area for enemies. The sun was well over halfway on its journey across the sky, and the shadows were getting longer.

He made his way into the forest, finding that the six honey trees he’d spotted were already making sap. The sticky, golden liquid ran slowly into the wooden bowls he had found in the hut and placed under the special, V-shaped cuts that had been made in the bark of the trees. He had doubted it would work — it was springtime, but here in the mountains spring came late.

Carrying the stack of cups back to the hut, he enjoyed the afternoon and the giddy anticipation of what might happen later. He’d fire up the sauna again, and then—

He froze. There was movement among the trees. Something dark was sneaking closer.

Squatting down, he carefully deposited the cups and their precious cargo on the snow. He silently drew Brisingr and walked slowly out of the shadows.

- JOSIE -

Josie froze. There were some weird sounds coming from outside. She stood up and looked out of a few of the crystals in the wall she could reach, but saw no movement except for quickly moving shadows.

There was definitely a fight going on.

She grabbed Tornado and quickly crawled out.

Bragr was locked in some kind of deadly embrace with a black fenr. His sword was on the ground, and it looked like he was losing.

“Get the hell away from him!” Josie yelled and lifted the spear as she ran.

The fenr jumped off Bragr and stood on its six legs, both tails whipping back and forth.

Bragr bounced up, unharmed, and lunged at the fenr. “I’ll get you!”

It jumped aside to avoid his arms, then pounced on him. He embraced the wild predator and rolled in the snow with it, laughing.

Josie relaxed. That was Ninja and Bragr playing the way boys do, wrestling.

It was clearly Ninja — the injury along his spine was easy to recognize.

Ninja got out of Bragr's grip, grabbed his wrist in his gape, and growled. Then he let go, bouncing on the snow. Bragr threw himself at the fenr, missed completely, and landed in the snow, face first.

Josie couldn't help but laugh at the horseplay.

Bragr laughed deeply, grabbed Ninja, and tossed the fenr pup into the air, making sure he landed in a thick drift of snow. Then he sprinted over to Josie, grabbed her, and tossed her into the air.

She squealed and dropped her spear, rotated once in the air, and was caught in strong arms long before she reached the ground. It lasted for one second. Then Bragr tossed her into the same drift as Ninja.

When she tried to get up, the pup gently pounced on her, barely touched her with his paws, but still managed to push her over before he bounced back, whimpering as if she had been fighting.

“You rascal,” Josie exclaimed and tried to catch him. He easily dodged her and pounced on Bragr instead.

She gave in to the urge to play for a while. Her muscles were not as sore as in the morning, and the pup was adorable.

So was Bragr, she couldn't help but notice. He pretended that the little fenr was a ferocious predator, letting the pup climb on top of him as if victorious. Then he grabbed the fenr and tossed him off, laughing as Ninja somersaulted through the air,

all six legs stretched out, before easily landing on his feet in the deep snow and bouncing right back.

“He’s a funny little tyke.” The Viking chuckled, brushing snow off himself.

Ninja came running, paws light on the snow and barely leaving tracks. Still at full speed, he jumped at Josie.

She squealed, suddenly thinking that the pup had gone back to his deadly predator instincts. But Ninja simply pushed her at the shoulders and used her as a ramp to jump into the air in a youthful display of energy. Josie was surprised at the weight of the pup — he pushed her off balance.

Bragr stepped close and caught her, and then she was looking into his face from close up. His body was hot with sweat and cold from the air, he had snow in his hair and beard, one horn had a small icicle hanging from it, and his musky scent was suddenly overwhelming.

Putting both arms around his neck, she placed an impulsive kiss on his full lips.

His embrace tightened and he responded to the kiss, his warm lips eagerly meeting hers in a passionate encounter. His hand moved up to her throat and he pushed her gently into the hard trunk of the tree. It was a gesture so dominant it made Josie gasp. The kiss was both tender and demanding, and she had no choice but to go along with the passion, loving that there was no need for her to hide her own attraction anymore. Her mind was going fuzzy in the most pleasant way, his eagerness making her feel irresistible for the first time in her life.

Bragr’s surprisingly soft beard tickled her chin, and she put her hand on his hard, bulging chest. His slow heartbeat echoed through her whole body, and something hard was poking her

in the stomach. She didn't need to check to see that he was just as aroused as she was.

They stood there for a long time, only the two of them existing in the world, until Ninja jumped up and tried to push Bragr down with a light punch with two paws.

"Let's go inside," Josie said, her voice hoarse. A swarm of butterflies took off in her stomach, fluttering downwards. This she couldn't go without anymore.

Without a word they went inside the hut, leaving Ninja to bounce around on the snow by himself. Bragr picked up a stack of bowls before he crawled inside, putting them by the wall. "For later," he said. Then he took Josie into his arms again, bending down to kiss her. "Did you like the bastu?"

"M-hm," Josie replied, lips busy with other things than talking.

"I'll go and light the fire," Bragr said and let go of her. He dug a glowing ember out of the fire and went into the sauna.

Josie heard him blow on it, swearing because it took time for the fire to catch.

She grinned. She wasn't the only one who was impatient. But she really was. Seeing the huge, strong Viking chief play-fighting a wolf-like pup like a father playing with the family puppy had melted all resistance in her. Yes, he had abducted her. But he had abducted her from a life that wasn't actually all that great, and he had kept her safe ever since and made her feel better about herself than she had in years. He was the best male she'd met, and if *he* wasn't good enough, who could possibly be?

She sat down on a fur where she'd slept and took her boots and headset off, discreetly spreading the other furs out on the

floor just in case they'd need a bigger area.

"Finally," Bragr grunted when he came out of the sauna and closed the door. "It will take a while to heat up. Can you think of anything we might do while we wait?" His eyes glittered blue as he stoked the fire and added pieces of firewood to it.

"The only thing I can think of is checking your wounds to see if they're still healing," Josie said, wanting to get more of his heat as soon as possible.

"Ah, good idea," Bragr said and sat down behind her, pulling her back and into him so she was lying back with her head right under his chin. "But I should check yours first."

She wriggled against his chest, making herself comfortable. "I don't have any wounds."

He put his hands on her upper thigh. "Really? Perhaps there's a whole lot of injuries that you've kept quiet about because you are a brave shieldmaiden."

"Perhaps," Josie said, wanting him to move that hand further up. "You'd better check." She shrugged off the upper part of the uniform and reached out an arm.

Bragr took hold of her hand and examined each finger. "What do you call these things in your alien speech?"

"*Fingers*," Josie said. "Let me see yours." She grabbed his hand and stroked along each finger, noting the calluses and the fine tattoos that extended all the way to the fingernails. "No injuries here."

His fingertips ran lightly up her arm, raising goosebumps in their wake. "Or here. The skin is perfectly smooth except for these fine, white scars. Sword practice?"

“No.” Josie slid two fingers along his massive forearm, covered in soft, golden hairs. “I made those myself. But *yours* are from sword practice, I’m sure.” She noticed the occasional bump and white line of an old scar.

“All warriors have those. And all shieldmaidens.” His fingers moved to her shoulders, making little circles as they moved down and to the front. “But not everyone has this.” He pinched the fabric of her sports bra, the only kind of bra allowed on *Unity*.

“Then I’ll take it off,” Josie offered and leaned forwards.

“Allow me,” Bragr said as he carefully inched his fingers under the lower elastic and then pulled the bra off in one smooth move. “Ah yes. Much better.”

He cupped her breasts from behind, thumbs circling the skin and barely brushing the nipples. They were plenty hard from before, but the touch made them stiffen even more.

“No injuries at all,” Bragr said, voice gruff. “Pristine and perfect.”

Josie leaned back into his chest and closed her eyes, wanting to be absorbed into the moment. “Mmm.”

He kissed her forehead from above as his hands slid further down her body, past her ribcage, and down to her stomach. His touch was light, moving towards her hips and then slowly sliding along the waistline of her uniform tights. “I wonder if these come off, too.”

Josie wordlessly lifted her hips so he could push them down. He did, getting her panties off in the same move.

“Smooth,” she groaned as she kicked both garments off, wanting to be bare for him.

His fingers continued their exploration, moving down and to the center, a fraction of an inch at a time. “So smooth,” he agreed, voice catching in his throat as he encountered the first coarse hairs.

The sheer anticipation made Josie tremble. She was more than ready for anything that could happen here. His touch was perfect, light but not tickling. She knew her body was far from perfect, but Bragr’s mind-filling presence and his obvious arousal helped her not care. She would show him all of her, and she knew he’d accept her as she was. The flickering light from the fire danced warmly over her, the air thick with the scent of her arousal.

Bragr’s big, strong, callused fingers caressed her inner thigh, moving up. Josie bucked from the sensation as one of them slid up along the very edge of her center.

Then he couldn’t wait anymore and used his great strength to lift her off him, then laid her down on the furs, one of them doubled up under her head.

He flung his pants off, revealing the big manhood as it strained skywards. In profile against the fire, all its alien features, its ridges and bulbs and knots, made her swallow. That thing would either kill her or send her to a totally different kind of heaven.

She knew he wouldn’t hurt her. But she also knew she had to get that inside her.

She met his sky-blue gaze. “Take me,” she whimpered.

Kneeling beside her, he kissed her mouth again, hand on her throat in a gesture so dominant it made her gasp. “I was always going to.”

Pushing her knees apart, he opened her to his eyes and to everything else. The air made her sex feel cool — she must have been incredibly wet to be able to sense it.

Bragr was on his knees between her thighs, stroking one hand lazily up his cock, showing it to her while raising his eyebrows. She got it — he was giving her a last chance to stop this.

His care for her, and his self-control, made any lasting doubt turn to hot vapor. This was a good man, and it was about time he got his reward for that. Right now, there was no need for him to know that the reward would be hers as much as his.

“Yes,” she breathed, barely able to form the word as she spread herself more. “Now.”

He placed the tip at her entrance and pushed in a little bit, his hardness just making her aware of its presence and intentions.

She arched her back reflexively, the anticipation shooting hot little arrows down her body to her center. It was really close now.

He pushed further in, calmly but determined. There was a wet squelch as he passed the narrowest part, but Josie didn't care. She was horny, and she wanted him to know it.

Her body had to adjust to the intrusion, stretching and producing a burning sensation that left as soon as it had come. Bragr's Viking cock was hard and thick and relentless. It was her sex that had to give in.

Her eyes flew open when he bottomed out in her. It was a strange feeling and a new pressure, making her feel parts of herself that she hadn't known she had.

His blue gaze met hers, as piercing as his rod. “My alien shieldmaiden,” he growled hoarsely as he stayed inside her,

letting her get used to his presence and accepting his dominance of her womanly center. She totally did, and she loved it.

“Fuck me,” she pleaded, knowing he couldn’t understand the words but sure he would get the meaning behind them.

He pulled out and calmly pushed back in, releasing a little rain of hot sparks inside her as his cock caressed every little spot in there. It was as if it had been specially tailored to her, carefully made to give her the most pleasure possible.

This can't be normal, she thought, half delirious. Only a Viking with an alien cock could make me feel this good. A worrying thought snuck in: After this, how will sex with an Earth man be remotely satisfying?

He calmly fucked her, his pleasure betrayed by his primal growls in rhythm with the thrusts. Josie whimpered and groaned in response, her pleasure probably being even greater and building up to something really nice with each thrust. She wouldn’t need much longer. She had been heating up for this for days, imagining what it would be like. She hadn’t known it would be this good. If this went on for just a little longer, she wouldn’t be able to keep from going over the edge.

Bragr changed positions, lifting her hips. Immediately there was movement at her clit — the root of his many-featured cock was stroking against it.

She bucked uncontrollably, then arched again to push herself closer, needing harder contact.

“Yes, that’s it.” Bragr growled. “We’ll get there together.” There was a smirk on his fire-lit face as he increased the speed of his thrusts.

Josie had never felt more possessed or more wanted. How could he know her so well? She had no defense against this.

Holding her breath as she was pushed to the top of the curve, she let go and the climax washed over her. She heard herself gasp and moan at the heat that spread in her, and she let it.

Bragr slowed down, and then his thrusts went erratic and hard as he sprayed his hot juices inside her, his throaty roar of triumph making the pots rattle by the fire.

Josie still bucked and jerked on his cock as she rode out the climax.

Bragr slowed down but stayed inside as he collapsed on top of her, letting some of his mass weigh her down, his warm chest pressing on hers.

After a while she was distantly aware that he lifted and carried her into the sauna. The heat didn't shock her — she was feeling pretty hot herself. Bragr placed her on the bench so her head was on his lap, and caressed her forearm.

She tried to withdraw it, not wanting him to study her cutting scars too closely. Her life hadn't always been easy.

But Bragr held firm. "All warriors have scars," he said softly, running his thumb back and forth across the thin, white lines. "Some on the outside, most on the inside. The hardest wars we fight are with ourselves. And the best we can hope for is not to lose. You haven't lost, and now you never will."

"How can you be so sure?" Josie managed, tears burning at the corners of her eyes.

"Hjalmarheim won't let you. It will throw other enemies at you, and you will fight. You will be too busy to wage war on yourself."

Josie sniffled. “Is that why you’re a warrior? To be distracted from the war against yourself?”

“I am a warrior because I have to be,” Bragr said, two fingers absentmindedly making small circles on her upper arm. “And because it distracts me from the... urges, I suppose.”

“The urges from your father, that you’re scared of giving in to,” Josie completed. “You never mentioned your mother. What happened to her?”

Bragr looked away. “She was the wife that Gornt poisoned. I was not even one year old when that happened. Her name was Gudruna, a famous shieldmaiden that Gornt briefly desired and then grew tired of. I only learned of her from secret whispers. Gornt would not permit having her name mentioned anywhere around me.”

“I’m sorry,” Josie said, putting one hand on his and squeezing. “That must have been really tough for you.”

“I suppose so. It’s been my experience that one can learn from almost anything. What I’ve mostly learned from Gornt is how *not* to do things, and how *not* to be. I wish it were different, but we must do the best we can with the tools we have. And I keep telling myself that while I am Gornt’s son, I am also Gudruna’s son. In this world, Gornt defeated her. But in the world inside me, Gudruna will win every time. She is my ally in that constant struggle against myself. She will help me be a *good* earl and chief. I will be the *opposite* of Gornt! I will be Bragr. And I have decided that Bragr is Gudruna’s son more than Gornt’s.” There was a quiet but intense passion in his words.

Josie leaned her head back so she could look into his sky-blue eyes. “I love you.”

He squeezed her hand. “And I love you.”

They sat in silence for a long time.

“You look hot,” Bragr finally said. “Your face is all flushed. Let’s cool down.” He took her hand and helped her get up, steadying her until her knees would carry her properly. They went out the tunnel and threw themselves into the snow, well away from the spot where Bragr had tossed the innards from the keir.

The stars sparkled above them like a million jewels strewn across black velvet. Josie stretched her arms and legs out and enjoyed the cooling effect. The air was crisp and fresh with the scent of pine.

She could learn to like this place. She really could.

“Bragr, does this planet have something like a—” She cut herself off. There was movement, barely visible in the darkness.

She squinted. It could be Ninja. But this thing, whatever it was, moved wrong...

“Bragr,” she said urgently.

He was on his feet immediately, pushing her behind him.

“Who’s there?” he called, moving them both quickly towards the hut.

There was a muffled sound like a groan, and then a raspy sound, almost like hoarse singing.

Bragr stiffened, then sprinted naked through the snow towards the shape.

“Bragr!” Josie backed all the way up to the hut, ready to throw herself in the door and through the tunnel to get her spear and

Bragr's sword.

Then she heard talking. Two voices. One of them was Bragr's and the other had a lighter tone to it.

They came closer, Bragr and one other, half-carrying and half-dragging a third.

Josie dove into the tunnel, crawled through it, quickly pulled on her tights, got her headset, and crawled right out. She lit the light on the headset, and the gas discharge diode bathed a good two thousand square feet of the forest in stark, blue light.

She immediately regretted it. There were two horned warriors with Bragr, one lying on the ground and the other on their knees.

"Do you need your sword?" Josie called over, her voice sounding thin.

"Bring the light here," came Bragr's calm, bassy reply.

Too calm, it seemed to Josie. She hurried over, wishing she had brought a fur or two.

The warrior on her knees was Siv, the one who had threatened Josie on the *Kraken*. The one on the ground was one of the other warriors.

"We fell," a raspy voice said with great effort. It was the warrior on the ground, and in the blue light Josie could see that he was terribly burned all over his face and torso. His face was singed black and gave off a sour smell. "We clung to the aft of the ship, the dragon's tail. It burned on the way down, but it stayed in one piece until it hit the ground. I burned too. Siv broke both her legs and many ribs. There were vettir right away... but now my chief is here... I can lie back..." the voice faded away.

“Rest now, my brave herjer,” Bragr said tightly. “We’ll get you inside the hut where it is warm.”

“He carried me the whole way,” Siv said, voice shaking along with the rest of her. “Despite him being just as badly injured as me. But he could walk. I couldn’t. The vettir hacked at him, tearing burned flesh off him. Day and night he carried me, singing his sword’s battle chant. Oh mighty Zhor, save him... save him...”

“And now *we* shall carry *him*,” Bragr said and kneeled down to get a good grip. “Josie, take his arm... oh.”

The warrior was staring emptily up at the sky.

Siv collapsed on his chest. “No, no no... my love... stay... mighty Zhor, let him go on...”

For a long moment the only sound was Siv’s desperate pleading with her god through clattering teeth.

Then Bragr closed the dead warrior’s eyes with his hand. “Now rest, son of Hjalmarheim. Much can and will be said about you. But now I will only say one thing about you: you were a herjer. We shall meet again in Valhalla.”

Siv shook with sore sobs, then dragged herself to the warrior’s head, her legs trailing uselessly behind her. The big shieldmaiden laboriously positioned herself with the dead man’s head on her broken knees. “I will guard him.”

Bragr’s hands were closing and opening in frustration and despair. “He doesn’t need a guard, Siv. Come into the hut, warrior. It’s cold out here.”

“I will guard him,” the woman said again as if not having heard. Her body trembled uncontrollably with the cold.

“Are you crazy?” Josie exclaimed, grabbing Siv’s upper arm. “You can’t save him! Come inside! It’s warm, and we can put splints on your legs!”

Siv calmly drew her ax out of her belt and pointed its massive edge at Josie. “You wanted revenge? It’s yours now. You must now take the place of Sigurdr and me in my chief’s crew.” Before Josie could reply, Siv looked at Bragr. “My chief and earl and captain! It’s been my honor to be a shieldmaiden to you. You are the finest earl Hjalmarheim has ever had. We all say it, and we thank Zhor every day for being allowed to fight alongside you. Go on like that, Chief. Go on for Hjalmarheim. But you and our beloved land will go on without Sigurdr and without me.” Her face was gray and stiff and her voice was flat and lifeless, but she held the huge ax as steady as if it were wedged into bedrock.

Josie backed away, realizing there was more going on here than she had thought.

“Then,” Bragr said, clearly struggling to stay calm, “we shall meet in Valhalla. All of us. Go on ahead, if that is your wish. Daughter of Hjalmarheim, much can and will be said about you. Now I will say only one thing: you were a herjer.”

“It’s the finest thing to be, Chief. Good lives had we as your warriors.” Siv’s lips were blue from the cold, trembling uncontrollably. She wouldn’t last long.

“I didn’t *actually* want revenge,” Josie said weakly. “It was just something I said. I really didn’t want this to happen at all!”

Bragr firmly grabbed Josie’s arm and led her back to the hut.

They crawled inside. Bragr pulled his pants on and wrapped a fur around Josie’s bare shoulders.

“She knows that this was not your doing. It was her way of acknowledging you as an equal. Think no more about it.”

He stood in the middle of the hut, head slumped forwards, fingertips of both hands on his forehead.

“Are they brother and sister?” Josie asked quietly, shaken by the experience.

He turned his head. “What?”

“Their tattoos. Their Marks all over their bodies. They were the same. Yours are different.”

“They’re not siblings,” Bragr said unsteadily. “They’re Karestir. A man and woman the gods wanted to be together. They came out of the Trials with the same Marks. It’s the ultimate sign of their fate as mates. It’s more than soulmates, deeper than just love. Most of us don’t have a Karest, or we never find them. But Siv and Sigurdr were Karestir, and they had already found each other. They’ve been married since the day after they passed their Trials. Always together. Always loving each other. Always fighting as one. I was proud to have them as part of my crew on the *Kraken*.”

“So now she... she’s just going to...” Josie couldn’t form the words.

Bragr turned around and embraced her tightly, pulling her into his chest. “It’s our way. She wouldn’t survive long anyway, without her Karest. This is a mercy for her — she won’t have to go through the weeks and months of a slow death because of a broken heart and soul.”

“They can’t live without each other? For real?”

“I wish it wasn’t real,” the Viking chief said, sounding brittle. “I can sorely afford to lose two of my best warriors now that the other crew members of the *Kraken* are almost certainly

dead. I was hoping they had all been saved by clinging to the stern and keel of the ship. But it looks like only Siv and Sigurdr survived the fall.”

“Gornt killed your crew,” Josie summed up. “But he didn’t kill *you*. Which was probably his plan.”

“He has to go,” Bragr said darkly. “It wasn’t enough to banish him. My advisors were right. He has to die.”

“He’s your father,” Josie carefully reminded him. “Nobody should have to kill their own father. It may not be necessary. I mean, you have those ships. Can’t you tie him up and send him to another planet?”

- BRAGR -

“My people wouldn’t understand it,” he said. “He’s done too much damage.”

Josie looked at the door, and he followed her gaze. Out there, Siv was freezing to death on purpose. It wasn’t going to be a good night.

“Not the best end to a wonderful day,” Bragr rasped. “But I’m grateful that you’re here with me, my love.”

“Me too,” Josie said, and her simple words made his heart glow like an ember in a block of ice.

He sat her down and urged her to eat some grilled meat and drink a cup of myod. Getting the stack of pots from before, he put one in her hands. “This is sweet and gives us energy. Eat it all.”

Josie dipped a fingertip into the syrup and sucked on it. “Very sweet. Thank you.” She quickly finished the bowl.

“I will tell you about them,” he said as he sat down behind her and cradled her in his arms. “You should go to sleep, there’s no dishonor in that. Now, it was five years ago that I asked Siv to join the crew of the *Kraken*...”

He noticed that Josie tried to stay awake, or maybe the unpleasant arrival and death of his two warriors made it hard for her to relax. But about midnight she was breathing regularly and he stayed still, knowing that she needed the rest and loving being able to finally hold her tight.

The night passed with impossible slowness. He kept hoping for a knock on the door, or the sounds of someone dragging themselves through the tunnel. But everything was quiet except for the crackling from the fire. When he saw the first sign of light from the small crystals in the wall, he carefully laid Josie down on the furs and put two of the softest over her.

He crawled out. It had snowed, and Siv's still-kneeling shape had a dusting of white all over it. Sigurdr's body was barely visible. Bragr went over and pulled Siv's ice cold ax from her belt.

"You want me to use your ax for this, I'm sure," he muttered, feeling weird touching someone else's weapon. "You don't need it anymore in Valhalla, and Brisingr is a battle sword and not an ax."

He got busy cutting down trees for the pyre, anger filling him with each chop. This was Gornt's doing. "He has to go. He has to go. He has to go!"

He piled the wood up as far from the hut as he could, then dragged the stiff corpses of Siv and Sigurdr over. He threw them onto the pile, having to use his entire strength because they had fused together.

Searching the foundations of the hut, he found an old barrel of pine needle oil. It was something they sometimes did in the old days, preparing for their own pyre. It was an act of humility, meant to discourage the gods from killing you from

spite. It said ‘look at this, I’m preparing for my own death, I know I’m not one of you immortals’.

He poured the oil over his dead crew members and set it alight just as Straum was showing the first sliver of its disk over the horizon. There was the sudden flash of light and strength that meant morning was there.

Bragr watched them burn, lifting his arm to put it around Josie when she came out of the hut and walked over to embrace him without a word.

“You had no reason to love any of them,” he said, wiping fluid off his face. “Siv least of all. It’s kind of you to be here. It does them great honor.”

“They were your friends,” she said simply.

He looked down at her. “I love you.”

She squeezed him hard, not saying a word but still saying it all.

The pillar of gray smoke towered over them and Josie shielded her eyes. “Maybe someone will see that.”

“Everyone in the valley will see it,” Bragr said. “And some of them will not be friendly. How do you feel today?”

“Really good,” Josie said. “I mean, except for this.” She nodded towards the fire.

“We have done what we could.” Bragr decided. “They don’t need us anymore. We’ll eat and then walk on. You have nothing to fear when we reach my jarlagard on the coast.” He grabbed the two weapons he had taken from the two dead warriors and examined them. “Try to swing this.” He handed her Sigurdr’s sword.

Josie hesitantly held the weapon with both hands. “It’s heavy. I’m not sure I can do much with it.” She tried to swing it, but it was clearly too unwieldy for her small frame.

“That was Sigurdr’s sword,” Bragr said and took it back. “He was much bigger than you. No, I think you’re better served by your Tornado. I will put these two inside the hut, and the next hunters to come here will have some idea what happened here. The weapons should be buried next to the altar in the woods. But the ground is still frozen.”

They got ready, and carrying as much food as they could, they started walking into the forest.

There were vettir circling the pyre, and that suited Bragr fine. They would be too interested in the smoke and fire to spot him and Josie moving away.

Josie walked in front. “How’s your foot?” she asked when they could no longer see the vettir.

“It is as I thought,” he told her. “You are a gifted healer and shieldmaiden at the same time.”

She walked on, leaving small footprints in the snow. “I never was before. Maybe your body just heals fast.”

He kept a sharp lookout for both vettir and trolls. He was sure the dfergir had learned their lesson and would not be bothering them again.

At midday the ground started to rise towards another range of mountains. From the clues he had seen, they had to be the Haling mountains. It meant the coast would be on the other side.

The thought of finally coming home after a raid had completely lost its luster. With the crew of the *Kraken* dead, there would be no reason to celebrate. Josie’s presence was the

only thing that brightened his thoughts. But it was obvious they had to stop Gornt once and for all.

Josie walked in front, sinking only a finger's breadth into the snow with each step. His eyes kept seeking her curves, aching to explore them again. They would have to spend one more night outside, and he wanted it to be a good one.

"Let's go more to the left," he told her and pointed in the direction he meant. "I know that place. There's a hut close to the peak. We can spend the night there."

Josie's eyes sought his crotch for a brief moment. "Good."

He caught up with her and handed her a cold slice of grilled keigr as well as a bowl of tree syrup. "The vettir are busy with the fire, and we've seen no trolls so far. They usually don't come much closer to the coast than this. There's even a good chance we'll meet hunters today."

"If the other ships landed safely," Josie said between mouthfuls, "and they saw your ship fall, won't they send out a search party?"

Bragr filled his mouth with newly fallen snow from a branch. "They won't know where we landed. They must have lost sight of us. For all they know, we could have landed in the ocean or on the other side of Gardr. We could be anywhere. And they will think we're probably dead."

They walked on as the hill became steeper. But Bragr knew where they were now, and the hut he had in mind was a small but good one.

The sun had set when they finally reached the top of the ridge and saw the dark shape of the hut against the red sky.

"Are all your houses built from stone?" Josie asked as Bragr opened the creaking door.

“Some are,” he said as he looked around inside the dark, cold room. “This one is not as old as the one down in the valley, but stone huts last longer than wooden ones, especially up here where the wind from the ocean blows hard. Can you use your magic light?”

Josie touched the black device by her ear, and the room was immediately starkly lit.

Bragr spotted several chests and a part of the wooden floor that could be opened, revealing a stone-lined space filled with woven baskets and wooden boxes. He didn't need to open them to know they were full of conserved food, probably salted meats and dried fruits. There was a low bench, a fireplace in the middle of the room, and various tools for cooking and chopping wood.

“Have you been here before?” Josie asked, adjusting the brightness of the light. “It looks like you know your way around.”

“I was here once or twice in my youth,” Bragr said absentmindedly as he opened the chests and found them full of furs and blankets. “It's a typical hut that a village will keep ready. They're all mostly the same. And they're protected by sacred runes all over. We'll be fine here until tomorrow. There's no bastu, though. Before we settle down, let's go back outside.”

He took Josie's hand and led her out of the hut, then climbed the last hundred steps to the very peak of the ridge. The moment they stuck their heads above it, their hair was blown out of their faces by the wind.

“The ocean,” Josie said.

Below them lay the soft green plains of Hjalmarheim. They ended at the craggy coast, rocky and flat. Beyond it lay the myriad of smaller islands, stretching out towards the red horizon where the sun had set.

“The ocean,” Bragr confirmed. “And the part of the island where my people live.”

“It’s beautiful!” Josie exclaimed. “I think I see some lights down there.”

Indeed, there were spread clusters of tiny, flickering lights, just being lit as dusk grew darker. Bragr filled his lungs with the fresh ocean air, mixed with the faint scent of farms and growing crops. “Settlements and farms and villages. My jarlagard is still far away. But someone down there will have a shortship, and we can get home fast.”

“What’s it like to be the chief of this place?”

He thought about it. “Some days it’s the last thing I want to be. Some days I wouldn’t have it any other way. Mostly it’s just the way things are and I have to deal with it.”

“Is it hard?”

“It would be harder if I didn’t think the people wanted me. And I have good advisors. I think it has made me a better person. But yes, it’s hard.”

She squeezed his hand. “I’m sure you’re doing really well. And I’m looking forward to seeing this view again in the morning. It is a beautiful land. Can we get back to the hut?”

Back inside, he lit the fire and prepared a meal that seemed luxurious after days in the vilmark. Josie insisted on helping, and soon they were cutting dried meat and peeling vegetables. There was an entire barrel of myod, and he poured for both of

them. “Remind me to reward the owners of this hut, too. They’re keeping it unusually well stocked.”

Josie took a sip of her cup. “They must come here often. Not a bad place to party.”

“That must be why,” he agreed, draining his own cup. “When you come up here to have a good time, you want everything ready. Even the drinks.”

“Looked like a long climb,” Josie said, carefully peeling a vegetable. “That barrel must have been heavy to carry.”

Bragr cut the meat into cubes. “Oh, they probably brought it up here with a shortship, along with the food. I don’t think they carried it. But to properly enjoy a party in this hut, the climb is a part of it. You want to have deserved the feast and —” He immediately regretted thinking about that. There would be no after-raid feast this time. And his crew would never feast again in this world.

Josie touched his hand. “I was there, Bragr. There was nothing you could do. Those two skrymtir destroyed the ship, not you.”

He gave her a surprised glance. How had she known that was what he had been thinking about?

“It was Gornt who did it, with his unholy undead,” he agreed. “But I was the captain. I should have checked that we had gotten rid of all the skrymtir, on the inside and outside of the ship. It was strange that he broke off the attack so quickly.”

“It’s hard to understand bad people,” Josie said, scooping up the vegetables she’d cut and putting them in the iron pot that hung over the fire, where melted snow was boiling. “They think of tricks and deceit that won’t even cross the minds of others. I’m glad you’re not like that.”

“My crew died because I’m not like that,” Bragr fretted. “But I understand your point. And I am also glad none of us are like that.” He stroked her hair and kissed her soft cheek.

“Also you don’t need to worry about being like your father. You’re a different man. There’s no evil in you that I can see. Even when you abduct someone, it turns out to be the right thing to do. More or less.”

“It’s remarkable how I had to go to another planet to find a woman who understands me better than I understand myself,” Bragr said, his voice not quite steady. “I’m not sure if it was the right thing to do. It just *felt* right. There was only one spark of real life on that station, one that was really alive. I had to get to know that spark better and keep you close to me. You were so out of place on that foul-smelling station.”

Josie stirred the pot. “I *felt* out of place. But I couldn’t afford to think about it, because there was nowhere else to go. My life was on *Unity*, whether I wanted it to be or not. How long should this boil?”

Bragr sprinkled dried herbs over the pot. “Not much longer now. Just until it’s all softened.”

Josie threw a glance at his crotch. “*All* softened?”

He chuckled, glad that she was taking his mind off the fate of his crew. “Some things will never be soft while you’re near.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, hiding a burp behind one hand. “You keep giving me myod, and I’m not used to it. There was nothing like that on *Unity* for us that worked there.”

He refilled her cup again. “Then you have to make up for it now. This is some of the better myod I’ve had. But perhaps it tastes this good because of the company.”

“I think so too. Shall we try?” Josie took a spoon and dipped it into the pot. “You first.” She held the spoon up to his mouth.

He tasted it. “Needs more time. It’s still too chewy.”

Josie put a lid on the pot. “Maybe it’s because I’m near, preventing it from being soft. They say I can have that effect.”

“I heard that too.” His crotch twitched, and he saw that she noticed.

“Why don’t you sit down there,” she suggested and nodded at the wooden bench by one wall. He got a heap of furs out of the chests and piled them onto the bench, making it comfortable. “Only if you join me here. That pot needs to cook for a long time yet.” He sat down and leaned back with his knees together, patting his thighs.

Josie gave the pot a thorough stir, then put the lid back on. “I think you’re right.” She came over and unceremoniously sat on his lap. “Hm. Feels like there’s something hard here, too. Sorry, I shouldn’t talk like this after what happened with your crew.”

He leaned forwards and nuzzled the side of her head. “There’s nothing we can do for them now except honor their memory and avenge them. And we shall. But they wouldn’t want us to stop living.” He blew on her bare neck.

She twitched. “That tickles. Is that the right word? Tickles? Feels like I just made it up.”

“Your Garda is incredible,” he said sincerely. “But I’m curious about your language, too. For instance, what are these?”

- JOSIE -

Bragr's huge hand caressed one breast outside the uniform.

"Those are 'breasts'," Josie said. "Or 'boobs', if we're being really casual."

He reached over to caress the other one. "Ah. Are we being casual?"

She laughed. "We really are."

"You're wearing a lot of clothes for someone who's being casual. Look at me, I'm wearing almost nothing."

Josie stroked along his bare chest, tracing the intricate Marks. "And still you didn't casually freeze to death in that forest."

"It was cold," he admitted. "But it is also my earldom and it wouldn't dare make me mad." He took the hem of her uniform top between two fingers and pulled at it.

Josie helped him get it off her, then sighed with pleasure as he cupped both breasts over the sports bra. "That feels nice."

"It does," he agreed and stroked both nipples at the same time, making them harden and raising goosebumps on her arms.

"What are these?"

"Nipples," she breathed.

“*Nippls*,” he echoed. “A well chosen word.” His hands slid slowly down. “And this?”

“Ribs.”

“This?”

“Stomach.”

“And this?”

“Belly button.”

“This?”

“Elastic.”

He lifted the elastic of her tights a fraction off her body and let it snap back.

“*Okay*, I get it.” Josie lifted her hips and slid the pants off, taking the panties with her at the same time.

His hand rubbed lightly where the elastic had been. “Much better. This?”

“Mm. Lower stomach.”

“That’s just... *luxurious*. This?”

“Hips.” His hands left a warm trail of tingles as they made circles on her skin.

“This?”

She gasped. “That’s... hair.”

“This?”

“Thigh.”

“This?”

“Also thigh.”

With one big hand on each upper thigh, he pushed her legs apart. Josie didn't resist.

One finger slid all the way up one thigh. "This?"

"Oh..." Her body jerked.

"The *oh*?" He wiggled his finger, making a wet noise.

"The O comes later," Josie managed. "That's the pussy. Again, if we're being casual— oh!"

"So many *oh*," Bragr teased as he kept wriggling his finger at her most sensitive place. "*Pussy*. I like it. So easy to say."

"Oooh...." Josie groaned, because his finger was doing some intense things to her. His touch was delicate and teasing, but she was ready for more than that. "Wait. I want to..." She clumsily tried to turn around on his lap.

He grabbed her under her arms and easily lifted her whole weight, turning her around until she was straddling him face to face.

"That's better," he said and slid his hands up and down her back. "This?"

"Back."

"This?"

She leaned forwards, into his chest. "Lower back."

"This?"

"Hips again."

"This?"

"Butt."

"Your *butt* is making me hard."

She reached down between them and stroked the hardness outside his suede pants. “I noticed. From the start. Is that why you took me?”

“Yes,” he said. “I thought, ‘I want to feel that butt’.”

Josie sighed with pleasure. “And now you have.”

“Wishes can come true,” he agreed and loosened his pants.

“Was it as good as you were hoping?”

Lifting Josie off him for a moment, he quickly pulled his pants all the way off. His cock stood up between them like a third person. “It was so much better that I can’t express it with words. I must use something else. Oh, look. There it is.”

She grabbed the hard shaft with both hands, making it twitch. “It’s expressing *something*.”

“So it is.” Bragr leaned in and kissed her. “Can you guess what it is?”

“It wants pussy?”

He smirked. “You really learn languages really fast. That’s exactly what it’s saying. And I know someone who has what it wants.”

“The vettir?” Josie suggested, stroking the immense alien cock. It had more features than she had realized, especially around the root. No wonder he had gotten her off so fast.

“What? No!”

“The trolls?”

“Stop it!”

“Not the dfergir?”

“If you don’t stop now, I’ll *make* you stop.”

“You and which army? Actually, never mind. I forgot you have an actual Viking army. Okay, *I* have what you want. What are you going to do about it?”

He smirked, placed his hands under her hips, and then lifted her all the way off him, pulled her closer, and then held her in the air, right on top of his cock. “I was thinking something like *this*.” He lowered her an inch until the tip was inside her.

Josie reached down and adjusted the angle, so it would go in right. “Oh. I actually like that. A lot. But slowly, please.”

He did as she asked and lowered her down onto him, slowly and with impressive control. He was pretty much holding her up on straight arms, but they were rock steady as he lowered her another fraction.

She moaned as he started filling her up, setting off all kinds of heat and delight in her center. This time she knew what to expect, and she could relax and just enjoy. She knew he would fit, and she knew he knew what he was doing.

He pierced her soul with his eyes as he sat her down slowly, filling her completely as she groaned in surrender.

Again he paused inside, giving her body the time to adjust to the intruder. He lifted her again, halfway off him, then let her slide down on his cock while holding her up and giving her perfect support.

Josie clung to his neck and breathed in his manly smell, the smell of the furs and the smoke from the fire. The flames crackled and cast flickering shadows on the stone walls. It all made her feel deliriously primal, as if she had gone back in time as well as through space. It spoke to something deep inside her, being fucked in a place like this. By a freaking *Viking*.

She leaned back and reached up to grab both his horns, leaning into him while he fucked her. Again she was just along for the ride, letting him take her weight and fuck her the way he wanted.

“I love your horns,” she groaned as his cock churned up heat in her center.

“And I love all of you,” he countered in a half-growl.

She let her arms slide down to his neck, getting ready for the fireworks she knew were about to start. It was as if electric current was running through her, gathering and growing deep down.

Bragr sped up again, his growl going deeper as he lifted and lowered her faster, but still with perfect control. Adjusting his position under her, he brought the root of his cock into contact with her clit.

She had no choice but to go with the flow, and the flow was cascading over a cliff. She clung to him uncontrollably as she came, whimpering and groaning with pleasure.

Bragr sped up more, and the noises in the little hut were a scandalous mix of deep roars, bright squeals, and wet squelches as he came inside her, pushing all the way in, so deep it hurt. But it was a wonderful pain that she relished as she let the climax take her on another orbit.

He slowed down and breathed hard in her hair. “My love.”

“My love, too,” she panted. “I love you.”

He stayed all the way inside her, stroking one big hand up and down her back. “I never knew it would be this much fun learning languages.”

“Just don’t learn any others,” Josie panted. “Except French, maybe. I know some words you might like.”

They sat like that for a while before they stirred.

“Let’s check on the stew,” Josie said, feeling hungry.

Bragr didn’t move, his thick arms heavy on her back. “Mhm.”

She straightened and kissed his bearded chin. “Or we could just stay like this.”

He slowly straightened and stretched. “We will stay like that the whole night. But we do need to eat something, and that pot smells really good.” He lifted her off him, got up, padded to the fireplace, and opened the lid. “Mmm. Stay where you are. I’ll get it for you.”

Josie stretched and pulled a fur over her, up to her eyes. “Thank you.”

Bragr brought over two plates. Josie dug in without hesitation. The food on this alien planet was a lot better than the freeze-dried stuff the staff got on *Unity*.

“Tomorrow we’ll get to your home,” she said when she was finishing up, draining a cup of myod. “What will happen then?”

“I will show you my jarlagard, and we’ll see how you like it here in Hjalmarheim. That’s all I know.”

“Will you help me find Aretha and the other girls?”

“I think finding them will be easy. They will not be hidden.”

Josie thought about it. This looked like it would work out after all. She would meet Aretha, they would talk about what to do, and probably Aretha would want to go home. And the other girls, too.

But Josie knew she wouldn't be going. She didn't know if it was just Bragr or the weird sun or the planet itself or maybe even the lace, but she knew that she felt better on this planet than she ever had on Earth or on *Unity*. She felt strong and attractive and important. And loved.

Oh, who do I think I'm kidding? she thought. *It's all because of him.*

He made her feel attractive because he couldn't keep his hands off her. He made her feel strong because he let her fight. He made her feel important because he was protecting her at any cost.

But they'd been alone all the time. What would happen when they got to his people? Would he change, the way everyone Josie knew would change depending on who was in the room?

Well, he was a straightforward man. She could just ask.

"Bragr, when we get to your people, will you change?"

Bragr smiled. "Good question. You have already seen me as I am on raids. And you have seen me as I am aboard ship. You have seen me as I am when alone with you. Have I changed a lot during those times?"

"You really haven't," Josie admitted. "But I don't know what you'll be like at home. What happens with us?"

"I have an oracle that I visit every year," Bragr said. "A seeress who predicts the future. I went to see her recently, but she made no mention of us."

Josie was astonished. "Really? An oracle?"

"Really. But her predictions are always about random things. They are always true, but I can't choose the topic. She has to say only what the crystal shows her."

Josie's eyes went narrow from suspicion. "She has a *crystal ball*?"

"It's not a ball, just a big chunk as black as obsidian. Except darker."

"And her predictions always come true?"

Bragr drained his cup. "Always."

"Because they're so vague they could mean anything at any time?"

"No, they're mostly specific. She never gives a time for the events, except that they will come to pass within a year. And they do."

"Huh. What did she predict?"

Bragr looked at her thoughtfully. "She predicted many things. And she gave me a Prophecy for the first time. She said my clan of Einungar would lose the earldom."

"You'd lose it? What does that mean?"

"It must mean that someone will conquer it. Or try to."

Josie frowned. "You seem really calm for an earl who is about to lose his lands."

Bragr shrugged his massive shoulders. "I'm guessing it means I will lose it for only a short while. But you're right — when we get home, I'll have to prepare to defend against an invasion and do my best to find a certain warrior the oracle mentioned, one who will help me regain the earldom. A Meistr, a master warrior. I think I'll have time to find him."

"An invasion? That has to be Gornt, right? And his skrymtir."

"My father is of the Einungar clan as well. It doesn't fit."

"It might not happen at all."

“The oracle is never wrong, they say.”

Josie shrugged. “Maybe this is the first time.”

Bragr grinned. “That’s what I said. I’m happy we think so alike.” He stacked the dishes and cleaned the knives and tools, hanging them back on the wall.

Josie impulsively grabbed his hand. “I don’t care if you are an earl or not. You’re a wonderful man, and that’s all I want.”

Bragr put his hand on top of hers. “That makes me happy, my love. Don’t worry. I’ll protect you, no matter what it takes.”

She turned over on her side and pushed her butt into him, still holding his arm so that he embraced her. “I know you will, love. But don’t protect me too much against *you*. I like the things you do to me.”

His hand wandered to her hip, and she felt his cock sliding up the inside of her thigh. “You know, I had a feeling you did.”

She woke up early in the morning with an urgent need. Bragr was still sleeping soundly as she disentangled herself from his limbs and tiptoed outside, covered by a blanket, Tornado in her hand just in case.

Her need taken care of, she saw that the pulsar called Straum was about to rise. She wanted to experience the strange surge of energy that it created in her, so she walked up to the top of the ridge where they had seen the ocean the night before.

The lands in front of her were still in darkness, but there were many points of light. The people there were clearly up already.

She squinted. Those were some big, pulsating splotches of light. They were not like the pinpoints from last night. They looked more like fires. Perhaps that was how they did things on this planet.

She turned just in time to see Straum rise. Again there was a flash of light as the first sliver of the star's disk rose over the horizon, and again it filled her with a kind of strength that she knew she would miss if it were gone. She could swear she saw sparks dance on the edge of the flint blade that topped Tornado.

She turned around again. Those fires were still blazing. And now it was brighter, she saw the tall pillars of black smoke rising from them. That could not be normal.

She hurried back to the hut. "Bragr!"

He woke up immediately, straightened, and reached for the sword right next to him. "What is it?"

"You better come and look at this. Get dressed first." Josie quickly put her uniform on. "Your villages look like they're on fire."

Bragr pulled on his pants and his boots, then stormed out with Brisingr in one hand.

Josie followed to the vantage point.

Bragr was frozen in place, his jaw tight and his face pale. "Invasion! There are many farms on fire! I must go down there. They need me!" They ran back to the hut and tidied it up in a feverish haste, making sure they had everything they needed before they started walking fast down the hill.

Josie clutched Tornado, feeling much less good about this whole thing than just a few minutes ago. If that was an invasion, then it must have happened during the night. And invasions usually meant people dying. She'd really prefer not to see a burning farm or people who had lost their homes or maybe even innocent people who had died. The skrymtir were bad enough.

As they came down from the mountain, the air got warmer and the lands stretched in front of them. It was made up of rolling hills with fields and creeks and occasional clusters of trees filled with little leaves. It was obviously springtime, and the air was fragrant with herbs and the colorful flowers that lined the grasslands and the fields. Josie spotted livestock grazing, not sure what to make of the big alien animals. They were big, but seemed harmless enough.

In the distance there was a plume of black smoke.

They found a narrow path and walked fast along it, Josie having to nearly jog to keep up with Bragr's long strides.

The road crested a hill, and in front of them they saw a farmstead with one building that had clearly been on fire, but which was only smoking.

"Only the barn was burned," Bragr said as they walked fast towards a small group of people, including several children. It looked like a large family.

He raised his hand when they turned to stare at him. "Greetings, good people of Hjalmarheim. What has happened to your barn?"

They were clearly stunned, but a woman in a long dress recovered. "Earl Bragr! They said you were..." The woman suddenly spotted Josie, and her eyes widened.

“We had a hard landing coming back from the spring raid,” Bragr said calmly, “but as you can see, I’m back in Hjalmarheim now, and I am perfectly fine. This is Josie, a shieldmaiden from very far away. What has happened here?”

“Skrymtir, Chief,” a man said darkly, looking like an old warrior, his bared sword in his hand. “The undead aliens of Gornt came here and set fire to the barn. And to the barns of all our neighbors. It happened during the night. We chased them, but they are very many and we have to organize an army before we can seek battle with them. They went north, setting more farms alight.”

“You are Ivarr,” Bragr said. “I remember you from the war against Gornt. You were in the front lines at the battle of Hakadal. Did you lose anyone here? Are there injuries?”

The man raised his eyebrows. “I am indeed Ivarr, Chief. No, thank Zhor we didn’t lose anyone. But the children are scared.”

Josie smiled at the woman. “How old are they?”

The woman cautiously returned the smile. “They are four, six, ten, twelve and fifteen.”

“A big family is a blessing,” Josie said, not sure where *that* came from but wanting to say something nice. Bragr was being all earl-like and dignified, and it seemed like the kind of thing she should say. “But I’m sure it has been a lot of work. Especially on a farm.”

“It has,” the woman said. “But it’s all worth it. I’m Solveg.”

“I’m Josie.”

“Do you have children yourself, perhaps?”

“Oh no,” Josie hurried to say. “Not yet.”

“You’re too young to have many, anyway. But perhaps soon.” Solveg glanced at Bragr and produced an enigmatic smile. “Anyway, we stayed inside until they had left. Those skrymtir are the creepiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Very good,” Bragr said with cold iron in his voice. “It was the wise thing to do. We shall destroy them all, and Gornt along with them. We have had enough of his skrymtir and his witchcraft. I will gather the army and throw them out of our lands forever. Ivarr, gather the warriors you know here in the area and bring them north to meet up with the main army. Do not seek battle unless you have no choice. We shall attack as one. Is there a shortship in the village?”

“There is,” Ivarr said. “At the farm of Lendmann Kark. Young Hansr will guide you. Hansr!”

A teenage boy came over, clearly in awe to be in the presence of Bragr. “Yes, Father!”

“Go with Earl Bragr and show him and Josie to Lendmann Kark’s farm.”

Bragr grasped Solveg’s hand in a firm hold of both their wrists, then did the same with Ivarr. “I shall return to visit when the war is won. Lead on, Hansr.”

“Yes, Chief,” the boy gulped and started walking fast away from the farm, nearly tripping over his own awkwardly long legs.

They moved quickly along the dirt road, and soon they were approaching another farm, much the same as the one they’d left. Here, two buildings had been burned and there were flocks of livestock standing around as if confused.

An old man came towards them, ax in hand. “Earl Bragr. The skrymtir were here. I suspect Gornt is up to his witchcraft

again.”

Bragr clasped hands with him. “So it seems, Kark. This is Josie, an alien shieldmaiden. We need to get to my jarlagard so we can gather the army and fight Gornt’s skrymtir.”

“The shortship is safe,” Kark said and pointed to a stone building. “They couldn’t set fire to that. Take it, Chief. I shall join the fight along with all the warriors of this village. I will lead them along with Ivarr. Hansr, bring the shortship out.”

The teenager ran over and opened the door to the stone building.

“He’s Ivarr’s boy,” Kark said. “One of your future warriors, no doubt.”

“When he passes his Trials,” Bragr said. “Not before. He will have to sit this battle out.”

“There is the difference between you and your father, Chief. He would force any child who could hold a stick to fight for him.”

“Gornt will never again terrorize Hjalmarheim,” Bragr growled. “Nor will he terrorize any other place.”

He’s saying he’ll kill his father, Josie thought.

“I think that is wise, Chief,” Kark said carefully. “Nobody wants him, and he would always be a menace.”

There was a metallic whine, and a strange shape came out of the stone building. It looked most of all like an old wooden sled with curved runners that rose high in front, each topped by a carved boar’s head. It was beautifully painted in red, with colorful swirls here and there, similar to the longships. It was the kind of thing that looked like it should have had a team of

reindeer pulling it. But it slid towards them on its own, although the runners didn't seem to be touching the ground.

You must be kidding me, Josie thought.

Hansr was standing in the sled and had it stop beside them. "It's ready, Chief."

Bragr gave the strange conveyance a critical look. "It's in good shape, Kark."

"We keep it ready," the old man said. "I only allow it to be used for serious errands. We use our sea-going ships for most of our needs."

Bragr took Josie's hand and helped her into the sled, making it rock on soft springs. "Sit down here. It's safe."

She gingerly sat down on the simple wood plank, noticing that the sled had primitive controls made from artful spirals of cast iron.

Bragr turned to Hansr. "Do you know the hut up in the mountains?" He pointed to the ridge where they had spent the night.

"Yes, Chief! It belongs to our village. We often go there."

Bragr fixed the boy with a blue gaze. "My guess is that you're the one who keeps it stocked with food and furs. It's the kind of job someone like you would enjoy."

The boy went red. "Yes, Chief."

Bragr grabbed his shoulder and squeezed it. "Well done, Hansr. Josie and I needed it last night, and it served us well. I will return with more supplies for it when this is all over. Lendmann Kark, gather all your warriors and march north. We will destroy Gornt and his unholy army once and for all." He sat down beside Josie, grabbed the strange iron controls, and

had the sled accelerate forwards until it lifted off the ground and rose to a height of several feet above the grass.

Josie grabbed onto the wooden handhold with one hand, the other holding her spear with the butt on the floor and the sharp end straight up. “How does this even work?”

“We often talk about that,” Bragr said. “It must be similar to the longships, although the shortships can’t go into space. Only our shipwrights say they know, but they keep their knowledge secret. I suspect they don’t know, either.”

“*Someone* must know,” Josie insisted. “How else can they repair them and keep them running?”

“Those who made them to begin with knew, and since then all we do is keep the ships in order. We replace boards when necessary, we touch up the paint, and we use them sparingly so as not to wear them out. The only parts on this shortship that have not been replaced are the runners. On the longships it’s the masts and the keels, from the dragon’s head in the bow to the dragon’s tail at the stern. We think that’s where the magic lies.”

“It can’t be *magic*,” Josie fretted. “Magic doesn’t exist.”

“I’ve traveled to many planets on raids,” Bragr said as they passed another burned farm, making him glower. “I’ve seen many wonders, and some of them seem like magic to me. Your space station, for instance. How does it stay up above the planet? How does the air stay inside it? How can it support so many people? But I notice that nobody has anything like our longships, and nobody can explain to us how they work. Here on Gardr, most people say they work by magic. You and I know that it is false. They must be made by someone. The makers must have known secret arts. They lived a long time ago and left us these ships, but no clue about how they work.

All we know is that they *do* work and they allow us to travel to other planets and raid them.”

“They must have something to do with that pulsar,” Josie said. “I saw your ships travel faster than light, and *this* thing is a heap of firewood that should not be able to fly at all. It’s alien tech on a crazy high level.”

“We do think Straum is involved,” Bragr agreed. “And aliens. Or possibly our ancient ancestors. The ships only work in daylight. That’s all we know.”

They were going fast now, passing one burned farm after the next, and the wind was forcing tears from Josie’s eyes. “How far is it?”

“Not so far now,” Bragr said, his jaws clenched. “The skrymtir must have moved fast.”

“It’s a strange way to invade,” Josie pondered. “Just burning the barns and not fighting anyone?”

“Much like your station, nobody here expects a sudden attack like this,” Bragr said. “My warriors had no time to gather and fight. And this is just a show of strength. It’s a way for Gornt to tell Hjalmarheim ‘I’m back, and I’m in charge’. Everyone will understand that things are about to get really bad.”

“He must think you’re dead.”

Bragr grabbed Josie’s arm to steady her as he had the sled bank hard around a copse of tall trees. “He knew the ship broke up above Gardr. But I think he wanted to be absolutely sure I was gone, so he sent that horde of skrymtir that we fought. If we’d been injured, like Siv and Sigurdr, then they would have killed us. We will take a shortcut. Don’t be alarmed.”

The sled turned to the right, towards the mountains, seeming to be heading straight for a sheer cliff. Josie squealed as the hard, gray cliffside came closer fast, but then Bragr turned the sled hard, going into a narrow canyon.

“Strangely, going through this gorge is easier when going fast than when going slow,” he called over the noise from the wind.

For long minutes the sled banked and weaved its way between two rocky walls, and then the canyon widened and they flew over a long, narrow lake with trees all around it.

“If his plan depends on you being dead,” Josie was finally able to say when they had passed the lake and were flying over farmland again, “and you’re actually alive, then you might be able to surprise him.”

“Who knows what he’s planned,” Bragr growled between clenched teeth. “I will use all my power to—”

An arrow on fire zoomed past right in front of them, and Bragr threw the sled into a turn so hard that Josie screamed, clinging to him with all her strength as the blood was forced from her head and her vision was framed in black.

- BRAGR -

He straightened the sled up and landed as fast as he could.

“It’s all right,” he told Josie, who was clinging to him with her eyes closed. “They’re my people.”

He jumped down to the ground and strode towards the group of warriors and shieldmaidens. One of them held a bow and a clutch of the arrows that were sometimes used to give signals during battles.

“Heidran!” Bragr called, spotting his old shaman. “What’s going on?”

Heidran bowed. “Gornt happened, Chief. He attacked Hjalmarheim last night with several hordes of skrymtir. He took the jarlagard, and he has declared himself king.”

Bragr just stared. The disaster was worse than he had feared. “King?”

“We thought you had died, Chief,” Heidran went on. He was pale, but composed. “There were tales of the *Kraken* coming apart and its crew falling over Gardr.”

“Those tales are true, but I survived. The rest of the crew wasn’t so lucky. How many are dead?” Bragr asked, dreading

the answer.

“A few dozen warriors died,” the shaman said. “They destroyed ten times as many skrymtir, but there were so many of them. Aliens, they were. Big and terrible. Much more deadly than the usual skrymtir, or they would not have been able to force their way to the jarlagard.”

A big warrior made his way towards him. “Earl Bragr! I saw Gornt’s army. It’s very large, and they’re all aliens. I fear this will be a bloody struggle.”

Bragr clasped hands with the man. “Prince Craxon! I’m honored to see you visit Hjalmarheim! Especially in these difficult times.”

“The times have turned difficult, indeed,” the prince said. “I came on the call of Shaman Heidran, who is looking for a certain warrior. Something to do with a recent Prophecy, I gather. I thought perhaps this warrior could be one of my men in Ragnhildros.”

“Possibly even you, Prince Craxon,” Bragr said. “I would never ask the prince of another land to fight for me. Though any help you could give would be gratefully received.”

“I shall stay and fight,” the prince rumbled, “and I shall send for my warriors. But I recommend this war be fought as soon as possible. It will be unusually bloody and terrible. Whence comes the astonishing huldr by your side?”

“That’s Josie,” Bragr said, proud to be in her company and boyishly gratified that even a discerning man like the prince recognized her beauty. “She’s a shieldmaiden from the planet Earth. Notice her spear! It’s called ‘Tornado’, and with it she has already defeated a host of eight dfergir without a single death.”

A murmur went through the crowd of seasoned warriors.

“Surely this female is more to you than a mere shieldmaiden,” Craxon said, frowning. “I see it in both your eyes. But I shall not say more until you yourself bring it up.”

Bragr glanced at Josie, and for a moment their gaze met. Was it that obvious to everyone?

“Be that as it may,” he said, “this war must be fought, and quickly. We have the advantage, because this is our land.”

“Everyone will fight, Chief,” a shieldmaiden said, slapping the hilt of her sword. “For our own land and for you as our king.”

“There’s no king in Hjalmarheim!” Bragr declared. “Despite what madness may have possessed Gornt to declare himself a monarch. This is an earldom. Where is he now? In the jarlagard?”

“He calls it the ‘konungsgard’ now,” Heidran says. “And he is having a crown made.”

“The raiders brought home some alien females, like Josie,” Bragr said. “Where are they now?”

“They were all together at the jarlagard,” said Arn, one of the raiders. “We weren’t sure what to do with them, and we couldn’t ask you. We treated them as honored guests. To my knowledge they’re still there, but now Gornt is their host.”

“I see.” Bragr looked away. He had to seem cool and in control. But this was looking really bad. Yet another bloody war to fight. He knew there would be great bloodshed. Gornt had learned since last time. This time he would be a much harder enemy. And he had not been easy to fight the first time. If he had alien skrymtir now, that was a whole new thing to learn how to fight.

He made a difficult decision. “Do we still have longships?”

“We have three, Chief. They’re hidden away. Gornt’s forces came in the *Dead Son* and many alien ships.”

“Assemble a small crew for one longship and get it ready to sail as soon as possible.”

The warriors looked at each other, confused.

“Excuse me, Chief,” Heidran said carefully. “Are you ordering a raid? Now?”

“No, that’s not it,” he said and took Josie’s hand, leading her a little distance away. His heart ached with what he had to do now.

He looked down on her. “I love you, Josie. And I have done my best to protect you from the dangers of Hjalmarheim. But this coming war will be terrible. I will not be able to protect you. That is not acceptable to me.”

Josie’s eyes widened as she understood. “No, don’t—”

He put one finger gently across her lips. “The last thing I want is to send you away. And yet I have no choice. This is not your war. It’s mine. And I cannot watch you get hurt or die for a land that’s completely alien to you or for a man who has abducted you from your home. The crew will take you home to Earth. You can reassure everyone that we will never raid your planet again. I don’t regret abducting you, my love. I’m grateful for the short time I had with you.” Despite his efforts to stay cool, his voice cracked at the end.

Josie’s eyes flashed. “You’ve been saying all along that I’m a warrior. Or a freaking shieldmaiden, whatever the hell that is. You saw me fight those dfergir and the skrymtir. You said it was good. You made me name a damn *stick!* And now you’re sending me away? When you’re about to go to war? When

you'd need all the warriors you can get? We fight well together, you said! You were just lying to me, then!"

A thousand possible replies shot through Bragr's mind. Most of all he wanted to tell her how serious he had been about those things, how much he wanted her to stay and that he would keep her safe. But he knew he couldn't promise that. He couldn't have her, after all. The only thing he could do for her was to keep her alive, but that had to happen away from Gardr. Gornt knew about her, and if what Bragr felt for Josie was so obvious to others, then Gornt would certainly know. His chilling little smile during the battle in the River was a strong indication.

Well, Josie had given him the clue to how this conversation could end. Now he had to be convincing.

He sighed. "Yes, of course I was lying! You're a tiny female with a stick. Do you seriously think you could measure up to my real shieldmaidens and warriors? Look at them! They're twice your size. You can't even lift their weapons! But you were pleasant company on the journey. Very accommodating, you were."

His heart felt like someone had pierced it with a red-hot needle when he saw the hurt in her eyes. Her hand twitched around the spear. If she thrust it at him now, he knew that he would let her kill him. He would deserve it.

Josie's little shoulders sank. "So that's the way it is. You tricked me. But I won't go home alone. I will only go with Aretha and the others."

"Unfortunately that's impossible," he told her. "They are all held by Gornt. I will send them after you, once we can free them."

“I don’t believe you,” Josie spat. “You’ve lied about everything. ‘You will do well on Gardr,’ you said. But that’s fine. I’ll find them myself.”

She suddenly bolted and sprinted to the shortship, leaped inside, and pulled back on the controls, making it rear skywards. It all happened so fast Bragr had no chance to do much else than stare.

Soon the shortship was flying unsteadily away, just above the treetops.

“I’ve never seen anyone move so fast,” Prince Craxon marveled. “She ran to the shortship before any of us could even draw our weapons. Truly she must be formidable in battle.”

“I can’t let her fight for me,” Bragr said, his mind and heart pitch black. “It’s not her war. Heidran, we must prepare for it.”

The shaman was gazing thoughtfully at the quickly moving shortship, now only a speck against the green hillsides. He rubbed his chin. “We had already started to prepare for this war, Chief. But nobody knew it would happen this soon after the Prophecy. Now I wonder why the oracle never mentioned that alien shieldmaiden. It seems to me that her presence on Gardr would be hard to miss.”

Bragr saw the shortship vanish in the distance, taking all his joy with it and leaving his life gray and dull. “Oh, the oracle didn’t miss her presence, Heidran. Let me explain what I mean...”

- JOSIE -

The brightly painted sled soared into the sky, reacting to her movements with the primitive iron controls. She'd noticed how Bragr drove it, and for an Earth girl with a driver's license, who'd been aboard fast boats and airplanes and helicopters and spaceships and seen them all controlled by experts, the shortship held no secrets. It was clearly made to be easy to fly.

If only she knew where to fly it.

She slowed down and looked behind her. The green fields and hills rolled all the way to the ocean. There was nobody following her yet.

Maybe nobody ever would. She was apparently not as important to anyone as she had been led to believe. Though the owners of this flying sled probably wanted it back. It was an incredible thing, a flying machine that didn't make a sound.

Damn, she suddenly wanted to get away from all this. This part of the island was obviously not the place for her. She'd been much happier out in the wilderness.

She knew that Aretha and the girls were held in Gornt's house. That sounded like a pretty bad place to go. And she had no

idea where it was. If she started searching among the villages, she was sure she would be seen and shot out of the sky by an arrow on fire. For all Bragr's talk about the honor of being able to look an enemy in the eyes, his people were clearly no strangers to bows and arrows.

No, her thoughts were too chaotic right now. She needed distance to everything that had to do with Bragr.

Turning the shortship to the right, she had it start climbing the hills towards the mountains.

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A couple of hours later she was standing in front of the rock hut where they had spent the night before. The only other place she knew was the sauna hut, but she didn't want to go back to that forest with the trolls and the vettir. This flying sled wouldn't protect her against those horrors.

There was a chance that the young Hansr would climb up here soon to restock the hut, over-awed with Bragr's commanding presence, and by having been noticed and praised by his earl. That was a chance she had to take. She needed time to herself, to think about things and not act rashly.

She sat down on a flat rock where the snow had melted in the warm light from the pulsar in the sky. A part of her was hoping it would sweep one of its energy streams across planet Gardr right now, frying her on the spot with all kinds of gamma rays and X-rays. And tachyons. All her problems would vanish on the spot.

She turned on the camera on the headset. The frame-in-image on her retinas showed the battery at about the halfway mark.

“This is the mountains of the island and earldom Hjalmarheim on planet Gardr,” she narrated. “That’s towards the east, where it’s all mountains. And this,” she turned her head, “is the coast where the humans live. There are other sentient species on the island, but nobody has made much of an effort in making contact with them. Except with the blade of a sword. So nothing is known about the trolls and the dfergir.”

She wasn’t feeling too benevolent towards the Viking aliens right now.

“That’s the planet’s sun, called Straum. It looks like a pulsar. My guess right now is that its energy beams are different from those of every other pulsar we know about. I suspect that they spray some super exotic particles that make things behave in a strange way here on the planet. I’m not going to say for sure that they are tachyons, but that is one possibility.”

The narrating was keeping her calm and forcing her to think of something other than Bragr. Trying to ignore his huge footprints in the snow all around her, she could feel the darkness and the despair surrounding her on every side.

She grabbed Tornado and held it up into the intense sunlight. “See how there are sparkles along the blade? That’s not a visual effect. That only happens in the light from that pulsar. It doesn’t seem to be bad radiation. I’m feeling no ill effects from it. It actually gives me energy.”

What else could she say that was at least semi-scientific? Her brain was empty. *She* was empty.

“That sled flies in the air with no engine that I can see.” She got up and went over to it. “See those iron bars that look like

something from an old covered wagon from the pioneer times? Those are the controls. I have no idea how any of it works. The Viking aliens don't either."

She sat back down and stared into the distance, not seeing anything but his face, not hearing anything but his voice.

Why did he have to be so great? Of course she was pretty sure that his real reason for wanting to send her away was to keep her safe. That other thing had just been to make it easier for her to leave. To *hate* him.

But now that the anger was gone, she couldn't hate him. He had filled her life to the brim, and where he had been there was now a big void that was quickly filling up with all the things he had kept away from her. Fear, worry, the old darkness that had always been lurking at the edge and sometimes came too close.

She couldn't stop it. Her face scrunched up all by itself, acid tears started running, and she turned the camera off. They didn't need to see this.

The little movement with her hand was echoed by a movement behind a rock fifty feet away.

Josie grabbed Tornado and stood up, heart beating like crazy. If Hansr would climb up here, he would approach from the other side, not the side that faced the woods and the mountains.

When she saw the black face and the snout, she relaxed and wiped her nose.

"Ninja?"

The fenn pup came out from behind the rock and trotted towards her on his six legs, then pretended to be fierce and put his head down. His double tail rotated like airplane propellers.

He came closer, then bounced back.

Josie sat back down, still holding Tornado in case this wasn't Ninja. And in case it was, but he had forgotten her. He was still an alien predator, and she knew she should never trust him completely.

The fenr came all the way up to her. It was clearly him. He still had a long patch along his spine where the wound seemed to have mostly healed, but where the fur hadn't grown in yet.

"Hey, Ninja," Josie said, glad for the interruption but still fighting off darkness. "You look well. How big will you grow, I wonder?"

He had grown noticeably in just a day or two, and he looked more dangerous than before. His moves were still playful, but now they were smoother and there was more power in them.

He got all the way over to her and looked up from close by. Josie slowly reached over and scratched his furry head. "Yeah. That other one is gone."

The words made the pain well up in her, and she squeezed her eyes shut. "Damn it."

When she opened them, the fenr was still there, tilting its head and looking up at her.

Josie got up. "Let's see if we can find you something to eat." The door to the hut was open, but Ninja stayed on the outside.

"Smells weird to you, huh?" Josie said as she went inside.

The hut was cold, and it looked pretty tidy. There were still glowing embers deep in the ash in the fireplace in the middle, and Josie added firewood and kindling and managed to get a fire burning. She found dried meat and tossed some slices to

Ninja, who attacked and devoured them with even more enthusiasm than he had the keigr guts.

She wasn't sure what to do with the fire except have it warm up the hut. She had zero appetite.

Leaning into the door frame, she stood there for a long time, just watching Ninja eat. He trotted around the area for a while, trying to entice Josie to play. But he was so big now that he might do some real damage to her without meaning to, so she didn't bite. She had never felt less inclined to play in the snow.

The sun had set when Ninja trotted away the same way he had come, tails rotating happily and only stopping once to look back at Josie.

"Bye, Ninja," she said. "I think that's better for all of us. A wild predator shouldn't be domesticated."

The starry sky was spectacular, but she didn't really notice. She only noticed the cold wind before she went inside the hut and sat down on the furs, trying to ignore that Bragr's scent was still in the room.

The emptiness and the sadness were becoming unbearable. The only thing she had to cling to was that she would find Aretha, whatever the cost. But the impossibility of it was hard to get past. She was a total stranger on this planet. If it hadn't been for Bragr, she would have been dead several times. If Aretha was held captive by Gornt, she would have to fight her way through many layers of probably his best zombies. Alien monster zombies, by the sound of it, ones that even the best Viking warriors lost to.

Without noticing, she had grabbed Tornado and caressed its razor sharp edge. It had been years since the last time she'd

been cutting.

She set the spear back down. She'd gotten past that. She wasn't about to start again, despite the grief and desperate loneliness she felt.

Bragr had the image of his mother as an ally against the demons inside him. Josie had something else, she decided on the spot. She had her own strength that she got from surviving the head injury and the neural lace, as well as the toughness to not collapse in despair when she was abducted by a space Viking. She didn't know what would happen tomorrow. But she knew she was strong enough to handle it.

Putting more wood on the fire, she laid down on the bench and closed her eyes.

She got no sleep that night. It was a relief when morning came and she could get the day started after all the tears through the night. Probably it would be the final day of her life, but she was not going to abandon Aretha to her fate.

When she went outside, it was still night time. Realizing she couldn't drive the flying sled in the dark, she forced herself to eat some food and then waited until Straum made the sky blue in the east. She got into the bright red shortship and slowly flew along the ridge of the mountain, going north, just like Bragr and she had done the day before. That was the way to the chief's estate that Gornt now occupied and where Aretha and the others were kept.

Gaining confidence in her piloting skills and the abilities of the shortship, she sped up and had the craft skim ten feet above the snow.

When the eastern sky got really bright, she stopped, set the shortship down, and stood on the ground with Tornado in her

hand. When the first sliver of Straum appeared above the dark mountains in the distance with a blue flash she could feel inside her, she reached the spear to the sky and saw sparks travel all along the edge of the spearhead. The light from the pulsar sent tingles out through her limbs, ending up at her fingertips.

She turned the headset back on. “That’s the rise of Straum, the pulsar that Gardr orbits. Notice the two beams of electromagnetic—”

“*Josie?!*”

She froze. That was Aretha’s voice! She must be in comms range, which meant she couldn’t be far away.

“Ari?!”

“*Hey! I never thought I’d hear from you again! Are you alive?*”

“I think so,” Josie laughed, filled with relief at hearing her friend’s voice. “If not, it’s a weird afterlife. You?”

“*I’m alive, but I don’t know for how much longer. We heard Bragr is somewhere close, so I was hoping you’d made it, too. I saw your ship turn into firewood out in space, so I was sure you burned up or suffocated. Anyway, I’m being held prisoner by the creepiest fucking space Viking you ever saw.*”

“Gornt, right? Yeah, he’s the one who attacked us in hyperspace or whatever it was. Where are you, exactly?”

“*I’m in his longship. Going into the mountains, I think. What’s your situation, Josie?*”

“I’m not a prisoner, exactly. I thought I’d figure out a way to get you out of there, then we’ll hijack a longship and get back to Earth.”

“Yesss! This is going to freak you out, but getting out of here fits perfectly with my plans, too! Can you do a triangulation with the comms to find out where I am? I have no idea where this is. I see mountains and rocks and snow. That’s about it. But if we can talk like this, you can’t be far away.”

“Wait.” Josie brought up the display-in-image and found the right function. “Got one reading. Hold on.” She jumped into the shortship and had it fly five hundred yards before she checked the display again. “Still there? Got the second reading. Now I know your direction and distance.”

“All right! You should know that there’s a bunch of monsters on this ship. They’re really creepy and weird. I think they’re zombies. So unless you have an army of your own, it might be better to stay away.”

“We’re in this together, Aretha. I’m coming for you. Stay in touch.”

Josie adjusted the shortship’s direction to a course that would intersect Aretha’s. They were still far apart, and radio comms shouldn’t have been possible. But maybe the energy from the pulsar made all electronics work better, not just her neural lace.

Hearing Aretha’s voice again energized her almost as much as the pulsar had. They were in this together, and they were getting closer to each other. There was still a chance.

- **BRAGR** -

“Watch out!”

Prince Craxon ducked, and Bragr slashed Brisingr at the alien skrymt behind him. It was a good hit, but the blade got stuck in the gelatinous mass of its body and he had to pull hard to get it back out.

“That was close,” the prince said as he casually skewered the undead monster with his own blade, causing it to collapse on the ground. “These things are harder to destroy than they should be.”

“Gornt has grown strong in his witchcraft,” Bragr growled as he dispatched another skrymt. “These skrymtir are dead, but they move as if alive.”

The undead monsters were squat and thick, with fingers like scythes and heads that were almost all mouth and black teeth. They had scales and were a sickly yellow all over, splotched with brown and gray. Three eyes were mounted in a triangle at their fronts, surrounded by pads that leaked sticky yellow fluid when pierced with a sword.

Not only were they murderous, they were also hard to defeat. It had taken Bragr’s forces all morning to figure out that they

had to ram the blade in the middle of the eye triangle to destroy the undead aliens.

Prince Craxon spun around and stabbed his sword into yet another adversary, holding it with both hands and hacking downwards, like with a dagger.

Bragr wiped alien fluids off his face. He had already lost several good warriors in the battle right in front of his jarlagard, the chief's hall. Hundreds of aliens had surrounded the place and made it impossible to attack in any other way than head-on.

"At least they're not terrorizing our villages," Heidran said, using his sword with great agility for someone so old. "They're all here, and we will cut them all down."

"But at what cost," Bragr seethed as he had to stumble backwards when two aliens attacked him at once. "I'm losing warriors fast here."

There was no reply because there was nothing to say. This was the only way to get rid of Gornt, and they all knew it. They were fighting for their own land and for their lives. They would never give up, even if the aliens kept pushing them back. The Hjalmarheim warriors were getting better, but the aliens were, too. They had realized that mass attacking one warrior at a time was the way to overwhelm a sword fighter.

And yet his warriors fought well, their blades sparkling in the bright light from Straum.

Bragr knew he should feel proud, be gratified to see them at their best. But the sun had gone down in his mind and he felt only emptiness and coldness. Josie had filled his life and been a sun every bit as warm and bright as Straum. Now that she

was gone, he was starting to understand how Siv had felt when Sigurdr had died. There wasn't much left to fight for.

“We can still win this, Chief,” Eira said, a shieldmaiden with a round shield and a weapon that was a mix of sword and ax. “Don't lose hope. We need your leadership.”

Holy Zhor, was his despair that easily seen? Could they all see it?

He had to pull himself together.

“Brisingr!” he roared, attacking with new force, piercing an enemy to the hilt of his sword. He climbed up on the lifeless undead alien and thrust his sword to the sky. “Come, my herjere! We shall throw them off our lands!”

Energized by their earl's zeal, his warriors answered with an ear-splitting roar and fought harder.

And still the aliens kept pushing them back, slowly and surely. The threat was clear — the moment the line of warriors failed, the skrymtir would overrun all of Hjalmarheim, killing and destroying as they went. Gornt plainly had no plan of ruling the island — he just wanted revenge.

His witchcraft was behind all of this.

“We may have to kill Gornt, Chief,” Heidran said into his thoughts. “To rid us of these things once and for all.”

“Gornt is inside the jarlagard,” Bragr said, pointing at the wooden hall behind the aliens. “We have to go through the skrymtir to get to him.”

“We shall fight on,” Heidran said. “And win on our own.”

Bragr knew what the shaman was thinking, because he was thinking it too: the Meistr, the master warrior that the Prophecy had said would help save the earldom, was not

fighting in this battle. That was why it was such a hard struggle.

Something had to be done, but Bragr's mind was empty and he had no ideas. He just had to go on.

“Warrrr!” he roared as he attacked another alien skrymt.

- **JOSIE** -

The distance to Aretha's headset, and Aretha herself, was down to less than a thousand feet.

Josie set the flying sled down, not wanting to fly any closer because the red shortship would be easy to spot.

She was high in the mountains, with an incredible view of Hjalmarheim below. The green coastland stretched south until it vanished in distant mist. It looked idyllic and peaceful.

Up here the mountain was bare, with only a light covering of ice and a thin dusting of snow. Big, translucent stones stuck out of the rock at strange angles, shining blue and green in the light from Straum like immense sapphires and emeralds

Josie grabbed Tornado and walked on, not too fast, wanting to discover any enemies before they saw her. She had stopped talking to Aretha — it wouldn't be good if Gornt heard her talking to someone. But they were closer now than they had been since they were on the longships in that dizzying River in space that had to be some kind of hyperspace, and that made her determined to succeed with the rescue.

Small rocks were dislodged by her feet and rolled down the steep slope. She was hoping that she wouldn't lose her footing

and slide down the hill herself, and that she wouldn't release some kind of avalanche of rocks that would give her away.

She pushed a hank of hair out of her face. Up here there was always a wind from the ocean, cold and salty. The thought crossed her mind that if Aretha's alien guards were sensitive to smell, like hunting dogs, then they might smell her before they saw her. But it was a risk she had to take.

The jewel-like stones around her became steadily bigger and bluer as she went along, and soon they were the size of buses, sticking out of the gray rock.

The display said fifty feet when she stopped behind a big stone and took off her headset, then slowly stuck the camera part out from behind the rock so it could get a look. She saw everything it saw in her display-in-image projected onto her retina.

There were aliens, yellow and gray. They were big and round, with huge mouths filled with long, thin, needle-like teeth. Their hands were long like a troll's, but they ended in claws like knives. They had two legs each and a long, snake-like tail. They were moving slowly in a strange circle, and their movements were not stiff and awkward like the skrymtir Josie had seen before. They were actual monsters from out of a horror movie set in space. They looked almost alive, although there was something about them that told her they were not. She shuddered at the sight. She would hate to have to fight them.

Gornt's longship was right nearby, standing upright on the snow.

Then she saw Aretha and her heart jumped. She was wearing a loose, gray dress held up with a belt. It wasn't something she'd had on *Unity*, so the Vikings must have given it to her. She

was standing still in front of a big cave opening. It wasn't like any cave Josie had ever seen — this looked most of all like a giant geode, studded with countless turquoise stones that glowed in the sunlight. It would have been a stunningly beautiful wonder of nature if not for the aliens in front of it.

And there was Gornt. She recognized him from the battle in the River in space. He was tall, but not wide and strong like Bragr. He looked thin and old, but there was clearly strength in him still. Wearing a white robe over shiny armor, he had a long sword in his belt.

He was standing in the middle of the aliens as they shuffled in a circle around him. As each one came past him, he put one hand on its mid-section and raised the other to the sky. It held something that glittered. It was a silvery chain, the same that had hung between his horns before. From the chain hung a gemstone that was painful to look at. It looked like a piece of pure darkness.

Every time Gornt placed a hand on an alien skrymt, the darkness in his hand flashed in blinding blue, as if Straum itself shone through it.

Each alien touched like that froze, then either fell to the ground or walked on, raising its head as if energized and moving faster than before. It looked like Gornt was using the light from Straum to charge those of his skrymtir that could handle it, and the dark gem on the chain was a necessary part of it.

Josie watched it all, keeping the camera steady against the crystal. She focused on Aretha. Her friend didn't look like she was injured, and she had crossed her arms over her chest in a defiant posture. Still she was too much of a scientist to look away from Gornt's strange process.

There were about twenty alien monsters, and it took a few minutes for the former earl to ‘charge’ them all.

Then he grabbed Aretha’s upper arm, said something that Josie didn’t catch, and dragged her into the geode-slash-cave. Aretha struggled and resisted, but Gornt was strong and pushed her ahead of him. The aliens followed.

When they had gone into the cave, Josie quickly replayed the part where Gornt had spoken. She turned up the volume so she could hear it.

“This is the special cave I mentioned,” Gornt said in the Viking language. His voice was dry and creaky, with no emotion in it. “It’s one of two magical places in Hjalmarheim. The other is even more powerful, and we will go there later. You have an important task to complete for me. It will be the end of you, I fear. But what an end! Go. Go!”

Damn. The end of Aretha? That didn’t sound good. The whole place had an ominous feel to it, as if its great beauty hid some deadly danger. And if Josie knew planet Gardr, it had to be a monster of some kind.

She couldn’t let that jerk hurt her friend.

She adjusted her grip on Tornado and came out from behind the crystal. Only the ship was left, as well as the aliens that had fallen. They looked completely dead, and when Josie stepped over and past them, they had a sour, burned smell to them.

She peered into the crystal cave.

It was incredibly beautiful, in a cold way. The wide tunnel was all sharp-edged translucent stones, even the floor, and if she had been barefoot they would have cut up her feet. But her boots handled it with no problem as she took the first

hesitating steps inside. The stones didn't just reflect light — it was as if there was blue light coming from the walls and floor and ceiling of the cave, not from the outside. It was so cold she could see her breath, and the stones looked like ice.

Ice Caves, she thought. *Where have I heard of that before?*

She went on, having to place her feet on top of the sharp rocks to not slide between them. She was ready to fight but worried about how she would destroy those skrymtir without a real ground to walk on. Keeping her balance would be hard.

The tunnel split in two, and she picked one at random. Getting back out of this cave was a bridge she had to cross when she got there. All she knew now was that she had to continue until she found Aretha.

The tunnel split again, and Josie stood still, just listening. One of the options looked brighter than the other, so she picked that one and used the same random rule as the tunnel split again and again and again. It was clearly a maze, and there was a good chance she wouldn't find Aretha at all.

Just as she had decided to turn around and pick another way, she met the first skrymt. It stood still in the middle of the tunnel as if waiting for her. It didn't say a word, just stared at her with three dead eyes for a moment and then came storming towards her, clawed arms stretched out in front of it.

Josie ducked under the claws and thrust upwards with the spear as the monster passed above her. It sank into the alien's lower portion and was pulled back out as the skrymt's legs gave out. The monster fell onto the sharp rocks and was punctured in many places, thin, green fluids oozing out of it. The dead body hissed like water dropped on a hot iron as the pressure leaked out of it.

Josie shook the disgusting fluid off the spearhead so it wouldn't run down to her hand, then walked on. This seemed to be the right way after all, if they were leaving guards.

At the next point the tunnel split, and she again picked the brightest tunnel, noticing that the light was getting more and more intense with each split. It was becoming blinding, and the headset's display on her retina was flashing a red-framed warning.

After a turn in the tunnel another skrymt came at her fast, startling her. As she readied the spear, the world slowed down to a crawl. It had to be the neural lace kicking in.

She leisurely aimed the spear at the zombie monster's head, right in the middle of its three eyes. She reasoned that in Earth animals, the eyes were usually close to the brain, and it was probably the same with aliens..

The monster ran right into the spear, skewering itself completely and going limp, its horrid face just a foot from Josie's. Its rotten smell washed over her, making her retch.

She pulled the spear out of the alien and let it collapse forwards, onto the sharp stones, still in slow-motion. Her neural lace was trying to take over, as if it had a mind of its own. It made her skin crawl, but right now, moving as fast as possible might be a good idea. She gave the lace room to work.

Continuing, she destroyed two more skrymtir. The light from the jewel-like walls of the tunnel was so bright she wished she had sunglasses to put on.

She turned a corner in the tunnel. It widened into a large crystal dome, filled with dazzling blue light as if it was the

inside of Straum itself. The air seemed to be buzzing with energy, making the hair on Josie's arms stand on end.

A human shape stood in the middle of it, surrounded by light.

"You're too tenacious for your own good," a creaky voice said. "But I can't have you interfere."

Josie shielded her eyes with one hand. It was Gornt, sword in one hand and the dark gemstone in the other.

"Josie!" came another voice in English. "Stop! Don't get any closer!"

Josie stopped, spear held ready. "Aretha! Can you come over here?"

"Just get the hell away! This is a trap! Steal his ship and go back home! Whatever you do, don't—"

Aretha's voice was cut off, as if someone was gagging her. In the blinding light, Josie spotted dark shapes on the other side of the dome. They were mostly skrymtir, but one of them had to be Aretha.

Josie started making her way around the circumference of the dome. "Stay there, Aretha. I know how to take these monsters."

"Indeed you've made it far," Gornt said into the silence. "Suspiciously far. I sensed you spying outside the cave. But it fits, I suppose. Only an alien witch could be silly enough to face me here, of all places. Well, you will see." He chuckled, a joyless sound that froze Josie's blood with its malice.

She kept inching her way around the dome. "Aretha, talk to me if you can. On the comms. How many are there of those monsters holding you?"

There was a muffled voice in the headset, clearly Aretha trying to speak while gagged or silenced in some other way. Josie couldn't understand it.

A deep chasm opened right in front of her feet, and she came to an unsteady stop. In the blinding light, she hadn't spotted it until she was right up to it.

"That's a pity," Gornt said. "I was hoping you'd walk right into it. For your own sake, you understand. It might have been an easier end for you."

"What do you want?" Josie said in the Viking language, hoping to distract him while she worked out how to get to Aretha now. The only way seemed to be right through the middle of the dome, right where Gornt was standing.. "Let Aretha and the girls go, and we will go back home without bothering you."

"Oh, you're no bother, alien witch. You are as far below me as a blood-sucking insect. I just want you gone. And of course your death will hurt someone we both know."

"Bragr?" Josie said. "That would be unlikely. He wants me gone, too."

"Yes, but for other reasons. Don't you think I saw what's going on with you two wretches? But never mind that. You want to fight me, don't you?"

"I want Aretha to come with me away from Gardr," Josie said sincerely, directing her way towards the middle of the dome. "I'm not a fighter."

"And yet you have defeated several of my skrymtir. In a most unusual way, too. I know it, I saw glimpses through their eyes. You can move really fast when you want."

Josie carefully put her feet on one sharp piece of crystalline rock, then another, keeping her balance and getting closer to the middle of the dome, where Gornt was standing.

He was alive, as opposed to the skrymtir. So she knew she couldn't kill him in cold blood, despite him threatening her life. But she had fought the dfergir without killing them, and this guy was kind of asking for a whack or two.

He was now only ten feet away, and Josie would have to get past him to get to Aretha. If she lunged at him, she could reach him with Tornado. She changed her grip on it to be better able to swing it without the sharp tip hitting him. But if he swung his sword at her, she couldn't afford that kind of care. It would be a real fight to the death.

“What will happen now,” Gornt said calmly, “is that I will cause you to die. It amuses me to tell you what happens after that. I will take your friend with me to the only place in my kingdom that's more sacred than this. Your friend here will help me see the future, and then I will know how to defeat my enemies. And then the oracle will show me how to best take my kingdom into space. Because why are we raiding when we could be *destroying*?”

“Your son will stop you,” Josie said, gauging the distance to Gornt. He had put his sword in its sheath and was standing still with his hands on his hips. Behind him were a handful of alien zombie monsters, surrounding Aretha and holding her in place.

Josie's plan was to give Gornt a whack on the ear and hopefully bring him off balance, which on this treacherous ground of sharp crystals would be a real problem for him and could cause him to fall. Then she would fight the skrymtir and defeat them, get Aretha, and then get the hell out of this cave.

“Son? I have no son,” Gornt said flatly. “The only one I had turned on me and thus showed himself completely unworthy of being a part of my family. Indeed, random alien witches are more dear to him now than his former father ever was.”

Josie inched forwards, getting as good a foothold as she could and planning where she'd place her feet after she'd lunged at Gornt. “It's not too late. You can still be a family. He didn't kill you, although everyone begged him to.”

Gornt scoffed. “That only shows his cruelty! I wish he had killed me! Instead I had to suffer the humiliation of being banished from Hjalmarheim by my own son, who proclaimed himself earl instead of me!”

“Oh, but that's not—” Josie pounced mid-sentence, drawing Tornado back to hit Gornt's side.

There was a blinding flash and Josie was frozen in mid-pounce and mid-air. A searing pain went slowly through her, from her feet and spreading out through her body. A bolt of lightning was burning her from the inside. She wanted to scream, but she'd lost all control of her body.

Strange images passed in front of her eyes, reminding her of the time when the neural lace had been settling into her brain. But now she saw it all through the eyes of an adult, not a scared child. She saw many things, some about the world and some about herself. One of those things gave her a jolt of happiness, despite the excruciating pain that coursed through her and kept getting worse.

She smelled burning and knew it was her. She heard a scream of horror and knew it was Aretha.

When she finally hit the sharp crystals below her, she barely noticed. The world was pulling away from her, and she

welcomed the blackness that was coming.

“Such a pretty way to go,” she heard Gornt say as if from a great distance. “But not a pleasant one.”

Everything went dark.

- **BRAGR** -

A warrior drenched with green alien blood and yellow goo fought his way over and gave a shallow bow. “The enemy are pushing us back everywhere, Chief. I recommend that we withdraw.”

Bragr gave the warrior a quick glance. It was a lendmann, a high-ranked commander. “I can see the way it’s going, lendmann. We shall withdraw slowly when I order it.”

“Yes, Chief.” The officer slapped the hilt of his sword and walked fast back to his men.

Bragr groaned inwardly. They had been making good progress, pushing the alien skrymtir back towards the jarlagard and seeing the possibility of winning. Then it was as if the undead monsters had gotten new power, and they had started fighting with greater energy. Bragr’s forces had been pushed back to the ocean on one side of the jarlagard and to the farmland on the other. Now they were on the verge of losing the whole battle, and the skrymtir would be able to attack the villages and farms of Hjalmarheim. Only by withdrawing could they avoid being overrun while still keeping the enemies from doing too much damage.

“This is Gornt’s doing,” Shaman Heidran said, breathing hard. “He has replenished his strength and now controls the skrymtir better than ever. His witchcraft is in all of them.”

“How is that possible?” Bragr seethed. “What magic does he have? The jarlagard is not a sacred place. It’s just a house.”

“I think we must consider the possibility that Gornt is no longer here, but at one of our holy sites. His longship is nowhere to be seen. We assumed it was inside one of the barns, but now I wonder.”

“The oracle?” Bragr asked, thrusting Brisinagr into a skrymt and backing off to leave the undead enemy space to fall.

“Possibly,” Heidran panted. “The magic there would certainly be strong enough to give him this level of power. Ah, someone wants to talk to you, I think, Chief.”

Bragr pulled back from the front line for a moment and looked around. “Ivarr! Over here.”

The warrior made his way over, knee deep in alien remains and stained with red blood from the dead warriors. “Chief! I’m sorry to disturb you. It’s probably not important, but we feel that you should be told.”

Bragr took the opportunity to wipe his sword clean of alien tissue. “What is it, herjer?”

“The alien shieldmaiden, Josie, was seen flying a shortship in the mountains. She was headed for the Ice Caves.”

Bragr froze. “The Ice Caves?”

“Yes, Chief. Nothing else is known. Except that the shortship looked like ours. The one you and the alien used.”

Ice settled in the pit of Bragr’s stomach. “When was this, herjer Ivarr?”

“I was only told just now, Chief. She was seen before noon, but not long before.”

“Could she have been headed somewhere else?”

“There’s nothing in that direction but the Ice Caves, Chief. With your permission, I’ll return to my squad. We keep being pushed back, but we’re not giving up.”

“Very well, Ivarr,” Bragr said automatically, his mind churning with new worry and images of Josie in the deadly Ice Caves.

“The Ice Caves *are* a sacred site!” Heidran pointed out over the noise from the battle. “It is the closest one. And if Gornt was there to replenish his unholy power, noon would be the best time, when the power from Straum is at its strongest. That was also when these skrymtir started pushing us back.”

Bragr looked to the north-east, towards the Ice Caves. “If he’s there, how long might he stay?”

“Alas I don’t know much about dark witchcraft,” the shaman said. “But surely it would take time to energize this many skrymtir.”

“If he went there to do his unholy witchery, do you think he might be there still?”

Heidran looked up at the sky. “I really wouldn’t know, Chief. But Straum is still up. I hasten to add that Gornt being in the Ice Caves is just a wild guess. All we know is that Josie might be there.”

An unpleasant thought entered Bragr’s mind. “Why would Josie be going to the Ice Caves if not because of Gornt? She would have no reason to seek them out, or even know where they are.”

Heidran shrugged. “Gornt is a witcher, and Josie is an alien, Chief. Zhor only knows what goes on in their minds. It *would* be useful for him to have a female if he intends to go to the oracle cave, the most sacred of our holy sites. He can’t look into the crystal himself. Only a woman could.”

Bragr thought hard. “You don’t think Josie and Gornt are in kahoots?”

“It might be worth finding out,” the shaman said, raising his eyebrows. “I would suggest that Josie going to the Ice Caves is an indication that Gornt may be there and could be luring her to him. If so, we might not have much time.”

Bragr made a decision. “Prince Craxon!”

The prince worked his way over. “Earl Bragr?”

“We will not have more warriors die here today, Your Highness. Please order a retreat and prepare as many fire arrows as we have. Use them as weapons, not for signals. These things are only skrymtir; they’re not living. Destroying them from a distance means no dishonor.” He knew this was not entirely true, but this was getting desperate. “Aim for their eyes! And keep the skrymtir away from the farms and villages for the rest of today. I will leave you in charge while I try to find Gornt to destroy him and thus all his undead at the same time.”

The seasoned warrior prince frowned. “Arrows, Earl Bragr? In battle?”

“We have many bows and many arrows,” Bragr said with a tight smile, much less confident than he wanted to seem. “It’s time we win this battle. Pull all our warriors back to a safe distance and shoot at these unholy things, out of range of their claws and teeth. If you please, of course, Your Highness.”

Craxon raised his sword to his nose in salute. “I do, of course. And you are in command here, not me. I thank you for your courtesy, Earl Bragr. Don’t stay away too long.”

“No longer than necessary, Your Highness,” Bragr promised and turned around. “Heidran, for this I will need a wise man who can ward off some evil witches.”

“For all the good my knowledge of them has done today,” Heidran said with a lopsided smile. “But of course I will come, Chief.”

They made their way to the shortships, making sure the retreat went as it should. Bragr slapped shoulders and praised his warriors in passing. Retreating was the last thing they wanted to do, but he knew they needed the experience. Sometimes withdrawing was the right thing, and would make a final victory more likely.

The bows came out and the first fire arrows were shot. One skrymt fell, but the others seemed confused.

“That gave them something to think about,” Bragr said as he and Heidran lifted off in the shortship and sped away. “No more of our men will die in that battle. And after sunset, I think those undead aliens will be much less eager.”

“We shall see, Chief,” Heidran said, holding on to the shortship with white knuckles. “Gornt’s powers have grown much stronger since last time we saw him.”

The journey took far too long for Bragr’s taste, despite him forcing the shortship to fly as fast as it could up into the mountains. If Josie was in the Ice Caves, she was in great danger, whether or not Gornt was there. He secretly doubted that his father was there — only Josie had been seen, and there wasn’t much to connect those two.

The landscape changed and became full of green, angular rocks, sticking out of the snow and sparkling in the light from Straum. Not long after, the opening to the Ice Caves loomed ahead.

“Skrymtir,” Heidran said. “Dead.”

Bragr brought the shortship to a stop and jumped out, Brisigr in his hand. There was no movement in the cave opening or anywhere else, but he spotted the long groove in the snow where a longship might have landed and taken off.

“He’s not here anymore,” he seethed. “He may have taken Josie with him.”

“And yet he left these dead skrymtir,” Heidran said, bending over to examine them. “They have not been stabbed or cut. Rather it seems Gornt lost his hold over them, or he chose to give them up.”

“What would be the point of that?” Bragr asked, peering into the Ice Caves. He’d only been there once before, and he didn’t relish going in again.

“Perhaps they were not worth the effort,” the shaman said. “Perhaps they didn’t work as well as he thought. These ones look smaller than the ones we’re battling. Or perhaps this sacred site didn’t provide as much power as he needed. There will be much more power inside the caves.”

Something caught Bragr’s eye on the ground. He reached down between two sharp crystals and picked up a narrow leather ribbon, braided and tied in a knot he had made himself.

His worry increased. “She was here. I made this for her.” He showed it to the shaman.

“She may still be inside, lost in the tunnels.”

“Then we shall find her,” Bragr said and took a step inside.
“Stay behind me, but tell me if you sense strong danger.”

“I shall stay in front, Chief.” The shaman’s voice was steady.
“I will guide us right.”

Arching his eyebrows at the shamans sudden assertiveness,
Bragr let him pass. “Very well.”

Bragr remembered the coldness of the Caves, the tension in the air, the difficulty of walking on the crystal floor, and the dizzying light reflected from thousands of blue-green facets. And the absolutely excruciating pain at the end.

He unconsciously stroked along the Marks on his arm. This was the place where they had been burned into him. “We must be approaching the dome. This has been a longer walk than last time.”

“Take a right here, Chief,” Heidran said in a distant voice.
“The caves change slowly. They are different now from when you were here for the Trials. But the correct way is revealing itself to me. The power of Straum is strong in here.”

“Should I call for her? Let her know we’re coming?”

The shaman was moving as if he were thirty years younger.
“No! Do not shout, although tempting. The cave distorts all sound, and nothing you yell will be understandable deeper inside.”

They moved fast, and when the tunnel split Heidran picked their route without hesitation.

“Ah,” said the old man. “*That’s* from combat. A spear wound, I think.”

There was a skrymt on the ground, lifeless on the sharp crystals.

“Josie has a spear,” Bragr said unnecessarily, seeing that the injury didn’t fit with a sword or an ax. It was an incredibly accurate hit, in the exactly middle of the triangle of eyes.

“Just so,” Heidran said and sped up. “We are getting closer. Ah, there is another speared skrymt.”

They passed several skrymtir with spear wounds before the tunnel widened.

“Stay back, Chief,” Heidran said. “This is where the power of Straum is the strongest in the caves. You don’t need Marks, you already have them.”

A cold shiver went down Bragr’s spine. He remembered the end of his Trials, sent into the Ice Caves to get his Marks, like any warrior. The tunnel had widened, just like this, there had been a dome-shaped room, and he had known this was the place. He had walked slowly through the middle of the room.

Then it was as if lightning had struck him and he had been burned from the inside out, falling to the ground. From then on, he’d had his Marks all over him. And everyone knew he had passed the Trials and survived. Not everyone was that lucky.

Heidran turned a corner and stopped. “Oh...”

Bragr hurried past him. “Josie!”

There she was, in the middle of the dome, sitting hunched over on the stone, not wearing a shred of clothing.

As Bragr ran to her, jumping from crystal to crystal, she slowly raised her head. “Bragr?”

He reached her and crouched down, touching her cheeks with a trembling hand. “My love! Are you all right?”

“No,” she said hoarsely. “I was burned.”

He saw that she had Marks all over her except the face, from her fingertips to her toes, from her neck to her heels, all down her front and her back. They were golden with a purple sheen. And there was something familiar about them.

He scooped Josie up in his arms and held her tight to his chest, burying his face in her hair. “My love, my love...”

Heidran gasped behind him. “Chief... your Marks! They are the same!”

“I know,” Bragr managed, his voice hoarse. “Our Marks are identical. We’re Karestir, Josie and I. We are fated by the gods to be together always.”

“Did you... *suspect* it, Chief?!” Heidran was astonished.

“I’ve never felt such love, Heidran. I was just scared...” his voice cracked, and he tried again. “Scared that her love for me wasn’t as strong.”

“I’m still here,” Josie piped up, her voice weak but clear. “Talk to me, not *about* me.”

“I love you.” Bragr laughed through tears. “And you survived the Marks! Thank Zhor! How do you feel?”

“I feel weak and hungry and burned. And cold. And I love you too. Why am I naked?”

Heidran bent down and picked up the singed rags that remained of her clothing, holding them up.

“The power of Straum burns everything,” Bragr told her, trying to control his emotions. “It burns us clean, on the outside and the inside. Heidran, find her spear.”

The shaman bent down again and picked up Tornado as well as a small knife. “No burn damage to these, Chief. I recommend we leave and get her somewhere warm. Take

this.” He shrugged off his shaman’s robe and draped it clumsily over Josie’s bare body while averting his eyes.

“Aretha,” Josie said and arranged the robe better. “Where is she?”

“Was she here?” Bragr asked as he walked on, itching to get out of the caves forever.

“She was here. Gornt was here, putting power into his skrymtir. He has a black gemstone. We have to get her, Bragr.”

“And we shall, my love. I promise. We just need to get you some clothes.”

She curled against his chest, putting her arms around his neck.

“They’re going to the oracle, I think. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” he said, stepping over a dead skrymt. “It is our most important site. We’ll go there and defeat Gornt.”

They got out of the caves and headed for the shortship.

Josie reached out a thin, freshly-Marked arm to point. A thin wisp of smoke rose from it. “Mine is over there.”

“I’ll get it,” Heidran said as he placed Tornado in their shortship. “Chief, the farmstead of huskarl Gunarr is not far from here. His wife will help with clothing and food. That way.” He nodded down the hill.

“Then we will go there,” Bragr decided. “And then we shall go on to the oracle and stop Gornt.”

“Chief, I can do more good at the battle. Josie, are you strong enough to speak?”

“Speak about what?” she asked.

The shaman came closer. “What did Gornt do in the caves? With the skrymtir?”

“He had a black stone in his hand. It looked as if he was using it to draw power from the caves and send it to the skrymtir. Some of them couldn’t handle it and fell over. Like those.” Josie pointed at the several lifeless but undamaged skrymtir on the ground.

“He must have a crystal of his own, like the one at the oracle,” Heidran said. “Now that I know, I can work against the unholy powers in the skrymtir at the battle. See you at the victory feast, Chief. The Meistr has finally shown herself. And a mighty warrior she is, too. She will help you keep your lands within the clan, as prophesied.”

“I don’t care about that,” Bragr said calmly. “As you know.”

Heidran adjusted his sword belt. “Josie, Earl Bragr has known for a few days that you are the Meistr. He told me right after he tried to send you away and you escaped in the shortship. And knowing who you were, he still wanted to send you off Gardr and get you out of harm’s way before any battle took place. It means that you mean more to him than the earldom itself. But that’s appropriate for Karestir, the fated mates.”

The shaman gave a shallow bow and walked away fast, looking determined.

- JOSIE -

Josie frowned. “Huh? *I’m* the Meistr? From the Prophecy you talked about?”

Bragr squeezed her. “I have suspected it since you defeated the dfergir without spilling their blood. You fight like a whirlwind, and you come from the outside.”

“But you told me to get the hell away from the planet!”

Bragr carried her over to the shortship and carefully set her down. “I don’t remember using those words. But yes, I wanted you away from any danger. You promptly countered by seeking out the worst danger on Gardr.”

She drew Heidran’s robe close around her. “So when you said I was a worthless female, that wasn’t what you really meant?”

He sat down beside her. “Of course not! But it seemed that was the only thing that might work to get you into a longship and off Gardr. I think we can say now that it didn’t work.”

“My love, you’re filthy,” Josie said and put one hand on his thigh. “There’s skrymtir-blood all over you. But it’s fine. You’re a warrior.” She put her thigh against his. “Look at our Marks! So pretty! So that’s how they’re made. If I’d known, I

wouldn't have gone in there. I've never felt worse pain. And I've had a lot."

"You would have gone in there anyway. Your friend was there. Anyway, you will never experience pain like that again, my love," Bragr promised as they skimmed the snowy rock.

"Are you sure? They say childbirth can be pretty bad."

"They do say that," he agreed. "But they also say it doesn't encompass your entire body, like the burned Marks do. I have had many injuries after I got my Marks. But none were nearly as painful as they were."

"Thanks for coming to get me," Josie said. "I didn't have the energy to get out of that cave. I would have frozen to death."

Bragr had the shortship speed down a steep hill. "I'm astonished you survived the Marks. Many big warriors don't. Some do freeze in there, unable to drag themselves out. Ah, that must be Gunarr's farm now."

It was a mountain farm, clinging to the hillside with snow-covered fields around it. Smoke rose from a low, wooden house.

They were received as honored guests by the women and children at the farm. The men had all gone to the battle at the jarlagard.

"But you're not at the battle, Chief?" Froydis, Gunarr's wife, asked carefully when they were all sitting by a long table and food and drink was being brought in.

"Gornt is behind the skrymtir and the war," Bragr said. "If we can get rid of him, the battle is over. Now we shall go and kill him." There was a dark determination in his face.

Josie decided not to be embarrassed by how hungry she was. Her neural lace had taken over during the fights inside the Ice Caves, and now her body needed to be replenished. She ate the simple, but delicious food with little restraint. She noticed Bragr was only sipping a cup of myod, more to be polite than because he needed a drink. He was quiet and brooding, for the first time since she'd met him.

Froydis had found clothes for her. While the adult Viking woman's own clothes were far too big for Josie, her teenage daughter had a red, woolen dress that fit somewhat when fastened with a pin at the shoulder. They found a pair of leather boots and furry mittens.

She noticed that the women were very interested in the matching Marks on her and Bragr — they had never seen a Karestir couple up close before.

When Josie tried to turn on her headset, it was completely dead. The casing had melted in places. She took it off, took out the tiny memory card, and gave the headset to Froydis's daughter, who was over-awed by the plastic alien artifact and immediately pinned it onto her dress like a brooch.

"It's nice and warm in here," Bragr said when Josie was done eating. "You still look cold. You're not needed at the oracle. The Meistr's work was finished in the Ice Caves. Your Marks clearly show it."

"My love," Josie said as she wiped her mouth, "we're Karestir. Our Marks match perfectly. You know that if one of us dies, we both die. Do you not remember Siv and Sigurdr? We must always fight together. And nothing is going to keep me from finding Aretha. I thought you had learned that about me, at least."

Bragr laughed drily. “Oh, believe me, my love. I learned that lesson the hard way. All right, we shall both go.”

“Let’s go now,” Josie said and got up from the bench. “I don’t want Aretha close to that creep for a moment longer than necessary.”

“Wait,” Bragr said and got up, too. “I have something to ask you. And it should be in front of witnesses.”

A hush went through the room when the women around them realized what was about to happen.

Josie’s heart skipped several beats when Bragr took her hand.

“Josie... oh. Do you have a clan?”

“A *clan*? Oh, I see. Um. Clan Garcia should work.”

“Josie clan Garcia,” Bragr said solemnly, his deep voice making glassware rattle in a cabinet by the wall. “Our Marks match. We’re Karestir, decreed by the gods to be together. But both you and I are too stubborn and too contrary to let mere gods decide our fates. I ask you this not because it’s expected of me by tradition or by some higher power, but because there’s nothing in this life I want more. I love you very deeply, you see. Josie clan Garcia, will you marry me?”

The silence in the room was deafening.

There was nothing to think about. Josie’s whole heart screamed it, and for a change her brain was totally onboard too. “Yes, Bragr. Of course I’ll marry you.”

He pulled her to him and placed a kiss on her mouth. “Good. We’ll get it done as soon as we win the war. And I think we should win it now.”

The farm’s women and children applauded and cheered.

They left the farm and got into the shortship, setting course for the oracle.

“Here,” Bragr said and handed her the hairband. “I found it outside the Ice Caves.”

Joise took it and tied her hair back. “So that’s where I lost it. I didn’t notice. How far is it?”

“Not very far. We’ll get there before sunset.”

They flew higher up in the mountains, then skimmed along the hillsides with the ocean to their right. After about an hour Bragr spotted a ship on the ground and landed next to it. It was a different design than the Hjalmarheim ones, but it was still clearly a longship.

A tall shape was standing next to it.

“Hail, Prince Craxon,” Bragr said with joy in his voice. “I had no idea you would join us here, Your Highness!”

“Earl Bragr,” the prince greeted him. “I heard you were coming here to fight Gornt. And I thought, fighting one’s own father can’t be anything other than horrific. Especially if the fight might end with someone dead. No son should have to kill his own father. But I’m not of your clan, and so I have a certain freedom in that regard. Greetings, Meistr Josie. It gratifies me to see you so strong and so beautifully Marked.”

“Thank you,” Josie said, not sure who this guy was. He looked like Bragr’s people, but he spoke the language in a different way, and he had an air of command about him. “We shall see if the Marks are still beautiful after today.”

“Meistr Josie and I are engaged,” Bragr said. “We want the wedding to take place as soon as possible. Any sign of Gornt and his captive?”

“Yes,” the prince said. “His longship is barely concealed right next to the oracle’s entrance. It was my understanding that you keep the entrance guarded, but I could see no guards.

“Probably at the battle by the jarlagard,” Bragr said as they all started to walk uphill. “The oracle guards were not called to that battle, but I suspect they would rather die than miss it. How goes that battle, Your Highness?”

“It’s a stalemate for now. The skrymtir have no defense against arrows, but they’re hard to kill. Thankfully no more of our men have died or been injured since you left. It’s a delicate balance, and I recommend that we deal with Gornt as soon as we can.”

Josie clutched her spear, wondering what she might see when they got to this mysterious oracle. She hoped that Aretha would be fine.

“That’s it,” Bragr said and pointed. “That building there. Inside is the stairwell that goes down to the oracle cave. Ah, there’s the *Dead Son*. Gornt is here.”

They sped up and approached the dome on top of the hill. It was a beautiful little building, looking more like the hut with the sauna than the entrance to a cave.

“This time he didn’t leave any skrymtir,” Josie said. “He’s probably not expecting company. He said he wanted to see the future and use his knowledge to win the war, and then go on raids where he would destroy instead of raid.”

“Then this is the place to go,” Bragr said. “The oracle can see the future. But I can’t imagine that any seeress would do Gornt’s bidding. The oracle is only for use of the earl of Hjalmarheim.”

“He calls himself king now,” Prince Craxon reminded them. “He may think he has every right to demand an audience with the oracle.”

“But the seeress will refuse,” Bragr said as they came up to the gate that led into the house. “I fear he knows it, and that’s why he has Aretha with him. Only a woman could look into the crystal and see anything of value. It will blind her on the spot, but after her blinding she might actually see something that’s useful for Gornt. Until she goes insane or she dies. It’s a horrible thing to force someone to do. Let’s hurry!”

There was nobody inside the house, and the spiral staircase was dark and ominous.

Bragr looked at Josie. “Do you happen to have that wondrous light— no, of course not. Never mind, my love.” He reached for her hand and squeezed it.

They started down the stairs, Bragr first and the prince in the rear, swords drawn.

Josie was nervous about what she might discover at the bottom of those creepy stairs.

Then she heard a distant voice from the depths.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, jerk? I’m not going any closer to that thing!”

“That’s Aretha!” she hissed. “She’s still alive!”

Bragr sent her a cheerful grin. “Soon she’ll be with us—”

He barely avoided the outstretched claws of an alien skrymt that came storming silently up the dark stairs. Josie instinctively swung her spear at it and hit the monster’s side. She ducked, and Prince Craxon had just enough warning to stab his sword at the zombie’s center. He kicked the destroyed

monster down the stairs, where it collided with another one on the way up.

Bragr ran down and hacked at the newcomer, then kicked it down the stairs too. The dead alien made the most disgusting sounds as it flopped down to the bottom of the stairs.

“They know we’re here now,” Bragr said.

“Aretha!” Josie yelled. “Don’t look at it!”

There was a moment of silence.

“*Josie?!*”

“Don’t look at *anything* in there!” Josie added for good measure.

“*Okay, but I may not have a choice...*”

Bragr reached the bottom, where there was a flickering light coming from inside a pair of doors. “Gornt! Let the woman go and we can settle this as warriors!”

As he spoke the last word, three skrymtir came storming at him. These were different from the others — they were tall and angular and looked like they consisted of only spikes, like sea urchins. They were nightmarish creatures, straight out of a horror movie. But they were also quick in their movements.

Bragr swung his sword and hit the first one, chopping off several spikes but not doing much real damage. The two other monsters were hindered by the first, and Bragr stood fast, stopping them from reaching the stairs by swinging his sword faster and harder than Josie had ever seen.

Prince Craxon jumped the last few steps to join him on the lower level, and they both fought the three monsters with immense ferocity, pushing them back.

Josie spotted an opening and rushed down to the bottom of the stairs. She ran past the fight, towards the light.

“Josie!” Bragr thundered. “Don’t go in there!”

But she couldn’t stop now. She clutched her spear as she jumped over a wide trench with fire burning in it.

The chamber was round, and the fire trench ran around the circumference of it. In the middle was a pedestal holding up a big patch of pure darkness. Aretha, hands bound behind her back, was standing on the other side of the room.

A woman in a long robe was lying on the floor, looking dead.

Gornt was next to a heap of black spikes and stalks and teeth and claws on the floor that Josie couldn’t figure out. The silver chain was in his hand. He was holding its gemstone up to the darkness in the middle of the room, as if he was charging it.

“Stay cool, Aretha,” Josie said tightly. “I’m not here alone.” The room resonated with the sound of the battle outside the chamber.

“I thought we’d gotten rid of you,” Gornt said with his flat voice. “Didn’t I see you burn? Oh, you have new Marks, I see. I hope you enjoyed them. You won’t have them for long.”

Josie stayed tense. “Why not just give up, Gornt? Bragr will only banish you to a comfortable place.” She knew it was no use, but her sense of fairness told her to try.

The former earl cackled joylessly. “It would be a strange thing to give up this close to total victory! This place has the power I need to conquer... well, *everything*.” He took his hand off the strange darkness on the pedestal. “Behold! Gardr is the most special planet in the universe. And yet nobody has used the power properly! Straum is more than a sun. It’s a source of magic! But we only use its magic for going on pointless raids

and to travel around the lands in comfort. That's all. Such ridiculous weakness of thought, of ambition! But when I was only earl of Hjalmarheim, I discovered that it was possible to raise the dead."

He bent down and touched the gemstone on his chain to the strange heap on the floor. Immediately a jolt went through it, and it gave off a piercing groan.

"Like *that*," Gornt said, straightening up. "Only the power of the oracle crystal is strong enough to raise *that* particular corpse. The Ice Caves are useful, of course. But their power is different, less clean. Down here, the crystal filters and purifies the magic that Straum sends us. It makes it stronger and cleaner. It's the kind of magic that's unique. It's the kind of power that will let me conquer it all. Only *I* understand how powerful Straum really is. With its power behind me, I will rule the galaxy!"

Josie didn't move. "I'm sure this is all very interesting. But Bragr is here now, and there's no way he'll let you get away with this."

The alien monster seemed to expand and change its position, creaking and rumbling like some kind of machine. It was all spikes and claws and tentacles, and it was impossible to see what kind of shape it really had.

"Getting away? Oh, that will be no problem for *me*," Gornt said. "When I'm finished here, not before. If that traitor you mention is here now, so much the better. He is already dead to me. I might as well make him dead for everyone else, too. And then," he held the chain up, showing the black gemstone in the middle, "why not make his remains my servant?"

The alien monster was growing fast until it filled a quarter of the room. It was clearly related to the three monsters that

Bragr and Craxon were fighting, but it was much bigger and looked infinitely more dangerous.

“At least let Aretha go,” Josie said, backing away from the creature as her skin crept. “She’s done you no harm.”

Gornt glanced at his captive. “I need a female to look into the crystal for me when this small disturbance has been dealt with. Or do you volunteer? Two are better than one.”

The monster was moving, stretching its tentacles out towards Josie.

“He can control it with his mind,” Aretha said urgently. “I saw it happen with those other monsters. But first he has to learn to control it. This is your chance!”

Josie changed her grip on Tornado and swung it at a tentacle that came too close. The edge of the spear connected and sliced two inches off the tip of the tentacle.

The alien withdrew and started oozing across the floor towards the door, waving venom-dripping spikes.

“Watch out, Bragr!” Josie yelled. “There’s another one!”

- **BRAGR** -

The three spiked alien skrymtir were nearly impossible to fight. Whenever Bragr or Prince Craxon would cut off a spike, the skrymt would throw itself at them with abandon, spinning around like crazy and forcing them to defend themselves instead of attacking. They were both bleeding in several places, having been pierced by the spikes and ripped by the claws. And they were exhausted from the battle, unable to strike as hard or as fast as when the fight began.

Even worse was the difficulty of destroying them — all three were still fighting hard, despite each being pierced dozens of times in all spots of their bodies.

Bragr was more worried about Josie. He could hear Gornt talk in the oracle room, and he was desperate to get in there and protect her. But the three skrymtir had pushed him and Craxon into a corner.

When the much bigger alien skrymt came out from the oracle room, he knew they would struggle to get out alive.

“That’s not looking good,” Prince Craxon said, his voice strained as he hacked at two skrymtir at the same time. “If that one is as resilient as these...”

He didn't need to finish his sentence. If that monster was as hard to kill as the three others, then they would lose. It was that simple.

“Your Highness,” Bragr said as he thrust his blade clean through a skrymt without it having much of an effect, “this is not your fight. Get away while you can! I shall cover your retreat.”

“When Gornt started creating skrymtir,” the prince replied tightly, “he started a war against all of Gardr. Say what you will about vettir and dfergir and even that horrific menace in your eastern mountains — they are not unholy skrymtir. Our battle is just and right. Let's fight and die together, Bragr. We will meet in Valhalla!”

The new, big skrymt came closer, oozing its way across the stone floor. The three others pulled back to give it room. It was like a spiked, armored wall reaching out with long, slender tentacles. They were tipped with long, pointy stingers dripping clear liquid.

“Josie!” Bragr called. “Run away! Up the stairs, to the shortship! Get to the jarlagard and tell them you need a longship to take you back to Earth! Earl Bragr has ordered it as his final command!”

His voice echoed from the whole stairwell and the oracle room. There was no reply, and the monster skrymt came ever closer. Soon it would have them isolated in the corner.

“It's been an honor fighting along with you, Your Highness,” he said, sick with worry about Josie. “But we will enjoy Valhalla—”

There was a furious scream from somewhere in the oracle room. It didn't sound like Josie.

“Get the hell away from my love!” a thin voice yelled. And *that* sounded like her.

Suddenly the tip of a spear appeared in the middle of the monster, having gone through it from the other side. Again and again the flint spearhead appeared, green with the skrymt’s internal fluids. First it was slow, but then the skrymt was pierced faster than the eye could follow.

The undead monster pulled back, then started to turn.

Bragr saw the strangest thing he’d ever witnessed.

“It’s a whirlwind!” the prince exclaimed. “A red whirlwind with a blade! Another skrymt?”

“No, Your Highness,” Bragr said, his chest swelling with pride. “What we’re seeing is the Meistr fulfilling the Prophecy.”

She moved too fast for him to discern her features, but it was clearly Josie and Tornado, the weapon fully deserving its name. Before he knew it, she had cut off half the tentacles on the monster’s body.

“Let’s assist!” Prince Craxon said and drew his sword back.

Bragr put his hand on the prince’s shoulder. “It’s not necessary, Your Highness. This is all her victory.”

Leaking green fluid from at least ten score places, the skrymt slowly sagged to the ground and went limp.

Immediately Josie turned her attention to the three smaller skrymtir. They were already badly hurt, and it only took a few searingly fast thrusts with her spear to destroy them all.

Only then did she slow down and stand still, Tornado held ready.

“Holy Zhor! She must be the deadliest fighter on Gardr,” Prince Crayon exclaimed. “Truly a Meistr!”

Bragr ran over and looked her up and down. “Are you all right, my love?”

“I’m fine,” Josie said, breathing hard, “just getting hungry again.”

An alien woman came out of the oracle room, hands behind her back.

“Greetings,” she said with a strong accent. “Gornt run. Up.” She nodded towards the stairs.

Prince Craxon walked over to her. “Aretha, I presume?” He cut the ropes that held her hands.

“Aretha,” the woman confirmed, then said something in Josie’s language.

“Gornt killed the seeress when she wouldn’t look in the crystal,” Josie translated.

Bragr embraced Josie quickly, pulling her into him. “I’ll go get Gornt.”

“We’ll both go,” Josie said. “There’s nothing for us here, right?”

“Just one thing,” Bragr said and walked into the oracle room where the fire along the walls was burning calmly. He adjusted the position of the dead seeress so that she was on her back with her hands folded across her chest, blind eyes closed. “We shall avenge you, then come back for you, Seeress Hjordis. You have served your earldom well, and you shall have the pyre of a hero.”

Then he grabbed Josie’s hand and they ran up the stairs, closely followed by Prince Craxon and Aretha.

When they came out of the building at the top of the hill, it was twilight.

But there were dark, moving shadows all around them. They were alarmingly big and moved like predators, dozens of yellow eyes staring at them.

Bragr drew Brisingr again, weary of the fighting but needing Josie safe. “Gornt left things to slow us down.”

“No,” Josie said and pointed. “There’s his ship. And there is Gornt.”

The former earl was on the ground, arms and legs spread out. His robe and the snow under him was red with blood and he stared emptily up at the sky. Someone had ripped his throat out.

A six-legged shape came up to Josie, so calmly that Bragr was able to restrain himself and not get between them.

She reached out to it and stroked its head. “You guys had enough of him, too?”

Ninja nuzzled her hand, then sauntered away along with his pack.

“I wondered how he got his injury in the woods. It must have been Gornt’s skrymtir.”

“It did look like a wound from a blade. I think this is the last we’ll see of him,” Bragr said and sheathed Brisingr.

Josie took his hand. “He is wild, and that’s the way it should be.”

Bragr looked over at the body of his father. “I’m grateful for them doing the job I should have done when I deposed him.”

Josie put a small hand on his chest. “Others may say you should have killed your father back then. You couldn’t do it, because that’s not who you are. And I love you for it.”

He bent down to kiss her, and she threw her arms around his neck to return the kiss with a passion.

Prince Craxon had cut the ropes binding Aretha’s hands, and now he walked over to Gornt’s body. When he returned, he was carrying a sword, a knife and a silver chain.

“This is Sjelbrand,” he said and examined the sword. “Perhaps it would be better if it were to only hang on a wall from now on.”

“I agree, Your Highness,” Bragr said. “Gornt’s sword will never fight again.”

“I don’t know the name of this,” the prince said and held out a small knife. “Nor whose it is. But it was stuck in Gornt’s shoulder to the hilt, so I doubt it was his.”

Josie reached out and took the knife from his hand. “It has no name yet. I stole it from the *Kraken*.”

Bragr stared in disbelief. “*You* stabbed him?!”

Josie gingerly held the knife between two fingers. “Right before I started fighting that huge alien skrymt. I wanted to stab Gornt in the heart and kill him, so that you wouldn’t have to. But at the last moment I realized I couldn’t kill him.”

“That was the scream we heard, then,” Prince Craxon said. “Well done, Meistr Josie.”

Bragr squeezed her shoulders, moved that she had wanted to relieve him of that burden. “Thank you.”

Josie gently freed herself from his embrace and walked fast over to Aretha. They hugged for a long time and talked in their

language.

Bragr heard sniffing, so he let them have some time alone.

The prince let a silver chain hang from his hand. “King Bragr, I think this belongs to you.”

Bragr frowned. “Your Highness, I’m not a king. Hjalmarheim is not a kingdom.”

The prince grinned and handed him the chain with the black gem hanging from it. “I have reason to believe that your subjects feel differently about it. And while Gornt was never recognized as a king, I’d wager that you will be. With acclaim. You will get used to it, Your Majesty.” He bowed, then smirked and walked towards his spaceship.

Looking down on Gornt’s dead body, he closed his father’s eyes and tried to feel grief. But there was nothing, only gratitude that he hadn’t had to do it himself.

Josie came back, while Aretha was sashaying quickly after Prince Craxon, who was waiting by his ship.

“I’m sorry about your father.”

Bragr put his arm around Josie’s shoulders. “As am I. Sorry that he couldn’t resist *his* urges.”

“If he had, would you have found your Karest?”

He shrugged. “Zhor knows. They say that even if two Karestir don’t find each other in this world, they will be brought together in Valhalla.”

“After they’re dead?” Josie chirped. “Seems like leaving it a little late. Anyway, I’m fine with the way this went. I didn’t even know there was such a thing as a Karest.”

Bragr turned his back to the dead man. “I am much more than fine about it. Come, let’s be on our way. With Gornt dead, his skrymtir are destroyed and we can bury them. I will send men to clean this place and bury Gornt, too. He shall have no pyre. But Hjordis shall, in the oracle hill so everyone can see.”

They walked to the shortship that was parked a ways down the hill.

“He used a small stone,” Josie said as she climbed into the ship. “It was the same type as that big, black crystal. It’s what he used to make the skrymtir, to give them life.”

Bragr held up the silver chain with the stone dangling from it. “Was it this?”

“Yes! That’s the one. Be careful about touching it, my love. I don’t think it’s safe.”

He had the shortship take off and turned it towards the coast. It would only work while there was still some daylight, and it was getting dark fast. “I wonder where he found it. But we won’t keep it. I’ll throw it into a star next time I’m out in space. We don’t want something like that in Hjalmarheim. Or even on Gardr.”

She kissed his cheek. “Good. The planet is better without skrymtir.”

“I think so too. My love, there’s talk about making me king. Do you want to be a queen?”

- JOSIE -

Josie stared at Bragr, horrified. “No! I don’t! *Who* is talking about that?”

“Prince Craxon,” Bragr said darkly, “and others before him. It’s their way of gently preparing me for something that has already been settled. It’s the kind of thing where you and I are the last to know. My love, if it turns out to be true, there are limits to how much I can resist my people if they want to honor me.”

“Huh. Can’t they just give you a raise?”

“A raise or a simple ‘thank you’ *would* be better,” Bragr groaned. “Though the king idea fits with the Prophecy. The Einungar clan lost the earldom, but kept the lands, now as a kingdom. Zhor knows I never wanted a crown. But that’s not how things are usually done here. Anyway, not much would change, I suppose. Except they would call me ‘majesty’ instead of ‘chief’. I much prefer ‘chief’. No, I will refuse. Being earl is bad enough. ”

The last thing in the world Josie wanted to be was a royal. She just wasn’t cut out for all kinds of protocol and pomp. “What

if we just... leave? Get married and then run away in the night and settle on an island somewhere?"

Bragr pointed at the dark coast below them. "This *is* an island somewhere. And I can't just abandon my people. Not after this, not after my father has done this much damage. My crew burned, warriors have died in battle, the seeress Hjordis is dead, farms were burned to the ground. I have to atone for it somehow."

"Can you discreetly let them know that you're not interested in being king?"

"Discreetly tell every single citizen of Hjalmarheim? Perhaps. They should know that a title like that could go to my head. It runs in the family. "

Josie thought about it. If anything would convince Bragr that he was a better leader and a much better man than Gornt, then the whole people making him their king would probably be enough.

She reached over and took his hand. "Actually, love, go ahead and be king if your people want it. I'll just live on an island by myself and you can come visit. Say, once a day?"

"We'll talk about it," Bragr grunted. "But we have something much more important to do first."

"Get married."

"That's right. Everything else is just..."

"Noise," Josie completed the sentence.

Bragr laughed. "Yes! It's just noise. The actual *song* is the two of us. The rest is noise."

“I do,” Josie said, her heart beating hard and fast.

“Then before the eyes of Zhor, in the light of Straum and in front of all witnesses, I state that you are now husband and wife.” Heidran the shaman bowed.

Bragr took her hand, and they turned around. The field was full of people as far as the eye could see, and now they all exploded in a joyful, thunderous cheer.

“I think they like us,” Josie said, having to wipe a tear of relief. All through the ceremony she’d heard them behind her, thousands of Vikings murmuring and coughing and clearing their throats. She wasn’t sure what to expect when she turned to face them. This was better than what she’d hoped for.

Aretha and the other girls were in the first row. Most of them were smiling and applauding. Josie gave them a little wave and a big grin. There was no such thing as bridesmaids on Gardr, but they had all banded together for her and persuaded the Vikings that she needed a white wedding dress, not a gray and drab one the way the Hjalmarheim tradition said.

She was happy, too. It was all crazy, she knew. This was an alien planet filled with monsters and creatures from out of some dark fairy tales, and Bragr was a Viking chief with a crazy father and horns growing from his head. Still, she had never felt more at home than she did in Hjalmarheim. And she had never felt more loved than she did in the arms of her abductor.

She was dizzy with how fast it had happened. But she had never been more certain about anything.

She and Bragr walked down the aisle in the open-air temple to his gods before some of his warriors couldn't stand it anymore and rushed in to do their wrist-grabbing armshake and congratulate him. Josie could swear some of the grizzliest warriors had tears in their eyes from genuine joy. She'd learned that they could be quite emotional, at least when they weren't fighting some battle or other.

The surroundings were suitably beautiful. The jarlagard had the ocean on one side and green hills on the other. There was a constant hiss from the surf, the springtime air was clear and fragrant, and Straum beamed hard in the sky. The light made Josie's white dress shine like the snow-covered mountains in the distance.

Bragr was surrounded by well-wishers, and soon they were parted by the crowd. The Viking women were shy around Josie, but when Solveg's starry-eyed teenage daughter dared to walk over to Josie and congratulate her, all the others rushed in, too. There were embraces and hugs and congratulations that seemed genuine.

It took a while before Josie could seek out Aretha and the four other girls.

She wiped a moved tear from her cheek. "This is more intense than I expected."

"They know how to celebrate," Aretha said, her voice a little unsteady, dabbing at her cheeks with a piece of cloth. "I guess it comes with all the fighting they do."

"It has to," Josie said. "There's got to be some balance."

"You look incredible, if I do say so myself," Celeste said as she straightened her yellow space ship mechanic's jumpsuit. "I know we designed that dress in one day, but a lot depends on

the bride who wears it, too. Damn, we made your ass look great. Together, I mean. You by having it in the first place. Us for helping you show it off.”

Josie laughed. She’d only known Celeste for a few days, but she already really liked her direct ways. “I know. No such dress was ever seen on this planet. They’ll talk about it for years.”

“I bet they’ll start using the same type themselves!” the girl called Chen exclaimed. “Because it’s the only color that makes sense. Who wears *gray* to get married? Okay, fine, I guess guys do sometimes. Like in England. But they’re guys! They don’t want to... to... shine! Well, maybe they do. Nobody cares. It’s not like they need to. But we do! And now these Viking women will! I tell you, we’re doing important work!” She grinned happily as the others laughed. She had a knack for spreading her mood, whether cheerful or downbeat. And she switched quickly between the two extremes.

What exactly she had been doing on *Unity* in the first place was hard to guess. Chen was so evasive about it, Josie had started to assume she’d been a stowaway.

“Anyway,” Chloe said smoothly as she stroked her dark, impossibly silky hair from her face and lifted her finely-sculpted chin. “I hear the ship is ready. Not that we want to leave immediately, Josie. You know that. We’ll stay for a day or two more, maybe. If you insist. It was nice of you to fix that for us.”

The *Dead Son* had been quickly renamed *Gudruna*. Bragr had made sure it was ready to take the five girls back to Earth anytime they wanted. It just needed a small crew, and they would be on the way home, never to see Gardr again.

“Honestly, it’s the least they could do,” Josie said. “I know they only abducted you guys because they got carried away when they saw Bragr take me, so it’s not like they had a plan with that.”

“They don’t have a plan with a lot of things,” Chloe sniffed. “But now they have you to help them along a little, I suppose. If that’s your thing.” She was a metals trader who had been on *Unity* for two weeks when the raid happened, and Josie knew that she was filthy rich back on Earth. She had paid for extra security on the station, and the staggering cost for the food and freshly-made cosmetics she had sent up from Earth by rocket every single day was becoming legendary among the *Unity* lifers.

“They plan the things they need to plan,” Rafaela countered calmly. She was a miner who had spent months on Mars before she arrived on *Unity* right before the raid. “Maybe they figure that not everything has to be about making as much money as possible.”

“Maybe they should figure out how not to steal others away from their homes,” Chloe snapped. “Maybe if they did some actual work themselves, they wouldn’t need to.”

“Anyway,” Aretha said quickly before it turned into a quarrel, “this is Josie’s wedding day, and we’ll celebrate before we talk about going home. When is the coronation, Josie?”

“Weeks from now,” Josie said, grateful for Aretha redirecting the conversation. “Bragr has made up all kinds of reasons to push it back as far as possible. He’s not relishing the idea, but the huskarls threatened to tie him up and drag him through all of Hjalmarheim so he could ask everyone in the land if they wanted him as king. He thought that would take him away from me for too long, so he relented. God, I never heard so

much grumbling and whining! His latest idea is that the earldom is in a state of mourning for his crew and the seeress and the warriors who died in the battle.”

Celeste frowned. “I thought those huge pyres last night were the end of that. There sure was a lot of crying.”

Josie shrugged. “They were. He made it up.”

“But not that much will change, will it?” Chen asked. “It’s just a new title. He was already the boss.”

“That’s what I keep telling him,” Josie said. “But who knows. I’m more than fine with him getting the whole thing postponed indefinitely.”

“We won’t be able to stay until you get your crown, or however that works,” Chloe informed her. “I was thinking, maybe we can leave tomorrow?”

“Let’s say three days from now,” Chen said and glanced at a group of Viking warriors. “I’d like to make some... *friends* first.”

“I say a week,” Rafaela said with a thin smile. “Or *two* weeks. So we can give a real good account about this place when we get home.”

“I’m *not* staying here for *weeks* more,” Chloe huffed. “And when we leave, I expect considerable remuneration for the tort and emotional distress and lost income and potential long-time trauma—”

“Excuse me,” Josie said quickly and hurried over to Bragr, making her way past the throngs of horned people wanting to congratulate him. “Hey, Chief.”

“Hey, chief’s wife,” Bragr grinned and grabbed both her hands. “Or something like that. You look incredible. A white

bride! Who would have thought it could be so beautiful?”

“Lots of people on Earth thought so,” she laughed. “But your people are welcome to copy it. Anyway. How long do we have to stay?”

He frowned. “I was hoping... you’d stay your whole life...”

Josie laughed and kissed him on his bearded cheek. “I’m pretty sure I will, my love. I mean, how long do you and I have to stay at this reception?”

He looked around, making the silver chains between his horns tinkle brightly. The black gemstone had been taken out of it. “I think everyone is still here, but they’re now more interested in the food and drink than us. But... perhaps we can sneak away?”

She gave him an impish smile. “Perhaps you can do whatever you want, because you’re the earl and chief?”

His face brightened. “Yes! Of course! Let’s simply confide in one person so they don’t think we’ve gone into space. Heidran! Ah, there you are.”

“Chief,” the shaman said and gave a shallow bow, looking suitably clerical in his black robe, with a thin, black ribbon tied between his horns. “How may I serve the chief and his wife?”

“Heidran, you just wedded me to Josie. If you do nothing else for me, it would be enough for several lifetimes. And yet I will ask you this: Josie and I will be leaving now, but we don’t want to say goodbye to all the three thousand guests.”

“Say no more, Chief. I shall inform those who need to know. But only when the time is right.”

“Thank you, Arch Shaman. We will be back tomorrow.” Bragr grabbed Josie’s hand and dragged her fast away from the crowd, ducking under a stone wall and passing a flock of fluffy saudrir.

“Arch Shaman now?” Josie whispered as they made their escape. “Was he promoted?”

“Surely a kingdom is entitled to an Arch Shaman,” Bragr said innocently. “I’m not sure if there has ever been such a thing. But as earl, I can decree that now there is. And whenever I can no longer put off the coronation nonsense, I can confirm my own decree as a king. Yes?”

“Um. Sure,” Josie said, having to hitch her dress up to keep up with her husband. “He’s a good man, too. He totally deserves it.”

“Among the best men in Hjalmarheim, in my judgment. He was a great support for me when Gornt was still earl. Often as a child, I wished that Heidran could be my father instead of the real one.”

They reached a long shortship and got into it. It would have space for probably eight people on four benches, and it was more luxuriously appointed than the regular type. It had seats upholstered in fluffy saudr skin, and it flew with a more dignified weight to it.

Bragr had it take off and set course south, just along the coastline, skimming the waves.

“I never asked where we’re going,” Josie said, holding on to both Bragr and the shortship.

“Just a simple hut, the kind you and I prefer,” Bragr replied. “Somewhere we can be alone.”

“Is there a sauna?”

“A bastu? Yes, of course. You’re starting to like those, huh?”

“I like the things that happen *inside* them,” Josie specified.

“That’s all.”

“That’s my favorite part, too!” Bragr said with mock surprise.

“I can’t believe we’re so much alike.”

Josie stroked the Marks on her arm. “More alike now than before, my love.”

“But still different enough to make it interesting, my wife.”

They flew on for a while. Josie enjoyed the fresh sea air and the flowery scents from the crooked, windswept trees and bushes around them.

Bragr steered the shortship out over the waves to a small island with a single building on it. It was a low, wooden house with a flat roof, built on round rocks and surrounded by low fir-like bushes and heather.

“It smells incredible,” Josie said when she got out of the shortship. “From the ocean and these plants.”

“The mountain is fine once in a while,” Bragr said. “But this is my favorite place in all of Hjalmarheim.”

They went inside and found the hut’s larder stocked to the brim with all kinds of food, both fresh and smoked and dried. The main room had a giant window pane facing the ocean. The panoramic view was breathtaking.

“I didn’t know you guys could make glass like that,” Josie said, astounded. “In your estate, there’s only panes as small as my hand.”

“I don’t think this glass was made on Gardr,” Bragr said, embracing her from behind. “I think it came from elsewhere.”

“Oh. It was plundered.”

“Some of the best things in Hjalmarheim are plunder,” he said into her hair. “So you can’t really blame us for the practice.”

“I won’t blame you for what’s happened until now,” Josie said. “But at some point, you and I have to talk about that particular tradition.”

“At some point,” he agreed. “There is much to say about our raids. Now, neither of us took part in the wedding feast. So I imagine you’re hungry.”

“Your imagination is correct,” Josie said. “Let’s cook together.”

Bragr got a big tray out of the larder and pulled off the cloth covering it. “I think everything has been prepared. Ah yes. All it needs is some fire.”

He lit an iron stove where the firewood had already been arranged.

“Your people have prepared the hut well,” Josie said. “Someone must have been here today and left all this.”

“That’s one good thing about being earl,” Bragr said airily. “I can tell people to do things.”

Josie looked at the tray. There were bowls of cut vegetables and meats and herbs, all just needing to be mixed or grilled. “But you didn’t tell someone to make this. *You* prepared it all.”

He frowned. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I can see from the way these vegetables have been cut. With care, but without patience. Same with these steaks. You might as well have carved your name into them.”

He shrugged. “Well, I didn’t want anyone else involved with this. I enjoy cooking for you. And *with* you. I came here early this morning and made the hut ready.”

She turned around and embraced him tightly. “You’re a hopeless romantic, and I love you.”

“Hopeless? Oh no. I’m *hopeful*. Let me show you.” He led her past a door. “Can you guess what I’m hoping for?”

It was a bedroom with a fireplace and a low bed covered in furs and skins. The fire was built and ready to light. It was a bright room because half the ceiling was glass, like the panoramic window.

“You’re hoping to see the stars tonight,” Josie said, hard tingles shooting down her front, because this room would be perfect for a wedding night.

“No, that’s not it.”

“You’re hoping to get some really good sleep.”

He groaned. “Stop it.”

“What? You’re hoping to look up and see vettir outside?”

Bragr grabbed her butt outside the dress. “One more try, and then I’ll show you.”

She grinned. “You’re hoping for a really good wedding night with lots of language learning.”

“You got it,” he said and cupped her breast. “That’s what I’m hoping for. Let’s cook and eat.”

After the delicious meal they took off their clothes and went into the big sauna, which just needed some water sprinkled on its glowing rocks to get really hot and misty in a matter of seconds.

Josie laid down against Bragr, a thick towel under her. “This is so niiceee!”

“It has a certain appeal,” the Viking agreed, leaning back and relaxing.

She stretched, letting her body relax completely. “You could fit a squad of warriors in here.”

“You could. I’ve done it several times.”

“There’s no snow outside, though. How will we cool down?”

“A dip in the ocean usually works just as well as snow.”

“That figures. I notice there’s an ocean just outside. *So* convenient. It has waves and everything.” Josie was so relaxed she didn’t care that she wasn’t making sense.

“Oh, you noticed that? Good, then it won’t be a surprise when I throw you in.”

Josie half-turned her head. “What?”

“My love, the *bastu* is a place where things can be talked about that are not talked about outside it. One of the things we warriors often talk about in here is what we saw when we got our Marks in the Ice Caves. While we’re being burned, we’re also shown things about ourselves and about the future. For instance, when I got the Marks, I saw Gudruna’s face. She was smiling at me and saying that she would always help me. It was weird — I’d never seen a picture of her and, yet I knew it was her. I also saw myself fighting strange, dead enemies. This was long before Gornt made *skrymtir*.”

“Like an oracle,” Josie drawled, relaxed.

“I say this only because we are told about it before the Trials. We often hear the tales of older Warriors. And after the Trials, when we have our Marks, we often want to talk about the

things we saw. It can be good to tell others about those things and think about what they may mean. The warrior herself or himself decides what to share. Some share a lot, some share only a little. And whatever is shared, we never mention it outside the bastu.”

Josie tensed up. Should she tell him, even though she wasn't sure? Well, she *was* married to him. It wasn't like he could get away from it.

She took a deep breath. “There is one thing I want to tell you. I was burning in the Ice Caves. I could smell my flesh burning. Gornt was laughing and Aretha was screaming. And I was two. Not one. Not just Josie. There was another, too. One that I wanted to protect.”

“You mean...” Bragr's voice failed, and he squeezed her hand.

“There are no other signs,” she hurried to say. “It could all be wrong. But it also might be right.”

“That you... that we...”

“That I'm *pregnant*, as we call it on Earth. *With child*, as you say it here.”

“And of course that child...” Bragr's voice trembled.

“Is yours, yes.” She managed a dry laugh. “Believe me, Chief. There's no other possibility.”

She was actually pretty sure it was real, despite the lack of other signs. That feeling in the Ice Caves had not been vague. There *had* been someone else there with her. Someone fragile.

Bragr lifted her closer to him and embraced her, hard. “That makes me happy, my love. I never dreamed the Ice Caves could have something good about them. And certainly not

something as good as this! You're with child! With *my* child!
With *our* child, Josie my love!"

Josie laughed through sudden tears, relieved he was taking it so well. She clung to his hand. "Our child."

"But... my love, is it good for the child to be in the bastu? Won't you be hot?"

"I was going to say it," Josie admitted. "I think it's safer not to do it. At least not for long. And I'm getting hot right now."

Bragr bounced to his feet and scooped her up into his arms, then marched naked through the hut, out into the cool air, onto the rocks, and then down to a small beach, going straight into the water. "I was going to throw you in, but now I will be much more careful."

He stood on the bottom and dipped Josie into the sea.

"That feels wonderful." Josie sighed as she cooled down. "But you don't have to be careful about *everything*."

"Oh! So... we can still..."

"Look at the stars? Yes!" Josie grinned.

"No, I mean, we can still..."

"Eat steaks? If they're tender."

"Stop it! I mean, we can still... learn languages?" He carried her back on land, back up the beach to the hut while the water dripped from them both.

"Oh. Yes, we can. If the language is *hard*. And *long*." She reached for his cock.

"Good. You see, you never told me what *this* is called." He moved one hand to her face.

"That's the *nose*."

“Noz. All right. And this?”

“That an *ear*.”

“*Ir*. Good, we’re making progress.” He rinsed sand off his feet before he carried her into the hut. “What is this?”

“That’s a *nipple*. You already knew that one.”

“Oh yes, the *nipl*. I knew, of course. It’s my favorite word in Earthish. Just testing if you remember.”

“It’s English, not Earthish. We have hundreds of languages on Earth. English is just one of them.”

He laid her down on the bed, on top of a thick layer of furs.

“Of course. I knew that, too.”

“You know a lot of things, warrior.”

Lighting the prepared stack of wood in the fireplace, he lay down behind her and put one massive arm around her. “And so do you, my huldr.”

“Huldr. What is that?”

“It’s you. An irresistibly beautiful and alluring woman who lures a man in and then keeps him captive forever.”

“Hmm. You know, there should be a balance. I’m your plunder. You’re my captive. So if that makes me a huldr, then I’m fine with it.”

His hand wandered down her front, ending at her chest. “Feels right so far. But a huldr has a tail. And I forgot to check if you have one.”

Insistent tingles shot down her body, and she tensed up, enjoying the heat. “A tail? I don’t remember.”

He quickly sat up, gently rolled her over on her stomach, and put one hand on her upper back. “What is this?”

“The *spine*.”

“*Spyn*. This?”

“Also the spine.”

“This?” His fingers slid outward.

“*Ribs*, and that tickles, so please move back to the...”

He put a finger at the middle of her back. “*Spyn*.”

“*Spiine*,” she corrected, heat gathering fast in her center as he explored his way down her back.

“*Spyyyn*. This?”

“So the spine actually goes on pretty far down, and it should end in a tail. *If* there is one. I promise nothing.”

“All this is the *spyn*?” He slid his hand up and down her back.

“You have the same thing yourself, huldr-man.”

“Of course. We’re very similar. This is only language learning, nothing else.” His finger slid down to the base of her spine.

“This?”

“That’s actually the tailbone, I think. Is there a tail?”

His hands slid down and stroked her bare butt. “There is. A very beautiful and alluring one. And invisible.”

“Then I guess I’m a huldr.”

One finger slid in between her legs and teased the wetness there. “Of course you are. This confirms it.”

He laid down atop her, along her whole length, his face by her ear. “I love my huldr wife.”

“And I love my warrior husband,” Josie said hoarsely, so turned on she could barely think.

The tip of his cock was at her entrance and his weight was holding her down without feeling heavy. She felt completely protected and safe, and also helplessly pinned down in the most arousing way. She loved his strength and his weight and his size, and the furs under her middle rubbed against exactly the right spots.

“Take me,” she urged, delirious with arousal and knowing that she would be coming fast.

“I already did,” the Viking raider growled and pushed into her.

EPILOGUE

- JOSIE -

Josie pointed. “That has to be it.”

Bragr steered the shortship towards the shadow in the middle of the frozen lake. “It is.”

He set the flying sled down and jumped out.

Josie followed and pushed the snow off the dragon’s head. “Doesn’t look like the dfergir ruined it.”

Bragr went in close, put his arms around the *Kraken*’s bow, and pulled. Slowly the half metal, half wood bow came up from the snow. He relaxed, took a deep breath, and pulled it halfway out. “It’s heavy.”

Josie got to the other side of it and grabbed hold of the upper part of the dragon’s head. “On three? One, two, three!”

They pulled together and managed to get the whole bow out of the snow. Josie felt the neural lace kicking in and helping with the lift, although Bragr lifted a good nine tenths of the weight all by himself.

“What will we do with this thing, anyway?” Josie asked.

“We will bring it to the shipwrights and see if they can build a ship out of it. Most of the keel is gone, and the stern too. But

maybe they know some tricks.”

“If this part survived the fall through the air, won’t those other parts also have made it? They’re made from the same stuff, right?”

Bragr shrugged. “The keel and the stern are probably somewhere in this forest. Do you want to search for them? Or for the mast and the sails?”

“Not really. It would take years.”

“It would, for a single searcher. But I will send out search parties. This is the time, before the snow melts. Those parts will be easier to find where they fell. Any longship is the most special craft in the galaxy, and it’s worth almost any effort to gather as many pieces as possible to hopefully make a new one.”

“All the pieces will have landed in a straight line,” Josie said, remembering some orbital mechanics. “Once you find the stern of the ship that Siv and Sigurdr clung to, you can take a map and mark that and the place where this bow piece landed. Not this spot, but up there, where we hit the ground first.” She pointed up to the side of the mountain. “Draw a line between those two points, and near that line you will find all the other pieces.”

“I will do that when we get back home,” Bragr said. “You seem so sure, it has to work.”

Josie kicked at the big piece of the *Kraken*’s bow. “Why is it carved like a dragon head, anyway? Your shield on the ship had a dragon on it, too.”

Bragr sent a brief glance to the east. “I will tell you about that some other time. And in some other place.”

They pulled and lifted the bow onto the shortship, leaving only space for the two of them.

“Some honeymoon *this* is,” Josie panted, out of breath from the heavy lift. “All we do is learn languages and pick up trash.”

Bragr tied the bow down with thin ropes. “I thought you enjoyed learning languages. You sound like you do.”

“I really do,” Josie admitted. “Especially teaching them. You’re a terrible student, but you’re a great linguist. It’s incredible how you do that.”

“I suppose I *am* somewhat incredible,” Bragr said modestly as he got into the shortship. “But so are you.”

“If the Earl of Hjalmarheim says so, then who am I to protest? Now we’re going to the stone hut, right?”

“We have to replenish the food and firewood, and I want to check on the pyre. There may be pieces that should be buried.”

They flew fast over the mountains and down into the wooded valley. In less than an hour they traveled as far as they had walked in two days.

It had snowed since they’d been at the dome-shaped hut, and their tracks could only be seen as soft indentations.

They got crates and wickerwork baskets and pots out from the shortship and carried them inside, putting them in their proper places.

Bragr grabbed Siv’s ax and went out to chop wood. Josie followed him out into the sunshine. Straum was being unusually bright, and one of the energy beams had clearly gotten closer.

“Bragr,” she called and looked up. “Does it usually look like that?”

He shielded his eyes. “I’ve never seen it like that before. You can’t see Straum anymore, just the beam. It fills the whole sky!”

“It’s pointed almost directly at us,” Josie said, getting nervous.

Bragr drew Brisingr from its scabbard and held it up. “Holy Zhor!”

The whole blade’s edge was sparkling silently in every color of the spectrum, looking more like fireworks than a sword.

Josie looked away from the sun. Her shadow was only a dark patch right beneath her because most of the sky was a brilliant blue light. The silence just made it more eerie. “I don’t like this, Bragr.”

“Nor do I,” the Viking said. “Let’s get home. If there’s a Shine happening, I want to be with my people.” He put the ax back in the hut, and they got into the shortship. Josie noticed that jumping in was effortless, as if she was becoming stronger. The pulsar had to influence the neural lace.

“The shortship moves faster than before,” Bragr said as they speeded away from the hut, up the hill towards the coast. “Straum gives more power.”

“Just as long as it doesn’t kill us,” Josie said tightly.

They didn’t say more until they saw the jarlagard in the distance. People were milling around, many staring at the sky.

They came to a halt and jumped out.

“Is it the Shine?” Bragr asked.

“It looks like it,” Heidran said. “And it feels like it. Old bones like mine aren’t well-suited for a Shine. They ache.”

“Then go inside,” Bragr told him. “Get under a solid roof.”

“It’s no help, Chief,” the arch shaman said. “I have tried. But the power of Straum goes through everything.”

Prince Craxon of Ragnhildros came over. After the battle with Gornt he had stayed in Hjalmarheim for unspecified reasons, although Josie thought she knew why. “Earl Bragr, that is a Shine or I’m the king of the dfergir. I wonder what effects it will have.”

“Your Highness,” Bragr greeted him. “Yes, the effects are different every time, so they say. Whatever it means, I’m determined to make the most of it. We shall use the good effects to our advantage, and whichever bad effects there are we shall find a way to deal with. Or just ignore. This shall be the best Shine in the history of Gardr!”

The prince laughed. “Marriage has been good for you, Bragr! No longer are you worrying and brooding about everything. Now you meet the dangers head on with a determination to triumph!” His eyes shifted behind them and became soft.

Josie was pretty sure she knew what he was seeing. “Hi, Aretha.”

“Uh... hi,” Aretha said. “Do you have eyes in your back now? How did you know it was me?”

Josie glanced at the prince, who was slowly moving away, sending the occasional glance behind him. “Just a guess. Damn, we’re being swept by the energy beam of a pulsar. We’re the first Earthlings ever to experience that.”

“And we’re still alive,” Aretha pointed out. “I would not have guessed that. Those energy beams are supposed to be all kinds

of hard gamma and x-ray. And here we are, not fried to a crisp. The Vikings say they've had this happen many times before, even. Though nobody remembers it. Told you that's not a regular pulsar. Or a pulsar at all."

"I've been thinking the same thing," Josie said, happy to finally be able to talk shop with another astronomer. "It looks like one. But it's too weird to be one. It doesn't pulsate, for one thing—"

A warrior came running. "Chief Bragr!"

Bragr spun around. "What is it, Huskarl Gudmundr?"

"The longships, Chief! They all fell over!"

"What? Fell over? How?"

"They usually balance on their keels, Chief. Now they've all fallen over on their sides, like an ordinary ship would. And we can't straighten them! It almost looks as if... as if they're *dead*."

Bragr walked fast towards the boathouses where the longships were stored when not in use. Josie and Aretha followed, as did many of the others.

Inside the boathouse, warriors and craftsmen were standing around scratching their heads. indeed all four ships were lying on their sides as if they had lost their balance.

"What could be the cause of this?" Bragr wondered out loud.

"Some lingering malice from Gornt?"

"It's the Shine," Heidran said as he joined them. "We're seeing one of the effects of *this* Shine."

Bragr went over and put his hand on the bow of one of the ships. "They must all be examined carefully! Perhaps they still

work.” He climbed into the ship as well as he could and started to check it.

Arch Shaman Heidran shook his head slowly. “It’s the Shine. Straum made it possible for longships to work. Now it has taken its gift away.”

“Bragr,” Josie said, getting a bad feeling about it. “What does this mean?”

The Viking chief climbed back out and slapped the bow of the ship in frustration. “It means no more raids while the Shine is on.”

“But for the girls? What does it mean for them?”

Bragr turned around and fixed her with his sky-blue eyes. “These longships can’t travel in the River anymore. They can’t go into space. Indeed I don’t think they can go anywhere. Including Earth. I’m sorry, Aretha. But it looks like you and your friends are stranded on Gardr.”

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Dear reader,

Thank you for reading *Alien Viking’s Plunder!*

This is the first part of a new series! I’ve been reading up on the Viking age, and I also watched a lot of Netflix. For research only, of course. Not for any other reason!

Anyway, the Vikings had a really rich culture and a lot of it has stayed with us. Surely all of that had to come from some roguishly handsome aliens with magical ships and a tendency to name their swords? If they ever came to Earth, they wouldn’t be forgotten. That’s my theory, anyway.

Was Josie likeable enough to root for? Her warrior side seems to get the best of her at times. But I needed her to be a good warrior, because Bragr would only be interested if she could hold her own. I like how protective Bragr turned out. He really takes his responsibility as an abductor seriously.

Josie's neural lace was inspired by medical devices that companies are developing right now. Those are nowhere near as advanced as Josie's, but maybe one day brain injuries can be treated that way.

The tachyons and the pulsar is mostly technobabble, although with a grain of real science. Tachyons have never been observed, but they could theoretically exist. What those faster-than-light particles would actually be like is anyone's guess, and *my* guess is that they enable things to happen that are so weird that it looks like magic.

There are many more things to explore on planet Gardr. I didn't want to unbox the alien world completely in the first book, but I have given a couple of hints about what we can expect for the other girls. I'm particularly looking forward to Chloe's book, for reasons that will gradually become clear.

But Aretha is the next Earth girl to be romanced by an Alien Viking! You have probably guessed who it is, but not everything about him is what it seems...

If you sign up for my newsletter right [here](#), you'll know when that book is ready.

And maybe come by my Facebook page [here](#), where you'll find the coolest science fiction romance fans in the known universe :)

In other news, the *Caveman Aliens* series is still going on! The next part, *Caveman Alien's Curse*, can be expected in

November of this year.

Thanks again for reading *Alien Viking's Plunder!* I hope you liked it, and I'll see you in the next one!

Calista