

A Viking man with a beard and tattoos, holding a sword and an axe, standing in a Viking village. The man has intricate black tattoos on his face and chest. He is wearing a dark, fur-lined tunic. In the background, there are traditional Viking wooden buildings with thatched roofs. The sky is blue with some clouds. The overall scene is set in a lush, green landscape.

KENNEDY THOMAS

THE
VIKING
TRANSLATOR'S
OBSESSION

A Viking Time Travel Romance

The Viking Translator's Obsession

**A Viking Time Travel Romance - #4 of To
Love a Viking series**

Kennedy Thomas

Queen Of Crows Publishing

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CHAPTER ONE

The Sorrow of Obsession

A dark forest surrounded him, the thick canopy prohibiting most light from entering. Frode felt akin to the shadows, the light too blinding, too vivid for his bloodshot eyes and panicked demeanor. He was lost in this forest, having no destination in mind and no direction to seek after, a familiar terrain now felt like a trap to him. But while he was lost in the forest, he was far more lost in his thoughts and the thick haze that had descended over his mind.

Grief felt like stumbling through the dark. Frode sought out the light, but both of his legs of his wandering soul were broken and his eyes had forgotten what light looked like. It was easy to forget what he was searching for, too easy to obsess over some vague idea that had long slipped from his mind.

Frode's wounds were fresh, his heart still bleeding. The shock of the betrayal was fresh on his mind, but it made him return to that old place he was all too familiar with, the place of utter

darkness, of searching for something that is intangible and seemingly unknowable, at least when he was in this place.

Flashes of the scene that haunted him continued to play in his mind, over and over, until he wished to clutch at his skull and scream for them to stop.

The expression on Queen Isis's, his brother's wife, face as understanding dawned upon her. The understanding that Violet had betrayed them.

The way that Frode's brother Bylur's face went slack with shock before contorting into immediate worry, his eyes jumping to search out Frode's, concern consuming him.

Concern that Frode had ripped up and tossed out like a farmer might treat weeds among his crop. Concern that Frode had treated his family and friends' words as accusations against the woman he loved. In a single moment, Frode had said things he would regret for the rest of his life, shaking a finger at his brother's face and even lashing out at Isis as well.

And yet, Frode knew he had not done enough, not for her. The pain he felt, even now, seeing her horrified face in his mind's eye, was excruciating, but it must have been nothing compared to what *she* felt. When he had observed Violet's face in the first moment that the news broke forth, the fear made her eyes go wild, darting around the room as if looking for a threat. Her eyebrows creased in anguish, her lips trembled. Everything within Frode demanded to not only protect her, but also extinguish those feelings so clearly written on her features.

Because he loved her. Undoubtedly, unconditionally, honestly, and fully. That did not stop because of the heartbreak he was now experiencing. If anything, it only exposed how strongly he felt for her, his beautiful Violet.

Frode's thoughts shifted to a time before, when he first met Violet. Things were quite different then. After years of study, the time had finally come for Frode to become a translator for his people, working with the women that had come to join their people as brides. His focus had been solely on that. His thoughts had never drifted to love or marriage. That was for other people, not him.

And yet, her quiet and soft demeanor had caught his attention. How could it not? The way her eyes studied the world, seeking out the truth. He had noticed that she was a kindred spirit from the start.

He had tried to remain focused on his duty, both to his people and to his brother, Bylur, the king. But his work often brought him into the same room as her. She was such close friends with Isis, who was central to both the entire bridal situation since Bylur had chosen her as his wife and queen. It was hard not to sneak glances at Violet from across the dining table, or relish in her sweet laughter every time Isis said something humorous. It became a bit of a game for Frode, seeing if he could get Violet to laugh. It felt like the greatest glory, being able to be the reason her face lit up with glee and joy.

When Violet and Isis were in danger, Frode would never forget the sickening twist of his stomach. When he saw that same

twist of anguish in Bylur's eyes, it had shocked Frode because he knew Bylur loved Isis. The danger against the two women woke him to the realization that he loved Violet, just as Bylur loved Isis.

Speaking to Violet after they were safe had been both thrilling and terrifying. He had not been so nervous in quite some time, feeling like an awkward clumsy boy again. And yet, she had been such a delight, her sweet demeanor enveloping him like a warm hug. He was smitten.

So when the suggestion arose that she was a traitor, how could he not rise to her defense? Of course, his mind could not comprehend it, and his heart refused to believe it. And when he turned around to see her gone, fleeing from the accusation, his heart shattered like a fragile clay pot. Disillusionment consumed him, betrayal dripping from her lips.

He did not understand her motives or actions. He did not understand why he wasn't enough for her, why he was unworthy of her loyalty. He suddenly was that little boy again, wondering why his parents had abandoned him. Was he not good enough to be loved?

Perhaps Frode would never measure up, would never be satisfactory. After all, as a man that had lived in the shadow of his brother—the king—all of his life, could Frode himself ever be as great as Bylur the Great King?

But he thought things were different when it came to Violet. He thought *everything* had changed when she stepped into his life; her smiling face and shining eyes lighting up his life in

ways he never thought possible. And maybe that was still true. After all, she had given him hope he had never felt before. That hope was like a shattered mirror, biting into the flesh of his heart.

Memories flashed back, haunting him still. *“So...the traitor is...someone trusted that would try to convince us to have a festival? And then, during, they would lure the women to be captured?”*

Frode had not understood the implications of their words until they had all looked at Violet as if she had just emerged as a wolf among lambs, snarling and covered in blood.

“Speak, Violet. State your defense against this.” Her eyes had been so wide, her body so rigid... When they accused her, his heart swelled in her defense, growing larger in its attempt to fight off what it viewed as a wrongful disease of sorts. The likes of which were stemming from his brother and dear friend Isis—not from Violet herself.

How far had he fallen in love for it to be easier to accept his own brother’s words with bitterness and betrayal? Rather than to even consider that what they were saying might be true, and that Violet might be wrong?

He couldn’t bear it. It was far easier to think his brother was making hurtful accusations than for Violet to have betrayed them—betrayed *him*, most of all. Perhaps Bylur’s wrongdoing was more forgiving, throwing out those harmful suspicions in the heat of war, in the panic of looming danger.

Or perhaps it was far harder to accept that his beloved Violet would stab a dagger so deep into his back that it punctured his heart. Because surely that meant that, once again, Frode had not been worthy enough if she had chosen to hand them over to the enemy.

“But...why? What did I do to deserve this?” Frode had never felt so vulnerable as he broke down in Isis’ arms after Violet fled. He had spoken harshly to his family there, words that were bitterly spat from the bleeding of his heart, like a wounded animal lashing out at those he loved, those that wanted to help him. Frode stumbled from the house like a madman or perhaps a drunkard. In that moment, he knew he needed to prove his worth by chasing after her and saving her from whatever she had entangled herself in.

Frode was prepared for anything.

This new world he had found himself in—the world which Violet was originally from—was somewhat terrifying for him, especially now that he found himself alone in it. The strange moving boxes on the streets, the lights without fire, the bizarre way people dressed. It was almost too much to adjust to. But perhaps what was most puzzling for Frode was where to look for Violet, where to begin.

He dodged through the shadows of the town, careful not to be spotted. After the way they had barged into this world, Frode knew that their enemies were looking for Vikings. He would too obviously stand out as such if a single pair of eyes laid upon him, still in his Viking attire and with his long hair and

beard, the likes of which these men from this time scarcely seemed to have.

His carefully trained eyes scanned the shops around him for any signs of Violet. He only needed the smallest clue, the tiniest reason to hope, just a shred of *something* to chase after. Minutes hidden in the shadows turned into hours, steadily but torturously slow for him.

Nothing. Not a single bit of evidence that Violet had ever stepped foot into this town. He did not know what to do next. Perhaps go to the next town? How big was this land, anyway?

He noticed the occasional figure stalking the streets searching for him and his family. He'd seen these figures chase after him after he traveled through the time portal. These figures were agents, as Queen Isis had called them, and they were the very enemies worth fighting to stop. But these agents *were* hunting—hunting *him*. A chill ran down Frode's spine at the thought.

He needed to avoid them, of course. But perhaps they could lead him to Violet. He attempted to follow them, but it was difficult to do so while remaining undetected. And so he lost them in the crowds of people. This was spy work, which Frode was not. He was a scholar, a scribe, an educator.

Frode's thoughts flashed to the school that Violet had started in his time. He could see her now, smiling down at the children, with a soft expression in her eyes as she spoke softly, teaching the children words in her tongue. He had hoped to help her grow this dream, perhaps join her in teaching even.

What would happen to that school, to the children, if Violet was no longer one of them?

Had all of his dreams for the future vanished like dust in the wind?

His mind was a churning mess. His thoughts were becoming obsessive, his focus on one thing and one thing alone. He walked for hours but found nowhere to go. One day felt like an eternity for him. Hope was not destined for him, not on this day at least.

Perhaps not on any day ever again.

He looked up to find himself in the darker parts of the forest—wilder, hidden, quiet—a familiar sight in the midst of the foreign chaos. He felt like running, returning to the only home that could be found here for him.

It was dark by the time he fell onto the forest floor, his face buried in the pine needles and dirt. For the first time since the discovery of Violet's betrayal and subsequent departure, Frode allowed his emotions to rise to the surface. Anger. Betrayal. Grief. Sorrow. He felt like crying out to the forest, making the trees hear his roar of pain.

He gritted his teeth before pushing himself to his feet, fingernails biting into the flesh of his palms. He walked on, into the forest, on and on until he felt sure his feet were bleeding in his boots and exhaustion made him stumble, dropping to his knees.

Frode laid on the ground. All of those years of studying, of learning a new language, so that he could build relations with these strange people from the future, where had it gotten him? What good did all of his efforts do?

His love was lost to him. His family was trapped here with wicked people breathing down their neck. He was proven unworthy yet again.

Frode did not realize he was falling asleep, despite all of the rocks and stones underneath him. He only knew that, for a moment, all he sensed was darkness, and his pain was numbed. It was a relief to stop feeling anything at all, if only for a few hours.

He comforted himself with thoughts of finding Violet, of delivering her from the evilness that had taken her. Even if she had done this, Frode knew that something wicked had possessed her. He felt convinced that this betrayal did not originate from her.

And when he'd found this evil, he would wring it from her, ripping it into bloodied pieces, so it could never form again. He would do whatever it took to make their relationship whole once more, to bring Violet back to her old self. He would chase her into the underworld itself, if that was what it took.

And then Violet would fall into his arms once she received this salvation, thanking him and promising to never leave him again.

He would finally be worthy. He would not be the little boy who his parents left behind... He would not be a man living in

the shadow of his king... He would not be the lover scorned and betrayed by the woman he cared for more than anything in the world.

The thoughts ran in circles around his head, again and again, even as they morphed slowly into dreams. His mind was consumed—no other thought could even breach his consciousness. His soul panted in desire to free her, like a man starved for food.

Obsession was grief with a purpose. And grief was just love bathed in the darkness of a broken heart.

Something awoke Frode with a start, his groggy mind forgetting everything for a moment as he looked around him in confusion. The forest around him was bathed in a beautiful golden light, but it was not the same forest that he had entered.

No, he recognized this place immediately as the forest near the Great City where he grew up. It was the place he had retreated to most often when he had just arrived there after he was sent to live with his uncle—the late king—after his parents died. It had been a difficult transition, and Frode retreated to the forest to find peace and solace.

But how was he here now? Had he somehow been transported back to his own time and land? He swore under his breath, as he thought of Violet. *I cannot leave her behind.*

“Shush, my child. You have not forsaken her, you are simply dreaming. But come now, speak with me.” Frode started at the sound of a voice speaking his mother tongue, the language of the Vikings. It was a feminine voice, and when he turned to

the direction it was coming from, a woman sat by the stream he had so often played in as a child. She had the appearance of an older woman, with gray hair and wrinkles lining her face. She was incredibly gorgeous, her mature beauty rich like a finely aged wine, and Frode knew who she was at once.

His eyes widened as all of the breath rushed from his lungs.

“The Supreme Goddess.”

She gave a slow nod, smiling at him in a motherly fashion.

“Hello, Frode. It is wonderful to meet you. I have been watching you for some time.”

Frode felt a knot rise in his throat. The goddess who his people respected and revered had been watching *him*? But how? He lowered himself to his knees. “My Goddess, it is an honor to be in your presence.”

The Supreme Goddess gave a light chuckle. “Rise, my son. Come here, come to the water’s edge. We have much to speak about.”

Frode did as he was told, rising and walking over to join the Supreme Goddess on the bank of the stream. There was a bit of an awkward silence as he waited to hear what she had to say.

Finally, she let out a sigh. “Do you know why I am here, speaking with you, Frode the Translator?”

It was strange, hearing the title his people gave him coming from the lips of a divine being. He took in a deep breath, buying time to think things through so he did not speak out of

turn. “I would guess it has something to do with your artifacts, my Goddess, and this war we have been fighting on both your behalf and our people’s behalf.”

She gave a solemn nod. “Yes, that is partially true, but there is more to the story than just that. I am here to beseech you, but also to align our interests. Peer into the water with me.” The Supreme Goddess gestured to the flowing water in front of them, and they both leaned forward, their reflections showing on the surface of the steadily moving water.

There, he stared at his and the Supreme Goddess’ faces for a moment before the water seemed to ripple; the image reflected churning and shifting to a new one.

At first, all he could see was Violet. Her beautiful face was so familiar to him. He had memorized it like the beautiful prose of the books he loved. He had embedded her visage so deeply inside of his heart that it was surely a part of him now. If another opened up his chest, surely they would find it there, scarred upon his heart.

The goddess’ voice was quiet, almost reverent, when she spoke again. “We need to discuss Lady Violet, the love of your life. You need to bring her back, Frode. You need to make her understand how much she desperately needs you and how much you desperately need *her*.”

Frode watched their reflections, and noticed his furrowed brows and his own piercing eyes staring at him, while his Goddess smiled kindly at him. Her words repeated in his mind

as those haunting memories of his sweet Violet played over and over again. *Bring her back*—Frode could certainly do that.

CHAPTER TWO

The Destruction of an Obsession

Violet shivered in her wet clothes as the air-conditioned room made her teeth chatter. But internally, it was the coldness of the people around her that made her anxiously shiver underneath the weight of their icy glares.

“Quite the thunderstorm we’re having today, isn’t it?” Agent Laura Martin remarked casually as if Violet couldn’t feel the frustration brewing just beneath the surface of her carefully put-together demeanor. Violet remembered seeing the agent for the first time when she had seemingly rescued the women who were kidnapped and brought to the Viking times against their will. Now, the relief Violet felt at that moment of rescue turned into bitter resentment against the agent, who happened to be the one forcing Violet to hide secrets and plan betrayals against her friends. Against the king and queen. *Against Frode.*

Violet kept her gaze on the floor as she nodded. “Yes. We couldn’t even get out of the car without getting drenched.”

“I can see that,” Agent Martin snapped, her irritation breaching the surface. She sighed as she stood up from the chair she had been watching Violet from. “It wasn’t storming back in town, was it?”

Violet kept her voice soft, submissive. These people seemed to like that, demand it, even. They liked her malleable, as everyone in Violet’s life seemed to. It was the only way that people seemed to find her sufferable. “No. It wasn’t storming in town.”

Agent Martin’s nails clicked against the desk as she tapped them against it. Her lips thinned as she looked at Violet with scrutinizing eyes. “Hmm. And yet, you still requested transportation here, despite not knowing about the storm? And even so, it’s just a little rain...It’s not like you can get any wetter than you already are now.”

Violet’s throat felt tight, her mouth dry. She didn’t know what to say. Was there anything she could tell the woman that would appease her? Violet doubted it. “This is an emergency. They discovered what I had been doing, that I had been working for you. I need your help—”

“Our arrangement was extremely clear when we started this. Helping you if you blew your own cover was certainly not a part of that arrangement, Ms. Matthews.” Agent Martin leveled her with an icy look, eyes narrowing, nostrils flaring.

Violet breathed in a shaky breath, trying to explain her situation without breaking down. “I did not blow my own

cover. Everything was going just fine, no one suspected a thing until—”

“Until what? How could they have possibly figured *anything* out if you had not covered your tracks correctly? They are dumb brutes, or have you forgotten? Has your lust-filled brain addled your thoughts?” Agent Martin sneered at her.

Violet’s eyes widened in surprise. “*What?*”

Agent Martin gave a dark chuckle, stalking around Violet like a lion circling its prey. “You know what I’m talking about. Did you think we wouldn’t notice how cozy you had gotten with the king’s brother?” Martin rolled her eyes. “I told them to pull you out as soon as that happened. You were obviously compromised. But the idiots were determined to keep you in the game, saying that your closeness made you get better information and was less suspicious. That was partially true, but that obviously didn’t make you invincible. And what information do you have to show for it? You tell me nothing I don’t already know.”

“I-I’m trying my best...” Violet’s voice stuttered, panic rising in her chest.

Agent Martin drew close, tilting her head at her, studying her even more. “Are you, though? You have carefully side-stepped my earlier questions—questions that would make all of the difference in our campaign against these barbarians. Where are they hiding? Who from the institute is aiding them? What are their plans? Your silence is deafening, Ms. Matthews.”

Violet opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She had been so careful to divert the conversation away from actually divulging about Doctor Jones and the others but apparently had not been subtle enough. She was truly caught between a rock and a hard place.

Martin gave her a wicked grin. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. That’s the definition of compromised, Ms. Matthews. You are emotionally attached and are unwilling to do your job as you are supposed to.”

Violet pursed her lips. Calling it her *job* wasn’t exactly the correct term for things, but she wasn’t about to correct the agent. Violet ducked her head again. “I understand. Does this mean our arrangement is off?”

Agent Martin’s analyzing gaze felt like a ton of bricks on Violet’s chest. Slowly, the agent raised her eyebrows. “You think the arrangement can be called off? No. Our deal was clear. You spy on the Vikings and give us the information we need. Then we set you up with a nice cushy amount of money. And don’t kill your mother, of course.”

Violet felt her throat tighten more until she felt like she was suffocating. Sudden tears threatened to spill from her widened eyes.

“Neither of which is on the table now, since you failed so terribly at this. I think punishment is due.”

Violet jerked to face Agent Martin. “What? You’re...you’re going to kill my mother?”

Agent Martin raised an eyebrow as she smirked. “Well, that was the arrangement, wasn’t it? And you broke it, so that’s the consequence.” The agent’s expression grew somber once more. “I would love nothing more than to do that. But we are in a bit of a pickle right now, with people breathing down our neck, so that would be a bit tricky to do. Probably in the future, we’ll make sure your mother is taken out of the picture. But for now, something else is in store for you.” A wicked grin spread across her face, her eyes wild with a vicious excitement.

An icy terror spread down Violet’s spine as she took in a shaky breath, wishing she could step back from the agent, wishing she could run away from her entirely, but she did not dare. She could not help herself but ask, “What do you have in store for *me?*”

The agent dropped her grin, a scowl replacing it. “It seems the client behind this all has a use for you. How he heard about you, I don’t know, but we don’t argue with him. He’s incredibly powerful and wealthy. I suspect he pulls a lot of the strings in this country, so he gets what he wants. I’ve been trying to get his attention and praise for some time by working as hard as I have and yet I have remained absolutely invisible to him, but somehow you get it without even trying...I hate you for that.”

Violet looked at her, aghast. “I assure you, you can have him. I want nothing to do with him. If you want to switch places, I would be more than happy to do that.”

Agent Martin gave a bitter chuckle. “Oh, that’s not how that works, sweetie. And I want to *earn* his attention, something I’m not convinced you actually did. Now, let’s get going. He’s an impatient man and I’m not about to get on his bad side.”

The agent was not gentle with her as she grabbed Violet’s arm and led her out of the meeting room. The hallways of this place were sterile and white, devoid of decoration or anything substantial to remember it by. It would be easy to get lost in this place. In fact, Violet already had no idea where she was or which way she had come from. Perhaps that was the point, they didn’t want outsiders to navigate it.

It felt like an eternity that they kept walking. Agent Martin was eerily silent as her face held a stony expression. The hallways seemed to go on forever, to the point where Violet nearly asked the agent if they were almost there. She didn’t think her question would be received well, though, so she kept her mouth shut.

It wasn’t too long after they arrived. Agent Martin stopped in front of a door that looked as nondescript as any of the others. She took a deep breath, her grip on Violet’s arm tightening before she used her free hand to open the door, pasting on a smile that sent chills down Violet’s spine.

The first thing Violet noticed was how cold the room was. As soon as Agent Martin opened the door, the air that seeped out felt frozen, like they were stepping into a walk-in freezer. Violet wrapped her arms around herself, both for comfort and

warmth. Agent Martin all but shoved her into the room, making Violet stumble forward.

The next thing Violet observed in the room was how dark it was, barely lit by the lights shining on either side of the door, casting faint shadows across the room. The center of the room was all but bathed in darkness, but at the back of the room was a strange square on the back wall which glowed a bright, shimmering blue light. It took Violet a minute to realize that it was a large doorway of sorts.

It took a moment for the smell to hit her. A disgustingly sweet scent, like an artificial floral perfume, was giving her a headache the moment she stepped into the room. The place seemed to be filled with it as if it was some sort of heavy incense.

Violet registered Agent Martin's presence moving behind her as she closed the door and stepped to Violet's side, still angled somewhat behind her to ensure Violet didn't try to run. It would be foolish of Violet to think she could even find her way out of this building, not to mention get back to town after being driven here blindfolded.

Which made Agent Martin's anger at her for requesting transportation that much more idiotic in Violet's mind, although she would never tell the agent that.

Agent Martin cleared her throat before speaking, that forced smile still visible in the shadowy room. "Hello, sir. It's a privilege to be here. I was requested to bring this...informant here to see you, as you requested."

There was silence in the room for a long moment before someone finally stirred, the shadows shifting as that someone moved briefly, sighing. “You were not specifically requested to bring her, now were you, Agent Martin?”

The agent’s face fell as she paled, eyes widening. “Well, no, sir, but I thought it best—”

The man sighed again, tsking. “No, no, Agent Martin, you don’t think much at all. If I wanted you here, I would have requested you. Stop being so desperate. Go. Leave us.”

Agent Martin looked horrified as she stepped back, her mouth opening and closing like a suffocating fish. She finally slammed her jaw shut, the motion so violent that Violet could hear her teeth clashing. The agent nodded, clenching her jaw shut before turning without a second word, and exiting.

It was the first time that Violet had actually *wanted* Agent Martin to be around since the prospect of her being alone in the room with this strange man was far from appealing. She had only been in his presence for maybe a minute, but there was something about his demeanor that reminded Violet of the man that had marked her, a cruel and brutish man that did not care for anyone else.

He had terrified Violet. Just like how this man now terrified her.

The silence stretched long and heavy in the room, making Violet want to squirm under its weight, but she dared not move. She barely dared to breathe.

“You and your friends have been a pain in my backside, but I assume you know that already.” The man gave a dark chuckle.

Violet wrapped her arms around herself tighter, unsure how to answer. Should she be respectful? Submissive once again? Or should she remain silent and stony? She didn't dare be confrontational in case she angered this powerful man.

After some time without Violet giving any answer, the man stood, crossing over into the light. The sight of him shocked Violet, making her gasp and take a step back.

Before her stood a man with golden skin and bright blue eyes. His perfectly coiffed blond hair and ivory teeth practically shined in the light. He tilted his head at her, eyeing her curiously. “Do you know who I am, woman?”

Violet could barely force herself to shake her head.

“No, I didn't think so. I'm a *god*, you see. Mortals have called me many things over the years, some I like better than others. Right now they call me *Greed*. It has a nice ring to it, don't you think?” Violet wanted to shake her head again in defiance but resisted the impulse. “Do you know who my greatest enemy is? You probably don't, but you do know her. *The Supreme Goddess*. She favors you and your friends, but I don't think she realized I had you under my thumb.” Greed gave her a wicked grin.

The god began to pace in front of her, hands clasped behind his back. Violet watched him warily, sweat breaking out across her body.

The man paused his pacing to look at her, narrowing his eyes at her. “Do you know why I have brought you here today?”

Violet was still uncertain what to do, and her body froze as her mind thought frantically, but this strange god called Greed kept talking, as he moved towards her.

“Of course, you don’t. To put it simply, I need you. As I said earlier, your friends have been a pain in my backside. But I am in a war with the Supreme Goddess, and I believe it’s coming to a head. I need a weapon, and you are perfect for it. When I heard your cover had been blown, I was disappointed, of course, but I chose to see it as an opportunity. That idiot viking still loves you, you know. And the Supreme Goddess is rather fond of him. She’ll send him after you, since she just so *cherishes* sappy love.” Greed said in a mocking tone before scrunching up his too-perfect nose in disgust. “Vile thing, love. Ruins everything. That’s a bit of free advice from me to you.” Greed smirked.

Violet couldn’t help it, as her lips formed a deep frown, disgusted at what Greed was telling her. When he stepped even closer to her, she drew back. He appeared to like that reaction, as his smirk morphed into a wicked grin at the sight of her fear.

“So this is what you are going to do, little Violet. I am going to send you to another realm where our war is taking place. Frode will inevitably follow you there. I’ll have my minions attack him, perhaps even attack him myself if I’m feeling

chaotic, and then she'll have to rush to his rescue. But I'll be waiting for her, ambushing her like never before..."

Violet felt bile sting her throat as tears brimmed in her eyes. She didn't like this, not any of it. She wished none of this had ever happened, that she had never even met Frode...

But it had, and she was stuck with it.

Violet did not have the nerve to say anything to this supposed god, but if she did, she would tell him that there was a flaw in his plan. For Frode surely hated her, and most likely never wanted to see her again. She deserved whatever terrible fate Greed and the Supreme Goddess ended up giving her when no one would come to rescue her.

Greed's predatory gaze fell on her again. "It's time for you to go to the other realm, young lady. Time to dangle the damsel in distress, so her prince charming comes running."

Violet had never felt so alone. It was like she was screaming, but no one could hear her, and she felt that no one would care even if they did. And yet, not a single sound could escape from her lips. Such was the intense fear she felt. And it was all her own fault. She was the girl who cried wolf, and no one would listen. Why should they?

Was this a nightmare? Or something worse?

CHAPTER THREE

The Dreaming of an Obsession

The vision in the water glimmered in the sunlight as it showed Violet happy and smiling in the Great City. It made Frode's heart soar to see it, feeling like that was how it ought to be. He wanted her back home and in his arms as soon as possible.

The image shifted to something new, although Frode didn't recognize the change at first as it was still Violet, still in the Great City. But this time, she did not look nearly as happy. Instead, she looked frightened, hugging herself tightly with her back to the wall.

A man stood towering over her, someone Frode didn't recognize. Frode would wager a lot of money that he was one of the foreigners from the future, a minion of the god Greed. "You'll convince them to throw a festival, then lure your friends Isis and Nakisha to the herbalist store. What happens after that is not your responsibility."

Violet looked up at the man, her eyes filled with fear and anger as she hugged herself tighter. "And what if I can't convince

them?”

The man's hands clenched at his sides. “You better. Find a way, or else you'll no longer be of use. And when that happens, there will be no reason for us *not* to kill you, your new friends, and your precious mother.”

An unholy rage burst in Frode's chest as he watched the woman he loved cower under the weight of the man's threats. It was nearly enough to make him lunge towards the water and try to throttle the man, though he knew this was simply a vision of the memory and these events had already passed. His logical brain and his respect for the goddess next to him kept him from doing so.

A gentle hand brought Frode's attention back to the present moment, cooling his anger at once. The Supreme Goddess smiled softly at him, a sadness present in her eyes, a clear understanding of what he was going through. “So now you see that things are not as they strictly seem.”

Frode nodded, turning back to the water with furrowed brows. “She never mentioned her mother to me. I asked about her family, but she was not forthcoming about it.”

The Supreme Goddess tilted her head at him, as her long braided hair fell over her shoulders. “Could this situation with her mother be why she betrayed you? You are the catalyst for much in your relationship with her, Frode, but perhaps you are not the reason for her betrayal.” Her voice was gentle and soft, like a mother speaking to her child carefully.

A frown darkened Frode's features. "You are saying that it wasn't my fault."

The Supreme Goddess nodded for a moment before further clarifying. "Yes, but I am saying more than that. I am saying do not be so proud to think it is your fault. There is more to the story than you know, as this is just the beginning. Both you and your love are blinded by your own insecurities. You must not let your own fragility be what stands between you and Violet."

Frode blinked in surprise at the gentle criticism he was currently receiving. He had wanted to deny her kindness, that it *was* his fault, but her comment about pride truly hit its target. "I understand, my Goddess."

She nodded at him, smiling before patting him on his shoulder. "Good. Now rise, my Translator, and go after your love. Show her that she is not broken as you come to understand that you are not, either."

Frode stood, taking in a deep breath. "As you wish, my Supreme Goddess."

"Are you implying that *you* do not wish to do this, Frode?"

The goddess arched her brow, but good-natured humor twinkled in her eyes. Could it be the goddess was teasing him?

Frode vehemently shook his head. "No, not at all. I wish more than anything to go and help her. I would go to the ends of the world just to ensure she was safe."

The Supreme Goddess rose, swirling her dress, which looked like it was made of stars pooling around her. Her voice was soft, reminding Frode of how flower petals felt. “Then do not do it for me, Frode. *Do it for her.*”

Frode’s eyes widened, his mouth growing dry at the goddess’ request. After years of dedication to the goddess and her Order, Frode had expected a continuous demand for complete and utter dedication to her. After all, wasn’t that how gods worked?

And yet, in some aspects, Frode was not surprised. She was a goddess dedicated to love, marriage, and harmony. Of course she would desire her followers to seek after love and follow their hearts.

“I will do that, gladly, my Goddess.” Frode took in a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for whatever came. He would stand with Violet, and thus, in doing so, would defend the Supreme Goddess and her ways.

The Supreme Goddess gestured towards the forest around them. “Then go and find her, waste not a moment. I will give you passage to the realm beyond, but you must promise me, Frode, that you will not allow your own fears and inner darkness to limit you in this journey.”

The promise felt heavy in Frode’s chest and as thick as bitter syrup trying to escape from his lips. “I promise, Supreme Goddess.” His chest tightened with the weight of his oath, one he knew that the goddess would hold him to. But he did not know how he could keep this promise, not with the shadows

that followed him endlessly in his mind, the vile spirits that had been with him since his youth.

The Supreme Goddess seemed to regard him with an intense gaze as if studying his very soul, and Frode felt sure that she could see all of his fears and insecurities bubbling up to reject his promise as even a possibility. Everything he had pushed down and bottled up for many years seemed to rise to the surface underneath her scrutinization.

At long last, she nodded, making Frode release the breath he had not even realized he had been holding. “Very well. Let us not waste another moment.” The Supreme Goddess turned, and with a swirl of her hand, light glinted in the air, expanding as it moved forward between the trees. It curled back around, heading straight towards Frode and making the translator panic for a moment. He barely had time to react before it slammed into him, making his consciousness fade to black.

As Frode’s eyes peeked open, he frowned in confusion at the canopy of trees above him. His mind raced to catch up with what was happening. He had dreamed of the Supreme Goddess, but could this just be his mind speaking to him? Violet and the Supreme Goddess had been consuming his thoughts, after all...

Something in his vision made Frode’s brows furrow, tightly knitting until it was sure to cause a headache later if he was not careful. Above the trees were streaks of pastel colors, shimmering and dancing in the sky. It reminded him of the sky when the winter spirits would come to celebrate and dance

together, colorful and vibrant unlike any other sights one could see. However, this was far more vibrant and rich in color, far more intense than any sunrise or sunset Frode had seen before.

And he was warm, despite not wearing many layers of clothing. How was that possible? These dancing lights only happened in the colder seasons. Unless all was not what it seemed.

Frode sat up to look around him, a sharp intake of breath filling his lungs at the sights around him.

These were not the woods that he had fallen asleep in. Nor were they the type of trees he had witnessed in his dream. No, these were lush evergreens, vines of flowers intermingling with the leaves in soft pinks and purples and accentuating the rich browns and greens of the forest, creating a beautiful array of colors for his eyes to feast upon.

This was not his home, nor the home of his beloved. This was no dreamland, but something beyond—something greater.

Frode had not understood when the Supreme Goddess had told him she would provide him passage into the realm beyond, but now it made perfect sense. Was this truly the land of gods, the land where heroes of the gods went to rest in the afterlife?

And, if that was true, then was Frode one of them? Had death come for him?

Darkness started to invade the edges of his vision, causing Frode to panic for a moment as he fought to shake it off.

Suddenly, the Supreme Goddess' words made more sense. *Do not let your fears consume you.*

Perhaps it was the Supreme Goddess' powers, or perhaps it was simply the effects of the strange realm he was in, but it seemed that the shadows that haunted him were far more tangible here. The consuming of the mind was far more literal than it ever had been before. This was dangerous. If Frode did not tame his demons they would send him out of this land, forcing him to abandon Violet, allowing who knows what to happen to her.

Giving in to fear would truly cause them to manifest into reality. Something he could not allow.

Frode stood to his feet and began to walk around, attempting to get his bearings on wherever he was. He had no idea how big this land was or where he should even be trying to get to. His goal should ultimately be to find Violet, but where would she be in this land? What was even in this land?

It was intimidating. Frode was a man that prided himself on knowing things. It gave him a semblance of control, knowing what was going on. Knowledge made him a natural leader, it enabled him to shift the tides of events.

But the tides were shifting *him* here and he was out of his depth, far beyond any depth he had ever known. He was not even sure he knew how to swim in waters like these, in this foreign world...

When everything was said and done, Frode did not wish to visit any new worlds for some time. He had enough of these

bizarre adventures for quite some time.

But for now, he would walk on. Pick a direction and begin to seek out Violet, for what else could he do? He was a man on a single-minded mission, and he had to trust that the Supreme Goddess would guide him as needed. This was the realm she dwelled in, after all.

Frode pressed on. He would not relent until he found Violet.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Darkness of an Obsession

The shadows closed in on Violet as if they were bloodthirsty beasts, the sound of Greed's wicked laughter ringing in her ears until the darkness consumed her entirely. The god's laughter screamed in her ears still, making them ache and her head pound.

And then all was silent.

The emptiness was almost as terrible as the laughter, a void in which she had found herself lost in, endless and hollow. She felt nothing, knew nothing, saw nothing.

There were no dimensions in darkness, no texture, nothing that made up life as she knew it. She wondered, *was this what death felt like?*

A terrible pain shot through Violet's chest at the thought that this was the end for her. She would never be able to tell Isis what had happened, never be able to explain to King Bylur that she hadn't wanted to betray him or his people. She'd never be able to hug her best friend again or her mother. She

would never see the Viking times again, the world she had fallen in love with.

Frode's face flashed in her mind, his handsome features and charming smile. The adoration which always seemed to glitter in his eyes when he looked at her. She didn't deserve him, she understood this fully. But now, in this dark place, she felt that sensation stronger than ever. She would never be allowed to hold him again, to touch his face, to curl into his embrace as he read his books. Would he live the rest of his life believing she had betrayed him? It was a bitter thought to consider.

The only happiness she had ever known had been ripped from her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

In the far distance, a small dot of gray disrupted the endless blackness of the void, steadily growing. Violet could not take her attention away from it if she tried, for there was nothing else to focus on. A strong force slammed into her before sucking her down, making Violet feel like she was falling off of a skyscraper. She screamed, but no sound came out.

Violet landed somewhere with a dull thud, gasping for air. She had expected it to be far more painful than it actually was, making her wonder if this hellscape had some mercy in it, after all. She suddenly felt herself blink as if her body was becoming more tangible than it had been before.

She blinked again, and the world shifted around her.

Everything was gray in varying shades, shadows still heavier than in the reality she was familiar with. She seemed to be in some sort of dead orchard, gnarled trees without any leaves

lined up in a perfectly straight line, row after row for as far as Violet could see. The trees seemed to rot from the inside out, a terrible stench filling the air. Violet scrunched her nose up at the smell before shaking her head. She just wanted to get out of here, but where could she go?

She turned around in a full circle, only to spot a difference in the landscape. A well stood in the near distance, dead vines all over it. While a well would not usually be of any interest to Violet, it was the only thing that wasn't just an endless array of dead trees, and thus it was the only thing she could go towards.

The walk to the well took longer than she thought. It was further than it had appeared before. Nothing about this land seemed simple. It was full of trickery and malice, the very air of the place making Violet's hair stand on end. As she stepped up to the well, a bone-chilling feeling drenched her, making her take in a sharp breath and step back.

As she did, she hit something behind her, something that hadn't been there before. Violet jerked around to face whatever it was, falling against the well in horror of what was before her. A ghostly visage of a Viking man stared at her with empty eyes, his mouth ajar in anguish. The phantom reached for her, the air growing colder with every inch he drew nearer.

A scream ripped from Violet's throat, tearing through her chest as this hellish nightmare descended upon her. She knew she did not deserve goodness, but was this truly the consequence of her actions? She had betrayed others in order to save her

mother, and while that did not make her a good person, surely it did not make her deserving of this?

The vision of the terrifying man shattered into dust as something struck him, changing his form to almost an eerie mist, which drifted off into the wind, carried away through the trees. Violet gasped for air, hands clutching her chest as she turned to see what had happened.

A woman stood to the side, frowning at Violet with intense eyes, a longsword at her side. She was definitely a Viking, but did not appear to be ghostly as the other man had been.

Instead, she was just as tangible in body as Violet was. She was tall and muscular, reminding Violet of King Bylur's sister Agda and the other shieldmaidens she had met in the Viking times.

The woman shoved her sword in the dirt, leaning against it as she studied Violet. Finally, the woman spoke, her deep voice harsh against the otherwise heavy silence in this orchard of death. "Are you a haunt?"

Violet knitted her eyebrows together, trying to decipher the strange woman's words and readying herself for anything that could possibly happen. "I...I don't know. What is a haunt?"

The woman gestured to where the ghostly man had just stood moments before. "That thing that was just about to attack you. I have never seen two haunts interact before, usually they only go after us...which makes me think you are not one. But then, who are you? Why did you not arrive in the town center as we all do? I have never seen you before."

Violet shook her head, the confusing words making it ache. “I was just sent here by an awful man that claimed to be a god...”

The woman swore. “Greed.” The woman spat at the ground after speaking his name, as if she wanted that word out of her mouth as soon as possible. “You are working with him?”

Violet shook her head vehemently as the woman took an aggressive step toward her. “No, no! He sent me here as bait, to lure in the man...I love. He thinks he will follow me here and try to help me.”

The woman’s eyes widened for a moment before narrowing once again, studying Violet intently. Suddenly, she stuck her hand out for Violet to shake. “Katla of the Orchard, or at least that’s what I am known as here.”

Violet’s eyes widened at the woman’s sudden introduction. She took her hand and gave it a shake, resisting the urge to grimace at Katla’s firm embrace. “I’m Violet Matthews.”

“Hmm. Well, Violet Matthews, you are in quite a predicament here. Do you know where you are?” Katla picked up her sword again before sliding it on her back, the beautiful furs and leathers she wore were rich in detail, a sharp contrast to the repetitive and grim world around them.

Violet gave a tentative shake of her head. “Not really. That awful man, he said he was sending me...to another realm. This does seem far different from what I know, so this must be it. Please tell me, where am I?”

Katla sighed and crossed her arms. “You are in another realm, yes. The Realm Beyond, where gods and their heroes come to reside. The heroes do so after death. I think you are the first person who has not died that I have met here. I did not think it was possible...but if a god wills it, so it is.”

Violet pursed her lips, wishing she could grumble about that. It felt like her life had been tossed around like the waves of a violent sea due to the will of these gods, and she was starting to heavily resent it. “I see. Well, is there a way out of here?”

Katla raised an eyebrow. “Not that I know of, little one. But come, you should not be in the orchard. It is dangerous for a defenseless little mouse like you. I will take you to the Gathering, and you will be far safer there. No one dares to enter the orchard, for reasons you have already experienced.”

“Then what were you doing here?” Violet frowned, following after the shieldmaiden as she led her out of the orchard.

Katla snorted in humor. “I am Katla of the Orchard. I am not included in that. I go in here for my own enjoyment. There is nothing like seeing a haunt turn to dust on your blade. What else am I supposed to do with my time? Sit around and drink all day? Ha!”

Violet could not help but join Katla in her humor. “I see. You’re that kind of person, got it. So, there’s really no way out of here?”

“Not unless Greed decides you’ve fulfilled your purpose or another god takes pity on you. I doubt Greed would ever send you back to the land of the living, though. He does not work

like that,” Katla explained as casually as if she was discussing the weather and not Violet’s death. Although, perhaps that should be expected, considering death was a rather usual thing in this realm if everyone else had experienced it.

“So you really think that there is no hope for me? Or for my... for Frode if he comes after me?” Violet bit her lip, furrowing her eyebrows as distress filled her chest.

Katla gave a huff of frustration. “I do not know, little mouse. Why do you think I would have the answers? I am just a woman who hunts these haunts for fun. I am not a god that I should know such things. Your fate is your own. I can only bring you back to the Gathering, so you do not get struck down by a haunt. That is all I know to do.”

Violet nodded, falling into step just behind Katla as she fell silent for a moment. “What is this gathering?”

Katla groaned dramatically, rolling her eyes. “Do you ever stop asking questions, little mouse? It is a bit ridiculous.”

Violet frowned at her. “I’ll stop asking questions when you stop calling me *little mouse*.”

Katla stopped in her tracks to glare at Violet. “I call you that because you look like one.”

“And I ask questions because I don’t know things, things that I really should know since my life depends on it.” Violet crossed her arms in front of her as she defended herself.

Katla pursed her lips before nodding. “Very well, little mouse. Your logic is sensible enough, I suppose. The Gathering is

what we call the town in this realm, where all of the heroes of the gods come to rest and celebrate together. You shall be safe there. The haunts do not dare step foot near it. Really, they do not venture outside of this orchard. That is why I go into it.”

Katla grinned, looking almost wild.

Violet nodded. “Well, that sounds like the best course of action, then.”

Katla nodded, pulling an apple out of a small satchel that rested on her hip before tossing it to Violet. “It is the best course of action. But since you have asked so many questions, I get to ask one now.”

Violet sucked in a breath, nodding. “Okay.” She bit into the small fruit as she waited for Katla to ask.

Katla shot another mischievous grin her way as she pulled her own apple from the satchel. “Who is this lover of yours? Tell me about him.”

Violet nearly choked on her apple. She shook her head. “He isn’t my lover, um...”

Katla cackled. “Your face has been saying otherwise every time you speak of him.”

Violet gave a huff of frustration. “Well, he and I...we were together, yes, but—”

“See? Lovers. I knew it.” Katla smirked at her victory.

Violet felt a strange familiarity with the woman. Katla was the first friendly face she had seen since Violet betrayed her friends and she found herself internally grasping tightly onto

that friendliness. “We aren’t together anymore, Katla. Not since I...It was my fault. That’s all you need to know. That’s why I think Greed is wrong and he won’t be coming after me, which means I’ll probably be here with you lot for a while at least...” Violet explained, looking down at the apple in her hand for a moment.

Katla eyed Violet for a long minute as she took a large bite of her apple. The shieldmaiden then shrugged her shoulders and began walking again. “No, I do not think so. Greed is rarely wrong about such things, and you still love Frode. I think he feels that. And even if he did not, I would wager my mead for a full cycle of the moon that he still loves you.”

Violet grit her teeth, a strange burst of anger spreading throughout her chest, making her say things she wouldn’t otherwise. And after all that she had been through in the past twenty-four hours, she could not help but ask, “And how would you know exactly? I don’t think you know anything about the situation, how could you?”

Katla looked over her shoulder at Violet, grinning brightly as her eyes twinkled with a look of knowing. “You might be surprised, Violet Matthews. This is a strange new land, and the people here are practically legends in your world. Do not be arrogant enough to dismiss that.” She turned, stopping in front of Violet with mischief bright in her eyes, her voice dropping to a whisper. “There are many things that I know which you do not. Love might just be one of them.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Searching for the Obsession

Despite the beauty around him, Frode felt a chilling loneliness, the bitter embrace of the empty world around him. The trees were tall and regal, but they provided no sanctuary for his broken heart.

Frode began to walk. He knew not in what direction, or for what he was walking for. He only knew it was all he could do, the only choice he felt he had in the matter. It felt like walking in a dream, this strange land, and just like in a dream, Frode felt like he was walking for an eternity in a blink of an eye. Or perhaps no time had gone by at all. It was difficult to tell.

Flowers seemed to grow and blossom before his eyes as he walked by, but Frode could not fully appreciate the fantastical sights because of the grief in his heart. When Frode heard voices from somewhere in the distance, he stopped walking, but he intentionally thought that it was simply his mind playing tricks on him.

Could it be some strange magical effect of this forest? Frode paused, listening intently. He could not help but wish that his

friend Kodran was here, the Viking warrior was highly skilled as a tracker in woods such as these, even despite the obvious amount of magic that hung heavily in the air. Gods above, Frode would also be happy to have Erik around him. The spy was an excellent companion and friend to have, especially for drinking games, and Frode greatly enjoyed his company. But at this moment, he would be happy to have him by his side as his friend through this difficult time.

Frode paused, breathing deeply as the picture of his brother passed through his mind. He had not left things well with him. A sharp pain stabbed in Frode's heart once more, this time as he thought about his best friend and adopted brother, and the woman that his brother Bylur had married, Isis. He had become so fond of her, too, thinking of her like a sister, and yet, Frode had accused them both of horrid things and then left. Surely, Isis felt just as much grief over Violet as he had felt, considering how close Isis and Violet had become.

He had not only been a terrible friend to them, but he had also been a terrible brother. Something he had sworn to himself to never do. What had he become?

Frode drew closer to the source of the voices, seeing a parting of the trees as he drew near. A small town seemed to be growing out of the forest itself, some of the longhouses even merging with the trees, as if they were truly one with nature. It reminded Frode so much of his home that his chest tightened, but he could not help but stand in awe of the beautiful abodes.

“Who are you, stranger?” A voice from behind Frode made him jump, and as he turned to face the voice, he quickly realized that an arrow was inches away from his face, fully tense on a bow and ready to release should the Bowman find it warranted.

The Bowman was a grizzled old man, with a thick beard and black ash covering his eyes. He was slightly shorter than Frode, but something told Frode not to let that fool him, nor this man’s age. From what he understood about this place from the Supreme Goddess, no one in this land should be underestimated even slightly.

Frode took a deep breath before raising his hands in surrender. “My name is Frode. I have been sent here by the Supreme Goddess in search of the woman I love, who was captured by the god called Greed.”

The old man’s eyes widened slightly as he stared at Frode for a long minute. Frode was starting to wonder if he was going to shoot him when the old man slowly lowered his weapon.

“Hmph. So you finally decided to show? Interesting.”

Frode frowned. “I beg your pardon, elder? I do not understand.”

The old man snickered. “You young living ones never seem to understand. How long were you going to keep her waiting, Frode the Translator?”

Frode’s eyes widened as the old man said his full title, which Frode had not told him. “How do you know who I am? Are you...are you talking about Violet?”

“Of course I am. Violet Matthews has spoken warmly about you since she arrived here, although her hope of your arrival has obviously faded to nothing by now. And can you blame her?” The old man scrunched his nose up in disgust at Frode.

Panic sliced through Frode’s chest as darkness began to swim at the edges of his vision. The old man’s words caused those old ghosts to wake and scream, threatening to toss Frode from this realm. Frode dug his fingers into his palm, the pain causing him to breathe and refocus. The old man seemed to notice, his gaze lowering to Frode’s hands before his eyes narrowed into thin slits, rising again to stare Frode down.

Frode cleared his throat, taking in another deep breath as he tried to fight against his internal wounds. “I cannot blame her. But I need to see her at once. I do not understand what is going on. I came as soon as I was able. Is it possible that time works differently here? Or that I lost time in my journey here?”

The old man looked unconvinced. “Mortal men always seem to make excuses. Where is your honor, your nobility?”

Offense spread like a fever through Frode’s entire body. “I am not intending to make excuses, elder. I am being truthful.

There are many things I am ashamed of in my life, such as this entire situation happening. I cannot help but feel I am at fault for some of it,” Frode admitted, his words causing darkness to creep back into his vision once more before he shook it off.

“But I am doing my best to atone for it and heal it.”

The old man growled and took a step closer to him. “You are most fortunate that it is not up to me to judge you. Let’s go,

mortal.” The man grabbed his shoulder and shoved his shoulder forward towards the village. If Frode was a lighter or weaker man, the force of the shove would have sent him tumbling into the dirt.

Frode felt like swearing at the man, but decided to hold his tongue until he had a better understanding of the situation. He did not want to act rashly when he had already put so much in jeopardy this past day or so by acting out of his emotions.

The walk into the village was rather silent as the old man walked beside him, bow and arrow now safely stored upon his back, but he continued to poke and prod Frode’s back, making Frode want to snap at the old man even more. It was a fortunate thing that Frode’s adopted father, the former King of the Great City, had instilled such patience and self-control into his children, including Frode.

The village was active with life as they entered it, people stopping to stare at Frode and the old man as they weaved their way through the wild greenery that seemed to live in the village as much as the people did. The old man waved down another older Viking man, clearly as much of a warrior as the old man that currently led Frode through the village. “Rolf! Come over here. Look who I found wandering the wild woods.”

The other man, Rolf, approached them with furrowed brows. “Andgar? What is the meaning of this?”

The old man, apparently called Andgar, grinned and poked Frode’s back again. “It’s Violet’s lover boy. I suppose he

finally decided to arrive.”

Rolf arched a brow and looked Frode over. “You are Frode the Translator? Truly?”

Frode nodded. “Yes, elder. I am Frode. My...new friend here says that Violet is here? I have come in search of her. Please, allow me to see her. I need to see that she is okay.”

“And why should I do that exactly?” Rolf crossed his arms, scratching his blond beard, which was slowly being taken over by gray. “That young lady has been through enough without you bringing it back up again. She is happy here. Why should we threaten that?”

Frode blinked in surprise, eyes widening as a headache began to build just behind his eyes. “I...I came as soon as I could. For me, it has only been one day since I have seen her. I do not think she was well then. This was further confirmed by the Supreme Goddess herself. Why would the goddess send me here only for it to be too late?”

Andgar snorted. “Yes, he tried to convince me of this already. He claims that time moves differently here, or that he lost time somehow. I do not believe him in the slightest. He is a *liar*, through and through. I can smell the dishonor on him. Violet must have been mistaken, there is no way that he came from a royal Viking family. The Supreme Goddess would never allow it.”

Anger and shame flooded through Frode’s chest, making his head spiral and the darkness threaten to take over once more. Instead, the words of his adopted father whispered in his mind.

“Do not let who you are be defined by anyone but yourself, my sons.” Frode took in a deep breath. He knew the truth about the situation and thus he did not owe anyone else proof. If they were unwilling to see the truth for what it was, there was no convincing them. He just needed to hold his head high and remain strong. If these people were not for him, then they were not for him, it was as simple as that.

A peace came over Frode as he let go of the insecurities around Andgar in particular. It was only then that he began to notice something strange about the men, their sneaky glances towards one another, the slight nod one would give in approval of what the other man said. Frode’s mind raced as he tried to solve this strange puzzle.

Rolf folded his arms in front of him, studying Frode with a look that said he was less than impressed. “I agree with you, Andgar. We should throw him to the orchard for the haunts to devour for his dishonor. I imagine he would cry like a baby out of fright of them. I would wager he would not last the night out there, just look at him! Barely any muscles on him.”

Now, things were getting ridiculous. While Frode was perhaps not as bulky as some other Viking men, such as his brother or the warrior Kodran, he was still strong, just in a lean and athletic way. He was still a capable fighter, and he had enough courage to venture into another realm to find the woman he loved. Nothing about their accusations made sense, nor were they founded. Unless they knew something about Frode that he himself did not know, then there was no reason for this madness. Either they were making hasty insults in a rapid

attempt to wound him, or they were grasping at the air for something that was not there.

No matter the case, Frode could not help but laugh at them. It was much funnier a joke when not taken seriously than they were intending it to be. Either the men had a foolish sense of humor, or they were just terrible individuals.

The two men looked taken aback by Frode's laughter, their eyes widening as Andgar even took a physical step away from Frode in surprise. Rolf stared at him with an open mouth.

“What kind of sickness has addled your mind?”

Frode grinned at him, shaking his head. “The sickness of knowing you both are wrong, but knowing it does not matter. The sickness of not caring two wits about your opinions.”

The two men shared a look of shock for a moment, a heavy silence sitting between the three of them as Frode kept a smile on his face. It was now his turn to cross his arms and understand that he was the one with nothing to prove.

The two men's eyebrows raised until they almost disappeared into their hairlines. They shared one look between themselves before they too burst into laughter, making it Frode's turn to be surprised. Andgar slapped a hand on Frode's shoulder, startling him. “That is a true Viking reaction, my friend! Well done! The Supreme Goddess was right about you.”

Frode turned to frown at him. “Explain yourself.”

Rolf laughed, slapping a hand against his chest. “Oh, I forgot what it was like to jest with mortals. It has been too long.” The

man burst into laughter again when Frode growled in anger. “Very well, young one. To put it plainly, the Supreme Goddess instructed us to challenge you before you encountered your lost love to ensure your emotions were tempered. We were all too happy to follow her directions.”

“So Violet is not here?” Frode felt his head spin with mixed emotions. While he was thankful the men’s accusations were false, the hope that had risen in finding Violet now felt shattered. But at least he was on the right track and was not just in the wilderness wandering aimlessly.

Andgar nodded. “That is correct. However, the Supreme Goddess seemed to think that you two will cross paths soon enough.”

Frode gritted his teeth as he held back his reply. The vagueness of the description *soon enough* was frustrating to say the least. Time was of the essence. He did not need his hopes raised only for them to be dropped so drastically.

Rolf laughed again. “You should see your face, young man. You are truly in love. Ah, it is blissful to see. But come, dine with us. You are most welcome here. I hope that your love will join us soon, as well. But we shall see. All in the Supreme Goddess’ timing, of course.”

“Of course.” Frode forced a smile as he followed them to where a large willow tree created a sort of natural tent, in which a table was laid out with candles and dishes. It was beautiful, but Frode had to keep his intention to remain patient in the front of his mind as they approached.

The Supreme Goddess had tested him throughout this entire ordeal, which meant that she was watching. He had no doubt that he had only experienced the beginning of her trials. He needed to watch his emotions closely.

Perhaps he was wrong and Violet would be arriving soon. Either way, Frode needed to remember why he was here. He needed to keep his purpose firmly in his mind and ensure he was not deterred.

CHAPTER SIX

The Journey of the Obsession

Violet was both frightened and impressed with this woman in front of her. Katla was not a warrior to be trifled with. Just moments ago, they had been swarmed by haunts, surrounded at every side, and yet the shieldmaiden had remained entirely calm as she struck every single one of them down with ease. In fact, Violet was fairly certain that she had not even broken a sweat.

And yet, the haunts continued to come. Violet felt like it was a nightmare that never ended, constantly dodging their attacks as Katla expertly cut through them as they arrived. Sometimes, it even looked like Katla was having fun with it.

But it seemed like they were only able to walk on for five minutes or so before the haunts attacked again. Each time they grew in numbers, and Violet was certain that some of the same haunts were returning as she recognized their faces. If these were enemies that could just...reappear after being cut down, surely they could not escape them? Especially if they were being joined by other haunts?

Eventually, after several hours of making barely any progress toward what Katla called the Gathering, the shieldmaiden looked rather put out, her fighting finally wearing her down as she grew tired and sweaty. She shoved her longsword in the ground with a growl. “I have never seen so many haunts in my life, not all at once. What is this madness?”

Violet clasped her trembling hands tightly, wringing them as she lowered her gaze to her feet. “I feel this has to be my fault. Greed must be sending them after me in order to attract Frode.”

“Hmph. I am not sure how much I buy that, little mouse. I do not think that Greed has as much power as that. While he might be able to influence the haunts somewhat, they are not under the rule of any one single god. In fact, all of the gods have power over them to some degree, but not entirely. They are their own beings as well. But I agree with you that there has to be a reason this is happening. It is most unusual, but I think there is more to the story here, little mouse.” Katla sighed as she grabbed her longsword and prodded Violet on. “I know you are tired, but we must keep going if we are going to ever get to the Gathering. We must not sit here waiting for our death.”

Violet was starting to wonder if they had much of a choice in the matter, but she held her tongue. If she wanted Katla to fight for them, then it was probably best that the shieldmaiden remained optimistic. And so, they walked on.

About five minutes ticked on. And then ten. It was the longest stretch that they had gone through without any haunts attacking and Violet was starting to get hopeful. Perhaps they had finally pushed them back far enough to whatever afterlife they actually belonged to, Violet didn't know how any of this worked. Perhaps they were finally free of these terrifying ghosts.

Violet took in a deep breath, letting her shoulders relax for the first time since she arrived in this dark and terrifying land. The wind blew through the trees, creating a howling sound that was eerie, as it tossed Violet's hair around her face. The howling wind increased until it was almost a shriek, rising until it was a scream.

Violet wrapped her arms around herself, shivering under the wind. Everything felt suddenly bitterly cold, the wind stinging her face as it bit into her skin. Violet looked to Katla, having to shout above the wind. "Is this sort of thing normal here?"

Katla turned to her with furrowed brows, matching Violet's shouting. "No. I have not experienced wind once in my thousands of ventures into the orchards. In the Gathering and the wilds, yes. In the orchard? No. That is part of what makes it so terrifying, how deathly still it is."

Something was coming, surely it had to be. A chill ran down Violet's spine. She stayed close to Katla's side as they hurried along, eager to get to the Gathering as soon as possible. Every step they took was one closer to safety.

The screaming wind got louder and louder until Violet felt like someone was directly behind her, screaming their lungs out. She even looked over her shoulder several times just to check, but each time there was nothing to see.

As abruptly as the winds came, they stopped. It ended with one last croaking howl, reminding Violet of someone's dying breath. In contrast, the orchard felt as silent as death itself, as stagnant as a land without any air at all. It suddenly felt harder to breathe, although Violet knew that was just her mind playing tricks on her.

Violet did not even know what was happening as she felt a strong force collide with her, shock overcoming her as she realized she was on the ground, her face in the dirt. Her shoulders felt as though they were on fire, and yet, every other part of her body felt as cold as ice. Strangely, in this moment, all Violet could think about was how the sensation was similar to picking up something frozen and your hands feeling like they were burning after a little while of holding it. She wondered why the feeling of ice was so similar to that of fire when touched?

Violet pushed herself up onto her elbows, her brain finally registering the sounds of Katla fighting and giving her war cries. Looking around them through the curtain of hair that fell around her face, Violet felt horror burst through her body like ice splinters.

There were haunts everywhere, coming from every direction. Dozens, perhaps even hundreds, Violet didn't know. Katla was

already tired, but even if she was at her best, Violet wasn't sure that she could take on this many all on her own, despite being such an incredible warrior. But the shieldmaiden was compromised, Violet was useless, and these haunts were relentless. *They were going to die.*

Violet didn't want to die like this. This moment, which felt like an eternity of hell, made Violet realize everything she had to lose. Things she did not have when Greed first threatened her. She had Isis, who she now realized how important it was to her to see her friend the queen again and reconcile with her. She was like a sister to her, and the terrible way they had separated was ringing in her mind like an off-tune cymbal. She even wished she could have a better ending with King Bylur, as the man had become a bit like a brother to her.

But she focused most on the man she loved. Frode, the intelligent but kind, strong but sweet, protective but empowering man. She did not want their ending to be this. She needed to right her wrongs. In that moment, Violet knew, if she got the chance to live after this, she would do everything within her power to kiss his wounds, to try to mend his broken heart. And if that meant doing so in secret, should he want nothing to do with her, she would do it. She would dedicate the rest of her life to help him if that was what it took.

She only needed to survive.

Her mind was like a dream as she looked up to see a storm of men charging towards them, and clear as day, her handsome Frode was far in the lead, charging towards her with a wild

anger and determination that Violet could only dream of. She knew then that this must not be true. Only in her imagination could she hope to see that look on anyone's face in defense of her, much less on Frode's face, the man she had just bitterly betrayed.

As the fighting continued to clash around her, Violet watched it all as if she was not truly there, as if she was watching it through a screen. Her head spun, her emotions numb and disconnected from her conscious thoughts. Haunts often twisted her way, soaring towards her with their gray lifeless arms outstretched towards her, as if they wished to take her vibrance for themselves and absorb her life into their void.

Violet did not fear them. She did not try to run. Truly, she felt unfeeling as they grabbed towards her. She had this newfound resolution, and yet, the world seemed to be flying around her faster than her tortured brain could keep up with.

Each time they screeched towards her, they seemed to be cut down at once, a roaring sound filling Violet's ears although she could not figure out what or where it came from. At long last, she turned to look over her shoulder to see Frode standing above her, fighting off any haunt that dared to near them.

Was this real? Or had the haunts somehow fractured her mind into seeing what it wanted?

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Rejection of an Obsession

“**T**his place is called the Gathering,” Andgar explained as he handed Frode a drink from the well at the center of the village. Frode listened as he drank the cold water deeply, wishing his anxiety away. His feet itched to move, to roam, to go and search for Violet. But where? “It is the main place that all people live in this realm. It is uniquely our own, separate from the gods. Everywhere else is at their mercy and influence.”

Frode nodded as he set the wooden cup on the lip of the well. “I see. And there is nowhere else to live—”

Frode’s words were cut off by a strange howling sound, somewhat like the wind, but harsher, more violent.

He turned to look in the direction it was coming from, past all of the longhouses, which were in the opposite direction from where he had entered the village. There he saw what he could only describe as a wasteland, dead trees reaching for the sky with spindly finger-like branches.

Andgar stepped past Frode as he stared in the direction of the wind with widened eyes. “What is that sound...? Nothing has ever made an utterance in the orchard before...”

Frode stepped up to Andgar’s side with furrowed brows.

“What is this *orchard*?”

Andgar pointed to the rows of dead trees. “That is the orchard. It is a cursed place, none of us enter there. Well, none of us but Katla. But if there are sounds coming from there...”

“I do not understand. Should we be concerned?” Frode crossed his arms, looking between Andgar and the orchard.

Rolf ran up to their sides, breathing heavily as he looked at them and the orchard with wild wide eyes. “What is happening? What is that wicked noise?”

Frode looked between the two men with confusion. “I do not understand. It just sounds like the wind to me?”

Andgar frowned, giving Frode a somber look. “You do not understand. The orchard makes no sound. It is a place of haunting, a place of death. It is as still as a grave, as silent as a corpse. It cannot be just wind, for what wind exists in the orchard? No, it must be originating from a foul spirit indeed.”

Rolf nodded in agreement. “Something terrible is afoot, I can feel it in my bones. Katla went out there not but two hours past. Has she finally stumbled into something and awoken it from its depths of slumber?”

A woman’s scream tore through the air like that of a banshee. All of the air was stolen out of Frode’s lungs with it, as his

heart twisted as if he had just been running through with a sword.

He knew he needed to heed its call.

Frode flew forward, like an eagle on a strong wind, a man with a purpose. Andgar tried to stop him, his hand grabbing Frode's shoulder, but he could not keep his hold. Rolf and Andgar called out to him, but his mind could not process their words, not with that scream still ringing in his ears.

The dead trees flew past Frode as he ran into the orchard, reaching for his sword, which still hung from his belt, despite being transferred into another realm. It felt like a comfort from his home to hold it in his hand, a security he did not realize he so desperately needed. The air was getting colder as he ran on, but he did not hesitate to continue. He let his instinct guide him until he saw gray figures in the distance, emerging from the mists, all floating in the air towards the same place, where more gray figures were already circling like sharks.

This had to be what he was looking for. His heart stopped when he saw a familiar figure on the ground, covering her head with her hands desperately as the beings swarmed around. A fire erupted in Frode's chest at the sight, making him charge ahead. A wild war cry ripped from his throat as he ran towards the woman he had been longing to see. An instinct stronger than gravity itself dragged him towards her.

Frode slashed at the haunts as he carved his way towards Violet, briefly acknowledging the shieldmaiden that fought against the haunts as well, exhaustion evident in her sluggish

movements and tired eyes. If Frode had not arrived, they surely would not have lasted long.

Standing over Violet's prone form, Frode defended her from the beings, glad to turn and see Rolf and Andgar just behind him, chasing the phantoms off of the shieldmaiden so she could breathe. The fight continued on until Frode's arms ached and sweat dripped down his face, his lung burning as he struggled to catch his breath. And yet, the haunts continued to come at him endlessly.

Frode needed to only look down at Violet's trembling body to find his motivation to keep going, for he could not allow anything to happen to her, not when she had already endured so much. Something he would never allow to happen again.

The haunts lessened, much to Frode's relief, until Rolf finally slammed the last one with his war hammer, sending it to the ground in a pile of dust. A heavy silence rang loudly in Frode's ears after the terrible commotion of the fighting. Not even a gust of wind could be heard now that the beings were vanquished.

The shieldmaiden stepped forward, wiping her brow. "We must depart from here at once. Every time I have defeated them in the past, they have returned in greater numbers than before. It is only a matter of time before we are swarmed again, worse than that. I do not know how much of a fight I have left in me."

Andgar nodded, crossing his arms. "Let us go, then. But you know this would not have happened if you did not insist on

going in here, Katla. You say it is enjoyable for you, but tell me, was that truly so fun?”

The shieldmaiden, Katla, glared at Andgar. “This was an unusual situation and you know it, old man. Besides, my new friend here would have been hopeless against them if I hadn’t been there.”

Rolf snorted. “Friend? You? Katla, don’t try to deceive us on such foolish matters. We all know you don’t play well with others.”

Katla clenched her jaw, turning her fiery glare towards Rolf this time. Clearly, their words were hurtful, more than they seemed to know.

Frode stepped forward, clearing his throat. “Thank you for your help. I am Frode. A pleasure to meet you,” Frode gave her a respectful bow.

The shieldmaiden arched her brow, obviously unimpressed. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

Before Frode could answer, he sensed movement to his right, and turned to see Violet rising to her feet, arms wrapped around herself, her gaze fixed on the ground. His breath caught in his throat, unsure of what to say.

Violet had always been a bit meek as long as he had known her, but this was an entirely different matter. She looked shrunken into herself, a shell of the woman he had fallen in love with. It made Frode both heartbroken and furious. Not at Violet, but at whoever did this to her.

Katla stepped forward, patting Violet on the shoulder. “Come now, little mouse, let us get you to safety.”

Frode longed to reach for her, longed to see her gaze lift to meet his. He wished he could bring the pain she was suffering out of her and bear it on his shoulders.

Instead, he could only watch as Katla led Violet away from him, in the direction of the Gathering, following mutely behind them as if he was someone else entirely, watching the scene unfold.

When they arrived in the village Frode found himself pulled in the opposite direction as Violet as she was led to be taken care of by Katla and some other women and Frode was led by Rolf and Andgar to discuss what had happened. As they were pulled apart, Frode looked behind him, watching her leave, and whispered her name on the wind, as soft as a summer breeze, “Violet.”

As if she heard him, Violet turned slightly, eyes searching the groups of people until she met his gaze, her eyes widening slightly at his pained expression. It felt like Frode was holding his breath, causing time to delay just for a moment, as if so many things were being communicated between them. Her eyes spoke of regret and sorrow, fear of his rejection, things that he already knew to expect there.

But there were so many things beyond those that he needed to address, needed to understand. And yet, it was not something that could be done in the moment they had together, speaking without words.

Rolf patted him on the shoulder, leading him forward. “Come along, Frode. There is much to discuss.”

“But I need to speak with Violet...” Frode sucked in a breath, looking over his shoulder at her once more. She had now turned away, walking in the opposite direction. “That is why I came here.”

Rolf sighed, nodding. “I understand that, but you can speak with her after. She needs rest and to be looked after. In the meantime, we need help with this situation.”

Frode flattened his lips into a thin line. “You do not understand. We last left each other on very difficult terms that I fear are causing her to suffer. I have to help her.”

Andgar joined them, overhearing Frode’s protests. He placed a hand on Frode’s arm. “Have no fear, Frode, Katla will take very good care of her while we handle this. It seems that she’s somehow developed a bit of a soft spot for her.” Andgar chuckled. “Let us get you a nice cold mead, hm?”

Something stirred within Frode, frustration building in his chest as desperation rose within him. He did not want to act out of his emotions, but it was this same feeling that he felt when his brother and Isis were accusing Violet. He *needed* to defend her.

And yet, what was there to defend her from? She was safe here, wasn’t she?

But it was more than physical safety. He felt the need to protect her from *herself*. From the thoughts and feelings that

were obviously torturing her, including her feelings for *him*.

“No,” Frode declared, turning around. “I will not be parted from her.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Confrontation of an Obsession

Violet felt numb as she followed Katla, Frode, and the other two unfamiliar men. Every fiber of her being burned to run to Frode, but she held herself back, shame pounding through her veins. She felt relief as people were gathering around them, putting more bodies between herself and Frode. The more that separated them, the less of a struggle it was to look his way. She knew if she met his eyes even once, she would crack. And if she cracked, she might not be able to put herself back together again.

Katla whispered that they were going to her home so Violet could rest. Relief but also worry stirred in Violet's chest. Would Frode and the other men follow? That would make it a struggle to avoid him again. But when Katla pulled her along, in the opposite direction that Frode and the other men had been speaking to one another, Violet found herself taking a terrible risk.

She looked back towards him.

He was supposed to be consumed with the other men, as he had been since the fight with the haunts finished. Not that she looked at him, quite the opposite, but every time she spied out of the corner of her eye, he was never looking her way.

As Violet dared to look over her shoulder towards where she last saw him, her breath was snatched from her lungs as her eyes met his. There was an intensity within his gaze, unlike any she had ever seen before. There seemed to be so much he wanted to say, promises he wanted to make, all evident within his eyes, emotions as deep as the ocean, plain for her to see.

He hid nothing. Not his tender affection, not his intensity, certainly not his desire to seek her out. His hand twitched at his side, as if he wished to reach for her.

And then Katla pulled on her hand, breaking the moment and forcing Violet to turn back around to watch where she was going. Her throat felt tight as she walked on, tears pooling in her eyes. Why was all of this so difficult?

Why was he even here? Violet didn't understand. She didn't think he'd chase after her like this, especially to another realm. How did he even manage to make it here? Had he made some terrible deal with Greed to come here, just like the god thought he would?

Violet steeled herself, taking in a steadying breath for whatever was to come. She just needed to distract herself with Katla's quiet company until she could find a way to be alone. *Then* she could sort through her thoughts and emotions,

hopefully finding enough relief so she wouldn't break at the sight of Frode, and during that time, she would make a plan.

A plan to escape. The further away from Frode she was, the better. She could not let Greed use their tenuous relationship to his advantage, and the only way she knew to prevent that was to separate herself from him.

And, if she was honest with herself, she *wanted* to run away from him and the depth of various emotions she saw within his eyes. She couldn't stand to be near him if he was angry at her. And if he wasn't...well, that was almost worse.

Katla stopped in front of a small cottage that was covered with ivy, even more so than the rest of the other houses. The shieldmaiden grumbled for a moment. "I really need to cut down that ivy..." Katla shrugged before turning back to Violet. "This is my home. Consider it yours, too, for as long as you are here, I—" She paused, looking over Violet's shoulder, arching one of her strong brows. "Well, that is most interesting. It seems we are about to get to know the other newcomer here in a moment."

Violet felt her entire body freeze in place, refusing to turn around. She had no need to. She knew what she would find if she did. She would not make that mistake again.

"Violet, I need to speak with you." Frode's rich timbre reached her ears, making Violet shut her eyes, wishing him away. He sounded breathless, almost desperate.

Katla crossed her arms in front of her. "And this cannot wait, strange but very handsome man?"

Frode spoke gruffly in response. “I appreciate the compliment, shieldmaiden, but I am not interested—”

“No, no. You misunderstand me, like most men do.” Katla waved him off. “It was just a simple observation. I am not seeking anything with you, not like that. You are...not my preference, have no fear. I was just thinking out loud.” Katla’s gaze wandered to observe Violet, her lips twitching with a knowing smile, causing Violet to blink in surprise before dropping her gaze. Whatever Katla observed, Violet didn’t want to know. Her cheeks burned, making her lower her eyes further until she was staring at her shoes. The fact that they were from the Viking age made her stomach twist until it ached, bile stinging her throat.

“Ah, I see,” Frode responded, his voice making Violet’s head spin once again, as thoughts ran through her mind. One in particular was loud and clear. *I wish I was anywhere but here.* “In that case, would you give me a few moments with Violet? Please, I need to speak with her.”

The sound of footsteps interrupted their conversation before Katla could reply, a masculine voice speaking up. “Ah, excuse us, fair ladies, but it seems our visitor has escaped us. Frode, we told you, there will be a time for that, but we need you...”

Frode groaned in annoyance. “No, you do not understand—”

“Rolf, Andgar, listen to me,” Katla interrupted him, stepping forward with outstretched hands. “There is nothing in this world that you would need as much as the handsome Frode needs to speak with Violet.”

“Handsome? What in the Supreme Goddess’ green world do you mean by that, Katla?” Rolf asked, obviously bewildered by his scoff and tone.

Katla gave a huff of annoyance. “It is an observation. He is handsome for a man, no? This makes sense.”

The other man, Andgar, stepped up to the other side of Violet. “What makes sense, Katla? *You* are making *no* sense.”

Katla laughed, pointing to Andgar. “No, my friends, you two are just *blind* to sense. That is not my fault, nor my responsibility. Now, leave poor Frode alone. He is suffering enough. Relieve him of his sorrow and let him speak to her.”

“But, Katla!” Rolf protested, to no avail. Katla simply laughed again before grabbing both elder Vikings by the collars of their tunics and dragging them into her home, both men protesting the entire way, but not putting up any sort of physical fight.

The world was silent for a moment. The only thing that Violet could process was the pounding in her ears. This was the thing she had dreaded, now unfolding before her.

Frode moved to stand in front of her, but still she did not meet his gaze, the intensity of shame flooding through her. A loud silence sat heavily between them. Finally, Frode broke it.

“Violet, we need to speak.”

Violet pursed her lips but did not reply.

Frode reached out, fingers playing with the hem of her sleeve. “This could not wait, my love. Not for another moment.”

Violet grit her teeth, taking in a deep breath before exhaling slowly through her nose. Her brain felt sluggish as it tried to figure out how to respond, her mind paralyzed. She bit her tongue, trying to come to her senses. She could only hope her silence would be loud enough for him to get the hint.

“Violet.” Frode’s tone was rich and deep, a heaviness present. There was more than just her name spoken on his lips, it was both a promise and a warning. He would not relent until he had what he wanted—*her*.

Violet closed her eyes for a moment, feeling defeated that freezing in this moment did not work in her favor. That meant Violet had no choice but to make it abundantly clear that he could not have her, not any longer. “Why are you here?” Violet snapped, her voice as sharp as Frode’s sword.

Frode blinked in surprise, his eyes widening at the glare she was leveling at him. “I...we need to talk.”

“You traveled to another realm, chasing after me, just so we could *talk*?” Violet needed to sever these ties from his heart to hers as quickly and cleanly as possible in order to hurt him but still get the job done.

Frode gaped at her for a moment. “Of course, Violet. I would travel all of the worlds in order to be with you—”

Violet sneered at him, feeling her heart twist at his hurt expression. “But we aren’t together, are we?” Her words seemed to hit the mark as Frode’s eyebrows knitted together, his eyes swimming with pain.

“We were...” Frode pointed out, his brows lowering even further. “What changed? What happened, Violet? What is this all about?”

Violet took in a deep breath, nostrils flaring as she tried to maintain her emotional distance. Her eyes burned, but she refused to let any tears come forth. She could not let him see her cry, no matter what. No, he needed to see her as heartless, cold, intangible. A terrible person. He couldn’t know the real reason behind all of this, otherwise he might pity her, and Violet couldn’t bear that. “What do you mean? Isn’t it evident? I thought you were supposed to be the smart one.” It was a pitiful attempt to cut him, but maybe it would work, anyway. “We are on opposite sides, Frode. I don’t work for the Supreme Goddess like you do.”

Frode pursed his lips together in dissatisfaction. “If he has something against you, Violet, if he is holding something over your head, I can help you. We can stop him together.”

He was in denial. Even if he was right, he was still not seeing her for what she was—a *traitor*. “Greed and I have a deal. You wouldn’t understand.” *Not exactly untrue, but it certainly implied more willingness from her than there truly was.* “You want to see me as a damsel in distress, someone for you to save. But there’s nothing to save me from, Frode. You need to give that notion up for good.”

“I will never give up on you, Violet. I—”

“That is not what I said!” Violet shouted, taking pride in the shocked expression on Frode’s face. She had never raised her

voice around him, or rarely ever, but she was desperate. The man made her want to pull her hair out. She needed to get Frode to leave this place immediately so Greed couldn't use him. "The woman you think you love doesn't exist, Frode. She never did. I took enjoyment in fooling you." The lie tasted metallic in her mouth, like bitter blood pouring out of an internal wound.

Frode closed his mouth firmly, gritting his teeth as his own anger rose, burning in his eyes. "You should not lie to me, Violet. Why do you refuse my help?"

Violet let out a loud exclamation of frustration, turning away from him and clenching her fists at her sides. "You insufferable man! You don't get it, do you? *I don't want you here.*"

Behind her, Frode was silent for a long moment, and Violet felt torn between looking back at him or walking away to make her point. His soft voice broke her from her dizzying thoughts. "I know about your mother, Violet."

CHAPTER NINE

The Revelation of an Obsession

In an instant, it felt like Violet had been running through the icy rain and had become violently ill. A cold sweat broke out across her entire body, her stomach churned in protest, her limbs felt weak and shaky. *How could he know?*

The very thing she had ached to tell him for months now had been stolen from her lips. She had suffered since the moment the agents cornered her and told her the deal between them. Her soul burned with such pain at the turmoil of holding this terrible secret from all of her new friends and family, but Frode especially. She had wanted to tell him for so long.

But now she could tell him but she didn't want him to know, in fact, she had *needed* him to *never* find out about that secret. But then after all of the hiding and pain she endured, he found out anyway.

What a wicked sense of humor the universe had.

Her mouth felt like sandpaper as she slowly turned her head to look over her shoulder at him, every muscle in her body tense.

“How do you know?”

“I saw a vision from the Supreme Goddess,” Frode explained.

Violet felt like cursing at the sky, aiming her words at the goddess in particular. She was really getting sick of these supposed gods’ interference with her life.

“She showed me you cornered in an alley in the Great City. There was a man intimidating you, giving you directions on what to convince us to do, where to lead Isis and Nakisha. She said if you didn’t cooperate that he’d hurt your mother.”

Violet shut her mouth, her lips sticking together in their dryness. How was she supposed to refute that? What could she even say to it?

Frode took a step closer to her, reaching out a gentle hand towards her. Violet recoiled before he could touch her, flipping around to face him as she stepped back, panic pounding behind her eyes. “Violet...” His eyes were full of such sorrow that Violet could barely take it. She wanted to reach out and console him in the same way he was attempting to do for her. But she knew she couldn’t. “Why?”

Violet blinked in confusion. Had she said something out loud that she hadn’t meant to? She was sure that she hadn’t, but what was he asking about, then? “What?”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me this? Why wouldn’t you come to me, to Bylur, or to Isis? Why wouldn’t you tell us? We could have helped you. I could have protected you. Even now, you are pulling away instead of reaching out.” Frode’s eyes

searched hers, hand still drifting in the air, outstretched towards her but just wavering there, as if he was waiting for something.

Something that could never come.

Violet shook her head. “You don’t understand. You make it sound so simple, but it isn’t. Could you protect me? Probably. Could you take care of yourself and your people? Possibly. But what about my mother?”

Frode looked thoughtful for a moment, nodding. “I give you that. But we have more resources now, more allies. Things are different. When we go back home, we can fetch your mother and keep her safe.”

“*They already have her*, Frode. It is far too late for that. And now you are right where Greed wants you. Don’t you see? It’s a trap, Frode, and you have fallen right into it. And for what?”

Violet tore her gaze away from his, shaking her head, pain threatening to flood out of her eyes.

Frode’s voice was dark and tense, almost growl-like as he responded. “Greed is not the only god involved here. He is not as smart as he thinks he is. I am well aware that he has plans, but I do not care. All I care about is you.”

Violet bit the inside of her cheek to keep the tears at bay.

“Then you are a fool, Frode.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, gently. “A fool for you.”

Violet could only shake her head in protest, unable to say anything without cracking.

Frode ran a finger across the back of her hands, his skin just a ghost against hers, as if testing the waters. When she did not pull away this time, he dared to run his fingers more firmly against her skin, running up her wrist before lowering back down to intertwine with her fingers, thumb brushing against her skin gently. “Don’t you think we are better together, my love?”

Taking in a shaky breath, Violet felt the weight of her inadequacy sink to the pit of her stomach. “No. I think you are perfect just as you are,” Violet admitted, feeling the grief finally swell enough to overflow, running down her cheeks.

Frode stepped closer, his voice a gentle, soothing caress. “But you make me better.”

Violet choked back her emotions as best she could, but it was becoming more difficult with every moment that passed. “No. I think...I tend to ruin things.”

She heard him take in a sharp breath at her confession, which Violet immediately regretted. She pulled away, waving her hand as if she could swipe the words out of the air.

“Forget I said anything.” Violet winced.

She knew all too well that would not be happening, even if it was possible, Frode wasn’t going to let that go, not without a fight. And Violet didn’t have much of a fight left in her. She was too exhausted for that. When was the last time she had even slept?

She turned away, unable to bear looking at Frode as he spoke, “Despite the...*difficulty* of the past few days, there are things that I know for certain. One of them is that I was alone and cold before you came into my life, but I am no longer. You have warmed my soul and awoken me from the slumber of my apathy like no one else ever has. You have made my life feel more vivid than it ever did before, and suddenly I feel as though I am actually truly *living* because of you, not just surviving.” Frode paused, taking another step closer.

Violet wished to flee, but she also wished for him to draw nearer. The war between the familiarity of being invisible versus the yearning in her soul to be seen and loved was reaching new heights, unbearably difficult.

Frode continued, “And you know what is so painful to me in this situation?”

Violet could not look at him, keeping her gaze off to the side, eyes staring at the grass which she did not really see. She barely managed to squeeze the one-word reply out of her throat. “What?”

Frode lifted his other hand, drawing a finger from the base of her throat all the way up to her chin, where he applied enough pressure to lift it, trying to make her look at him. Violet panicked, struggling to keep her composure and keep her gaze elsewhere. “What has been so painful is the fact that I have not been able to do the same for you, my love. Here you have been, suffering in silence, and I have not been a refuge for you.”

Violet gasped. Guilt tore through Violet like a scythe through grass. “No, no. It is not your fault—”

“Ah, but it is. If I had made myself a safer place for you, if I had made it more evident to you, then you would have known.” Frode ran a thumb over her jawline tenderly.

Violet winced again. The falseness of his statement weighed heavily on her chest. Tears pooled in her eyes once again as she shook her head, desperate for him to believe her. “No, Frode, you’re wrong. I kept it from you not because I didn’t trust you, but because I didn’t trust *them*. Or myself.”

Frode lowered his head, angling it down towards Violet’s, a smirk cresting onto his lips, and Violet knew she had been had. “So you confess it then?”

Violet blinked, pulling her head back an inch and immediately regretting it, resenting any amount of space left between them. “N-no.”

Frode ignored her, continuing on as if she hadn’t denied it at all. “And do you promise that you won’t do it again, my love?”

Violet opened and closed her mouth in surprise, unsure of how to reply. All that she knew was that there was a heat rising through her body, a magnetic pull towards him, a burning desire that couldn’t be quenched.

“I’m going to need you to promise me, Violet...” His lips were dangerously close to hers and drawing ever nearer. “I need to hear it from you...”

Violet's mind raced a mile a minute and before she knew it, she was placing her lips against his, drinking deeply from the well of love Frode always seemed to be offering her. Frode seemed all too happy to oblige her, cupping her cheek with one hand and wrapping the other around her waist, pulling her closer. Violet held onto both of his arms for dear life as she poured all of her emotion into the kiss.

Before she was ready for the kiss to be over, Frode pulled back, eyes twinkling with knowing mischief. "You did not promise me, Violet. You will not distract me with those delicious lips of yours."

Violet blinked up at him innocently. "But what if that kiss was a promise?"

Frode grew close once more, his face a breath away from hers. "Ah, but you are still avoiding it, even by suggesting it was a promise. If it truly was a promise, then it would be easy for you to repeat with your *words*."

She was unable to hide behind her side-stepped words and carefully placed lips. He was too clever of a man and knew her too well. Violet flattened her lips into a thin line, unsure of how to proceed. She didn't believe she could genuinely make that promise to him. After all, she had been hiding secrets from him, in the hopes of protecting him. And she would do that again, if she needed to.

"Violet..." Frode said her name so softly that it felt like a prayer she was eavesdropping on, not meant for her ears. He

brushed his thumb over her lips gently, the sensation making her raise her gaze to meet his once again.

Violet frowned, giving a soft shake of her head, careful not to dislodge his hand from where it cupped her chin gently. “I can’t do that, Frode. I’d do it over again...to protect you.”

Frode gave her a soft, sad smile. “But are you truly protecting me, my love? What you need to be protecting me from is from any kind of distance or separation from *you*. For that would bring me the worse pain out of everything, worse than torture, worse than death. Do you understand that? Do you understand that taking yourself away from me might as well be taking away my heart and soul?”

Violet let her eyes flutter closed, soaking in the words she both longed for and feared. “I’m tired, Frode.” It was an admittance, a confession, more than he would probably ever know. “I want to go to sleep.” She thought of how slumber would be bliss, to forget that this reality exists.

Frode’s voice was barely above a whisper as he responded. “Very well. I am not leaving you, though. While I make no demand to be bound at your hip, I do not want to be parted from you, for various reasons. We are at war, Violet, and you are at the center of it. I cannot leave you unprotected from the likes of Greed or your own mind, for there is a war waging in there, as well.”

Violet flattened her lips in displeasure. “You won’t give me even a moment of privacy?”

“Privacy? Yes.” Frode leaned in closer, a mischievous but knowing gleam in his eye. “A chance at running away from me? No.”

“I-I wouldn’t run—”

“Of course, if you *did* run, you know that I would follow you, yes? And that if I followed you, I would surely catch you. Would you like that, my love, if I caught you on the run?” His voice was dark, almost darker than Violet had ever heard it before.

Violet swallowed harshly. “N-no.”

Frode gave a dark chuckle. “Then you best not put my word to the test, Violet. My obsession with you will not waver, no matter where you flee to. What neither Greed nor you seem to understand is the extensive lengths that I will go to in order to protect you and make you mine, no matter the risk or danger. So, yes, let us go and get you taken care of. But I shall not be parted from you, now or anytime soon, not after what you have been through. *You are mine.*”

CHAPTER TEN

The Fear of an Obsession

Frode stared up at the ceiling from where he had made a bed on the floor. His decision to do so was met with protests and genuine irritation from Violet, which made him grin. It was good to know he still affected her as much as she did him, but Frode was set in his decision. He had already demanded enough from her for the time being. He need not push her anymore.

But being parted from her was not a risk he could take, much less stomach. He wouldn't be able to sleep with her far from him, even just in another longhouse. Whatever Greed was planning, it was surely involving her, which meant that Frode could not leave her on her own.

Frode understood her reasoning for wanting to run from him, he truly did. She thought that she was protecting him, protecting her mother, protecting their *worlds*. But Frode was fairly sure that their division was exactly what Greed *wanted*. Perhaps, even needed from them.

No, whatever the terrible god had planned, they would face it together, hand in hand, and Frode would protect her.

He only wished it wasn't necessary. Greed would pay for involving Violet in his madness. Frode would make sure of it.

Violet's soft breathing filled the room, showing Frode that she had finally fallen asleep. Frode finally relaxed into his makeshift bed, sighing gently as he closed his eyes. He did not realize how exhausted he was until he did so, his burning eyes finally being met with relief at being closed. It did not take long for him to drift off.

But then the glowing visage of the Supreme Goddess startled Frode. Her voice boomed throughout his mind. "Greed comes for her. In a day's time, he will reach for your love. You must do whatever it takes to ensure his failure. I will be with you, guiding you, and you will become my vessel. Fight for my ways, Frode. Fight for love, harmony, union. Love be with you, child."

As the goddess' form faded from view, it was like lightning struck across his vision, thunder following close behind it to accentuate her words. He wondered about it for a moment.

Gods are not subtle in their conspicuous nature, are they?

Frode almost resented them for it, for their audacity at every turn, even if they did seem to have the right to be so out of all living things.

Frode startled awake, covered in sweat. Morning sunlight streamed through the room that Katla had allowed them to stay in within her home, and Frode sat up, trying to catch his

breath, the thin sheet falling down his bare chest. He looked towards the bed, only to find it empty, causing curses to fall from his lips as he stood up, hurrying to get dressed.

He was met by Katla almost as soon as he exited the room. She held up a hand, silencing him before he even spoke. “She is fine. She is with Luta, my neighbor. She is showing her how to care for her pet chickens behind her house. Rolf and Andgar are nearby, caring for their weapons. All is well.”

Relief filled Frode’s chest even as he shook his head. “All is not well. I have received a dream from the Supreme Goddess.”

Katla’s eyebrows raised as she set down the dagger she had been sharpening at the table. “I am listening.”

“She says Greed is coming. Coming for *Violet*. In a day’s time.” Frode grunted, balling his hands into fists. “She has directed me to protect her, of course.”

Katla snickered. “*Of course.*” Frode could not detect the root of her humor at the moment, frustrating him further. “Then it is settled. You two shall spend the day at the glen.”

Frode paused, furrowing his brows. “What? What is this glen?”

Katla grinned, and suddenly Frode wasn’t sure to be excited or worried about whatever the shieldmaiden had planned. “If they are coming for her, then I believe she deserves some rest and peace before they do. I think the same could be said for you. What better way to combat Greed than to unify you two?”

“Speak plainly, Katla. What do you have planned?” Frode frowned, crossing his arms.

Katla chuckled, picking up her dagger once more to sharpen it. “You will see. But I promise you, you will be pleased.” While sharpening her dagger, she continued, “The glen is a magical place, and better yet, it is secluded. Perhaps not best for if you are being hunted, but if the Supreme Goddess says that it will not happen for a day, then you best make the most of it. Then, upon tomorrow’s morn, you can return to us and have better protection. Yes, it makes perfect sense, truly.” The shieldmaiden seemed to almost say the last phrase more to herself than to Frode, nodding her head in approval.

Frode shook his head. “I do not understand your intentions with this idea, Katla, but I assure you, it will not work. Violet will not wish to join me there, not alone. She is in a tender state currently. We must not impose upon her free will more than I already have by demanding to remain near her.”

Katla laughed heartily at that, shaking her head. “Oh, you foolish man. Do you not see it? Violet would follow you anywhere that you asked. She runs because she does not feel worthy of you or your love. She runs because she is afraid of your rejection *or* your approval. She is at war within herself because she loves you and yet she hates herself. She will gladly go with you, but you must conquer your enemy when she does.”

Frode stepped nearer, intrigued by the woman’s words. “And who, by the Goddess, is my enemy in your eyes, Katla?”

Katla paused what she was doing for a moment to grin up at him as if she was revealing a grand secret. “Violet herself. Or, at least, her hatred for herself. You must make her see that her love for you and her hatred for herself are at odds with one another. They are fighting and cannot coexist. And then, once it is plain, you must drown that enemy with so much love that it cannot survive.” Katla lifted her chin, a fire burning in her eyes. “I believe you are capable of this, Frode the Translator. Do you disagree?”

“No.” Frode held the shieldmaiden’s eye contact for a long moment. “You know a lot about these things, hm?”

Katla’s smirk widened. “Yes. I am rather skilled with matters of the heart and the matters of women. Will you take my advice then?”

Frode narrowed his eyes at her for a moment before nodding. He believed he was catching onto her meaning. “Yes. I would love nothing more than to do just as you said. And, in truth, I feel it echoes what my intuition is now directing me to do.”

Katla gave a firm nod. “Good. Then you two will go to the glen, it is settled. Rolf and Andgar will be most pleased. They were quite pleased with the idea, too.”

Frode arched a brow. “They were involved with this, too? Insufferable old men,” Frode remarked with a shake of his head and a grin. His smile faded after a moment, a frown replacing it. “And what if I cannot persuade her to abandon her self-hatred?”

Katla paused, a serious expression falling over her face as well. Her eyes searched his for a long moment. “Something tells me that you are not a man that will relent until he achieves his goal. Do you believe in the strength of the love you have for her?”

“More than I have ever believed in anything before,” Frode confirmed, feeling the conviction of his words sink deep into his chest.

“Then you will be fine.” Katla shrugged, turning back to her dagger. “Love is more powerful than hatred, Frode. It is far more potent than any poison. The roots of your love will push out any seeds that Greed has planted within her, have no fear.”

Frode nodded, but he was still not convinced. Another feeling of uncertainty mingled in his chest, his shoulders tightening under the weight of his fear, and a cold sweat breaking out over his body. This was one feeling he could not admit to Katla. It was a feeling of wanting to claim Violet for his own, to refuse to let her go. It was an obsession, plain and simple. He had felt a strong desire for her before, but this was something new entirely, brought on by her betrayal and subsequent fleeing. It was then strengthened by the knowledge that Greed had been using her like a servant.

Violet did not belong to Greed. He had no right to do such a thing, and the pure rage that Frode felt towards him was almost alarming. And yet, he found he could not quell it. He did not want to. Instead, he wanted to indulge it, and indulge the feelings of craving he felt towards Violet. He wished to

fight Greed by ensuring that the god knew who Violet truly belonged to.

And perhaps he would do just that at the glen this day and all throughout the night that followed. He would ensure that even the wicked god could hear the cries of pleasure, which Frode and only Frode would ever bring forth from her.

She would be making them for *him*. And him alone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Feelings of an Obsession

Violet did not understand the smirk on Katla's face or what the shieldmaiden was trying to explain to her. Violet wondered about this glen and why she and Frode needed to go to it, much less alone? But it was starting to feel like the more she questioned Katla, the less the shieldmaiden would tell her.

Violet squirmed at the thought of going to a secluded place with Frode. It was *dangerous*. The racing of her heart only confirmed this, but the excited fluttering in her stomach told her all that she needed to know. She wanted to be alone with Frode badly enough that it posed a major risk.

Katla nudged her softly, still grinning at her. "You will have fun." Her strong accent only added to the mischievous tone she had, making Violet sigh.

"That's what I'm scared of," Violet admitted.

Katla laughed. "And that is why you need to do it, little mouse. Fear tells us a lot about ourselves that we need to

know. Go. Have fun. Rest in the moment. Trust in Frode, he is good for you.”

Violet bit the inside of her cheek, thinking. *That’s what I’m scared of, too.* Instead of confessing that out loud, she simply nodded. “You aren’t forcing him to go, though, right?”

Katla just laughed again, as if Violet had just made the most hilarious of jokes. “Yes, he wants to go, little mouse. You are thinking too much. You should take care of yourself better. That man would follow you anywhere, you know. *Especially* if you asked him to. The glen is beautiful. You will both enjoy it. Now go, shoo. I want my home back to myself. Go, go!”

Violet couldn’t help but giggle as Katla shooed her off with a smile, towards where Frode was apparently waiting for her. The good humor of the shieldmaiden mixed with Violet’s own nervousness made for a lot of nervous laughter simmering just under the surface, ready to explode at any moment. Violet hated the physical evidence of her unwanted emotions.

As Violet rounded the corner to where Katla directed her to go, she stopped in her tracks as she laid eyes on Frode. The Viking leaned against the side of Katla’s house, looking finer and more well-groomed than when he even presided in his brother’s court. His hair looked freshly washed and braided, his clothes pressed and clean. And in his hands he held a bouquet of beautiful wildflowers that grew outside of the village, freshly picked. As Violet observed him, he looked a tad nervous, shifting his weight from one foot to the other,

clutching the bouquet tightly, his brows pinched with a worried expression.

The sight stole Violet's breath away. Was he truly nervous about this? Frode was usually confident and assertive, traits she loved about him. He could hold and maintain court without breaking a sweat, order around a bunch of Viking warriors, and stare down enemies in war without fear. But he was nervous *now*? Not only that, but he put so much time, thought, and care into this. But why? Taking her to this glen couldn't be *that* important.

Unless it was important to him. Unless...*she* was important to him.

Violet let out a long exhale as she tried to calm her pounding heart. As Frode caught a glimpse of her, his eyes widened slightly and he turned to face her. A shy but mischievous smile rose onto his features, as if he knew something she didn't. Still, there was a tender sweetness shining in his eyes, as well as a genuine shyness that Violet wasn't expecting. It reminded her of the first time that Frode confessed his feelings for her in the barn, quite a few months ago. He had been so meek in his admittance. It was yet another way that Frode had won her heart.

Frode offered the bouquet of flowers to her. Violet gave him a soft, thoughtful smile as she took it, fingers brushing for a moment. It felt strange, in a way, to be reduced to such sweet but distant courting rituals. It wasn't as if the two of them hadn't already been together for some time. In fact, they had

been discussing marriage, something everyone seemed quite eager for. Violet would never forget what Isis had told her on her and Bylur's wedding day. When Violet had remarked that she hoped she looked as beautiful as Isis did on her wedding day, Isis had easily replied, "*Well, we don't have long to wait to find out. I am so happy for you and Frode.*" Everyone seemed to believe that their own marital union was just around the corner.

But Violet had ruined it, hadn't she? So why was Frode treating her like it was *his* fault as he tried to make amends?

"Thank you, Frode." Violet rubbed the petals of one of the flowers between her fingers, feeling the silky texture glide over her skin, the sensation calming her and bringing her back to the present moment.

Frode smiled down at her, admiration shining in his eyes. "You are most welcome, my love. Tell me, you did not feel too pressured to join me at the glen, did you?"

Violet chuckled. "Katla *is* very persuasive."

As soon as she said it, she realized this was not the correct assurance to give him. His face fell. "Do you not want to go? You do not have to. We can remain here. I will not be offended."

Violet shook her head, frustrated at her own mistake as she tried to quickly remedy it. "No, no, I didn't mean it like that. I am willing to go, I simply meant that Katla laid out a good, logical reason for it and...I agreed. I'm sorry, I should have been clearer. But thank you for...well, for being you."

Frode reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “You do not need to apologize for anything, Violet. I am just concerned that you feel as though you are being forced to do something you do not want to.”

“I do! I do...want to...” Violet jumped to clarify, face turning red at her own excited fumbling. “It sounds like a nice time, although I’m still not totally sure where the idea came from or why it’s happening, exactly.”

A dark expression crossed over Frode’s features as he looked torn on how to respond. His eyes searched hers as his brows knitted together. “There is much to explain.”

Violet nodded. “I see. Perhaps it is best that we do it at this glen, then? I think that we do have a lot to discuss. Perhaps we’re overdue for a long conversation.” Her own admittance surprised her. Without thinking, she suggested the very thing she had been trying to avoid with Frode. But she realized that, since she couldn’t avoid him, perhaps she ought to try something different and just get it over with.

Frode’s eyes widened slightly, but he nodded enthusiastically. That easy-going grin slid back onto his face, the mischief in his eyes returning in full force. “I agree with you. But I admit, I might have some other ulterior plans as well.”

Violet arched a brow as she followed him, a familiar heat returning to her chest and cascading down her body at his suggestive tone. “Oh? More than just talking?”

“Oh, yes. More than just talking. I fully plan on being distracted by those delicious lips of yours again.” He turned

towards a rather wild path, barely visible as the nature of this realm was taking it back over.

Violet laughed, a gentle breeze rolling through the trees and blowing across them, making the tall, pink grasses on either side of the path gently sway. “Well, Katla didn’t mention that in her argument, at least not really. Now that I think about it, she might have been hinting at that, but...” Violet grinned. “Perhaps she should have said it plainly. I might not have needed any other kind of convincing.”

Frode laughed lightly before growing serious for a moment, a low fire simmering in his eyes. “Are you sure, my love? You have been avoiding me so much. I was starting to think you did not want me anymore... Perhaps you found someone new. Perhaps Greed caught your eye.”

An uncontrollable, boisterous laugh fell from Violet’s lips. She had to cover her mouth with her hand just to be able to keep walking. “You can’t be serious. I know you haven’t seen him, but trust me, that wouldn’t be happening. But what kind of insane woman would get bored with you, Frode? I know you might not see it in yourself, but you are so handsome and charming, intelligent, regal...”

“Hm, yes. Keep going.” Frode beamed, puffing out his chest slightly as he listened to her praises.

Violet laughed, shaking her head. “Well, now I’m not going to.”

Frode turned to her with big, sad puppy eyes. “Why not?”

“I don’t want your ego inflated more than it already is.” Violet smirked at him.

Frode’s mischievous glint returned to his eye in full force, from a low-burning fire to a roaring furnace. “Oh?” He slowed his pace slightly to lean towards her, lips twitching with a smirk. “You want something else to be inflated instead, is that it?” His voice was low and gravelly as he teased her.

Violet laughed, her face growing hot as she batted him away with the flowers. “Quit it, you troublemaker. Is that what this entire glen-situation is about? You plan to tease and seduce me?”

Frode stood straight again, clasping his hands behind his back as returned his gaze to the path ahead, his lips fighting off a grin. “Perhaps. Would that be so bad, love?”

“No,” Violet admitted, growing serious. “Nothing could be as bad as thinking I lost you, Frode.”

The two stopped in the middle of the path. Frode turned to face her, his face enraptured by his serious expression. He reached for her hands, tucking her bouquet in the pocket of the front of her dress for a moment. His eyes searched hers for a long moment. “You never lost me, Violet.”

Violet looked down, brows furrowing together. “Maybe not. But I thought I did. And that feeling was worse than death.”

“I know,” His voice was so soft that Violet thought it was just the wind playing tricks on her at first. “I know how you feel because I thought I lost you, too. I have never felt such

panicked desperation in my life, like I was trying to claw my way back up from the grave.”

Violet lifted her gaze to meet his again, eyes widening slightly at his words. Frode did always have a way to be poetic, yet another thing she loved about him. “I’m sorry I made you feel that way. I...I never wanted that, Frode. Truly.”

Frode smiled sadly, dropping one of her hands to cup her cheek, caressing her skin with his thumb gently. “You think of yourself as a villain, far more than you ever should, my love. You have been a victim in this more than you acknowledge, just as much as I. In some way, perhaps it is a good thing that we have experienced this, for we have learned how much we mean to one another. It has shown us the weight of our love and how great it is. I know it has made me realize I cannot lose you, never again.”

Violet nodded, feeling her emotions rise into her throat. She felt as though it was now or never to speak her truth. “I...I am quickly realizing that I don’t want to lose you, either, Frode. But I also feel like I don’t deserve you, that I don’t deserve the love you so freely give me.”

Frode lowered his face to hers, kissing her softly before whispering against her lips. “Your feelings misguide you, my love. You deserve unconditional love more than anything, especially after all that you have been through. I understand your feelings, but you are worthy of love. And I am one of the honored individuals who get to love you.”

Violet pressed her lips against his once more, drinking in the sweetness of both his words and the taste of his kiss. Her mind felt hazy, drunk on his affections. A tiny light caught her attention behind Frode, making her turn her head slightly to look at it. Frode followed her gaze, seeing little lavender bugs illuminating the field around them. The bugs flew about in a dance.

Violet held her breath. It was gorgeous to see, magical and striking wonder within her as she inhaled sharply at the beautiful sight. Frode held her closer, kissing her temple before looking back at the nature around them.

Frode squeezed her hand. “Come, let us get to the glen. I think we have more marvelous surprises in store for us there. The Supreme Goddess guides us. Shall we?”

Violet smiled at him, squeezing his hand in return as she nodded. “If it is anywhere near as beautiful as this, I can’t wait to see this glen.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Indulgence of an Obsession

The lavender lightning bugs guided their way on the path, little magical escorts that showed them the way to the glen in their own colorful way. Violet felt free for the first time in quite a while, holding Frode's hand as they stepped through the fields before entering a wooded area. The weight that had been paralyzing her ever since Greed approached her months prior seemed suddenly lifted, at least mostly. She felt light, almost like she could fly and bring Frode with her, soaring into the heavens.

The pair was quiet as they walked hand in hand through the forests. The trees were a strange mixture of evergreen and some other kind of magical tree with fluffy pink leaves.

Between the lavender bugs and the pink trees, Violet felt like she was in some sort of fairyland. But considering what she knew of the Supreme Goddess, it strangely suited her.

As they stepped into a clearing, Violet smiled at the sight of a little cottage tucked into a large oak tree. A tranquil pond was in front of it, its gentle waves rolling against the shoreline. A

couple of dark blue ducks swam in the water. There were less of the pink trees present here, the edges of the clearing mostly filled with evergreens.

For a moment, Violet could forget that they were in another realm. It seemed so ordinary of a sight, like a peaceful painting that would be perfect as a puzzle background. It only had little touches of magic scattered here and there that reminded her of the true nature of the place.

Frode brought Violet's hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles for a long moment. "I want to show you how worthy you are of my love..." He kissed the back of her hand once more, this time slower, holding eye contact with her. "I want to worship you until you understand..."

Violet's heart was in her throat. Unsure of what to say or how to respond, she mutely nodded, her brain unable to form words at the moment due to the look of great desire and love in Frode's eyes.

"Will you allow me to reveal this to you? To show you the depths of my adoration?" Frode pulled her close to him until their chests met, his nose nuzzling her ear as he spoke softly into it, his voice husky and deep with desire. "Will you let me worship you?"

"Y-yes." Violet was breathless, hands clinging to his biceps when she didn't even remember moving them to his arms. Frode always managed to do this to her, melt her inhibitions and insecurities. He was their ruler, making them bow at his feet. With him, she lost all sense of the past and all thought of

the future. He held her mind in the present in a vice grip, unrelenting as he magnetically drew her in.

Frode walked away without another word, leaving her panting as she watched him continue on the path towards the cottage. Violet could only gawk at him, wondering why he wasn't doing as he promised. Frode *never* went back on his word, never in all of the months she had known him and grown close to him. *Especially* when it came to her. He always followed through.

Violet closed her mouth and swallowed harshly as she realized that he was not abandoning his request, quite the opposite. Now that he had permission, he was taking charge of the situation. Frode was deliberate in his patience and he never indulged his own animalistic desires when he could indulge hers first.

Violet followed him like a lost puppy, walking on clouds towards the cottage, unable to absorb her beautiful surroundings anymore, her focus entirely consumed by Frode. As they stepped into the cottage, Frode looked around, observing the interior of their home for the night, nodding in approval. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Violet had no idea what it looked like. Her mind had no capacity to look. She could think of one thing and one thing only—*Frode*. Her entire mind and body were on fire for him. How could she possibly think of anything else after what he had just asked of her, whispered in her ear?

When she didn't answer, Frode turned to regard her, smirking at what he saw. "Oh, my poor little Violet. Come here, my love. I am not cruel and I see how much you want this. I will put you out of your misery."

Violet's entire body vibrated with need, the need for *him*. The need to be held and accepted by him, to feel safe and loved. It was like the floodgates opened and the love she had been withholding for him rushed out, consuming her. She rushed into his arms without a second thought, smashing her lips against his, moaning against them in desperation. When Frode pulled back after a moment, Violet panted against his lips. "You promised..."

"And I will not neglect you nor my promise, my love. But if I let you take what you want, is that truly fulfilling that promise? How can I worship you then?" The logic that Frode was presenting her with went in one ear and out the other as her brain was only able to process her desire for him.

But Frode would not relent, taking hold of her arms and kissing her firmly, plunging his tongue into her mouth and taking charge of the situation, drinking her in with such a calm force that her wild want was put into submission. With a gentle pressure, he pushed her up against the wall, placing his arms on either side of her before breaking the kiss once again.

Violet felt her knees go shaky as she looked up at him, the dark desire in his eyes making her mouth go dry and her stomach twist with excited anticipation. Frode moved one hand to her lips, dragging his thumb across her mouth before

pulling down her bottom lip. “Do you know how much you mean to me, my love?”

“I think so, but I’m not entirely sure,” Violet admitted, wincing slightly at her honest words. She wished she could just say yes, but she had a feeling that, at this close proximity, Frode would be able to see the lie swimming in her eyes.

“Mmm, then let me reveal to you just how much you mean to me. And then you shall never doubt it. But I will continue to prove to you the depths of my love for you for the rest of my life to ensure that you never doubt it again.” Frode placed a gentle open-mouthed kiss on her cheek before moving down to her jaw. As he kissed along it, he gave low moans, the deep sound igniting her entire body just as much as his kisses. “Oh, Violet... You have made me go mad with want for you. My soul craves the taste of your skin. I have chased after you from your land to this one, and I would chase after you into a thousand more if that was what it took to keep you safe, to keep you mine...”

Violet snaked her hand up his arm, before finally tangling in his braids. “I could never belong to anyone else, Frode. You fill my mind endlessly and always have since I first laid eyes on you. I will always want you.” Violet’s voice was breathless, panting with want for him.

Frode let out a low groan, grabbing her waist harshly and grinding against her, his voice guttural. “That is what I want to hear, my love...”

Violet felt the strong urge to please him, to indulge his every whim for everything he had endured because of her. He had certainly earned it. She lowered one hand between them, running her palm down his chest before arriving at the front of his trousers and grasping his hardening member through the fabric, heat pooling between her own legs at the sensation of it against her hand.

Frode let out a low whimper, throwing his head back in pleasure. He recovered quickly, though, baring his teeth as if to resist the temptation of giving in. He grabbed both of her hands swiftly, pinning them against the wall above her. “No, no. I thought I was clear. *I will be worshiping you*, not the other way around. There is nothing for you to prove or earn here, and you will not be distracting me, my love. I am a stubborn man and I am determined to lather my adoration on you, do you understand me?”

Violet squirmed slightly under the intensity of his gaze, nodding slightly.

“Answer me with your words, love.” Frode pressed his chest firmer against her, his voice demanding and dark, even as his words dripped with sweetness.

Violet let out a whimper at the contact, pushing her hips forward as she sought more of it. “Yes, I understand, Frode...”

“Hmm...” Frode analyzed her, his free hand running along her jaw, the pad of his thumb pressing against her lips once again before lowering and settling on her neck. “Tell me what you understand. Explain it to me.”

Violet flushed at the thought, squirming under his demands. Hearing his proclamations was enough to make her feel dizzy, but having to say them back to him? That was almost torture. “Y-you are going to worship me, to prove to me just how much you love and adore me.”

Frode gave a dark chuckle, thrusting his hips forward to rub against her. “Yes, that is it...but tell me, when you picture me doing that, what does it look like?” Frode leaned forward to nuzzle her neck before mouthing her ear gently. “What do I do to you in your mind’s eye?”

“You...I...” Violet couldn’t think straight, her blood rushing south as she tried to come up with an answer.

Frode pushed against her again, growling slightly. “Do not think, Violet. Just tell me the first thing that emerges in your mind at the thought of me worshiping you.”

Violet panted, chest rubbing against his with every inhale she took. “I want your mouth on me...”

“Mmm, an excellent idea. Where do you want my mouth precisely?” Frode asked as he pressed a kiss just below her ear on her neck.

“Everywhere,” Violet immediately admitted, whimpering slightly at the loss of content as Frode pulled back before promptly dropping to his knees.

Frode grinned up at her. “I thought that a good place to start is on my knees.” With firm hands, he slid her dress up, warm hands on her flesh as he started from her ankles, torturously

slow as he dragged the fabric up to her knees. Violet felt sure that he was working in slow motion as he brushed his fingers against her hips, the pads of his digits almost tickling as they ran up her sides. He finally put her out of her misery by yanking the dress over her head and shoulders with a relative swiftness compared to the rest.

With her hands now freed from his grip, Violet couldn't resist but run them over his shoulders and up his neck, tangling in the hair that wasn't braided. She couldn't seem to catch her breath, and didn't think she would be able to anytime soon, not if Frode got his way. And by the dark look in his eyes, full of need and want, there was going to be no stopping him. Not that she wanted to.

Frode was tall enough that even on his knees, his head still came up to her abdomen. Placing his hands on either side of her to brace himself, he leaned forward, placing whispers of kisses between her breasts. "Is this a good place for my mouth?" He grinned up at her, knowing full well that he was driving her insane.

Violet whimpered, biting her lip. "Please, Frode..."

He tilted his head at her, acting innocent. "What do you want? Use your words, my love. Tell me what you desire, with as many details as you can muster..."

Violet gently stroked the back of his head, trying to decide what exactly it was that she wanted. "Kiss all over my chest and then..." Frode waited, listening intently as he looked up at her from where he knelt on the ground, his pupils looking

almost black in the dim light of the cottage. “And then kiss me where I want you most.”

Frode grinned at her. “As you command, I will worship.”

Frode dove for her breasts, plunging his face into her bosom as he kissed the soft skin there, pausing his caresses every now and then to nip and suckle before moving on. Violet gave a soft sigh at his affections, basking in both his devotion and the sensation.

Violet gently stroked his head, throwing her head back as she basked in the feeling of his lips upon her skin. “Your lips feel so good, Frode.” Her voice sounded almost dreamy, matching how she felt.

Frode made a quiet sound of acknowledgement as he continued his good work, his tongue circling her nipple softly before increasing his pace, suckling at her breast as well, and making her cry out and dig her nails into his scalp. His hands ran up and down her body, stopping only to squeeze her hips before slipping behind her, grasping the soft flesh of her butt before pulling his head back. Violet sucked in a sharp breath at the feeling of the cold air hitting her breasts, now wet from his mouth.

She did not have the chance to regain her breath as Frode pulled down her remaining undergarments before lifting her in the air, holding her aloft with his strong forearms as he moved her legs over his shoulders. “Mmm,” Frode looked at her dripping wetness in front of him, licking his lips. “A meal fit for the most honorable of kings.”

Violet didn't even have a chance to process his compliment before his tongue was upon her, kissing both of her thighs before diving straight in, giving a gentle lick with just the tip of his tongue. Violet's breath staggered, a soft moan falling from her lips as she resisted the urge to squirm in his arms. "Frode," she cried out his name, biting her lip as he kissed around where she wanted him most. After a few moments of his teasing, she gritted her teeth. "I thought you wanted to worship me, not play silly games?"

Frode gave a dark chuckle but said nothing, his only response was to return to her wetness, flattening his tongue as he moved it up and down against her. Violet arched her back at the sensation, crying out once more as he increased his pace. Finally, he switched tactics, using the tip of his tongue to swirl around her bud, making heat build up in her stomach at an alarming rate.

He devoured her as if she was his last meal without apology, hungrily lapping at her juices without pause or hesitation. And when Violet reached her peak, pleasure coursing through her veins, spreading all across her body, Frode barely even slowed, prolonging her pleasure as much as he was able.

Frode gently set her wobbly legs on the ground, wiping his chin with a grin as he stood up. "Ah, yes. A refreshing first course. But I believe I am quite ready for the second one now."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Pursuit of an Obsession

Frode felt alive. This was his prime, making the woman he loved feel seen and desired, and furthermore, bring her as much pleasure as possible. He grabbed Violet and wrapped her bare legs around his still-clothed abdomen, carrying her into the next room, finding his assumptions about it being a bedchamber correct.

Sitting her gently on the fur-covered bed, Frode kissed her softly, enjoying the feeling of her hands running up and down his arms and chest. As he stepped away from her, Violet gave a quiet whine of protest, making Frode smirk. Her eyes were still closed as he stepped out of her reach, her hands still outstretched and seeking him. It was truly a lovely sight, one that Frode wished to engrave upon his memory for the rest of his life.

“Frode?” Violet sounded so sweet as she finally opened her eyes, frowning slightly in confusion at his distance and lack of kisses.

His grin only grew as he began to look around the bedchamber. “Shh, my love. I will only be a minute. Stay there.”

Violet’s frown deepened, but Frode was determined. “But why be gone at all? Why aren’t you kissing me?”

Frode chuckled. “Because I wish to do so in a very special atmosphere.” When he looked back at her, he could tell that Violet had no idea what he meant. *Good. Then it will be a surprise.*

It didn’t take long for Frode to find the very thing he was searching for, although he did have to leave the bedchamber to do so, sparking more protests from Violet. On the opposite side of the cottage sat a small alcove, a large wooden tub taking most of its space. Frode grinned at the sight. *It was perfect.*

As if the tub could sense his intentions, water began to flow from a wooden spout over it, steam beginning to rise, drifting into the air to greet him. Frode’s eyebrows raised at the sight, his breath catching in his throat. Lifting his eyes to the ceiling, he sent up a silent prayer of thanks to the Supreme Goddess for her help and guidance.

“Frode? What’s that sound?” Violet called from the next room.

He rushed back to her, kicking off his boots along the way. When he reached where Violet remained sitting on the edge of the bed, he nearly tackled her, making Violet squeal as he picked her up once more, cradling her in his arms this time. “What’s going on?” She asked breathlessly.

Frode could only grin in response as she brought her through the main section of the cottage, crossing it as he entered the small alcove. Before Violet could even process what was happening, Frode was dipping a toe into the water, ensuring that it was not too hot before gently lowering Violet into the water, getting his sleeves wet in the process but not caring.

Violet inhaled sharply as she looked around, one hand grasping Frode's arm, the other the side of the tub. "How...? They have running water here? And hot water? Impressive."

"The Supreme Goddess smiles down upon us and our union, my love." Frode kissed the side of her head tenderly before standing back up.

Violet pursed her lips, her brows knitting together for a moment as if she was unsure about that. Whatever doubts she had quickly vanished as Frode slowly lifted his arms, pulling the seam of his tunic up, dragging the fabric over his chest before throwing it to the side. Violet sat back in the large tub, watching him with a heated gaze, making Frode's hard member grow impossibly harder.

As Frode rid himself of the rest of his clothing, he grinned at Violet and her hungry eyes. "Are you enjoying the view?"

A slight chuckle slipped from Violet's lips as she nodded. "A hot bath *and* a show? I feel pampered."

"As you should," Frode said with a chuckle of his own. As he stepped into the tub, shivering as the hot water flowed over him, he sat opposite of Violet, wondering how long either of them could keep their hands off of each other.

Frode maintained eye contact with her, knowing full well that his gaze was heavy and filled with intensity. Violet squirmed underneath it, and he could tell that she was itching to break their eye contact but refused to do so, lifting her chin up in defiance.

It was good to see her with such a fiery spirit returned to her. Violet was too often quiet and compliant, which Frode had to wonder if the weight of the threats lodged against her had anything to do with it.

Frode tilted his head as he observed her, trying not to focus on the pulsing between his legs. “What are you thinking right now, my love?”

The edges of Violet’s lips twitched with a smile. “I’m thinking that you are being cruel.”

“Oh? How so?” Frode raised his eyebrows, but a smile of his own betrayed his knowing of what she meant.

Violet’s smile twisted into a smirk as she leaned forward, slowly crawling through the water towards him before climbing into his lap. “Is this what you want? For me to take charge now?”

A flash of heat flooded through Frode at her devilish expression. Grabbing her waist, he flipped her around so that her back was against his chest, her head resting against his shoulder. “No. I am not done worshiping you, my love.”

“Mm, but you weren’t doing that, Frode. I thought I had to take matters into my own hands.” Her voice was breathless

once more, informing Frode that he had been successful in his actions to excite her once more.

Frode pressed a kiss into her hair, and then to the side of her face. “Ah, but I was ensuring that both my offering and the altar at which I worship were prepared.”

Violet chuckled. “Is that so? How prepared is it?” Her hand moved down behind her back, grasping his member underneath the water. It took everything within Frode to keep his wits about him and not just take her then and there. She turned her head, lips ghosting over his as she whispered. “Does that feel good? Does it make you want to worship me even more, Frode?”

Frode felt his lungs burn as he nipped at her lips, his own hand snaking around her body before dipping in between her legs, which fell open for him at once. Violet’s lips parted as he circled her bud slowly. “Everything within me yearns to worship you, my love.”

Soft moans and whispers of pleasure filled the cottage as they touched each other, lips brushing against one another, connecting their hearts just as much as their skin. As Violet rubbed a thumb over Frode’s tip, something within him broke. Before he could fully even process what was happening, he was pushing her forward, onto her hands and knees, water splashing up in her face. Grabbing her hips, Frode pushed himself into her, making Violet make an exquisite sound of pleasure.

Water splashed over the sides of the tub from his violent thrusts, grunting as the feeling of her walls squeezing him milked the pleasure from his very core. Quickening his pace, Frode caused the movement in the tub to turn into tidal waves, the water cascading onto the floor outside of the tub in sheets.

Concerned that the water might be too much for Violet as it was splashing around in her face, Frode grabbed her by the neck, pulling her up, so that her back was up against his chest as he continued his brutal thrusts into her. Gently biting the skin of her neck, he marked her, hoping that his fierce grip into her hips did the same.

Pushing her forward again, he moved with her, so that he was now in the center of the tub. Violet grabbed onto the sides of the tub instead, able to lean forward again without her face in the water. Violet let out a cry of pleasure at the new angle, legs spreading wider as she began to beg. "Please, please, Frode... Please...Oh god..."

Frode grabbed her hair, tugging on it to make her head turn to look over her shoulder at him. "Please what?"

"I don't know!" Violet cried out, legs quivering as her lips babbled nonsense from her maddening pleasure. "Anything, anything...Make me come. I'll come for you, I promise..."

Frode grunted, fingers digging into her hip again. "That is damn right, you will. You will be coming all over my cock here in a minute, again and again while I pound you mercilessly. Is that what you want, my pretty one?"

Violet bit her lip, nodding, a moan ripping from her throat. “Yes! That’s exactly what I want. That’s how you’re going to worship me, right?”

Running his hand up and down the curve of her back, Frode chuckled, feeling like his entire body was on fire. “Oh, yes, my love. That is *exactly* how I am going to worship you.”

Frode did not relent in his pace until he felt Violet begin to tighten around him, her legs quaking as she cried out. “Oh, god, Frode!”

“Do it,” Frode commanded through gritted teeth. “Come for me, Violet. Let me hear how good I make you feel. Scream at my adoration, my worship. Scream until all you can feel is me.”

Violet did as she was instructed, filling the cottage with the sounds of his name falling from her lips, her sounds crescendoing into a scream that ricocheted off of the walls. Frode drank it in, absorbing her cries into his very soul. Feeling her tighten around him, Frode increased his pace until she gave one last cry, her walls squeezing him in waves. Frode slowed slightly, keeping his pace steady as he prolonged her orgasm, panting heavily as he stroked up and down her back tenderly.

Frode grit his teeth, trying to enjoy her climax while still controlling his own from taking over. As she came down from her high, Violet melted into the side of the tub, her breathing heavy as she rested her cheek against the wood of the bath.

Frode stilled, caressing her back still. “How are you faring, my love?”

Violet was quiet for a moment before looking back at him, her hungry gaze surprising him. “Give me another one.”

Her demand caught him off guard, but he was quick to recover. “Anything to worship you.”

His pace became bruising almost at once, making Violet gasp and cling to the side of the tub, her sensitivity making her shake. Frode’s knees ached from where he knelt on them, rocking back and forth in his adoration for her. But was that not what worship was about? Bruising your knees in proving your devotion?

Frode leaned over Violet, grabbing the side of the tub, his hands on either side of hers as he pursued both of their pleasure with fierce abandon. Violet’s inner walls held him in a death grip as another orgasm quickly built within her, the tension in him building as his own was sure to follow.

Violet needed to feel him lose control. Her need and desire for him was making her go wild. She grabbed both of his hands, pushing her hips back to meet his thrusts. “Make me come and then fill me up,” she commanded again.

Frode let out a low growl. “Yes,” he breathed, eagerly waiting for her climax to arrive. “Yes, I will do just that.”

Violet turned her head, grabbing his chin and kissing him harshly. Frode entangled their hands that were still resting on the side of the tub, the other hand raising to grab her throat. He

chuckled darkly against her lips. “That is right, take it for me. Take my worship. You are doing so well. Give me another, my love, and I will give you my seed.”

At his words, Violet cried out, thrashing for a moment as he felt her orgasm around him. Frode grabbed her hips harshly, pounding into her before his own pleasure slammed into him. His member swelled and spilled into her.

Frode laughed, observing the scene around them. There was barely any water left in the tub at this point, but Frode did not care. Nor did he care if the water they spilled ruined anything.

He would gladly ruin many things in order to worship his beloved Violet.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Separation of an Obsession

It felt like having the most pleasant of dreams after having a horrible nightmare, waking up in Frode's arms, golden sunlight streaming through the window of the cottage, birdsong filling the glen and filtering into their room, gently waking Violet. She let out a long, happy sigh as she curled up further into Frode's embrace.

If she could stay here forever in this happy partially-asleep state, Violet might finally be able to be happy. In her blissful slumber, she forgot about her threats and her sorrows, her sins and her self-loathing. All she could recognize in this moment was the peaceful atmosphere and being in the arms of her lover, the sweetest man she had ever met.

Some time later, Frode stretched, waking her up further from the light dozing she had fallen back into, but Frode did not seem to be eager to leave the bed, either, remaining there until they couldn't any longer.

And even still after that, they spoke in light, whispered tones, only getting out of bed when they had to, and even then, they

returned to the comfort of the blankets and each other's arms rather as soon as they could. The entire day before had been spent in each other's arms as well, including more love-making.

But there came a time mid-morning that Frode propped himself up on his elbow, looking over at Violet with a lazy smile. "I do not want to leave this place. It feels like a gift from the goddess herself."

Violet returned his smile, a flicker of doubt crossing her eyes. "I'm not sure that your goddess really cares two wits about us, but...I understand the sentiment."

Frode looked at her curiously, tilting his head slightly. "It is strange to hear you say so, most people from my land would not ever consider doubting it. But I accept your hesitation. I admit, of all my people, I am not the most devout of followers. I am much more devoted to *you*," Frode smirked, nuzzling her forehead for a moment. "It is strange that I have become so wrapped up with her dealings when I have always been more focused on my scholarly pursuits. But it has all happened out of necessity. I believe from her side of things, too. I will do whatever it takes to protect you, you know."

Violet smiled as she reached up and stroked the side of his face gently, wanting to comfort him. "Which I'm very thankful for. I understand what you are saying, though. I feel like I've been living out of survival for some time now."

A sad smile came over Frode's features as he let out a soft sigh. "I know that now. I just cannot believe I did not see it

sooner, so I could have put an end to it.”

Seeing the guilt in his eyes made Violet’s heart twist. “You don’t get it, do you? You didn’t see it because I didn’t feel that way with you. Being with you was the only time I felt any sense of security or safety. I didn’t live in survival around you, Frode, and I still don’t. I *thrive* when I’m with you.”

Frode’s eyes widened slightly, many emotions flickering within them as he looked at her. Finally, he cracked, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close. They stayed that way for quite some time, soaking in each other’s embrace, until Frode finally kissed the side of her head, breathing in her scent for a long moment before whispering softly in her ear. “We must get back today.”

Confusion rippled through Violet. They were having such a peaceful time and Violet truly never wanted to leave. So she wondered, why should they? What would they do in the village that was different from here, other than having far less privacy? Wasn’t she allowed to be selfish just this once?

Violet’s eyebrows pinched together. “But why? I thought we were happy here.”

“We are.” Frode’s voice was barely above a whisper as he continued to hold her tightly, as if he was scared of spooking her.

“Then I don’t understand. What’s the rush? They know where we are. There’s nothing for us there, Frode. And I’m not sure we can help them with their problems, I think I’d be more of a liability than anything...But even so, can’t we just stay

another day or two?” Violet pleaded, holding him closer, her confusion bordering on hurt swirling within her.

Frode sighed, digging his face into the crook of her shoulder, his words muffled by her skin. “Violet, there is something I have yet to tell you.”

Violet stilled, pausing her playing with his hair for a moment as her mind raced to think about what he could be about to tell her. Her voice was quiet, almost scared, anxiety making her heart race. “What is it?”

“Greed is coming.” The statement was simple, but it made her head spin and her stomach churn. “I received a vision from the Supreme Goddess. She warned me that he was on his way and would arrive here in a day’s time. We need to return to the village, so we are not caught alone and unprepared here.”

Heart still pounding in her chest, Violet felt tears sting her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Frode lifted his head, nuzzling her neck again before kissing it softly. “Because I did not want it to ruin our time here. I wanted you to have some peace before he arrived. I did not want him looming over our heads, especially yours, while we enjoyed some well-earned serenity. But it is time that you were made aware.”

“I understand...” Violet pursed her lips to keep from saying the rest of her thoughts out loud. While she did, in fact, understand his reasoning, she wasn’t sure if she wanted these kinds of decisions to be made for her. Including the one to come here to this cottage in the glen. Now that she thought

about it, she realized she hadn't had much of a say in that at all. The only explanation she had been given from both Katla, and Frode wasn't even the true reasoning for coming here.

And yet, she said nothing. Perhaps they really did know better. Who was she to judge them for it? Still, a low burning feeling remained in her chest, aching deep within. She chose to ignore it, pushing it down as she always did when something like this happened.

Frode pulled away from their embrace, sighing as he got out of the bed. "Let us get ready to depart."

Violet nodded, unsure of what to say. She suddenly felt numb all over. As they cleaned up the cottage and prepared to go, Frode continued the conversation, chatting with her as they carried out their chores. And while Violet did respond, answering his questions and asking some of her own, she felt distant internally, separated from him suddenly, giving her emotional whiplash. She had done this to herself, she knew, which only made her feel more guilty. She wore shame like a heavy crown upon her head, a responsibility she was born into but did not want.

The rest of their time went on in a blur for her, even as they walked back through the glen and the forest and fields beyond, weaving their way along the path towards the village. When they were almost there, Frode paused, looking at her with knitted brows. "Are you all right, my love?"

Of course he noticed. He always noticed. Violet forced a smile and a nod. "A bit sad our time there had to end, but yes. I'm

fine.”

Frode studied her for a moment, eyes searching hers, scrutinizing. Sweat began to break out across her body, scared that he could see straight through her soul and be mad at her. “Are you sure?”

Keeping her smile up on her face, Violet nodded again. “Of course.” *He doesn't want the truth. No one does. He is doing what he believes is right, and that's what's important.*

Frode narrowed his eyes for a moment before nodding and turning back towards the direction of the village, away from her. “Okay. I love you, Violet.” He grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze.

Violet breathed a sigh of relief that he was letting it go. He was always so sweet. Being upset was so silly of her. “I love you, too, Frode.” She wholeheartedly meant the words, but they felt a bit hollow coming out of her mouth.

As they rounded the bend, the village seemed to be chaotic, the people within sharpening their weapons, making arrows, and setting up what appeared to be different traps around their homesteads. It appeared that news had gotten out about Greed's impending arrival and the village was quick to prepare.

Violet frowned at the sight. “I forgot to ask, Frode, but...why is Greed even coming? What does he hope to achieve? I'm sure that we're involved somehow, but why?”

Frode sighed. “All that the Supreme Goddess said was that he...he was coming for *you*.”

“*What?*” Violet jerked her head to face him, eyes widening with the horror that was pounding through her now.

Frode frowned, twisting his lips downward with displeasure. “I...I think he wishes to use you against the Supreme Goddess somehow. Perhaps he wishes to use us *both* against her in some way, I do not know. The Supreme Goddess did not give an explanation of *why* he was coming, only that he was. She instructed me to protect you, to fight for you and our love. That is all I know.”

Violet’s eyes searched his, trying to gain insight if he was telling the truth or if he was holding more information back from her again. After a moment, she realized that he truly was telling her everything. “Then why don’t we run? Why stay within this village and make them suffer as well?” She looked around at the bustling people. “I am surprised they are even willing to help. If I were them, I would not want to fight a god for two mortals from another realm. I would ask us to leave if I were them, if not throw us out entirely.”

Frode gave her a sad smile. “It is not the Viking way. My people help and support each other. If a wolf goes after one of us, he goes after us all. People in this realm especially will abide by that belief, as many of them died in defense of their people and now live with their consequences and interference from the gods in their daily life. They know if they throw us to the wolves, then they may be next. So the wolf must be

stopped. They are most honorable in that way, and it makes my heart ache that you have not experienced that kind of honor much in your life.”

A small spark of offense stirred up in Violet’s chest as she shrugged her shoulders, trying to remain calm. “It’s not that I haven’t. There are plenty of honorable people where I come from that gladly fight for something greater than themselves on a daily basis. It’s just that...It’s not normal for one or two people. Individuals can get lost in the mess of things.”

Frode tilted his head slightly. “Why should the standard of honor change depending on the number of people involved? Should it be two or ten, one hundred or a thousand, is a life not important?”

Violet paused, thinking about his words. He had a good point, but she wasn’t quite sure where it fit in with her culture. “It’s just...There’s so many people where I’m from. It makes it easier to get lost in the crowd of society, I suppose.”

Frode gave a solemn nod of understanding, but Violet could already tell that he didn’t approve of what she was saying. Heat spread across the back of Violet’s neck, already squirming in her skin before she even heard his response.

As he opened his mouth to speak, shouts from across the village rose up, cutting him off before he even had a chance to say something. They both turned towards the sound, fear spiking through Violet. Frode turned to her, cupping her cheek, his face filled with concern. “Go to Katla’s home. Hide there until I come to fetch you. Leave with no one else, do you

understand me? I will mention something only the two of us will know. Go, and be safe.”

He kissed her temple before grabbing her hand and leading her to Katla’s home, ensuring she was safe inside it before departing.

Violet didn’t even have a chance to say anything to him. Her hands shook, sweat coating her palms. What if she hadn’t wanted to leave him? What if she had begged him to stay with her, would he have listened? But she hadn’t even gotten the chance.

She felt like a child again, sent to her room without even being given a chance to explain herself. Her feelings were reduced to nothing. Violet knew that wasn’t Frode’s intent, but still the feelings held true. A flash of shame roared through her for even thinking about such things when he was just trying to keep her safe.

Taking a deep breath, Violet tried to calm herself as she stepped through Katla’s home, going to the room she had lent to Violet and Frode to stay in two nights ago. Violet wrung her hands, pacing back and forth as helplessness consumed her. This was all because of her and she couldn’t even help. She could only wait and watch in horror as people fought for her, and for what? Was she really worth all of this? She didn’t get why Greed would even do any of this because of her.

But it really wasn’t because of her, was it? It was more for Frode than from her. She was just a pawn in his game. And Frode was only a way to get to the Supreme Goddess.

Although, if what Frode said was true and he wasn't really a religious man, then why did she care about him? None of it made any sense. It was just a big gruesome mess, and it all seemed meaningless to Violet.

“Ah, there you are. I should have guessed that the shieldmaiden would be the one hiding you.” Violet spun around to see Greed standing in a white suit, leaning against the doorway of the room, effectively trapping her in there with him. “Let's have some fun and ruin the Supreme Goddess' day, shall we?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Opposition of an Obsession

As Frode observed the steady stream of haunts and other dark beings that were attacking the far side of the village, a strange feeling twisted in his gut. His intuition was telling him that something wasn't right, but he couldn't put his finger on it exactly. Obviously, the entire situation was amiss, but there was something more than that.

Rolf ran to his side, looking over the battlefield that was slowly forming. "Those beings are all belonging to Greed. The other gods will be furious about this. The Gathering is supposed to be off limits."

Frode grit his teeth, shaking his head. "Something is wrong here, Rolf."

Rolf scoffed. "Whatever makes you think that?" He asked with a tone of sarcasm.

"No, I mean more than that. Why is Greed doing this? What are his intentions?" Frode frowned, crossing his arms.

Rolf shrugged his shoulders. “He is hungry for power. After all, his name in this era *is* Greed. Perhaps he wishes to fully embody it. Does it truly matter? We need to go stop his attackers so they cannot take over the Gathering. Come, we need you!” Rolf slapped Frode’s shoulder before running forward, grabbing a weapon before charging into the fray.

Frode frowned as he watched him depart. “It does matter,” he whispered to himself. “Because those are immortal creatures that will just keep returning. We have to stop the source, which is Greed himself. And we cannot do that unless we properly understand his intentions here.” Frode shook his head, knowing no one was listening.

A beam of light blinded Frode, making him cover his eyes. When he opened them again, he realized he was entirely encapsulated in a golden light. A familiar voice echoed in his ears. “Come, my child. Now is the time I mentioned. You will become my vessel and together we will bring justice to Greed and his petty ways.”

A strange sensation took over Frode’s entire body, power coursing through him that he had never experienced before. He felt like he was flying, or perhaps falling, but all internally, as if it was his soul that was in a freefall state. He watched as he looked down at his hands, even though he had not chosen to do so. He felt himself nod before taking a step out of the light, which then quickly dissipated.

Frode turned, watching his body move, although he felt no control over it. *The Supreme Goddess had taken hold of his*

physical form? The thought was terrifying, for even if he believed the Supreme Goddess to be a just and good god, that did not mean that he wanted her to puppet him. He was not one of her worshippers, so why should he trust her in such intimate and strong ways?

He watched as the Supreme Goddess moved his body, climbing onto one of the longhouses, holding onto the ivy that grew all over it for support. Once they had firm footing, she lifted his hands as they looked over the battlefield, nonsensical words falling from his lips even though they were not his, despite his voice being the one to speak to them. A bright light began to emit from his hands, shining brighter and brighter until the entire roof of the longhouse was oversaturated with the illumination of the magic.

“Ooh, going for the sunlight approach, I like it! Even if it is a bit predictable for you.” A feminine voice startled both Frode and the Supreme Goddess within him, making her drop his hands, the magic dispelling as they turned to the source of the words.

Violet stood on the ground, looking up at them with her hands on her hips. She wore a smirk that Frode had never seen her wear before, and something about it was distinctly *not Violet*. Inside, he wished to yell at her to go back to Katla’s home, that something was bound to happen to her out here. Greed was looking for her! What was she thinking, wandering about? He felt a coldness coming from the other being inside of his body. The Supreme Goddess was not pleased, but why? He

watched himself leap from the roof with more grace than he could ever possess himself. When he stood face to face with Violet, Frode noticed a darkness within her eyes that he didn't understand.

“What have you done? Are you asking for war with me?” He heard himself speak, not understanding what the Supreme Goddess was saying. Why would she want war with Violet? Internally, he fought against her, wishing to take back control of his own body, but it was like beating against the stone wall of a fortress with his bare hands and expecting the entire castle to fall down.

Violet's smirk grew as she tilted her head at him. “Come now. You cannot be serious. After all, haven't you been the one interfering with my plans as of late?”

A flash of anger roared through Frode's body, anger that did not belong to him. “I have only interfered with you because your plans kept involving both my artifacts and my children!”

Violet laughed, wagging a finger in his face. “Tsk, tsk. You should know better than to call them your children. Endearing yourself to them in that way is only asking for trouble, and you know it. But that's the thing, isn't it? You might call them that, but do you really think of them in that way? No. You just call them that to manipulate them, don't you?”

A horror began to bloom inside of Frode's chest as he realized what was happening, but he was terrified to admit it to himself. The Supreme Goddess' anger grew into a terrifying rage, more fierce than any storm that Frode had ever had to

weather. “Do not throw such accusations around, Greed. If you want to fight, so be it. But do not play your insulting games with me. You will receive no reaction that you desire. You have stolen the body of this poor woman, the love of my own vessel. Is that not declaration enough?”

Confirmation of Frode’s worst fears fell from his own lips, and suddenly he knew he was not flying like he wondered before. No, he was falling, dropping from the sky with such a speed he surely could not survive. He had never felt so helpless and scared in his life, not even when he lost Violet for the first time. Now he felt as though he was losing her all over again, but this time it was happening before his very eyes and he could do nothing about it.

Greed, in Violet’s body, shrugged, as his maniacal smirk twisted her features. “You know, I always like to add a little flare to things. Sure, just the haunts attacking these dead so-called *heroes* would be enough to earn your attention and ire. Taking her would be an incredible way to declare war with you. But also throwing the cold hard truth in your face on top of it all? Truly stylish, don’t you think?”

“Style denotes attractiveness, Greed. And there is *nothing* attractive about you.” The Supreme Goddess spat out, grinding Frode’s teeth until they ached.

An oily black substance began to form on Violet’s hands, dripping onto the ground as Greed grinned within her. “My host here is very scared. How is yours faring? Is he ready to see himself destroy his beautiful maiden?”

The Supreme Goddess circled Greed, light forming in Frode's hands once more. "You will rue this day and decision, Greed, I will ensure it. Choosing her was a mistake."

Greed laughed, following the Supreme Goddess' every move. "I think taking over her was a fantastic decision. It was worth it to see your face alone. You think you won't give me the reaction that I'm looking for, but oh my dear Goddess, you already have. You've already given me everything I have wanted, and you'll continue to do so. You had no choice but to take over her lover to fight me since I chose her and that infuriates you. Both of those things are what I want, your fight and your fury!" Greed gave a boisterous laugh, loud and obnoxious, something that Frode didn't even know that Violet was physically capable of doing.

As Greed laughed, the Supreme Goddess looked away to gaze over the hill, seeing haunts swarm the Gathering, where the villagers, including those that followed the goddess, fought the haunts. Anger filled the goddess at the audacity and aggression that Greed was showing.

Enraged, the Supreme Goddess attacked first, letting out a blasting ray of light directly onto Violet's face. Frode felt himself cry out as he could only watch, his screams of protest unable to make a sound as he was trapped inside of his own body, forced to watch himself attack the woman he so desperately loved.

Greed was quick to attack back, sending globs of the thick, tar-like substance towards Frode's body. Pain was swift to follow,

the sticky substance burning into his skin and leaving him howling inside, although his body still made no such sound.

The fight continued on for an eternity, a torturous nightmare for Frode that never seemed to end. The entire time, the only thing Frode could do was regret and weep. Weep for what was happening in the present and regret what he chose in the past.

He never should have left her. What had he been thinking? He had been so desperate to protect her that he abandoned her entirely, leaving her alone and vulnerable. What special kind of fool was he? A very strong one, evidently.

Every now and then, as he watched the terrible scene unfold, he swore he could see Violet behind Greed in her eyes, watching in horror and fierce sorrow just as he was. Perhaps it was just wishful thinking, but he could swear that there was such grief with those eyes occasionally, and the distinct look of the woman he loved. He had hope. How could he not? It was the only thing he had left to cling to in this hellish moment in his life.

The two gods continued to fight until Frode's body grabbed hold of Violet's, holding her by the neck, as the goddess inside of him held a burning beam of light to Violet's face.

No! No! Do not hurt her! I beg of you! Frode pleaded within his own mind, praying that the Supreme Goddess could hear him, but she gave him no acknowledgement.

The Supreme Goddess' voice was dark as she used Frode's voice to speak. "Cease this madness at once, so I do not have to do something I shall regret, Greed."

Greed replied through Violet, her body wheezing and struggling against the grasp Frode's body held on her. "I'll kill her, I'll do it. What will you do then? I shall be brought before the council of the gods, yes, but at what cost?"

The Supreme Goddess hissed. "And why should I care about the girl? You were right, she is no child of mine. Just a mere mortal, not even willing to trust me for a moment. She is of no use to me. Why should I care if you dispose of her?"

Frode yearned to feel deception within the Supreme Goddess' words, but he felt none. While the goddess was not particularly happy about what she was admitting, it was not false. The Supreme Goddess held no affection for Violet and had very little to no use for her. Her death would mean next to nothing to the immortal goddess.

And Frode hated her for it.

Greed laughed, which turned to choking for a moment as Violet's body struggled underneath the grasp of the tight hold Frode's body had on her throat. "You are a fool then, goddess. For she might not matter to you, but she matters to others. Others that you *need*. You call me arrogant, but that makes you a hypocrite, because look at you, just as arrogant as me! But at least I am aware and admit to it. You wear your denial like a second skin." Greed relaxed in his grip, a wicked laughter spewing forth again. "If you kill her, your precious Translator there will despise you. And that despisal will turn into a wicked bitterness, which will spread to his brother, to his friends and allies like a plague. All of those precious

followers that you care so much for will hate you as much as they hate me. And they will quickly learn the truth—that we gods are all the same and we do not care for mortals as much as they would like to believe.”

Frode heard his own breath catch as the Supreme Goddess realized that what Greed said was true. She felt the hate that was already beginning to simmer within Frode towards her, both for taking his body and for her lack of care for Violet’s life.

She released Violet’s body, which dropped to the ground, coughing and hacking. “Then let us leave them out of it. You want to fight? Then let us fight in the sky, Greed.”

A sensation akin to being brutally punched in the gut by the strongest of warriors slammed into Frode’s body, making him feel like he was being shunted out of his body before being snapped back into it. He blinked, realizing that he had control over his eyes and breathe once more. He looked at his hands, which were buried in the grass. He moved his pinky finger back to forth, realizing that he had full control of his body once more. The Supreme Goddess had left him.

A bloodcurdling chorus of screams sounded from where Frode knew the battle had been taking place, even louder and more intense than the usual sounds of fighting had been before. The sound of the destruction of wood filled his ears, and Frode looked up to see Violet not far away from him, crying on the ground.

Frode crawled towards her as quickly as he could, sharp rocks slicing into his knees and hands as he did, though he paid them no mind, desperate to get to her. “I am so sorry, my love. I am so sorry, I am so—” His words were cut off by another loud crashing sound, and Frode looked up to the sound.

His breath was taken from his lungs as he saw the massive figures dominating the sky, destroying trees and houses with even the slightest of movement. The image of the Supreme Goddess, whom he recognized from various images and art depicting her, stood tall and shining in the otherwise overcast sky. Her hands were outstretched, encircling the throat of the other figure dominating the sky. A man, handsome with a glowing face, grinned as he took her blows, delivering several of his own. He wore the finest of robes, the fabric a deep purple.

Frode cradled Violet in his arms, whispering and mumbling his apologies as he watched on in enraptured horror at what was happening, not even really conscious of what he was saying anymore.

The two gods seemed to be determined to destroy this entire realm as they fought, leveling the forests and even the orchards that surrounded the village as they throttled one another.

And then came the magic. The gods seemed to remember they were not mere mortals and thus did not need to fight as such. The Supreme Goddess slammed a giant ball of fire into the

side of Greed's face, and he was quick to retaliate with magic of his own.

The two outstretched their hands towards one another, sending continuous rays of magic flying into each other. The two streams of magic merged, combining and growing into a sickly mass of gray magic. It grew until it could not any longer, the two gods careless with it. It exploded, sending flashes of light and the sound of the most terrible of thunder breaking across the sky.

Frode was blinded for what felt like a solid minute as he blinked, trying to regain his sight. When he finally was able to see once more through bleary eyes, it almost looked like snow drifting down from the sky. He frowned, his brain trying to make sense of what it was seeing.

The gods were gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Resolution of an Obsession

Violet's entire body felt like it was freezing, sinking beneath a lake in winter, trapped underneath a thick layer of ice. Her soul was paralyzed, unable to feel, or perhaps unwilling. The ordeal she had just endured was too much for her. And as Frode held her, his apologies fell on deaf ears. The only thing she could register was the fighting that was happening in the sky too close to them for comfort. She could only wait for the moment of their demise, for one of the gods to step on them like the little insects they were.

She had felt the disregard and even the despise that Greed had for them. And he had felt so confident in what he told the Supreme Goddess that Violet knew it was true. These powerful beings did not care for them. And if they felt that any humans were in their way, they would have no problem eradicating them in a blink of an eye, without hesitation.

The world went silent. Violet opened her eyes, wondering if she was dead. Instead, she found Frode still holding her tightly, tears streaming down his face as he gawked at the sky.

Following his gaze, Violet found that it was raining. Or snowing. Or...was that ash? Was something on fire? She moved her hand, finding herself sore but otherwise unharmed. Perhaps having a god inhabiting her body provided otherworldly protection, because she was relatively unharmed, other than some minor cuts and bruises.

As Violet's gaze turned to Frode, a fierce determination fell upon her. She was done with staying quiet, with being a pushover. These gods did not care for them, but that didn't mean they wouldn't have consequences, not if she had any say about it. She didn't know what just happened, but she knew that she wasn't going to let what just happened slide.

She felt angry, not for the first time in her life, but never to this level of intensity. It was enough to push through her insecurities and fears, enough to make her rise up and get to her feet as she saw a beam of light land in the middle of the village. She was angry. Angry enough to allow someone to feel her wrath, and she hoped it was the people responsible.

A handsome young man stood there, clad in golden robes. He turned to bow in each direction as the people of this realm began to gather around him to see what was happening. He clasped his hands together, smiling with a bright but forced smile. "Good people of the Gathering. I come on behalf of the council of the gods this terrible day. They send their most heartfelt of apologies and condolences for the destruction and pain that has occurred on this day. They want you to know that *both Greed and the Supreme Goddess* will be held accountable for their actions this day. They are being judged in front of the

council even now, as we speak. They send their kind regards and promise something like this will never happen again.”

The village was silent. Not even a wind blew through, and the lack of noise was heavy. “That’s not good enough.” Violet’s voice cut through the silence as she stepped forward, her voice dark and demanding.

Surprise was written across the messenger’s face as he turned to look at Violet. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said, *that’s not good enough*. They took hold of my body, of Frode’s body, they played with us like *dolls*. They destroyed this village, they actively hurt people in the Viking time and meddled with things from my time, too. They have continually shown lack of care or regard for human life. *We* are the ones that have been wronged, and so we should be the ones to judge them and decide what punishment should be given to them. Why should we trust that the gods will be just?” Violet strode forward, a fierce determination pounding in her chest, until she was within arm’s reach of the messenger.

The messenger blinked at her in surprise before his face twisted into disgust. “You *dare* question the gods? You are not even a Viking!”

“I don’t *care*,” Violet hissed, her words dripping with venom.

“I have suffered. I will make my demands. Your gods *need* us mortals. They need worshippers, followers, *puppets*. But if they do not do what we wish, we will not give them that. We will strip them of their power, person by person, until they are erased from relevance.” Violet stepped forward until she was

in the messenger's face, making the man cower slightly. "Tell them this, tell them that if they dare to interfere with our lives like this again, they won't have to fear them because we will not give them the time of day. I will personally ensure that they are forgotten and disregarded like yesterday's trash. Do you understand me?"

The messenger stared at her for a minute with wide eyes, and when Violet bared her teeth at him, he nodded quickly, fear in his eyes. "I will, will. I will go tell them now."

"Good," Violet nodded. "We will worship them from afar if they abide by this. They will take care of us, we will take care of them, but we will not have them hurting anyone in their fighting of one another. They will keep their petty dueling to the privacy of their own realms, away from any mortals, dead or alive. Are my demands clear, messenger?"

The man nodded, a soft whimper falling from his lips.

Violet stepped back. "Good. Now go!" She pointed to the skies, and a beam of light appeared again, the man disappearing into it. The crowd began to murmur, talking amongst themselves about what just happened. Violet couldn't care less.

She turned towards Frode, who looked like he had just found his way onto his shaky legs, face pale and slack with shock. Walking towards him, she grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt.

"And you!" She stared at him for a moment. "You're an idiot. You never should have left me, what were you thinking? But

did you bother to ask me? No. You didn't ask me what I wanted, you rarely have. Do you know how that makes me feel? Awful, Frode, awful. I hate it, but I've never wanted to rock the boat, so I didn't say anything. Well, I'm saying something now. If you don't stop treating me like a fragile doll that needs to be protected at the expense of her own mind, feelings, and free will, then I'm going to throttle you. Do you hear me?"

Frode only gave a mute nod in response, his jaw practically hanging on the ground.

"And for heaven's sake, stop almost sacrificing yourself. It's terribly annoying!" Violet exclaimed, shaking him back and forth by the fabric of his tunic.

Frode finally managed to close his jaw, swallowing harshly, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I-I promise—"

Violet cut him off by kissing him harshly, teeth clashing as she drank him in before pushing him away. "Good. I'll hold you to that. Now where's Katla?"

Somewhere within the crowd, a voice called back to her.

"Here! I am coming!" The shieldmaiden pushed her way through the group, a grin on her face. Clearly, the battle had been her happy place, and she was still beaming in the aftermath of it. "How can I be of service, my lady?"

Violet gestured her over, which Katla quickly obeyed. "I need you to set up a perimeter and make sure no haunts return, just in case the gods try to test us. Can you do that for me?"

Katla grinned, an eagerness burning in her eyes. “Gladly.”

As the shieldmaiden disappeared, Violet returned to the people, addressing them with a raised voice. “You’ll rebuild, I promise you. But what is the point of rebuilding if the gods—even the ones that are supposed to be good—do not care? If they are willing to destroy things again and again? No. We must put an end to this. We must set up boundaries with these gods and make it clear they cannot *literally* walk all over us. Or would you like to pretend that they care? That they won’t do this? Until, of course, you can no longer pretend because they have done it again.”

The people looked at one another, whispering to one another until the noise reached a point where, even if Violet shouted again, barely anyone would be able to hear her. Thankfully, she no longer needed to speak. She had done just what she wished to, sparked the conversation. She hoped it was a conversation that would lead to something fruitful, namely at least an ounce of accountability for the gods.

It took several hours before they heard anything. Violet was beginning to think that her demands had been met with complete and utter disregard, and now, out of the heat of the moment, she was beginning to feel a bit embarrassed about it all. Would Frode look at her differently now? He didn’t seem to. In fact, he seemed to look at her with a new respect and admiration in his eyes, as well as the gentle fondness he always had for her. She could see it in the way he looked at her, as they faced each other, silently staring, a smile forming on his handsome face.

But she wondered if she would ever be seen in respect by the Viking people if the gods end up laughing at her?

What had she been thinking when she threatened the gods? Now that a bit of time has passed, she felt a heaviness in the pit of her stomach as she doubted herself. She wondered who she thought she was for acting this way.

And yet, deep down, she knew she was right. These gods needed mortals, and yet they took them for granted. And if no one spoke up for these people, then what would happen? Someone needed to risk looking like a fool, and she had done it, even though she hadn't known she had it in her. She had been just as shocked as everyone else once her emotions had cooled.

But then, all of a sudden, the messenger returned, looking quite sheepish, seeking out Violet in particular and addressing her. Apparently, she now spoke for all of the village and perhaps the entirety of the Viking people, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

The messenger took off his golden hat when he saw her, giving her a small bow. "Good evening. I apologize for the delay, but the gods had quite a bit to discuss, as you might imagine." The man swallowed harshly, wringing his hat in his hands and looking quite fearful that Violet wouldn't find that explanation satisfactory. Apparently, she had struck quite a lot of fear in the man, something she didn't know she was capable of. Perhaps, there was more to her than even she knew.

Violet sucked in a breath, stepping forward and trying to regain some of the confidence she had earlier that day. “Very well. Carry on.”

The man opened his mouth to speak but paused. Violet could almost see the wheels turning in his mind, trying to figure out how to say what he needed to. “The gods have agreed to your terms. They wish to go back to how things were before Greed and the Supreme Goddess became more...*motivated* in their own personal pursuits, which brought mortals into their aspirations.”

Violet eyed the messenger warily, trying to figure out what to make of his words. She turned to Frode, trying to glean his response. She didn’t want to become a hypocrite and cut him out of this when she had just yelled at him for doing the same to her.

Frode caught her eyes at once, stepping up to her and placing a hand on her shoulder. “The gods swear this? Not just for this realm, but for every place and era of humanity?”

The messenger pursed his lips for a moment, as if initially displeased by their questioning of his information. He even opened his mouth as if to protest, but Violet stepped forward. Anger reignited within her chest, a fire burning at her core. The messenger’s gaze turned to her at her movement and he shut his mouth, paling slightly at the sight. Clearing his throat, he nodded. “Yes, they swear. Every realm of mortals, every time and place. Their feuds shall not be brought in front of

mortals nor involve them in any case. It will become a new law of the gods.”

Violet thought for a moment, taking in a breath. “Very well. We accept. But we will be watching closely, spreading tales of this moment for many generations to come, in order to ensure that the gods keep their word.”

“You doubt the gods will not keep their word?” The messenger asked with genuine surprise, as if the idea of a human doubting such a thing was unbelievable.

Violet gave a firm nod. “Earlier today, I heard the Supreme Goddess that she didn’t actually care much for us, even though she had called us her children. She admitted it wasn’t because she truly cared. So yes, I absolutely would not be surprised if they would lie if it meant they got their way.”

The messenger frowned at this, taking a moment to consider this. After a moment, he blinked, as if realizing he didn’t need to be here any longer. “That is all of the knowledge I have been given to tell you, so I shall be going now. Peace be with you, mortals.” A beam of light appeared, before Violet could even reply, as the messenger hurried off.

Violet turned to Frode with an arched brow. “Well, that was interesting.”

Frode nodded, coming closer to her to hold her in a warm embrace. She watched as his shoulders relaxed when she smiled up at him. He returned the smile with ease. “We need to return home. I do not know what has happened with the others, but they might still need us on the human side of this war. And

my brother needs to know what has happened here. We need to keep our promise and hold the gods accountable by spreading the knowledge of what has happened here.”

Violet sighed, though she was still smiling and looking around her. She watched the good people of this realm continue to be engrossed in their conversation. “I agree. There’s so much to clean up from all of this, both literally and figuratively...”

Violet looked elsewhere around the village, which was in complete disarray. There were pieces of the longhouses that had been smashed and spread all over. Splinters of trees had also been destroyed in the rubble.

Frode took her hand in his, giving it a squeeze. “But we will do it together.”

Violet turned to regard him, searching his eyes. “You aren’t upset with me, then?”

Frode laughed, pulling her into her arms and kissing her.

“Upset with you? My love, I am *proud* of you. My heart is filled with such gladness that you have finally come through your true self and feelings. The only thing I am upset with is myself for overlooking you so carelessly. But I am glad that you have reprimanded me and put me in my place as I deserve.”

Violet smiled at him meekly. “I didn’t mean to put you in your place, not like that.”

“Yes, you did. And it was the right thing to do, for yourself *and* for me.” Frode reached up to stroke the side of her face.

“You were right. Leaving you behind was foolish of me. I

have done many foolish things when it has come to you, some I regret, others I do not. But anytime I minimized your voice is something I greatly regret and vow to never do again.”

Violet smiled at him softly, squeezing his hand. “Thank you, Frode. That means a lot to me. I love you very much.”

Frode’s eyes widened at her admission of affection, a smile growing onto his lips until it encompassed half of his face. “I love you, my darling Violet. More than the gods, more than my land, more than anything.”

Violet laughed before pausing, realization making her face fall. “Oh no, Frode. We forgot to ask the messenger to send us back home. Are we stuck here?”

Frode’s smile immediately dropped. “I cannot believe such a thought never even crossed my mind. We shall have to wait and hope he returns. Or else that the gods realize it and move to quickly right their wrongs.”

Indeed, Violet agreed that Frode was right, and that all they could do was wait. Not that the weeks they would then spend in waiting would be ill spent, and certainly, not when they did indeed spend most of that time waiting, in the cottage in the glen, basking in each other’s company.

In that time, Violet found herself enjoying the simple pleasures Frode was so lovingly eager to give to her. They took quiet journeys into the forest, long nights of pleasure in the cottage, gentle mornings filled with loving caresses and whispered affections. Violet felt like she healed during this time. She felt like she was becoming whole again, not just because of Frode,

but because she was learning so much about herself and now had a safe space to be herself again.

And thus, when the messenger returned some weeks later to give them news from the council of the gods, Violet and Frode were quick to remedy that. Thankfully, they had been in the village to eat supper with the rest of the Gathering and thus, they did not miss his arrival.

Yet again, the man addressed Violet as their leader of sorts, which was still going to take some getting used to. After he gave his grand speech about the Supreme Goddess and Greed being punished, Violet was quick to approve of what he had to say before making her request.

The messenger was willing to grant it himself.

And thus, Frode and Violet found themselves saying hurried goodbyes to their newfound friends. Violet gave a big hug to Katla as the two had become rather good friends in the short amount of time they had known each other.

Rolf and Andgar were also sad to see Frode go, but all of their friends promised to look after them from this realm beyond, something Violet found strangely comforting.

As the messenger sent them through the portal back to Violet's time, the pair clutched each other's hand, their bond now utterly unbreakable.

As they stepped into the familiar room in Doctor Aria Jones' house, there was a shattering of glass almost instantly. Violet winced as Doctor Aria Jones screamed at their sudden

appearance in her house. Both she and Frode tried to calm her, but were distracted by the sight of Erik the Serpent sprinting into the room with nothing but an apron on, a frying pan overhead as he was ready to attack any intruder that dared to threaten the woman he loved.

After a moment, they all calmed down. Aria gawked at them. “Where have you two *been*? King Bylur and Queen Isis have been worried sick over you!”

Erik cleared his throat, backing out of the room slowly without turning around. “I shall make myself decent and then return.” Once he had disappeared from view, Violet heard him sprinting away.

Violet stepped forward, feeling a heavy weight sitting on her chest. “I wanted to apologize, Aria, for...well, for my betrayal. I know you were not involved that much, but still, I could have put you in danger and for that, I apologize.”

Aria nodded. “I appreciate that. I don’t understand everything that happened to you, but you seem like a good person. I just hope you are free from whatever made you work for the other side.”

Violet frowned, turning back to Frode. “Well, I haven’t exactly been freed yet. Those agents might still have my mother, and who knows what they’ll do to her after everything?”

Aria’s eyebrows shot up. “They have your mother? Well, no wonder. Who could blame you for trying to keep her safe?”

Violet bit her lip. “I could.”

Frode placed a hand on her shoulder, bringing her attention back to him. “You should not, though.”

Aria nodded. “I agree. Listen, I’ll get in contact with Queen Isis through the portal I’ve built, a replication of the one I worked on for the institute. Theirs has been destroyed now. It’s been a whole ordeal, let me tell you, but it’s dealt with. That’s all you need to know.” Facing Frode, Aria continued, “Your brother and the others returned back to the Viking times. I am sure they are eager to see you, but they’ll understand the need to save your mother.” This time, Aria turned to Violet, smiling sympathetically. “Go and make sure she’s safe, and if you want to go back to your home, just come back here and I’ll be happy to send you back.”

Frode nodded, reaching his hand out to shake Aria’s hand, the doctor gladly taking and giving a firm shake. “Thank you, Doctor Jones. We truly appreciate your help through all of this. Give my brother my love and apologies. We will be back soon.”

They left before Erik even returned from getting dressed, and Violet felt relieved. As much as they seemed like lovely people, now that she was back here, all she could think about was her mother and ensuring her safety.

“What do you think your mother will feel about going to live in the Viking time?” Frode asked, surprising Violet.

Her eyebrows raised in response. “You want to bring her there?”

Frode nodded, searching her eyes as if to glean her thoughts from them. “I cannot think of any way we can protect her if we live in that time without hopping back and forth consistently. Or relying on Erik and Doctor Jones to check in with her, which is also possible, but I feel like they may grow tired of us in time. They could deal with that, I am sure, but I know if it were me, I would want my mother near me. Unless, that is, you have changed your mind and do not wish to live in the Viking times anymore...?”

Violet arched a brow. “Well, I don’t wish to leave you, Frode. I don’t even want to think about that.”

He let out a breath that sounded like he was holding it for a moment, but after hearing Violet’s words, he smiled easily. “Yes, and I don’t either. But it is not our only option, you know. We could come to live here, in this time. I speak the language. I could learn the ways of this life. I’d do anything for you, you know.” Frode’s smile grew, as he intertwined his fingers with hers.

Violet raised both of her eyebrows, as far as they would go. “You would leave your family and people for me? But you love them. You love your work as a translator and court scholar! “

Frode gave a shrug of his shoulders. “You are willing to do the same for me. And we could possibly visit. I would give up my world for you, my love. I thought I made that clear before?”

Violet laughed, shaking her head. “I just didn’t realize you meant it so literally.”

“I do not confess my love for you lightly, Violet.” He squeezed her hand, smiling at her.

Violet returned his smile, thinking for a moment. In truth, she found herself longing for the Viking times. She wasn't sure if it was because of its association with Frode, but it was the only place that had felt like home in a long time. And she really didn't want to leave Isis, either, or the school she had built, for that matter. “I think...I think I want to go back to your time.”

Frode's smile widened even more. “Then it is settled. That is, if you are sure, of course. I do not want you deciding that just because you think it is what I want. Because that's not true. I would love to return there, but the truth is, my home is wherever I am with you, my love.”

Violet nodded. “I'm sure. I've gotten my voice, remember? I would tell you how I really feel.”

“Good. But only if you promise.” Frode grinned down at her.

Violet laughed. “I promise, I promise!”

Frode leaned down, nuzzling her nose with his. “Ah, but you must seal that promise with a kiss to make it a true promise.”

“Gladly.” Violet grabbed his face and pressed her lips to his, moving against him in a gentle dance. When she finally pulled back, she smirked at him. “Is that a good enough of a seal? Do you believe me now?”

Frode chuckled. “I think so, my dear. But you ought to kiss me a few more times just to ensure that the seal is strong enough.”

Violet laughed, feeling hope for the future soar in her heart.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Epilogue

Violet had never felt as relieved as when they arrived at her mother's house to find the older woman unharmed. Her mother sobbed in her arms, having believed that her daughter might be dead since she was missing for such a long time. Agents had come and interrogated her dear mother quite a few times. Her mother had the continuous feeling of being watched, which had haunted her every step for some time. Thankfully, the agents had not returned in some time, and that feeling had dissipated into nothing, bringing her great relief.

Although Violet felt sure that the agents had left her alone and probably wouldn't be a threat anymore, Violet didn't want to take any chances. She also didn't particularly want to leave her mother behind or be separated from her again. So after a good bit of convincing, they brought her to the Viking times, settling her into a nice house not far from theirs where she could live out the rest of the days in peace.

The reunion between Violet and Frode, and Isis and Bylur was bittersweet. They were all quite glad to see each other, but

there was a somberness over the grief that Violet and Frode had suffered through, as well as the tension their friendships had endured.

The king and queen were understanding and kind, and their friendship healed relatively quickly, though Violet still felt the occasional stirrings of guilt over the betrayal she had committed, even though she now gave herself the grace of understanding. She had done her best, and that was good enough.

If only she had spoken her truth and shared the burden of what she had been going through with her loved ones. It was a lesson harshly learned, but learned nonetheless. She would no longer shrink or keep her own needs quiet. And that change already reaped much fruit as she felt more at peace than she ever had before, and her relationships greatly benefited from her honesty.

After months passed, Violet realized that the gods indeed kept their promise, kept at bay by Violet's threats. The gods learned that day never to earn the wrath of a gentle woman, for even the immortal's wellbeing could be brought down by one such as that.

The artifacts were kept safely tucked away. The gods remained in their place. The agents and scientists involved were kept accountable by the public's watchful eye. Everyone was where they wanted to be in time, and the Vikings prospered under such circumstances.

And Violet was happy. Her voice was still soft and gentle, but it was still present, firm when it needed to be. Frode kept his vow, never dismissing her feelings even when they had not yet been presented. He always made room for them, no matter what.

There was peace. There was joy. Violet's school prospered, as did their eventual marriage. He proposed to her at a beautiful clearing in the forest, filled with wildflowers and a gentle stream trickling nearby, reminding both of them of the glen in the magical realm where they learned to love each other even with their own faults. He plucked a wildflower as he got down on one knee, offering up the pretty flower and the ring as he asked her to marry him. Frode's thoughtfulness never ceased to touch her heart and fill her with such love for him.

The wedding was a quiet and private event, a merging of their culture as they also became united. The weather was beautiful that day, sunny and bright with a gentle breeze. They spent most of it outdoors, celebrating in the forest with their loved ones until the sun went down. Soon after that special day, King Bylur brought them to one of the outer villages, the very one that Frode and Violet first met. There, he offered them a gorgeous longhouse he had built just for them, and just around the corner, a large building built to be a school. *Violet's* school. It was close enough to the Great City that the children there could easily travel, but so could the children in the outer villages that were further from the city. After Bylur presented them with such wondrous gifts, Violet kissed her brother-in-law on both of his cheeks in pure delight.

Queen Isis and Violet soon got one of their greatest wishes fulfilled, to raise children together as a pair of the best of friends.

And maybe, looking down from her realm beyond the skies, the Supreme Goddess did care. At least, Violet warmed up to that idea. Perhaps, Violet thought that the goddess realized how consumed she had become with protecting her power and artifacts that she had forgotten her greatest desires as a goddess, to bring love, harmony, and unity into the world. Something that had happened, almost without her interference, through time travel. It was a beautiful thing to witness, the happy children growing up in Viking lands, and the children of one couple in the land of the future.

This realm was happy, and these people were finally at peace. And love did indeed reign supreme.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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